

ESSAY

## The changing dynamics of the political economy in South and Southeast Asia and their impact on the security of ethno-religious minorities: a case study of Bangladesh and Myanmar

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### Abstract

At the geographical confluence of South and mainland Southeast Asia, connecting three economically vibrant regions of South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia, are located two asymmetric neighbours, the predominantly Buddhist Myanmar and the predominantly Muslim Bangladesh. Although at the exterior both neighbours seem to be distinct in topography, racial composition, and socio-cultural practices, they share similar post-colonial histories and nation forming trajectories, marked by decades of military dictatorship and struggles towards democracy, culminating in similar communal and ethno-religious politics. Initially these policies stemmed from a promise to secure the interests of the majority of the population but have over the decades evolved into regulating minorities' access to the benefits of citizenship and human rights, thereby rendering the ethno-religious minorities helpless. This paper seeks to comprehensively study the aftermath of the struggle for liberation, post-colonial history and the process of nation-building, to understand how and why ethno-religious identity gained fundamental stature in state politics, and its impact on the security of ethno-religious minorities.

### Keywords

Bangladesh, Myanmar, Islamization, Maha Bama nationalism, Ethno-religious minorities

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## Introduction

*“Security frames politics beyond established rules framing the issue as above politics or as a special kind of politics. Securitization then, seen in this light, is an extreme version of politicization”.*<sup>1</sup>

At the cusp of South Asia and Southeast Asia lay the vital connections of strategic sea-lanes, opening to the port haven of the resource-rich Bay of Bengal. The topography of this connecting bridge between South Asia and mainland Southeast Asia is shared between the sovereign states of Bangladesh and Myanmar, locking India’s North-eastern region to access from oceanic trade. Bangladesh and Myanmar share a 269 km<sup>2</sup> long river and land border, extending to a maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal to the south-east of St. Martin’s Island. There are perhaps extremely limited parameters for studying Bangladesh and Myanmar together. Visible differences are observed in terrain, ethnic and racial composition, predominant religion, culture, language and pre-colonial history. Yet shared colonial encounters and decades of striving towards democracy in the post-colonial period, interrupted with spans of military dictatorship and authoritarian leadership, has resulted in political stagnation, othering of the minorities and state sponsored securitization characterized by dehumanization of ethno-religious minorities.

Bangladesh is the youngest nation in South Asia, and has the eighth-largest population in the world. After suffering a genocide that resulted in millions of deaths, it gained independence from Pakistan in 1971.<sup>3</sup> The independence of Bangladesh has great importance for South Asia and additionally for the world, as it is the only country where language and cultural sentiments initiated the struggle for independence. Despite all the sacrifices that contributed to the independence of Bangladesh, within the past five decades the country has been ruled by military and pseudo-military regimes for more than 15 years. Governance by the elected civilian political regimes has been marred by corruption and instability.<sup>4</sup> Yet, Bangladesh has achieved many successes in the social, political, economic and cultural spheres. For example, The Bangladeshi economy has never contracted below 2%, making it one of only 18 developing economies in that category. The economy grew by over 6% annually in the past decade, and between 1980 and 2012 the Bangladeshi life expectancy at birth increased by 14 years, a significant achievement in relation to poverty reduction. According to the 2013 Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme, poverty incidence declined from 70% in 1971 to 31.5% in 2010.<sup>5</sup> The present geostrategic position of Bangladesh

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<sup>1</sup> B.B De, *Security-A New Framework for Analysis* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> J. Chanda, *Irrawaddy Imperatives: Reviewing India’s Myanmar Strategy* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press LLB, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> A. Riaz, *State, Class and Military Rule: Political Economy of Martial Law in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Nadi New Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

makes it attractive to foreign investors and foreign policymakers. It is also an important country for various field researchers in studying its cultural diversity, domestic and international politics and economic development.

Myanmar (also known as Burma),<sup>6</sup> on the other hand, is territorially the most extensive country in mainland Southeast Asia. Within Asia, it is the tenth largest in terms of landmass. It is comparatively less densely populated than Bangladesh, and is home to **54 million people**, making it the 26th largest population in the world. The country is geo-strategically located between two ascending powers, China and India, and has the potential to bridge East Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia to the Bay of Bengal. The median age in Myanmar is 29.0 years, making it one of the youngest nations by age and one of the cheapest labour forces in mainland Southeast Asia. It emerged as the Union of Burma, breaking from the British Crown and the Commonwealth of Nations in January 1948.<sup>7</sup> Following decolonisation, the erstwhile British Burma could not hold peace, and at the verge of balkanization of the Union in 1958 was faced with authoritarian military dictatorship, **one of the longest** in world history, with brief spells of limited democratisation. Myanmar was regarded as the rice bowl of Asia in the 1940s, but economically degraded into one of the most impoverished nations in the world with one of the biggest illicit narcotics industries.<sup>8</sup> A lack of visible and physical markers of development prompted the Asian Development Bank to call it 'Asia's last frontier of development' and the United Nations to categorise it as a '**Least Developed Country**' since 1987.

There is a song written by the late Abdul Karim 'Age Ki Sundor Din Kataitam'<sup>9</sup> which gives us insight into the past of Bangladesh. There are many poems, songs, etc. which help us to recollect the past of Bangladesh, where all religions and ethnic groups are said to have co-existed in peace. The amalgamation of all these cultures provides a unique identity to Bangladesh. Although Islam had been a major factor in the creation and sustenance of Pakistan, yet a strong presence of indigenous Sufi movements and habitation of Hindus and Buddhists alongside their Muslim neighbours led to practice of a syncretic and moderate version of Islam, showing

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<sup>6</sup> The country was formerly called the 'Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma'. However, in 1989, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) renamed the country to 'Union of Myanmar', amidst growing protests over its legitimacy. International scholarship, especially Chinese and American scholarship, is divided on referring to the country as Myanmar and Burma respectively, thereby clearly projecting their support to either the regime or the anti-regime democratic groups. For the purpose of this research, 'Myanmar' will be used for reference to events or developments occurring post-1989. For events that happened before the change, 'Burma' will be used throughout the research. Also, for the ease of research 'Burmese' will be used as an adjective instead of 'Myanmar' or 'Myanmarese'.

<sup>7</sup> N. Kipgen, "Political Change in Burma: Transition from Democracy to Military Dictatorship (1948–62)," *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 20 (MAY 14–20, 2011): 48–55. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23018213>.

<sup>8</sup> T. Myint-U, *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century* (Juggernaut, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> "Oh! How beautiful were those past spent days," translated from Bengali.

tolerance towards ‘the others’. Bangladesh has an estimated 98% Bengali population, out of which more than 5% are Hindu Bengalis, while the remainder are mainly a non-Muslim tribal population.<sup>10</sup> In 1971, immediately after gaining independence, the Bangladeshi government enacted a ‘secular constitution’ aimed at eroding religious communalism, state recognition of religion, and use of religion as a political tool.<sup>11</sup> This changed drastically in 2005, when militants exploded 450 bombs in 63 of the country’s 64 districts within less than an hour. As a result, Bangladesh has emerged as an important logistical base for militant groups operating in India from Pakistan, and for the Indian Mujahedeen in seeking to expand their activities across the country.<sup>12</sup>

Historically the imperialistic attitude of the Burmese empire under Konbaung Dynasty culminated in the three phased annexation<sup>13</sup> of Burma into British India.<sup>14</sup> The colonial experience opened up Burma like never before, to climate migrants, indentured labourers and skilled nationalities<sup>15</sup> from all corners of the British Empire. Colonial policies alienated the native population and handed the reins of the administration as well as much of the cultivable land to the hands of British subjects, especially Indians,<sup>16</sup> resulting in a shaping of the idea of the ‘foreigner’. Post-independence, Burma inherited a multi-national population as remnants of the colony along with a particular geographical location, which presented formidable strategic challenges, prompting the first Prime Minister of Burma U Nu to express the situation in 1948 as being ‘hemmed in like a tender gourd among the cacti’.<sup>17</sup> The 1947 Constitution was adopted giving importance to the principles of social-democracy. It was aimed at building a welfare state. Section 30 (1) and (2) stipulated that the ultimate owner of all the lands would be the state. It further stated that the state had the right to regulate land. It was empowered to alter or abolish any land tenure. The power to distribute land to collective (or cooperative) farming also lay with the state. Additionally, Section 23 (1) established ‘private-property’ rights. In the economic

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<sup>10</sup> ‘M. Hossain, *The Rising Tide of Islamism in Bangladesh* (Hudson Institution, n.d.), 1–13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–13.

<sup>12</sup> A.R Fair, *Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> L.K. Choudhary, “Indo-Myanmar Relations: Retrospect and Prospect,” *Indian Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs* 61, no. 4 (2005): 143–68, <https://doi.org/10.1177/097492840506100406>.

<sup>14</sup> The Treaty of Yandaboo (1826) annexed lower Burma to British India. Thereafter Pegu province and upper Burma were annexed in 1854 and 1887 respectively.

<sup>15</sup> A. Selth, *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis* (ANU Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1d5nm3z>.

<sup>16</sup> P. Bhaumik, *Bengalis in Burma: A Colonial Encounter (1886–1948)* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> R. Egreteau and L. Jagan, *Back to Old Habits: Isolationism or the Self Preservation of Burma’s Military Regime* (Bangkok: Irasec, 2008).

sphere, ‘private initiative’ also found a guarantee. Similarly, citizens’ rights pertaining to equality and liberty, including rights of farmers and workers, are stipulated in Section 13–19.<sup>18</sup> Although anti-foreigner, specifically anti-Indian and anti-Chinese, resentments shaped Burmese nationalism since the 1930s, it was not until 1962 that official government policies under the military regime<sup>19</sup> forced most of the non-Burman minorities to be alienated and internally displaced, many went into exile.<sup>20</sup> Theravada Buddhism is the <https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/faq/buddhism-myanmar#:~:text=main religion in Myanmar>, with almost 90% of the population adhering to it. Predominated by the Burman ethnic group, the Shans, Arakanese and Mon ethnic minorities also practice Buddhism. Following the military-led coup of 1962, the 1947 Constitution was suspended.<sup>21</sup> A new law of the land was drafted as the 1974 Constitution which adopted the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’,<sup>22</sup> nationalizing private investment and banks, placing further systematic pressure on exile of people of non-Burman ethnicity, and ultimately reduced the financial system to a near-barter economy.<sup>23</sup>

This paper assumes that it was an outcome of the growing hidden social, political, and economic cultures of Bangladesh and Myanmar that had been patronized since their inception. The growing religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh and Myanmar have contributed to the displacement of ethno-religious minorities to comparative safety in neighbouring countries, and this has caused substantial demographic shifts. For example during the foundational years of Bangladesh, about a tenth of its population was Hindu. Over the decades, it is estimated that as many as 25 million Hindu people from Bangladesh have crossed over into India. This brought about a decline in the Hindu population in Bangladesh to about 5%. Between May and October 2002 alone, an estimated 20,000 people fled across the border.<sup>24</sup> According to the estimates of the UNHCR, by the end of 2018 there were nearly **1.1 million refugees from Myanmar alone**. Although a refugee outflow of this scale makes Myanmar originating refugees the fourth largest refugee group in the world, yet this figure excludes the internally displaced people (IDP) of Myanmar. This study will attempt to find the principal reasons behind the exodus of the Hindu and tribal population from Bangladesh, and non-Burman non-Buddhist population from Myanmar, and also examine the religious security of ethno-religious minorities

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<sup>18</sup> K. Odaka, (Ed.), *The Myanmar Economy: It's Past, Present and Prospects* (Springer, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> J. Silverstein, “First Steps on the Burmese Way to Socialism,” *Asian Survey* 4, no. 2 A Survey of Asia in 1963, Part II (February 1964): 716–22, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3023580>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 48–55.

<sup>21</sup> R. Bhatia, *India-Myanmar Relations: Changing contours* (Routledge, Reprint 2019).

<sup>22</sup> A. Dutta, *Myanmar in the World: Journeys through a Changing Burma* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> S. Turnell, “Burma’s Insatiable State,” *Asian Survey* 48, no. 6 (November/December, 2008): University of California Press, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2008.48.6.958>.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–13.

before and after exodus by asking some major questions. The major turn towards Islamization in Bangladesh and Buddhist supremacist nationalism in Myanmar is creating refugee and displacement situations in neighbouring countries. Refugee inflows in the immediate neighbourhood have led to instability at the borders of states in India's North-east and other littoral states in the Bay of Bengal. For example the situation of Bangladeshi Hindus in India's North-eastern states, specifically in Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya, or the migration of the predominantly Christian Karen refugees to Thailand, of the tribal of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, mainly Chakma people, to India, or for that matter, 'the boat people' in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean waters following the 2012, 2016 and 2017 Rohingya crisis, the largest refugee influx of predominantly Muslim Rohingyas from Myanmar. Thus a comprehensive study of the condition of ethno-religious minorities in Bangladesh and Myanmar becomes vital for policy formulation towards South Asia and Southeast Asia in the 'Asian Century'. The reasons leading to this phenomenon will be investigated by a few questions, which are:

1. How the emergence of the radical groups in Bangladesh and Myanmar threaten minority security through their political connection, proximity and primitive accumulation in the sphere of the economy?
2. How is the changing nature of Islamization in Bangladesh and Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar assisting to shape the politics for minorities, including in creating fear among them?
3. What are the potential forces that could help in creating a counter-hegemony against the dominant discourse and allow the minorities to perceive a sense of belonging to the motherland?

For this research, we have adopted a qualitative approach in seeking to understand the major political factors that are involved with radicalization and which eventually lead to religious extremism, particularly in the context of Bangladesh and Myanmar. Since there can be no singular objective reality for a phenomenon as complex as radicalization and religious extremism, qualitative methods of inquiry are most likely to encompass the narratives that have been represented in the academic literature, in striving to depict an interpretation of this phenomenon. Even though content analysis can be treated both as a qualitative and quantitative research method, it is also largely helpful in identifying and analysing the presence and meaning of such concepts in communicative language within a naturalistic paradigm.<sup>25</sup> The purpose of the content analysis is to identify the patterns of findings and arguments relevant to the political dynamics of radicalization and religious extremism in Bangladesh and Myanmar. Lastly, this research will try to find similarities or dissimilarities between two countries with the help of comparative analysis.

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<sup>25</sup> H.F. Hsieh and S.E. Shanon, "Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis," *Qualitative Health Research* 15, no. 9 (2005): 2005. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>.



## Post-colonial nation building

Decades have passed following the holocaust of *Muktijuddho*<sup>26</sup> in Bangladesh and the *Phatsittawhlanyay*<sup>27</sup> and *Luttlattyayitikepwe*<sup>28</sup> in Myanmar. Following the partition of the subcontinent, a country for the Bengali Muslim population of Pakistan was a distant achievement. Just as the language movement of East Pakistan in 1952 was directed against the West's autocratic rule, similarly the Burman nationalism which led to the Government of India Act 1935<sup>29</sup> was mainly against 'rule by foreigners'.<sup>30</sup> In response to this rejection of foreign rule and through resistance movements, a strong sense of nationalism among the Bengalis of East Pakistan and also of the Burmese general populace in Burma evolved. In this background, Bangladeshi freedom leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman proposed a 'Six-Point Formula' that would grant autonomy to East Pakistan while maintaining West Pakistan's paramountcy. Later, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman gained an enormous victory in the 1970s elections for the proposed National Assembly. West Pakistan, then led by Yahya Khan, ordered the arrest of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman triggering a campaign of non-cooperation by the Bengali population. After a protracted struggle against the military rulers of West Pakistan along with military assistance from India, Bangladesh achieved independence in 1971. In the case of Burma, the administrative separation from India triggered by anti-foreigner rhetoric under the leadership of Dr. Ba Maw and U Chit Hlaing led to the bloodless dissection of the British Indian colony. Two legislative acts in 1935, namely the Government of India Act and the Burma Act, resulted in the formation of British Burma in 1937. Simultaneously, the Thakin<sup>31</sup> Movement gained momentum with the leadership of Thakin Nu<sup>32</sup> and Aung

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<sup>26</sup> Liberation war.

<sup>27</sup> War against Japanese/fascists.

<sup>28</sup> Independence movement.

<sup>29</sup> The Government of India Act 1935 was proposed for rearranging federal administration in British India, identifying and separating federal units to rearrange British administration. This act created the Burma Office for transitioning of the province into a separate unit. It was in line with the recommendations of the Indian Statutory Commission (Simon Commission) which proposed the separation of Burma. The Burma Act was adopted in 1935 and the actual separation took place in 1937 creating a separate British Burma.

<sup>30</sup> Indians had leverage over Burmese people in high ranking bureaucratic jobs. The Rangoon College (now Yangon University) offered limited courses in humanities and social sciences, leaving the Burmese untrained for jobs in the medical and engineering sector. Additionally, the Chettiar moneylenders from India were controlling a large section of farmlands resulting from failures in paying debts. Indian and Chinese indentured labourers filled in any role that the British colony demanded of them, thus creating a sense of insecurity of the Burmese people, towards foreigners.

<sup>31</sup> Thakin in Burmese means 'Master' and was used to address any British official. The Thakin Movement in Burma was a radical student group that rejected the British education system as it was discriminatory and elitist towards the majority population.

<sup>32</sup> Later U. Nu. He goes on to become the first Prime Minister of independent Burma; S. Bhattacharya (Chakraborti), *India-Myanmar Relations 1886-1948* (Kolkata: K.P. Bagchi and Company, 2007).

San. Thus as nations rose from the debris of World War II, Bangladesh emerged as the only country that had fought an independence war for the sake of preservation and valuation of its language and Burma resorted to a supremacist view of their ethno-religious identity. It is to be noted here that the birth of both the countries was made possible by the enormous suffering and sacrifice of ethno-religious minorities along with the majority population.<sup>33</sup>

## Constitutional developments

Recent political turmoil, the decline of political and social culture, and atrocities committed against minorities are not sudden phenomena. This research attempts to identify the reasons behind the incidents that changed the nature of these countries, which requires a critical analysis from the beginning.

Based on the Provisional Constitution, a parliamentary system of government was set up in Bangladesh. The Parliament was composed of elected members and the Jatiyo Sansad acted as the Constituent Assembly. The main features of the Constitution were the recognition of Nationalism, Socialism, Democracy, and Secularism. Since no specific details were provided, these ideas remained open to interpretation.<sup>34</sup> Similar institutional weakness can be observed in Burma's 1947 Constitution. Initially the Panglong Peace Agreement held the large swathes of non-Burman non-Buddhist territories together<sup>35</sup> through representation of minorities in the Chamber of Nationalities. Although Chapter X of the 1947 Constitution clearly recognized the Right of frontier states 'to secession', yet the terms of the Panglong Peace Agreement were violated when the military was invited by the PM U Nu to take over the administration through a bloodless coup in 1958.

Strong parallels can be seen in the bold political steps taken by the regimes in both Bangladesh and Burma. In Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman categorically declared that he took pride in being a Muslim leader, and in heading the second-largest Muslim Nation in the world. In Burma U Nu gained enormous popularity as a devout Buddhist and through promoting 'Buddhist Socialism'. In his speeches, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman made frequent use of Islamic expressions and emphasised that his vision of 'secularism did not imply the absence of religion'. On November 4, 1972, during the session of the Constitution Bill, Mujib did not hesitate to lead the Munajat Islamic prayer. In stark parallel to this situation, in Burma U Nu convened the Sixth Buddhist Synod at the Maha Prasana Guha (great cave) in Rangoon (later Yangon) while in office, as well as at the newly constructed Kaba Aye Phayar, which resulted in a developed version of the Pali canon, Chatta Sangayana

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<sup>33</sup> D.I. Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs To Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> J. Silverstein, *The Evolution and Salience of Burma's National Political Culture in Rotberg, Robert I., Burma: Prospects for a Democratic Future* (Virginia: R.R. Donnelley and Sons Co, 1998).



Tripitaka (Sixth Council Tripitaka). U Nu brought Buddhism from the socio-cultural domain to the political-administrative domain<sup>36</sup> by funding building and establishment of religious institutions from the state exchequer, much like what was developing in sovereign Bangladesh. The government extended indulgence, as well as subjecting itself to religious pressure. Due to pressure of this kind, in Bangladesh in 1973 the government allocated increased funding for religious education. This resulted in the raising of the annual budgetary allocation for Madrasahs to Taka 7.2 million in 1973 from Taka 2.5 million within two years. Additionally, in March 1975, the government reopened the Islamic Academy, which had been shut down in 1972, and it was elevated to a foundation to promote the ideals of Islam. In February 1974, when Mujib participated in the Islamic Summit held in Lahore and two months later led Bangladesh to the Islamic Foreign Ministers Conference on Jihad for the establishment of an Islamic Development Bank, the inherent contradiction and self-contradiction of the ruling government of Bangladesh became apparent.<sup>37</sup> In stark similarity, U Nu institutionalized the International Institute of Advanced Buddhist Studies and passed the State Religion Act in 1961, making Buddhism the state religion.

We assume these changes have given adequate evidence that religious politics in Bangladesh and Myanmar are not a new phenomenon. Rather it was systematically implanted during their inception. In this respect, the rise of Islamism in contemporary Bangladesh and Bama Buddhist supremacist nationalism in Myanmar have failed to address the basic livelihood issues of the people, especially of the ethno-religious minorities. The prominence of Jamaat-e-Islami in contemporary Bangladesh and 969 Movement in Myanmar have been linked to the inability of liberal and the socialist models of development under projects of secular-nationalism to eradicate poverty in post-colonial Myanmar and independent Bangladesh.

## Failure of democracy

Democracy was changed into a dictatorial form of government within a year of Bangladesh's independence. By amending the Constitution, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman took 'repressive measures' of governing in order to become president for five years with full executive authority. He additionally established a new political party, namely, the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL), and outlawed all political opposition by banning any other political parties. The fourth amendment to the Bangladesh Constitution replaced the 'parliamentary system' with a 'presidential

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<sup>36</sup> F. Von Der Mehden, "Buddhism and Politics in Burma," *The Antioch Review* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1961): 166–75, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4610325>.

<sup>37</sup> H.O. Rashid, "Desecularisation and Rise of Political Islam," *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (Hum.)* 57, no. 1 (2012): 29–40; A. Riaz, *Bangladesh: A Political History since Independence* (London. New York: I.B.TAURIS, 2016).

form of government'. Those opposed to Mujib's authoritarianism regarded such unconstitutional measures as the 'constitutional coup' of January 25, 1975. In a multi-party system with one-party rule and totalitarian control, the National Parliament's power had been curtailed, and the Judiciary had lost much of its independence as the Supreme Court was stripped of its jurisdiction to protect and enforce Fundamental Rights. Rakkhi Bahini, known for its intimidation, was the paramilitary group that Mujib commanded, and it acted almost like his private militia.<sup>38</sup> In the case of Myanmar, the civilian led democratic government of U Nu, after the brutal assassination of the Bogyoke Aung San,<sup>39</sup> the founding father of modern Burma and the Burma Independence Army, have not only failed to keep the Panglong Peace with ethnic minority states intact, but have subsequently led to the political stagnation in Myanmar by inviting the Burma Army to form a caretaker government through a bloodless coup in 1958 which lasted till 1960.<sup>40</sup> This was done to dilute the right to secession of the signatories of the Panglong Peace Agreement, which was guaranteed by the 1947 Constitution, thus not allowing ethnic minorities to secede the 'Union of Burma'.<sup>41</sup>

### Failure of implementing socialism

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman adopted socialism as a basic principle of the Constitution of Bangladesh. However his socialist policy was also questionable. Among the basic responsibilities of the state, Article 14 enshrined the centrality of the state's role in protecting the working population, consisting of peasants, labourers, and the "backward section" of the population, from being exploited. Its failure can be seen in Bangladesh experiencing an industrial decline, the Indian takeover of the country's industry and commerce, a fake currency notes scandal, scarcity of food items, reduced incomes, simultaneous hyperinflation, and the man-made famine of 1974. These were supplemented by means of the corruption of numerous Awami Leaguers who were known to have been close to Mujib. These culminated in extra dissolution of many of the Bangladeshi people closer to the Mujib regime. For the reason that new energy holders of Bangladesh were incapable of stabilizing an equitable and safe society below the political task of Mujibism, their permission of nationalism, secularism, socialism, and democracy began to strike a chord. Not only did Mujib's policies fail to address the socio-economic concerns of the state, but also the Awami League's trajectory paved the way for the rise of Islamism in Bangladesh.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> M. Islam, *Limits of Islamism: Jamaat-e-Islami in Contemporary India and Bangladesh* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>39</sup> M. Maung, *Burma's Constitution* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1959). <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-011-8890-6>.

<sup>40</sup> M. Bunte, "Burma's Transition to Quasi-Military Rule: From Rulers to Guardians?" *Armed Forces and Society* 40, no. 4 (2013): 742–64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X13492943>.

<sup>41</sup> S. Wansai, *Tracking the Transition: The Path from Quasi-civilian Rule to Fully Fledged Democracy* (Hamburg: tradition GmbH, 2017).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

In Burma, decades of colonial policies concentrated the reins of the economy, as well as cultivable land in the hands of Chettiars. To the Burmans, the Chettiars were essentially a foreign race and remnants of the British colony. The U Nu government invited the military to take control of state administration in 1958,<sup>43</sup> However, in 1962, the Union Revolutionary Council under the chairmanship of General Ne Win<sup>44</sup> exploited the simmering discontent on ethno-religious minorities and led a second coup,<sup>45</sup> this time without the blessings of U Nu.<sup>46</sup> In January 1974, following the adoption of the 1973 Referendum as the **Constitution of the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma**, the Union Revolutionary Council was reinvented into an elected government under the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). Systematic and purposeful decline of the economy was caused by nationalizing all industries, nationalizing banks, usurping land in the name of state development and introducing the Burmese Way to state led Socialism. In 1964, the Law Protecting National Unit was brought into effect and all political parties in Burma except the BSPP were banned, turning Burma into a one-party state.<sup>47</sup>

Mujibism could not fulfil the promise of Bangladesh liberation with an emancipatory political outlook and became alternatively diagnosed through the humans as a repressive enterprise.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, in neighbouring Burma, the administration could not hold the Panglong Peace Accord to keep the Union politically stable.<sup>49</sup> As a result military led policies were established, like Zia's 19-point program with its emphasis on issues as rural development, furthering industrialization, population planning, health delivery, and education, which appealed to students, the urban and rural middle and working classes, and business groups<sup>50</sup> in Bangladesh, and Martial Law from 1948 to 1950 in U Nu's Burma<sup>51</sup> followed by Ne Win's socialist policy, the Burmese Way to Socialism and nationalization brought about through the Burma Socialist Programme Party. Bangladesh under Zia witnessed some constitutional amendments via a proclamation. The amendments delivered modifications to article 6 of the original constitution, which stipulated that the residents of Bangladesh might be referred to as 'Bengali'. As an alternative, the change proclaimed, the citizens could be known as "Bangladeshi". Accordingly, the identity

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 742–64.

<sup>44</sup> R.H. Taylor, *The State in Myanmar* (Singapore: NUS, 2009).

<sup>45</sup> D.I. Steinberg, "Burma under the Military: Towards A Chronology," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 3, no. 3 (1981): 244–85, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25797670>.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 742–64.

<sup>47</sup> M. Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Thailand: White Lotus Co. Ltd, 1999).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 742–64.

<sup>50</sup> C.B. Raheman, "Bangladesh votes 1991: Building Democratic Institution," *Asian Survey* 31, no. 8 (1991): 683–93.

<sup>51</sup> M. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

of the nation was linked with the territorial restriction to isolate and the so-called “Bengali sub-lifestyle” of India, divorcing the ethnic linkages across the border. Similarly, in the case of Burma, alliance with Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) during U Nu’s democratic regime proved to be temporary due to differences in goals of the regime striving towards a Burman Buddhist identity of the Union.<sup>52</sup>

Bangladesh’s Pahadis or hill people of Chittagong Hill Tracts, ethnically and religiously different, have been targeted in attacks over several years. Their temples, pagodas, places of worship, and houses have also been set on fire, and women violated. As a result, some 50,000 hill people took refuge in neighbouring India.<sup>53</sup> The incident of the attack on the Babri Masjid by Hindu fundamentalists in 1992 resulted in a backlash towards Hindu temples and residences all over Bangladesh. Even Christians and Buddhists had been no longer spared.<sup>54</sup> According to preliminary information reaching the capital from different areas, some 28,000 houses were destroyed, 9,000 of them completely, 2,700 commercial establishments were looted and 3,600 temples, places of worship, and religious institutions were demolished partially or totally (Communal onslaught from 6th December 1992 and onward, 1993).

### Territoriality of religious identity

Religion, the territoriality of identification, and countrywide safety constituted the centre of the newly rising identification of each nation and national ideology. It might appear symbolic rather than significant but a closer examination reveals their long-lasting impact. In the case of Bangladesh, this involved training. In 1977 the authorities appointed a “syllabi committee” which declared that “Islam is a code of lifestyles now not simply the sum of rituals, a Muslim has to stay his personal, social, financial and worldwide existence following Islam from early life to death”. In 1978 the authorities hooked up a separate directorate in the education ministry and installed the “Madrasa Schooling Board” to oversee religious schooling. The responsibilities of the board included the standardisation of the Madrasah curriculum and assessments. The second grade was changed with the introduction of Islamiyat, a branch of Islamic research, at the number one and secondary stages. This course was made mandatory for all Muslim students. The authorities installed a new minister referred to as the “Minister of Religious Affairs” to coordinate non-secular activities on behalf of the authorities. Soon ‘Eid-e-Milad-i-Nabi’, Prophet Muhammed’s birthday was declared as a national holiday, and state-controlled digital media began broadcasting Azan five times a day and programs on Islam’s role in everyday life. On the other

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian unity Council, *Atrocities on Minorities*, (Bangladesh Dhaka: Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council, 2014).

<sup>54</sup> M. Guhathakurta, *Democracy and statecraft in a Neo-Liberal world: narratives and counter-narratives in Bangladesh*, n.d.

hand, the democratic government under U Nu in Myanmar, as well as the rising military, both supported Buddhism since 1948, supported through the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The short-lived State Religion Promotion Act of 1961 also made provisions for celebrating Buddhist holidays as public holidays in Myanmar, promoted teaching of Buddhist scriptures in schools, and established the role of religious and ethnic identity for selection to public offices.<sup>55</sup> Along with Burmese monk U Kelatha, U Nu advocated the need for religious intervention to contain Communist movement that had been plaguing the country since its struggle for independence. There have been periods of disruption to this policy under the military regime of U Nu, where politically active monks faced crackdown and the 1974 Constitution promoted a Burmese form of Socialism, dethroning Buddhism from the position of state religion.

A series of military regimes in both Bangladesh and Myanmar were faced with the crisis of constitutional legitimacy, and glaring discontent among students. While General Hussain Mohammad Ershad tightened the grip of Islam in Bangladesh's socio-political space following Zia's death, and introduced 'Islamic principles' into the cultural life of Bangladesh Muslims, the military in Myanmar under Ne Win forcefully registered each monk under the State Sangha Mahanayaka Committee to keep the reins of Burmese Buddhism in their own hands. However these policies were revoked under the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), a continuation of the military regime which lasted till 2011, the year when democratic transition was officially announced.

## The spring

The 1980s brought about challenges for military regimes, both for the Ershad regime in Bangladesh in 1983 and 1987, as well as for Ne Win and the Saw Maung regime in Burma in 1988. Success of the regimes in creating rifts among opposition parties and a massive crackdown saved both the regimes from being toppled. In Bangladesh, in spite of his Islamic rhetoric and steps in the direction of furthering the nationalization of society, Ershad gained the aid of Islamic political groups. The Jamaat-e-Islami, for example, maintained a close link with two opposition alliances led with the aid of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Awami League (AL) respectively, and expressed agitation through participation in road blockades and strikes. Embroiled in a political crisis that began in early 1983 and intensified in 1987, Ershad attempted to woo away Jamaat from agitators, to placate the Islamist forces as well as to prove his Islamic credential. In the case of Myanmar, democracy seemed unattainable, as a series of military led dictatorial regimes succeeded to power. Martial law was declared under the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), and a low-intensity crackdown on ethnic minorities intensified.

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<sup>55</sup> M. Crouch, "Constructing Religion by Law in Myanmar," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 13, no. 4 (Religion, Law and Society in Myanmar) (2015): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2015.1104961>.

In 1991 democracy was revived in Bangladesh. However, by this time situations had modified to some extent that Awami League, which took pride in its secular identification, made a tremendous trade in its strategies regarding faith and faith-based political events. Now it favoured being portrayed as a celebration that values Islam as an integral part of the lifestyle of Bangladesh. Similarly, in May 1990, the regime in Myanmar held limited multiparty elections ushering in hope for the people of Myanmar, for democratic change in more than three decades. The National League for Democracy (NLD) under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, participated in the elections, winning massively nationwide. The election results were rubbished by the military regime under the SLORC, which changed name and leadership within a couple of years of the election, and continued to hold power under General Than Shwe till 2011. By 2011 the regime had proposed transitioning Myanmar into a quasi-democracy to attract foreign investment as well as to counter China's growing footprint in its economy. However, by this time even the pro-democracy NLD had shaped up its electoral goal, and Bama nationalism and anti-minority sentiments had seeped into its organisational structure. This can be seen in their response to the 2012 crackdown on Rohingya refugees and the intensification of armed civil wars in the ethnic minority inhabited regions.

### Present leadership

Rapidly before the parliamentary elections in 1996, the AL chief Sheik Hasina finished the Muslim pilgrimage or Hajj with lots of fanfare. Keen to show off non-public piety, she emerged in public in a black headdress, long black-sleeved shirt, and with prayer beads in her arms. The Awami League leadership became unwilling to take the political hazard of being categorized as anti-Muslim by establishing, in basic terms, a "secular" schedule. The BNP stirred up anti-India sentiments, and as a result ostensibly threatened the Hindu neighbour, and also resorted to nearby bullying to sell its parochial religio-nationalist schedule. The AL no longer resisted<sup>56</sup> but the situation was getting worse after 2001 when right-wing elements captured power. In an exceptional show of pressure, company, and ability, two prescribed Islamist militant organizations exploded more than 450 bombs within less than an hour throughout Bangladesh on 17th August 2005 which was a clear indication of an increase of Islamist power in Bangladesh. These new forms of violence have serious socio-economic and political implications for the country.<sup>57</sup>

In Myanmar, Islamophobia was triggered to a level where Buddhist monks like Ashin Wirathu incited anti-Muslim hatred amongst the Burman majority population. The political leadership as well as high ranking Buddhist monks remained silent as the Ma Ba Tha or the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion, the Organisation

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> M.S. Islam, "Political Violence in Bangladesh," in *Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh*, A.R. Fair, (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 27–45.



for the Protection of Race and Religion and Committee for the Protection of Nationality and Religion, and the 969 Movement gained anti-fascist momentum in Myanmar. The 2012 crackdown on Rohingyas, disenfranchisement of Muslims in Myanmar's urban spaces and policies handicapping the growth and development of Muslims of Indian origin in Myanmar were a direct result of the silence and support of the leadership, including the National League for Democracy. In 2015, the NLD came into power as the first democratically elected government after decades of political-administrative stagnation in Myanmar. However, this democratic change sealed the fate of the Muslims in Myanmar, especially the Rohingyas, as soon as U Win Thein, senior leader and spokesperson of the NLD, officially denied any responsibility of the newly formed government towards the Rohingyas. Aung San Suu Kyi, of the civil-military government, has also denied responsibility following the military crackdowns in 2016 and 2017, which led to displacement and exile of over 1 billion Rohingyas.

### The political economy of structural exclusion

In the decades following independence, the number of minorities have gone down as millions have been forced into silent migration and displacement. Between the years 2001 to 2005, government recruitment of Hindus to the Bangladeshi civil service was 10% lower, opening up more jobs for the Islamists. Similarly in the case of Myanmar, exiles of non-Burman origin were disenfranchised, robbed of their properties and jobs, and forced to repatriate to 'lands of their ancestors', as in the case of people of Indian origin, or at the worst massacred as in the case of people of Chinese ancestry. The native non-Burman non-Buddhist population beyond the Irrawaddy delta were also subject to systematic torture leading to ethnic and religious conflict that continues to plague the country. In recent years, Bangladesh and Myanmar have been portrayed by international media as 'a hotbed of political and religious violence'<sup>58</sup> and 'a textbook example of ethnic cleansing', respectively. Attacks against minorities, particularly against Hind, and ethnic minorities such as the Chakma and other Jumma people<sup>59</sup> in Bangladesh, and Chin, Karen, Karreni, Rakhine, Hindus and Muslim of Indian and Chinese origin and the Rohingya in Myanmar, with political objectives have become part of political culture.<sup>60</sup>

The repression and persecution of minorities has intensified globally in recent years in the wake of the Babri Mosque incident, the Gulf War, Sinhalese nationalism, and nationwide elections. In Bangladesh, communal attacks from 1989 to 1992 increased in number. Myanmar's communal and ethnic riots became more prominent from

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 27–45.

<sup>59</sup> Jumma people are called so because they practice shifting agriculture or swidden, also known as Jhum cultivation in that region. There are different ethnicities amidst them including the Chakmas, Marmas or Moghs, Tripuris, Tanchangyas, Lushais, Uchais, Khumis, Boms, Murongs or Mros, Pankhos, Chaks and Khyangs. To the plains-dwellers they are also known as Pahadis which literally mean hill people.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 27–45.

1988 to 2017, in the absence of remedial action. Moreover, the police have been falsely and intentionally labelling the youths of minority communities as members of certain underground political groups and arresting, detaining, and torturing them physically in the name of state securitization. In consequence of the communal attitude of state power in Bangladesh, Dhaka University Jagannath Hall, which is the only hall for the religious minority students, has attacked almost 50 times from 1971 to 96.<sup>61</sup> The Burmese armed forces have systematically tortured minorities, especially the Rohingyas, a predominantly Muslim people, forcing over 1 million people into refuge in neighbouring Bangladesh, a predominantly Muslim nation, and over 90 thousand Karen people, a predominantly Christian population into Thailand, and an estimate of more than 50000 Chins, Nagas and Rakhine refugees in Bangladesh and India. There is also systematic discrimination towards people of Indian and Chinese ancestry to the benefit of the state.

Elections and democratic struggles have additionally been a focus of communal and ethnic riots. Following the well-known Bangladesh elections on 1st October 2001, which had been won by way of a coalition led through the Bangladesh Nationalist birthday celebration with a large majority, BNP supporters reportedly attacked Hindus because of their perceived support for the rival Awami League party for the duration of the election, hundreds of Hindu families have been reportedly pushed off their land by way of a collection affiliated to the BNP led coalition who, in a few instances, allegedly burnt their homes and raped Hindu women. Several **Hindus have been killed**. In the 27th BCS (Bangladesh Civil Service) in 2008, out of the general cadre of 940, 68 individuals from religious minorities were selected (65 Hindus and three Buddhists); and in the health care out of 1,477, 90 members from religious communities were selected (81 Hindus, three Christians, and six Buddhists).<sup>62</sup> In the case of Myanmar, any democratic struggle was crushed by the Military regime, which held onto power since 1962. It was the Pro-Democracy People's Power Movement of August 8, 1988, and the massive military-led crackdown, that brought international spotlight on Burma.

### Systematic policies in communalizing national identity

For a holistic understanding of the nature of communalisation, focusing only on the political structure or social changes would not be enough. The study requires a sceptical analysis of the structural change in the economic sphere which might bring about a forced change in Bangladesh's and Myanmar's political as well as social atmosphere.

Even as Bangladesh had inherited systems from each the British colonial and Pakistani nations, some of which, just like the army and the paperwork, had created

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> M.A. Afsana Amin, "Paving the Way to Liberation," in *South Asia: State of Minorities Report 2016*, (New Delhi: Books for Change, 2016), 93–153.

a privileged centre of elegance within Bengali society,<sup>63</sup> Myanmar inherited structures from the British colonial state in India. The neutrality of the state, as well as civil society, has also been undermined by asymmetrical economic growth that has concentrated resources and power in fewer and fewer hands, combined with an aggressively polarized network of power and resources which can be accessed only through kinship or other patronage ties.<sup>64</sup> Patronage politics and kinship obligations appear to be fundamental in connecting the kingdom and society.<sup>65</sup>

Considering the fact that most of the political management in Bangladesh emerges from the expanding middle-class, it isn't always unusual to discover blood relatives amongst political personalities belonging to numerous ideological camps. A new rising middle class whose base is small capital and trade are not limited to urban sites but also cover rural areas is emerging. It is this trend that is giving way to a strong domestic market that was absent at the time of independence.<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, Myanmar's leadership is of elitist and military origin, creating an unending nexus between business and politics as in authoritarian regimes. However Myanmar's economy is based more on the 'Khaki capital' as the military dominates the state's domestic and foreign enterprises directly from within the ranks, as well as indirectly from their family members. In Bangladesh's 1991 parliament, one-third of JP and AL members were from business and industrial backgrounds. Ninety-four of the BNP's candidates were formed in the business world.<sup>67</sup>

The Awami League government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Bangladesh, and the U Nu led military regime in Burma, greatly expanded the role of the state: among other things, their policies nationalised all major industries and introduced ceilings on landholding and private investment. Policymakers in Bangladesh who drew up the first five-year plan along a soviet model envisioned a process of radical redistribution and transformation that Ali Riaz characterizes as "bourgeoisification."<sup>68</sup> The military's Burmese Way to Socialism and Nationalization of private enterprise ensured the economic reins of Burma were controlled directly by the Military regime.

## Conclusion

As seen from the previous discussions on the formative years of the nation in both Bangladesh and Myanmar, the law of the land in both the cases clearly seems to be enforced top-down through either a military regime or a democratically elected partisan leadership. Over the decades following independence, these ideals of democracy

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<sup>63</sup> M. Guhathakurata, *THE NATURE OF BANGLADESH STATE* Ed. H. HOSSAIN (HUMAN RIGHTS IN BANGLADESH, 2001).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> T. Mitchell, *State/Culture After Their Culture*, Ed. G. Steinmetz (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1999).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

became insignificant as the state created structural exclusionist policies for the majority population, leaving the ethno-religious minorities behind. These structural exclusions were extended in the fields of higher education, employment, public policies and overall development of citizens of the state. At every step national identity has been communalized through the sponsorship of the state, leading to gradual stagnation of the political and economic position of the minorities, creating an emergent radical groups within the framework of the state.

Secondarily, although the situation for ethno-religious minorities in Myanmar kept deteriorating, it is worth mentioning that Bangladesh AL leader Sheikh Hasina adopted minority friendly policies and ensured safe passage for celebration of religious festivals. Unlike Myanmar, where non-Burman and non-Buddhist minorities are thought to have migrated to the region through colonial implantation policies, in Bangladesh these pockets of minorities are accepted to have shared common spaces in the territory. However, policies like the Enemy Property Act. Known as the Vested Property Act (VPA) in Bangladesh and Burmese Nationality Law, Monogamy Bill 2015, the 2008 Constitution restricting citizenship and recognition of only certain races,<sup>69</sup> and the **Race and Religion Protection Laws**, the latter of which is supported by the Ma Ba Tha, have economically marginalized the minority community. These laws not only marginalized the religious minorities like the Hindus of Bangladesh and Muslims of Myanmar but have also turned them into second-class citizens, or more importantly in the case of Rohingyas, stateless. It is considered as a major cause of their displacement and migration. Minimal representation or non-representation of minorities in electoral politics is also directly reflected in ceasing of minority property in both Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Development is a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. Development requires the removal of major restrictive factors: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as a social depression, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or over activity of repressive state.<sup>70</sup> Economic deprivation of minorities makes them weak in the sphere of economy, polity, and culture. These particular patterns of deprivation and atrocities are used to help raise a particular dominant class and influence the structure of the state. The foregrounding of majoritarianism, inscribing a language like Bengali or Burmese as a state language and subscribing to a particular religion, in this case Islam and Buddhism for Bangladesh and Myanmar respectively, as a state religion automatically marginalizes religious and ethnic minorities from attaining a central role in determining class hegemony.<sup>71</sup>

As an outcome, Bangladesh and Myanmar are said to have developed “fundamentalist economies’ in their respective ways, limiting the role of minorities. Several researchers have said that in Bangladesh, Islamist political parties have so far invested

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<sup>69</sup> 135 ethnic races in the case of Myanmar, in accordance with the 2008 Constitution.

<sup>70</sup> A. Sen, *Unnayan O Swakshamata* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 2004).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

in 13 different economic sectors, including finance, insurance, retail, education, real estate, communication, media, health care, and pharmaceuticals. In the case of Myanmar the economy is largely dominated by the Myanmar armed forces which do not recognize the rights of ethnic and religious minorities. There is also a constant inflow of foreign funding in the name of Islamic charity<sup>72</sup> in Bangladesh and foreign direct investment into the state owned enterprises that empower the military in Myanmar. Chaos surrounding elections have time and again also led to military intervention, Bangladesh witnessed it in 2007 and soon reverted back to democratic governance, however the recent military takeover in Myanmar in February 1, 2021 is also an example of the weakening of institutions resulting from political stagnation and dehumanization of religious minorities, eventually impacting the general populace. State sponsorship has also led to fastening of the changing nature of religious fundamentalism, as shown in the study. Although the very foundation of a nation depended on certain identities, both in the case of Bangladesh and Myanmar, the role of the state in making it concrete and fundamental and fastening its pace, is undeniable.

It can also be seen by reviewing the post-colonial histories of both Bangladesh and Myanmar that although varying degrees of socialism and secularism were enacted into law in the initial years, the leadership had failed to implement it for the people. Forces that can lead to creating counter hegemonic forces in the case of Myanmar and Bangladesh are civil society groups. To restore the basic tenets of the foundational constitutions of both Myanmar and Bangladesh, the role of civil society not only needs to be acknowledged but also strengthened to restore the essence of the 1972 Constitution of a secular and safe Bangladesh and a multi-cultural space respecting the rights of ethno-religious minorities in Myanmar, formulating a federal system as per the Panglong Peace Agreement.

## Data availability

No data are associated with this article.

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<sup>72</sup> H. Habib, *Bangladesh: The Hanging of Quasem Ali* (R. Sankar, Ed.) Frontline, 33, no. 19 (2016): 64–66.