

In defence of secularism



Dr Selim Raihan
is professor in the Department of Economics at the University of Dhaka and executive director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM). He can be reached at selim.raihan@econdu.ac.bd.

SELIM RAIHAN

The Constitution Reform Commission, in its report submitted to the interim government last month, has proposed that secularism be replaced with pluralism as one of the fundamental principles of the constitution. Though the word “pluralism” seems amiable to represent the diversity of voices within society, it is almost impossible to put into practice effectively due to the lack of any formal framework for implementation. Ironically, the state has to be intrinsically secular to become a quintessential pluralistic society.

Secularism, as a basic tenet of the national identity of Bangladesh, was recognised after the Liberation War. However, this has increasingly been challenged over the past few years, which raises questions about the country’s level of commitment towards religious pluralism, democracy, and social harmony. As the country makes its sociopolitical

journey, the reaffirmation of secularism is quite instrumental in guaranteeing inclusive development, peace, and democratic stability.

Bangladesh was born out of a long struggle for linguistic and cultural identity and democratic rights, which led to the war in 1971. The drafters of the 1972 constitution envisioned a secular state where citizens, irrespective of their religious affiliation, would enjoy equal rights and freedoms. But subsequent political developments, including constitutional amendments and policy shifts, growing influence of religion-based parties and elements, rejection of secularism by some dominant political parties, and diminishing significance of leftist politics, have gradually undermined the commitment to secularism. This also coincided with the inclusion of religious elements in governance and political rhetoric, often at the cost of communal harmony.

Secularism, contrary to the belief of some people, is not about the rejection of religion; rather, it is about ensuring the equal treatment of all religious communities and the separation of religion from state affairs. At its core, it guarantees that no religion is privileged over another in the governance of the state. This principle upholds freedom of belief, prevents discrimination, and fosters a sense of national unity that transcends religious divides.

Though secularism was one of the main planks of the 1972 constitution, the Awami League itself strayed far from its real essence over the past one and a half decades. It used a perverted form of secularism to silence opposition voices. This aberration also served to undermine the founding ideals by which the nation was anchored, and further eroded trust within society. The erosion of

about ensuring the equal treatment of all religious communities and the separation of religion from state affairs. At its core, it guarantees that no religion is privileged over another in the governance of the state. This principle upholds freedom of belief, prevents discrimination, and fosters a sense of national unity that transcends religious divides.

In a country like Bangladesh,

a secular and inclusive polity strengthens Bangladesh’s diplomatic and economic prospects. Countries that uphold religious neutrality and pluralism are often seen as stable and attractive for investment and international cooperation.

Some would argue that pluralism—a principle that accommodates multiple religious and cultural traditions—could

Moreover, pluralism assumes that there is a balance of power among the different religious groups, which is not always the case in reality. Unless the state is secular to ensure religious neutrality, there will always remain a strong chance of domination by the majority or religiously based political influence. While pluralism is one of the essential social values, it needs to supplement—and not substitute—secularism as a basic principle for governance in Bangladesh.

Moreover, having a fixed state religion is contradictory to both pluralism and secularism. True pluralism requires a secular foundation where no religion is given preferential treatment in the constitution or governance.

Despite its constitutional commitment to secularism, Bangladesh has faced persistent challenges such as extremism, political opportunism, and social intolerance. To reinforce secularism, political leadership must unequivocally support policies that protect religious freedom and prevent discrimination. Educational curricula should promote values of tolerance and coexistence, while civil society must actively engage in advocacy to counter divisive narratives.

Secularism is not merely an ideological stance; it is a necessity for a cohesive and forward-looking Bangladesh. As the country aspires to achieve upper-middle-income and developed status, maintaining an inclusive and secular political framework will be essential for sustainable progress. Defending secularism is, therefore, not just about preserving history, but about securing the future of Bangladesh as a prosperous and harmonious country.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

secular principles, especially under the aegis of the very party that once claimed to be the guardian of these values, highlights the pressing need for a recommitment to true secularism to ensure that all citizens, regardless of their beliefs, are treated with fairness and equality.

Secularism, contrary to the belief of some people, is not about the rejection of religion; rather, it is

with its rich history of interfaith harmony, secularism is the bulwark against extremism and sectarianism. It ensures that all citizens have equal rights and opportunities. Secularism also supports the idea that religion is a personal matter, and should not interfere with the functioning of the state.

Additionally, in a rapidly globalised world, maintaining

replace secularism in Bangladesh. While pluralism encourages diversity and respect for different faiths, it does not adequately offer the structural neutrality that secularism does. Pluralism, if not undergirded by a secular framework, may still allow religious norms to seep into state affairs, thus raising a risk of undermining equal treatment for all citizens.

Circular agricultural innovation platform can benefit farmers and consumers



Dr Sabrina Luthfa
is senior lecturer at the University West, Sweden, and lecturer at the STARS EU. She can be reached at sabrina.luthfa@uv.se.

SABRINA LUTHEA

In Bangladesh, farmers do not get fair prices for their harvest and consumers do not get access to quality food at reasonable prices, both because of the existing dysfunctional marketing channel, which includes many layers of value chain actors who are commonly known as middlemen. To address this issue, developing a circular agricultural innovation platform can help both farmers and consumers to avail fair market prices. This can be actualised only if we can create an agricultural ecosystem and a supporting infrastructure for the platform.

Innovation is not necessarily something novel; rather, it is something that creates value for consumers. In the agricultural sector, innovation can be producing quality foods, higher yield, vertical farming, precision agriculture that increases soil quality and productivity, faster delivery to the consumer end, storing, processing, preparing and marketing of quality foods at reasonable prices to consumers, etc. An innovation platform is a virtual place that enables value creation. This platform brings together producers, consumers, and other stakeholders—for example, distributors, processing organisations, policymakers, regulatory authorities, etc—and helps them identify common problems and market needs while also creating opportunities for new stakeholders to emerge. For instance, consumers demanding organic foods would necessitate organic feed for poultry, organic manure for soil, and delivery with a low carbon footprint. Entrepreneurs can find opportunities to fulfil these necessities by establishing sustainable companies.

In sustainable development literature, circular economy is defined as a regenerative system for which the main principles are: to eliminate waste and pollution; to extend the life of the products through reuse, recycling, repair, and remanufacture; and to use renewable resources to replenish the ecosystem. In simpler words, in a circular economy, waste and resources are recycled, recreated, reconstructed, and reconfigured into new products to achieve zero waste.



A circular agricultural innovation platform would connect farmers and consumers without too many value chain actors.

PHOTO: MOSTAFA SABUI

For example, cow dung can be used to produce organic manure, which can then be used to fertilise lands for crop production, or food waste can be used to create compost or rice husk ash, a byproduct produced by burning rice grain husks that can be used to produce energy to power a manufacturing facility. These examples show that circular practices are not new in Bangladesh.

However, over the last few decades, organic practices have been replaced by more non-organic ones. Thus, developing a circular agricultural innovation platform would connect farmers and consumers without having too many value chain actors competing with each other, ensuring fair prices for farmers and better value for consumers. It will ensure zero waste by coordinating the exchange of resources among different value creators, e.g. farmers, poultry and fish harvesters, green fertiliser and pesticide companies, seed and food processing centres, recycling centres, groceries, and consumers. It can also enable national and international actors to contact the farmers directly without the intervention of any middlemen. It will also enable research centres and universities to create and apply knowledge in the related field and for future education and research, and allow entrepreneurs to capture

the activities. This application would be used to increase production and promote and market fresh and processed food items to consumers.

There must be a physical platform as well in the form of an outlet, storage, processing, and packaging facility connected with this virtual platform. Farmers will bring their produce to the outlet to sell at market prices. They can leave their produce at the storage, processing, and packaging centre located close to the outlet that can be delivered to faraway markets. The physical platform must be owned by the farmers collectively. Owning the centre will increase the bargaining power of the farmers, reduce the power of different levels of *arotdar* (warehouse agents), and create a competition with large food processing companies/retailers. Consequently, it will force innovation and quality enhancement, encourage consumers to buy from the “nearby” market, and in the process will also help reduce carbon footprint.

How will the platform function? Initially this platform should be developed covering a small area, including some villages under one upazila. If the model succeeds, this can be scaled up. The platform will need a smartphone application developer, an IT and website manager, outlet managers, employees

to work in the outlet, a trainer, a processing centre manager, social business investors, and researchers from different fields of agriculture, marketing, and engineering to help build the ecosystem to make the platform functional.

Firstly, upazila storage and food processing and packaging facilities will be developed where farmers will

store their produce, process them, and package them. For example, they can wash, dry, and pack them, set a price, and make them ready for dispatch to other locations.

Secondly, there will be auction-based marketing of products from the outlet, so the profit from the produce at this centre will go directly to the farmers. Farmers will be able to upload information and photos of their produce on the app. Retailers and individual customers can contact the farmers directly through this app, unless they use their contract farmers while also having direct access to the produce at the outlet.

As we know, when supply is abundant, it decreases the bargaining power of the producer since consumers have options to choose from. Hence, farmers can produce certain items to maintain the demand and supply balance by the agricultural officers.

Now, the most important part of this platform is to use the wastes of the post-harvest and pre-market processing of products through recycling. This can create opportunities for entrepreneurs to start recycling companies. This platform can encourage entrepreneurial activities in food processing, green fertiliser, green pesticides, energy, recycling, and the waste sector. Public-private

partnerships can be encouraged, too.

Additionally, this platform will support all forms of organised training programmes of the government agencies, research organisations and NGOs, and can be the hub of agricultural transformation, from individual level to group or community level, giving a better bargaining power to the producers for better prices on their investment.

If this works at the upazila level, an extended platform at the district level can be developed to ensure faster market access from where produce can be transported to other markets.

In many advanced countries, innovation platforms exist, which enable interaction among producers and customers, allow different stakeholders to come and share information, ideas and resources, and play a significant role in creating opportunities for entrepreneurial activities to begin, shape up policies and regulations, and develop supporting infrastructure for entrepreneurial activities. Bangladesh may not be an advanced country yet and may have a number of challenges, but it is possible to develop a platform like this that can bring a fundamental change in the lives of the marginal farmers—if, and only if, we can turn this idea into practice.

ESSENTIAL DRUGS COMPANY LIMITED
395-397, Tejgaon I/A, Dhaka-1208

PRESS TENDER NOTICE

Tender Ref.: EDCL (Dhaka)/PUR/PT/ S.S perforated baskets/2025/37 **Date: 10/02/2025**

Sealed Tenders are hereby invited from the reputed Suppliers/Local Manufacturer/Workshop/ Organization for Supply of following item at EDCL, Dhaka on urgent basis:

Name of the Item	Earnest Money	Cost of Tender Schedule	Last date of Closing & Opening
S.S perforated baskets --- 50 (Fifty) pcs. For Sterile section under the Production Department at EDCL, Dhaka Plant. (Details as per Tender Schedule)	TK.2.5% of quoted amount	Tk.1,000.00/set (Non-Refundable)	Closing : 24/02/2025 at 12.00PM Opening : 24/02/2025 at 12.30PM

Tender schedule will be sold from the Accounts Department of Essential Drugs Company Limited (EDCL), Dhaka on payment as stated above during office hours on all working days (except Friday, Saturday and Govt. Holidays). No tender schedule will be sold on the opening date of the tender.

The tender will be accompanied by an amount of Earnest Money as mentioned above in the from of Bank Draft/ Pay Order from any Schedule Bank of Bangladesh in favour of “Essential Drugs Company Ltd.” without which the tender will be considered as non-responsive.

EDCL authority reserves the right to accept or reject any or all the tenders without assigning any reason whatsoever.

**General Manager (CC)
Procurement Department
For: Managing Director**

(৫" X ৪)