Three competing nationalisms and the battle for Bangladesh

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When we speak about Bangladesh today, we often pretend as if there is one clear national story. In reality, three stories are competing to define who "we" are and are not. Islamic nationalism, Bangalee nationalism, and Bangladeshi nationalism are not just party slogans. These are three rival nationalist projects for imagining the country.

Nationalism seeks to align the state with a particular vision of the nation. Ernest Gellner describes it as the demand for a shared culture to have its own state. Benedict Anderson calls nations "imagined communities," where individuals feel connected through language, media, and shared practices, despite never having met. Eric Hobsbawm shows how many "ancient" traditions are actually modern inventions used to maintain power. At the same time, Anthony D. Smith argues that successful nations link modern citizenship to older myths and symbols. Taken together, nationalism is a project that constructs a community in people's minds, gives it a shared past and destiny, anchors it in state institutions, and usually identifies at least one threatening "other."

Measured by that lens, the three nationalisms of Bangladesh are three different ways of defining membership, memory, and enemies on the same land. Islamic nationalism is the oldest. Its roots go back to late colonial Bengal, long before Jamaat-e-Islami politics in the 1950s and 1970s. The partition of Bengal in 1905 and the founding of the All-India Muslim League in Dhaka in 1906 created a new arena in which Muslim elites organised as a community they saw as vulnerable in a Hindu-dominated political economy. Through the 1930s and 1940s, leaders such as A.K. Fazlul Huq, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, and even the then-young Sheikh Mujibur Rahman moved within this wider Muslim frame, despite their differences. The "we" was the Muslim community; the reward was a state where Muslims would be safe and in charge; the implied enemy was "the Hindu."

The birth of Pakistan in 1947 looked like a clear victory. But the new state was split into West and East, separated by geography and culture. The central leadership tried to impose a single Muslim Pakistani identity, built around Islam and Urdu. In East Bengal, this project faced challenges and produced new tensions instead of harmony. In response, Bangalee nationalism emerged. With the language movement of 1952, the education movement of 1962, the Six Point Programme of 1966, and the mass uprising of 1969, a Bangalee political identity emerged that was no longer willing to be the submissive "eastern wing" of a Muslim Pakistan. That sentiment was transformed into an armed struggle with the Liberation War of 1971. The founding moment shifted from 1947 to 1971, and the enemy became the Pakistani military regime and its local collaborators.

The 1972 constitution tried to turn this experience into a state project. Nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism were announced as guiding principles. In theory, "Bangalee" was defined broadly. In practice, our version of nationalism was heavily majority culture-centred, which left many Biharis, indigenous communities, and non-Bangla speakers at the margins.

Islamic nationalism did not vanish with Pakistan's defeat. In independent Bangladesh, Jamaat-e-Islami was banned, and religious politics were pushed back from the centre of power, but mosque networks, madrasa structures, and religious sentiments survived. Proponents of Islamic nationalism remained in the background, waiting for an opening. That opening came indirectly through a third project: Bangladeshi nationalism.

After Mujib's assassination in 1975, General Ziaur Rahman became the president. Zia introduced "Bangladeshi nationalism" in his speeches and through constitutional changes. The focus moved from cultural Bangalee identity to a territorial Bangladeshi identity centred on citizenship. The "we" became those living within the borders of Bangladesh. The founding event remained the Liberation War of 1971, but it was reinterpreted less as an ethno-linguistic struggle and more as the birth of a sovereign state.

VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

Bangladeshi nationalism, in a more generous version of history, could have produced a nationalism that respected multiple ethnicities and religions under one legal roof, while valuing 1971 as the founding moment of Bangladesh. That path, however, was never fully taken by the proponents of Bangladeshi nationalism. Party competition and regional geopolitics pulled Bangladeshi nationalism in another direction. It became the language of the BNP against the Awami League and often against India. Because of constitutional changes under Zia and later Ershad, Bangladeshi nationalism gradually came to be viewed by many as a softer cover for Islamic nationalism. However, there are fundamental differences between a territorial, citizenship-based project and a religious identity project.

When parliamentary democracy was restored in 1991, the script was more or less fixed. The Awami League carried the banner of Bangalee nationalism. The BNP projected itself as the guardian of Bangladeshi nationalism. It took a tougher line on India. Islamic parties, including a relegalised Jamaat, spoke in the language of Islamic nationalism, turning grievances about secular elites, global politics, and war crimes trials into a call for a more openly Islamic state. Each project tried to install its own heroes, martyrs, and villains into the national calendar and the schoolbooks. The weaknesses of this arrangement were obvious. Every change of government also means a change in the national story; the state never becomes a neutral home for all its citizens. It becomes a prize to be captured so that one's own version of the nation can be declared official and others erased. The country has gone through constant reinvention of tradition to secure power.

The last decade has pushed this instability to its limits. Since 2013, the re-emergence of Islamic nationalism has been impossible to ignore. The Shahbagh protests around war crimes trials, and the counter-mobilisation by Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh and other groups, brought Islamic identity to the centre of street politics again. The elections of 2014, 2018, and 2024 failed to receive public mandate. Therefore, public space for politics became narrow, leading to the opening up of room for alternative authorities. By August 5, 2024, Islamic nationalist currents had become a major force in the uprising.

Here lies the central problem. All three nationalisms are real, with genuine constituencies, histories, and grievances. None of them can wipe out the others, though it has been tried since our independence. Many Bangladeshi citizens carry elements of all three nationalisms at once: pride in Bangla, loyalty to Bangladesh as a state, and attachment to Islam. Parties also cross these lines for political reasons. In reality, nationalisms are messy in practice, even while elites try to turn them into clean, competing brands.

If we accept that none of these projects can be eliminated, the question changes. It no longer remains a question of which nationalism should win, but what kind of political order can keep the conflict from destroying the republic.

For Bangladesh, this moment demands a clear boundary between the battlefield of nationalisms and the machinery of the state. Parties can keep arguing over whether the country and nation are Islamic, Bangalee, or Bangladeshi, and over the meanings of 1947, 1971, and 2024. But certain things should stay out of this political fight. Elections have to be a peaceful way to change governments. Judges, bureaucrats, and the security forces must stay neutral and follow the law, not any political party. School books should be written and reviewed by credible authors and researchers. And every citizen must know they will get the same protection from the state, no matter their political inclination. These steps may not end the rivalry between the three nationalisms, but they will lower the risk of the destruction of the state. If institutions protect everyone and children grow up with openness to more than one version or interpretation of history, they will grow up to be less willing to hurt competitors. If we do not move in this direction, our national identity will keep dividing us, with graver consequences each time.

Rebutting the rebuttal: On inflation, unemployment, and the Phillips curve

OPEN SKY

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My article, "The interim has failed to curb inflation and unemployment," was published in *The Daily Star* on Dec 29, 2025. Dr Abdullah A Dewan has delivered a rebuttal to my writing, published on January 4, 2026. While Dr Dewan's theoretical belief is his own choice, his misinterpretation of my writing warrants my response. The rebuttal centres on the theory of the Phillips curve, which includes a typical trade-off between unemployment and inflation, suggesting that the task of lowering unemployment raises inflation and vice versa. The rebuttal says that I criticised the interim government for not being able to control both inflation and unemployment. And to make it happen, I advocated the application of the Phillips curve as the only mantra of salvation.

As Dr Dewan writes, my article "evaluates the interim government's economic performance primarily through the conventional inflation-unemployment trade-off, concluding that policy failure explains the persistence of both." He adds that my argument's analytical assumptions do not hold anymore, and that it also omits critical institutional realities. Although I started with the notion of the Phillips curve, suggesting that the central bank raised the policy rate to 10 percent to bring inflation down, I pointed out that this high interest rate is actually augmenting unemployment by discouraging private credit, whose growth has come down to six percent. Disappointingly, inflation is not coming down as designed. Then, I concluded that Bangladesh's current situation of high inflation and rising unemployment heralds the advent of stagflation—when the typical Phillips curve disappears.

The intent of Dr Dewan's rebuttal is unclear. First, he argued that my allusion to the unemployment-inflation trade-off as nested in the typical Phillips curve is a bad attempt to mislead the reader. Second, he attempted to justify the presence of both high inflation and rising unemployment during the interim administration, whose main job, in his language, was to arrest deterioration after inheriting a crisis-prone economy. Despite my disagreement, I don't see any problem with his second stance, where he finds the interim's achievement a success, without presenting credible evidence or numbers. However, I don't see any reason to slaughter the Phillips curve theory only for the sake of crediting the interim.

Dr Dewan discards the Phillips curve as an old-style, mid-20th-century instrument. He seems to be unaware of the latest developments that fortified the curve's relevance in modern economics.

There is a plethora of research on whether the unemployment-inflation trade-off is active or not in peer-reviewed journals. Economists as a whole body of scholars didn't declare the demise of the Phillips curve, although Dr Dewan almost unilaterally sent the theory to the coffin by branding it an old, "obsolete" tool of the mid-20th century. I personally authored and co-authored papers in research journals on the existence of the Phillips curve, even in developing countries like Bangladesh and India.

In 1958, economist AW Phillips from the London School of Economics found a negative relationship between unemployment and wages after working on almost one hundred years' data from the UK. He himself didn't claim it as a theory. In the 1960s, Paul Samuelson and Robert Solow, two Nobel laureates, worked with American data and found the trade-off authentic. They first coined the term Phillips curve, which later drew enormous attention in economic policymaking. Even the Nobel laureate monetarist Milton Friedman made a powerful reconciliation of the theory by saying that although there is no permanent trade-off, there is always a temporary trade-off between inflation and unemployment. Robert Lucas and Edmund Phelps, two Nobel laureates, theorised the role of expectations, which are also pertinent to the model of the expectations-augmented Phillips curve or the New Keynesian Phillips curve.

The disappearance of the Phillips curve in the stagflation of the 1970s was due to the role of expectations and supply shocks, such as the fuel-price hikes. Thus, the Phillips curve is like a mountain, which may occasionally disappear from our typical eyesight due to clouds or dense fog. That is why George Akerlof, another Nobel laureate, commented, "Probably the single most important macroeconomic relationship is the Phillips curve."

Dr Dewan discards the Phillips curve as an old-style, mid-20th-century instrument. He seems to be unaware of the latest developments that fortified the curve's relevance in modern economics. The Harvard economist Gregory Mankiw asserted that three things have rejuvenated the Phillips curve to make it a modern policy tool: i) the replacement of wage inflation with price inflation; ii) the attachment of expectations or expected inflation, and finally iii) the inclusion of supply shocks.

The reason why we don't readily see this trade-off in developing countries is attributable to expectations, supply shocks, institutional factors, and often data inaccuracies. When those factors are taken care of, the Phillips curve reappears. Sometimes, the selection of the right data series is important. For example, Nobel laureate Paul Krugman cautioned that we need to use wage inflation instead of price inflation to see the Phillips.

Dr Dewan complains that my article "omits critical institutional realities." The fourth paragraph of my article includes, "Monetary treatments, including high policy rates above 10 percent, almost failed to tame inflation because of other rogue institutional failures such as extortions, mobocracy, fiscal debility, and declining loan recovery." It appears that Dr Dewan didn't carefully go through my whole article before orchestrating a criticism of my theoretical reference to the Phillips curve.

The flipside of the Phillips curve, the Lucas supply function—which shows a positive relationship between output and inflation—has a strong micro foundation in the rising disutility of work. Thus, the Phillips curve is not just a statistical accident; it is deeply ingrained in human psychology of accepting low wages when unemployment in society is high and bargaining for higher wages when unemployment is slim. Recent research by the Federal Reserve of Chicago showed that while the Phillips curve for the US almost flattened in the pre-pandemic period, it again reemerged and steepened in the post-Covid era. Thus, despite changes in the slope of the Phillips curve, it stays there as long as human psychology preserves order and rationality. That is why the Phillips-curve trade-off theory is a tremendously powerful companion that policymakers devotedly treasure in their toolbox.