Muslims in media, and media in Muslim-majority Bangladesh



I lived in the UK from 2000 to 2007. It was

a time fraught with events of momentous consequences to Muslims, especially those

in Britain. During that period, the world witnessed, among others, the 9/11 attacks on

New York City's World Trade Center in 2001;

the invasion of Afghanistan by the US-led

coalition forces in the same year; major anti-

war rallies and protests (especially those on February 15, 2003) in cities around the globe;

the illegal war on Iraq by the US-British-led

alliance in 2003; the 7/7 London bombings

in 2005; and sporadic Israeli military

or indirect impacts on British Muslims

who experienced heightened levels of

media hostility and stereotyping, as well as

unprovoked physical and verbal attacks in the

streets. Though there are strong anti-racist

and anti-Islamophobic voices in Britain, the

disproportionate media bias against Islam

and Muslims in the country has been inciting

hatred and escalating into anti-Muslim

media concocting lies and prejudices and

coining pejorative terms to caricature and

marginalise Muslims in British society. To

rail against the presence of visible Muslims in

the country, London was given the nickname

of "Londonistan," and places with sizeable

Muslim communities were categorised as "no-

go areas" for non-Muslims. The sensational

phrase "Islamification of Britain" was

promoted to scare non-Muslims of imagined

I have continued to follow the British

media even after leaving the country. What

is evident is that there are continuous media

attempts to put a spotlight on Muslims and to

make the whole community accountable for

For example, in September 2010, Pope

Benedict XVI visited London, and on

September 18, 2010-without any proof or

evidence whatsoever—The Daily Express

featured an eye-catching, frontpage headline:

"Muslim plot to kill Pope." Written by John

the actions of a few individuals.

perils of the growing Muslim population.

During my time in the UK, I saw the

extremism.

These and similar incidents had direct

aggressions on Palestine and Lebanon.

Dr Md Mahmudul Hasan is professor at the Department of Enalish Language and Literature in the International Islamic University Malaysia. He can be reached at

MD MAHMUDUL HASAN

spanned three pages, the redress was only one line, and that on Page 9.

Accordingly, in a research paper titled 'Islamophobia in the UK" conducted at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in 2014, Fleur Allen comments, "When the original story had been given so much space it seems inadequate that the correction was afforded so little. The original story, without correction, is also still available on their website.

following quote from Dr Bari, "Every society Muslim bias and prejudice. A comparable has to be really careful so the situation doesn't lead us to a time when people's minds can be poisoned as they were in the 1930s. If your community is perceived in a very negative manner, and poll after poll says that we are alienated, then Muslims begin to feel very vulnerable.'

Later, Dr Bari's statement was distorted and decontextualised in the service of anti-Muslim

scrutiny of media outlets in other powerful countries may show a similar or worse trend of demonising and securitising Muslims. Against this backdrop, I present below an example of responsible media practices in Muslim-majority Bangladesh.

On November 25, 2024, former ISKCON leader and Hindu monk Chinmoy Krishna Das Brahmachari was arrested in Dhaka on charges of sedition and dishonouring Bangladesh's flag. The next day, on November 26, he was produced before a court in Chattogram, where he was denied bail. Thousands of Chinmoy's supporters and followers sought to blockade the prison van carrying their leader. This created a chaotic situation, and a clash broke out between the protesters and police in the court premises. Assistant Public Prosecutor Saiful Islam Alif got caught in the line of fire and was hacked to death by some of the protesters.

Images of the bloodstained dead body of the young lawyer fully dressed in his court attire shocked the whole country. The deafening silence of his two-year-old daughter clinging onto her four-month pregnant mother brought tears to many eyes.

I have read dozens of Bangladeshi news stories of the killing of this Muslim lawyer. None of them highlighted the religious identity of his killers. Nor were their religion and religious community put on trial for the actions of some individuals. Even though 90 percent of Bangladesh's population is Muslim, the brutal murder of a Muslim lawyer by the followers of a Hindu monk didn't vitiate the interreligious harmony in the country. Bangladeshi people, no matter which religion they follow, are mature enough to understand that killers are killers and the rest are brothers and sisters in humanity.

However, certain media people with warped minds continued spreading crude disinformation. For example, as of this writing, the headline of the reporting of Ramananda Sengupta of India-based StratNewsGlobal still reads, "Lawyer Defending Arrested Hindu Leader Killed in Bangladesh." Can anything be farther from the truth?

Anti-Muslim media bigotry is so normalised that even Reuters initially circulated the false information that the slain lawyer was defending the Hindu leader, which the British news agency later retracted.

I would like to end this essay with the following rhetorical question: how would Bangladeshi and foreign media outlets report a comparable case involving the killing of a



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

story continued on two inside pages of the newspaper.

While the title presented the plot as a fact, only in the actual report did its authors use words like "alleged," "suspected" and "suspicion." They then concluded that the police didn't find "any hazardous items" with the suspects, who were of North African origin. But the reputation damage done to Muslims by the frontpage headline was hardly remedied by the details provided in the report.

Clearly, there was no plot to kill the Pope. Nor were those (Muslim) men charged for hatching any. Two days later, on September 20, 2010, the newspaper published a redress. Twomey, David Pilditch and Nathan Rao, the However, while the provocative fake news story

Another very common method of media manipulation is the distortion and decontextualisation of statements of Muslim individuals or groups. For example, in a 2008 report titled "Images of Islam in the UK," Kerry Moore, Paul Mason and Justin Lewis of the UK's Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies touch on media reports involving British-Bangladeshi writer Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari.

Dr Bari was the secretary-general of the Muslim Council of Britain in 2006-2010. On November 10, 2007, London-based newspaper The Daily Telegraph published an interview with him conducted by journalists Rachel

racism. As Kerry Moore, Paul Mason and Justin Lewis state, "In the week that followed, 21 articles and Letters to the Editor were printed by the UK press, basing their story on the Telegraph interview. Headlines included 'Fury as Muslim brands Britain "Nazi" (Sunday Express, November 11); 'Comparisons to Nazi Germany inaccurately reflect Muslim status in Britain' (The Daily Telegraph, November 12); and 'Muslim in fear of a "Nazi UK" (The People, November 11)."

All these hyperbolised, incendiary media headlines were intended to drive a wedge between the British Muslims and their country.

As I have discussed above, a section of Sylvester and Alice Thomson. It included the the British media is charged with anti-

Bangladeshis know how to shape their destiny



for Policy, Advocacy, and Governance (IPAG), an international think tank.

SYED MUNIR KHASRU

The recent controversy involving and cultural distinctiveness rather the Bangladesh chapter of the International Society for Krishna (IŠKCON) Consciousness underlined the country's challenges in maintaining its legacy of tolerance in the aftermath of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's ouster who has outlets of the arrest of ISKCON leader Chinmoy Krishna Das Brahmachari and the tragic death of Advocate Saiful Islam Alif on November 26 has fuelled debates about communal harmony in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is the world's eighthmost populous country and 35thlargest economy. It is the secondlargest exporter of ready-made garments (RMG) and home to BRAC, the world's largest NGO, and Grameen Bank, founded by Nobel Laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus, a pioneer of microcredit finance and head of the interim caretaker government. Following Hasina's departure, concerns have emerged in certain quarters over the resurgence of Islamist political parties and whether Bangladesh could shift toward theocracy in a nation where over 90 percent of the population is Muslim. There have also been some comparisons with Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The story of Bangladesh's independence is rooted in a struggle against communal identity imposed by the then-Pakistani rulers. Unlike Pakistan, where religious ideologies are central in shaping governance

than religious uniformity.

The call for autonomy, often symbolised by the term "Bangladeshi" since the early 1960s, reflects this desire for a unique national identity. This historic resistance reinforces Bangladesh's foundation built on been provided shelter in India. cultural plurality and assertion of Misrepresentation by some media a distinct Bengali identity, which continues to shape its political and social landscape even today.

The recent unrest centres on a public demonstration held by ISKCON members, during which a saffron flag-often associated with Hindu nationalism-was hoisted above the national flag of Bangladesh at a rally in Chittagong on October 25. This act was widely condemned as a violation of national sovereignty and an affront to the country's secular identity, leading to the Brahmachari's arrest.

The situation escalated when ISKCON's supporters, reportedly enraged by the court's decision to deny bail to Brahmachari, surrounded a prison van and began protesting. These protests quickly turned violent, with demonstrators allegedly vandalising vehicles, throwing brickbats, and causing damage to public property, including windows at the court mosque complex.

During the clashes, Advocate Saiful Islam Alif, a member of the Chittagong Bar Association, was killed and his body was desecrated, which further inflamed public sentiment.

While communal tensions can arise in Bangladesh, like in other parts of South Asia, international structures, Bangladesh's identity is media often misrepresent these anchored in Bengali nationalism. incidents, overlooking Bangladesh's During the Liberation War of 1971, commendable, if not perfect, track Bangladeshis emphasised linguistic record in upholding and promoting occurred since.

Prof Syed Munir Khasru tolerance. Reports exaggerating the is chairman of the Institute situation, such as claims of systematic situation, such as claims of systematic suppression of Hindu organisations, ignore the local context and Bangladesh's unique socio-cultural

Bangladesh's constitution uniquely balances secular principles with Islam as the state religion. The Supreme Court's 2016 judgment reinforced that Islam's recognition does not contradict the state's secular obligations and that all religious communities must enjoy equal protection and rights under the law. The social fabric reflects this balance, visible in the shared courtyards between mosques and

temples in regions like Lalmonirhat. Bangladeshis are known for their moderate, devout faith and progressive outlook. Influenced by Sufi traditions, the country's religious landscape promotes peaceful spiritualism and coexistence, contrasting with hardline interpretations in some neighbouring regions. The state's emphasis on religious neutrality ensures respect for religion without it dictating public life, in sharp contrast with the theocratic shift in countries like Afghanistan. Even during the political turmoil following Sheikh Hasina's ouster, community leaders and students have united to protect the religious

sites of the minorities. Despite the emergence of radicalism in many parts of the world, these sentiments remain on the fringe and have not received widespread support in secular Bangladesh. Counterterrorism efforts have dismantled networks like Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B), preventing the rise of a unified Islamist front.

This resilience stems partly from Bangladesh's experience with extremist violence, such as the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery attack. The state's firm response, combined with the community's rejection of extremist ideologies has ensured that such an incident has not

emphasis has also been on maintaining order and safeguarding minority communities. Both Professor Yunus and Army Chief General Waker-Uz-Zaman visited several temples and shrines ahead of Durga Puja. Except for a few isolated incidents in a country of nearly 180 million, attacks on minorities, including Hindus, have been limited and largely neutralised. Hence, structural conditions and public sentiment in Bangladesh do not favour a Taliban-style takeover or Pakistani-style quasi-military rule under the cloak of so-called democracy.

In addition, the country's vigorous engagement in international peacekeeping missions highlights by Muhammad Ali Jinnah until of The Indian Express on

government's its borders. While Afghanistan's 1971. Today, February 21 is universally governance has often been marked by shifts between authoritarianism and radicalism, Bangladesh's trajectory aspirations with a firm stance against militancy.

If religion alone could shape a state's trajectory, Bangladesh would not have parted ways with Pakistan. Instead, people's freespirited nature and a rich tradition of cultural celebration have created a space where being devout doesn't conflict with being open-minded and progressive. Bangladeshis have trod this path with blood and sweat since February 21, 1952, when martyrs gave their lives to resist Urdu being imposed as the national language *published in the opinion column* its commitment to stability beyond Bangladeshis liberated the country in **December 2, 2024.**

observed as International Mother Language Day.

As the interim government steers has been one of balancing democratic the country towards elections, the challenges it faces are real, but the strengths it possesses are equally significant. While vigilance is necessary, the core values that have shaped Bangladesh's independence remain its greatest asset in navigating these uncertain times with cautious optimism. There is no need for anybody, regionally or globally, to be overly concerned as history shows, despite setbacks and challenges, Bangladeshis know how to shape their destiny.

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Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB) IRESPPW-2nd PHASE

Palli Bhaban, 5 Kawranbazar, Dhaka-1215. Phone: 02-41010341, email: pdiresppw@gmail.com

Memo No:47.62.0000.966.07.016.24-2285

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> Mohammad Reshedul Alam Project Director

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