

SPECIAL FEATURE

After page 4

Back then, both Titu and his wife worked in the garments industry. After the incident though, both of them lost their jobs. Meanwhile, Titu's 14-year-old son has stopped attending school ever since the attack. He used to study in class six at the Paglapir Academy.

"My son could not give his final exam because of the attack. But I still managed to get him enrolled in class seven after spending some extra money. But even then, he couldn't continue. His classmates would insult him and make derogatory comments. He stopped going to school and stays at home now," says 43-year-old Titu, who himself studied till class five.

The attack, says Titu, has turned his life upside down. "I have turned into a beggar now," he cries. "My sister and daughter are supporting my family financially," he says with a hint of shame in his voice.

As I am about to leave, Titu picks up a piece of paper and hands it over. It's the list of accused in the attack and Titu alleges that the police are yet to arrest them. "There are some nights when I can't sleep. Who knows, the police might come and arrest me in the middle of the night," he laments.

The attack at Rangpur wasn't the first time when someone seemingly unaware of using smartphones or Facebook had



PHOTO: KONGKON KARMAR

A woman in the village sewing a *katha* ahead of the winter. Most of her creations got burnt this time around last year.

been accused of the attack. In 2016, a demeaning Facebook post led to 14 temples getting destroyed in Brahmanbaria.

The Facebook account belonged to a

27-year-old fisherman, Rasraj. He was arrested. However, days later it was revealed that the account was fake and that Rasraj had nothing to do with the Facebook post.

Titu has around three more months to go before his six-month bail ends. Desperate, Titu hopes that the police can catch the real culprits and clear his name by then.

POLITICS

After page 3

Political aspiration

Unlike Jamaat-e-Islami, Qawmi-based parties haven't been able to solidify its base, hence, couldn't tilt the electoral politics to a significant degree.

In 1991, the IOJ managed to win just one seat in Sylhet.

In 1996, Mufti Amini, with his Islami Morcha (now Khelafat-e-Islami), joined the alliance and became its secretary-general. In 1998, Amini played an instrumental role to forge an electoral alliance with Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which caused a rift in the coalition. Islami Andolon left the IOJ, citing "the woman leadership" in BNP.

With BNP, the IOJ won four seats in total in 2001. Shortly afterwards, however, the power struggle between two factions led by the old duos, Allama Azizul Haque and Mufti Amini, resulted in the alliance being divided, with the latter retaining its ties with BNP.

In 2006, Allama Azizul Haque's Khelafat Mazlish, now out of the IOJ, formed an alliance in principle with the Awami League, the then main opposition party. They together agreed to adhere to a five-point list, which many cite as the predecessor of Hefajat's 13-point charter. The Awami League had to take a lot of heat for this arrangement, although it later abandoned the ties. In August 2012, Allama Azizul Haque died.

Mufti Amini too died the same year, but he maintained his grip over the IOJ until his last breath. In 2011, he was put to a virtual house arrest after he was accused of sedition by making an incendiary remark regarding the

Constitution.

After Amini's death, IOJ secretary general Mawlana Abdul Latif Nezami became the chairman, while Amini's disciple, Mufti Fayeazullah, became the secretary general. They were instrumental in organising the Hefajat's 2013 rally. In January 2016, they withdrew IOJ from the BNP-led 20-party alliance, presumably under the government's pressure.

Ideological stance

While relatively indifferent to matters of public interest, these parties thrive upon religiously sensitive issues.

For example, in 1993, Allama Azizul Haque and Mufti Fazlul Haque Amini came into prominence by leading a long march protest over the demolition of Babri Masjid in India. The next year they

fomented protests against writer Taslima Nasrin, forcing her to flee the country, which made international headlines.

In February, the IOJ took to the streets against a High Court verdict banning fatwa. These parties have long demanded to declare Ahmadiya community as non-Muslim and formulate a blasphemy law. In addition, they have taken issues with secularism, secular education policy, sculptures, candle-lighting, atheism, the depiction of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), the portrayal of religious leaders in the mass media, mixing of males and females, etc.

These parties seem to have an issue with women, too. In 2009, for example, Mufti Amini harshly criticised the government's "Women Development

Policy" as anti-Islamic. In fact, many believe the agitation over the issue resulted in Hefajat-e-Islam, which remained in hibernation until 2013. Several incendiary remarks of Allama Shafi, the chief of Hefajat, about women also caused an uproar. The government's insistence on lowering the age requirement for girls' marriage was also in line with Hefajat's demands.

While the AL government initially resisted those demands, the authorities have recently acted favourably to these groups. For example, the textbooks were significantly changed to conform to their demands. In April 2017, when the then Chief Justice, Surendra Kumar Sinha, attempted to install a statue of Lady Justice in front of the Supreme Court, a group of Islamist parties waged protests. The prime minister supported their calls, forcing the chief justice to relocate the statue to a less prominent position.

Unlike in 2006, when Awami League's apparent ties with Khelafat Mazlish upset the party's secular supporter base, the close proximity between Hefajat and AL has been met with silent approval from the latter's supporters, who see the association as a political necessity.

Ironically, the group that's taking heat from their supporters this time is Hefajat. As indicated by the absence of its several influential leaders at the grand 'thanksgiving' rally, Hefajat may soon face a split and find many of its supporters disillusioned with it, in particular, and religion-based politics, in general.

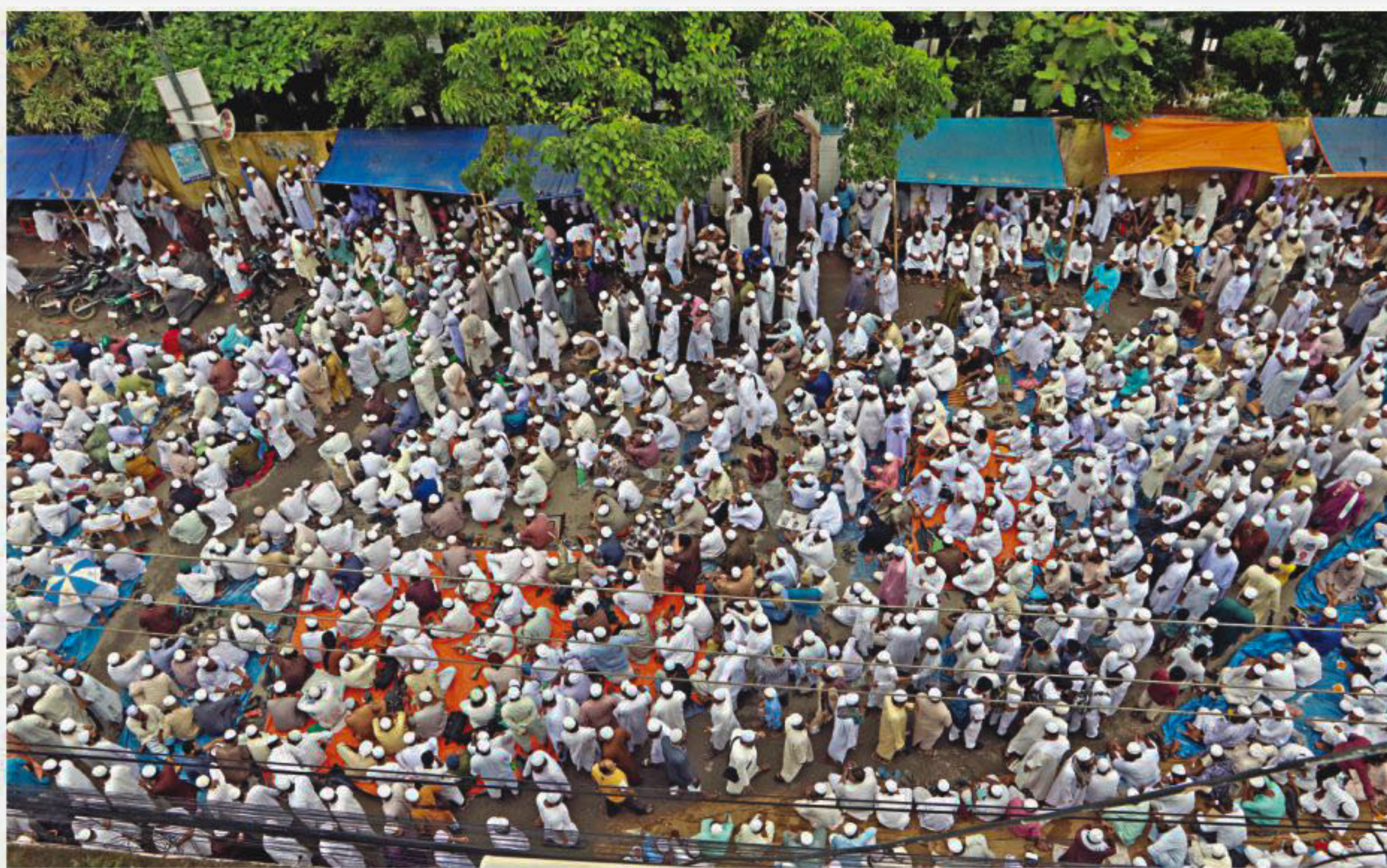


PHOTO: STAR

Their true political prowess lies in their position as religious leaders and their ability to summon hundreds of thousands of madrasa students within a short period of time.

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