

Why non-discrimination demands secularism



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The Constitution Reform Commission, in its report, proposed to discard "secularism" as one of the fundamental principles underlying the Constitution of Bangladesh. I would like to argue against this proposal. What could be the possible explanations for this proposal? A little reflection shows that there can be only three possible reasons for discarding secularism: first, secularism cannot be accepted as a matter of fundamental values; second, secularism may be a valuable general principle, but it is not relevant in the present context of Bangladesh; and third, secularism is both valuable and relevant for Bangladesh but it has become redundant following the introduction of new principles, which will suffice to meet the concerns underlying the demand for secularism.

For ready reference, I will describe the first argument as the "value judgement" argument, the second as the "irrelevance" argument, and the third as the "redundancy" argument.

What is secularism?

It is first necessary to clarify the concept of secularism, because it has multiple meanings, and different meanings apply to different contexts. An important contextual distinction is between the personal level and the societal level. At the personal level, secularism usually refers to one's attitude towards religion. A "secular person" may mean that a person is either (a) non-religious or even anti-religion, or (b) religious but practising privately, without trying to denigrate other religious dispositions (including atheism, agnosticism, etc.). In either case, secularism at the personal level tends to evoke a sense of antagonism among a segment of religious people.

The antagonism towards secularism at the personal level is often transferred to debates on secularism at the societal level. But this is a mistake, because secularism at the societal level is very different from what it means at the personal level. In particular, secularism

at the societal level does not represent any attitude towards religion. The society as a collectivity doesn't have a mind of its own and hence cannot have an attitude; secularism at this level is a principle of governance.

A typical society is composed of individuals with very different attitudes towards religion; therefore, while dealing with matters of religion, the state must take a stand on how to deal with this pluralism. Secularism represents one particular stand, which can be described as the "liberal democratic" response, and is defined as the principle that, in the conduct of its affairs, the state will treat all religious views with neutrality—without favouring any particular view or discriminating against any.

The underlying logic is perhaps best explained with the help of the concept of "overlapping consensus," introduced by political philosopher John Rawls: it refers to a common ground where individuals with different beliefs can agree on shared principles while maintaining their differences in other areas. Secularism is supposed to represent an overlapping consensus in the context of diversity in religious beliefs. People may disagree on whether religiosity is better than atheism or agnosticism, and religious people may disagree on which religion is the "right" one, yet they may all agree that the state should treat all religious views neutrally without favour or prejudice.

Secularism is thus essentially a concept of neutrality. But neutrality does not imply that the state accords equal "value" to all religious views. This is because the idea of equal value cannot belong to an overlapping consensus, since people might feel that only their own religious view is worth valuing. Neutrality simply implies a commitment not to favour or discriminate against any religious view, without making any judgement on the value of any particular view. Secularism is thus

entirely consistent with the spirit of non-discrimination that inspired the July mass uprising.

Countering the three arguments

Not all beliefs can be accommodated within an overlapping consensus, however. For example, it leaves out the ideology of theocracy, which demands that a state's institutions must be based on religious principles. Since only one religion will

mean rejection of religion; it simply means rejection of domination of one religion in the affairs of the state.

This brings me to the other two arguments for discarding secularism—namely, "irrelevance" and "redundancy" arguments—which are compatible with liberal democratic values. The "irrelevance" argument could be made as follows: the emphasis on secularism may have been relevant at a certain stage in



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command primacy in this ideology, theocracy cannot seek an overlapping consensus. The liberal democratic principle of secularism is thus fundamentally incompatible with the ideology of theocracy. Therefore, proponents of theocracy in Bangladesh will necessarily reject secularism as a matter of principle—that's the "value judgement" argument for discarding secularism.

By the same token, those of us who subscribe to liberal democratic values must reject theocracy and uphold secularism. Just to be clear, rejection of theocracy does not

our history, when our society was ripped apart by deeply ingrained mistrust between different religions, but we have gone past that stage and there now exists such a high degree of harmony and mutual confidence between different religious beliefs and groups that inscribing the principle of secularism in the constitution has become irrelevant. However, certain events unfolding after the July uprising provide incontrovertible proof, if one was at all needed, that this argument is simply not credible. We should therefore reject this argument as empirically untenable.

The "redundancy" argument says the new principles proposed by the reform commission will suffice to take care of the concerns underlying the demand for secularism. Some commentators have suggested that the proposed principle of "pluralism" will serve the purpose. I beg to differ. The respect for pluralism is noble, but the question is: how would we operationalise the respect for plural values when some values turn out to be mutually incompatible, such as theocracy versus liberal democracy? Simply valuing pluralism does not provide a clue as to what to do about the impasse created by this incompatibility in a manner that respects the ideal of non-discrimination.

In my view, in the face of incompatible values, there is only one way of operationalising the respect for pluralism and non-discrimination. It involves a two-pronged strategy. First, enshrine the principle of secularism to represent the overlapping consensus among those who uphold liberal democratic values. At the same time, allow democratic space to those who wish to espouse the values of theocracy through legal means. Their values will not be reflected in the constitution at present, but given the democratic space they will enjoy, they will have the opportunity to inscribe their values in the constitution should they succeed in ascending to power someday through democratic means.

Should this eventually happen, I am under no illusion that the champions of theocracy will return the favour. Both history and current trends in the country suggest that they are unlikely to offer any space to liberal values if they come to power. Nonetheless, in order to be consistent, those of us who believe in liberal values must offer the space for legal propagation of theocratic values, with the hope that our own values will triumph in the court of public opinion.

But for that triumph to be possible, we must demonstrate to the believers in liberal democracy that we can meet their concerns for pluralism among themselves. And that in turn requires that we enshrine the principle of secularism in the constitution to represent the overlapping consensus among them, and then implement it with steadfastness. I, therefore, believe that the Constitution Reform Commission's proposal to discard secularism is a grave mistake.

Building a future for Bangladeshi football



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Bangladeshi booters are now in Shillong to participate in the AFC Asian Cup 2027 qualifiers. Their opponent is India, who will be playing before a host crowd and the high altitude chill of Shillong. Against the formidable opponent, the newest member of the team, Hamza Choudhury, has made a rallying cry. In his Sylheti accent, he declared, "We will win against India." This jolt of belief coming from the former England U21 international player, with Premier League experience for Leicester City and Sheffield United, signals something new for Bangladeshi football.

The Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) has been scouting for players with dual nationality for some time now. Danish Bangladeshi Jamal Bhuyan and Finnish-Bangladeshi Tariq Kazi have been instrumental in reviving our football. According to a football fan page, there are nearly 30 foreign-born players with Bangladeshi roots who could be considered for our national cause. Then again, we need to be realistic in thinking that our diasporic footballers are willing to sacrifice the comfort of developed countries to relocate to a country that lacks basic amenities.

To make the imported inspiration sustainable, we need to create an ecosystem for our players. This process includes a long-term vision, building of infrastructure, investment in youth development, and inculcation of national pride beyond political badges.

We need to be bifocal, admitting that the optics should focus on both the near and the far, both home and abroad. We must pursue the resources of foreign-born talent as part of a larger institutional strategy. Overreliance on these figures may give

the local players the impression that they will soon be replaced by outsiders. We must present the integration of foreign-trained players as the nation's mission to enhance its football sector, benefiting all stakeholders, including the local players. The presence of players like Hamza must serve to inspire local players to work hard for the team.

The media hype over Hamza is understandable. If he can seamlessly integrate into our system, he can inspire other Bangladeshi origin players to join our national set-up. Unless the players find the same professional atmosphere, coaching services, and training facilities, they may not be interested in moving to Bangladesh. For the betterment of both these foreign-born/trained players and our homegrown ones, we must focus on developing our infrastructure. We must ensure that our homegrown players are developed with equal care and attention. Above all, we must avoid any system that prioritises or privileges one group of players over others. A lot will depend on the coach. And we must respect his decision because he is the one who understands team dynamics.

In cases of women's football, we have seen how a remote village football academy at Kalsindur in Mymensingh produced a number of footballers who brought us glory in the SAFF championship. Most of our players do not even see a proper football pitch. We need funding and sponsors for turf fields, training facilities, and local academies in every division. Such investment is essential for the growth of football.

In the 1990s, there was a sports lottery that helped the federation generate funds. We bought those tickets not necessarily to win a million

For long-term sustainability, we need sports diplomacy that forges strategic partnerships with footballing nations such as Japan, Germany, and South Korea. The government can create bursaries for local talents to train abroad or earn diplomas. Instead of sending officials on foreign tours, we need exchange programmes that facilitate our players' access to elite training methods.

upgrade and certified, international standard coaching staff, BKSP cannot become the desired centre of talent cultivation. As part of sports diplomacy, overseas missions can encourage donor countries to further support this institute.

We need to recognise the unifying power of sport. In a nation often fragmented by politics and region, football (as well as cricket) has the rare power to bring us together. It is a stage where our dream becomes one. The other reason for investing in sports involves the fact that it answers to one of Bangladesh's greatest challenges: youth engagement. With rising unemployment and disillusionment, sport can become a national platform for inspiration, discipline, and identity.

While we wish our booters the best of luck for their away game in India, we need to renew our commitment to building a footballing culture rooted in professionalism, patriotism, and policy. With thoughtful scouting, strong institutions, global exposure, and nationwide infrastructure, Bangladesh can not only return to its former footballing glory but surpass it.

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Isolated
6 Fuses
11 Sub sounder
12 Plain to see
13 Rho follower
14 Copycat's cry
15 Before, to bards
16 Sch. support group
18 Quill need
19 Musical note
20 Play on words
21 Player's peg
22 New York's – Island
4 Encircle
25 Latte preparer
27 Speedy horse
29 Missouri motto
32 Not neg.
33 Dessert choice
34 Galloped
35 – Alamos
36 "2001" computer
37 Company abbr.
38 Psi follower
40 Mortensen of "Green Book"
42 Tiny amounts

43 Clear sky

44 Entertainer Midler
45 Raison –

DOWN

1 Rate
2 Belgian sleuth
3 "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" co-star
4 Zodiac animal
5 Fur trader
6 Grown girl
7 Second person
8 "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" co-star
9 Tiresome talker
10 Excited
17 Libya neighbor
23 Bar bill
24 Car in a 1964 song
26 Put on hold
27 Poise
28 Dorm sharer
30 Crèche part
31 Concert bonus
33 Full moon, for one
39 Acquire
41 Mineral suffix

WEDNESDAY'S ANSWERS



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