

WHY ARE ISLAMISTS IN THE LIMELIGHT?

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With the 2018 election at our doorstep, various kinds of polarisation and reconfiguration of political forces are taking place. Among them, the role of Islamists has drawn substantial attention. Islamists have not enjoyed as much prominence in previous elections as they have in 2018.

Since the re-emergence of Islamists as political actors in 1979 election, the Islamist political landscape has substantially changed. Three changes are noticeable: first, the number of Islamist parties have increased; secondly, drastic attenuation of the organisational strength of the largest Islamist party, the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), since 2010, hasn't diminished the influence of the Islamists, instead it has strengthened the leverage of conservative Islamists; thirdly, both Islamists and secularists have made alliances with each other.

Islamist political landscape

The number of Islamist parties remained two between 1979 and 1986. In 1991, the number increased to 17; in the 1996 election, another Islamist party was added to the ballot. In 2001, the number declined slightly to 11 and in 2008, the number was 10. Of course, not all Islamist parties participate in the election; but overall, there was a slight downward trend of Islamist parties with electoral significance.

Among these Islamists, the JI

successfully switched sides between two major parties, the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), since 1991, and eventually became a member of the BNP-led ruling coalition in 2001. The other Islamist partner of the coalition was the rural Qawmi madrasah based Islami Oikyo Jote (IOJ). It is often argued that both electoral consideration—to secure the votes of the Islamists—and ideological affinity—to be viewed as more sympathetic to Islamic values—encouraged the BNP to make the JI its ally. The AL, long known as a left-of-center secularist party, did work with the JI on many occasions, yet maintained the

parties, six are with the AL while two are with the BNP and two remained away from any alliances.

Why do Islamists befriend secularists? Islamists, all around the world, would like to replace the extant secular liberal democratic system with a more Islamised system, either abruptly or incrementally. Some Islamists adopt a bottom-up approach, that is Islamisation of the society leading to the transformation of the state, while others prefer a top-down approach where the state becomes the instrument to change the societal ethos. These strategies are not highly compartmentalised, and with the latter goal Islamists in many Muslim majority countries have participated in liberal democratic politics. In Bangladesh, Islamists have adopted both strategies, but conservative Islamists underscore the need for a bottom-up approach while modernists have engaged in mainstream politics for incremental change from the top. None of these two strands of Islamists have been successful in garnering enough support from the electorate to become the ruling party. Consequently, they have worked with 'secular' parties to gain a foot in the door and make as many changes as possible. Global experience also shows that participation in the electoral system and legislative politics in democratic and semi-democratic system has moderated Islamist parties. For the conservative Islamists, it is an opportunity to get the attention and extend their reach to a broader audience.

Why do secular parties need Islamists? Military regimes, between 1975 and 1990, adopted religion as an element of their ideology due to their lack of moral legitimacy. Since the 1980s, the AL and the BNP courted Islamists in the name of democracy and electoral success. The politics of expediency has been the name of the game. Due to a deadlock in the support base (average 34 percent each), both parties tried to woo the Islamists to ensure the victory. The BNP was far more forthright and successful than the AL until now, as its ideological stance didn't want to exclude religion from politics or public life. However, interestingly, the Islamists do not have a large share of popular votes. The share of popular votes of the Islamists in the past four participatory elections between 1991 and 2008 has been very small and has declined. The share of all Islamist parties' in 1991, was 14.41 percent (of which the JI had 12.13 percent); in 1996 it came down to 9.7 percent (JI's share was 8.61 percent); in 2001 it declined to 4.97 (JI's share was 4.29), and in 2008 it increased slightly, to 6.27 percent (JI's share was 4.48 percent), as more Islamist parties joined the election.

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aura of a secularist party.

The number of Islamist parties grew significantly after 2008, particularly after the controversial election in 2014. The resuscitation of the Hefazat-e-Islam (HI) in 2013, apparently as a response to the Shahbagh movement, was a watershed moment in this regard. HI has successfully brought a wide variety of conservative Islamists to its fold.

Currently, almost one fourth of registered political parties—10 of 39 parties—bear the name and ideological orientation of Islamism. The total number of Islamist parties now stands close to 70. While the JI has lost its registration, the HI has assumed greater significance. The HI, which had a faceoff with the ruling party and the government in 2013, made a U-turn in 2017, accorded a reception to the PM on October 3, 2018 under the guise of the Al-Haiatul Ulya Lil-Jamiatil Qawmia Bangladesh, and extended support to the AL.

Contrary to the earlier perception and trend that the Islamists will align with the BNP, more conservative Islamists have become closer to the AL in recent years. Considering both the AL and its allies' alliances, a staggering 61 Islamist parties are now within the fold of the AL-led alliance. The BNP has only five within their fold. Of the registered 10

Registered Islamist parties and share of popular votes (1991-2008)

Infographic: Shaer Reaz

