

When crackdowns and cooptation fail: What constrains religious opposition forces in Bangladesh?

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This article examines an evolving mix of constraints facing two key religious opposition forces in Bangladesh, namely, a modern Islamist political party known as the Jama'at-e-Islami (JI; Assembly of Islam) and a traditional madrasa-based social protest movement known as Hefazat-e-Islam (HeI; Protection of Islam). The article examines both 'external' constraints emanating from the country's ruling party, the Awami League (AL; People's League), as well as 'internal' constraints associated with enduring frictions between JI and HeI themselves.

First, we consider a sweeping AL crackdown on religious opposition forces—crackdowns that began with JI before extending to HeI. We then consider AL efforts to divide the country's religious opposition forces by coopting HeI instead. Both AL initiatives, however, failed to tame the forces of religious opposition. In fact, even after AL crackdowns were reduced and efforts to coopt HeI were subsequently abandoned, enduring tensions between the modern Islamist JI and the traditional madrasa-based HeI continued to frustrate the emergence of a 'united front' of religious opposition to AL.

Similar tensions between modernist and traditionalist forces are associated with similar constraints on opposition cooperation across the Muslim world. Touching on comparative cases from Iran, Afghanistan, Egypt, and Turkey, we note that, within Bangladesh, a united front of religious opposition combining 'modern' (JI) and

‘traditional’ (HeI) forces is unlikely. Ultimately, we argue that AL’s enduring incumbency has less to do with AL’s anti-opposition initiatives than its opponents’ intra-religious divisions.

1. Religious-cum-political opposition in the Muslim world: ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’

Within Bangladesh, the approach to religion-state relations embraced by the incumbent ruling party (AL) is often described as ‘secular’, but in practice it is secular only in the sense that AL leaders see *themselves* as the preeminent mediators of religious belief and practice in public life. Furthermore, whilst AL describes itself as a democratic party, its regime is widely associated with elements of [electoral authoritarianism](#): manipulation of electoral processes, restrictions on fundamental rights, and constraints on the press.

Opposition parties such as JI do not describe themselves as secular; they are more comfortable with the explicitly ‘Islamist’ ideologies of JI’s founder Syed Abu’l a’la Maududi (1903-79). Maududi felt that interpretations of Islam and the enforcement of Islamic law should not be left to the ‘traditional’ religious leaders (he was particularly critical of those ensconced in local seminaries—that is, the ulema—as well as Sufi sheikhs) nor to processes of ongoing ‘democratic’ deliberation and legislation. He believed that his own ideological vanguard should be empowered, via the executive branch of the modern state (or a judicial veto), to interpret and enforce Islamic legal injunctions.

Following its landslide electoral victory in 2008, AL launched a campaign to crush its party-based ‘Islamist’ rivals. But, as we explain below, this intensive crackdown on JI encouraged the formation of a *non*-party-based opposition movement, namely HeI, rooted in non-state (so-called ‘qawmi’ or popular) madrasas. Amongst the religious opposition forces of Bangladesh, JI is best understood as an older (but ‘modern’) political-party-based force, whereas HeI is a newer (but more ‘traditional’) madrasa-

based force. Understanding the difference between modern ‘Islamist’ and madrasa-based ‘traditionalist’ forces is important—not only in Bangladesh, but across the Muslim world.

Rooted in the work of JI ideologues like Maududi in South Asia—and, building on his work, Muslim Brothers such as Syed Qutb in the Middle East—modern Islamist groups are generally associated with highly disciplined organisations, both political parties and student or community-based social movements. Further, they tend to pull away from narrow sectarian or denominational labels in favour of a pan-Islamic and generically ‘Muslim’ orientation, even as they combine their own religious ideology with university-level training in modern professions: medicine, business, engineering, and so on.

Traditionalists, on the other hand, are rarely associated with highly disciplined organisations. They tend to be associated with relatively broad and often rather loose coalitions of otherwise autonomous local madrasas instead. And, whereas Islamists gravitate towards modern professions, traditionalists tend to remain closely associated with madrasa-based studies focused on the Qur’an and hadith (that is, the sayings that record the lived example of the Prophet)—typically, via historically embedded ‘schools’ (madahab) of religious-cum-legal training. In fact, where Islamists abjure denominational distinctions, traditionalists often highlight these distinctions to draw out subtle hierarchies between them.

Whereas Islamists embrace state-based forms of executive power, traditionalists often aim to engage other Muslims via personalised fatwas instead: tailored to fit questions posed by individuals, fatwas are subject to voluntary, not compulsory, enforcement. Like Islamists, however, some traditionalists also pursue state power—either as a defensive move (to protect the autonomy of their local madrasas from various forms of state encroachment) or in a push to overcome the limitations of an idealised legal model based on ‘voluntary’ enforcement.

Both Islamists and madrasa-based traditionalists may form political parties—for

example, the Islamist Jama'at-e-Islami and the traditionalist Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ, Islamic Unity Front) in Bangladesh. However, each has also engaged in violence: students affiliated with JI collaborated with the Pakistan Army in a militia known as al-Badr to resist the formation of Bangladesh in 1971; madrasa-based veterans of the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad formed a militant movement known as the Harkat-ul-Jihad-e-Islam Bangladesh or HuJI-B [Movement of Islamic Jihad in Bangladesh]) during the early 1990s.

Collaboration between modern Islamists and traditionalists can be politically transformational. But, more often than not, disagreements *between* them stifle sustained forms of cooperation or coordination.

In Iran, the Islamist ideology of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini came together with the traditional clerical establishment of Qom (Iran's city of seminaries) to remove the monarchy of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1979. But, shortly after this, clerics in Qom such as Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Kazim Shariatmadari expressed deep concerns about the state-oriented activism of Khomeini, arguing that clerics should limit their influence to 'authoritative' scholarship, not an 'authoritarian' attachment to state power. Khomeini's arrest of Shariatmadari set up enduring forms of tension between Iranian modernists and traditionalists.

Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, international support brought modern Islamist and traditional Sufi mujahideen together in a combined form of resistance force. Yet, immediately after the Soviets withdrew, ten years later, rival Islamists and Sufis as well as ethnically divided Islamists (e.g. the Tajik-dominated Jamiat-e-Islami and the Pashtun-dominated Hizb-e-Islami) fell on one another in a brutal civil war. This intra-mujahideen failure of cooperation allowed the madrasa-based Taliban to displace Afghanistan's fractured Islamists and seize power in 1996.

In Egypt, modern Islamists from the Muslim Brotherhood worked with traditional madrasa-based Salafis to topple the authoritarian regime of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011. But, in 2013, a military coup led by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi

ousted Egypt's first Muslim Brotherhood President, Mohamed Morsi. This coup was not resisted by Egyptian Salafis; instead, they supported it.

Again, collaboration between modernists and traditionalists can be politically transformational. But, more often than not, these collaborations (and their joint achievements) are short-lived. In what follows we trace three different explanations for the failure of religious 'opposition cooperation' in Bangladesh. First, we examine AL's crackdown on religious opponents as well as the circumstances that led AL to extend this crackdown beyond party-based opponents such as JI to the non-party-based protesters of HeI. This increasingly comprehensive crackdown on religious opposition forces, however, did *not* push those forces closer together. Second, we highlight Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's pivot away from a blanket crackdown on religious opposition forces, seeking to co-opt HeI instead. But again, HeI rejected AL co-optation in favour of persistent opposition and, having done so, it also rejected any form of 'opposition cooperation' with JI. Neither crackdowns nor attempted co-optation can explain the lack of opposition cooperation in Bangladesh.

Finally, noting that the presence of a common enemy has not turned religious rivals into anti-incumbency allies in Bangladesh, we argue that the greatest constraint on religious opposition is not an 'external' constraint associated with AL crackdowns or co-optation. Instead, building on the experience of Iran, Afghanistan, Egypt, and elsewhere, we note that the greatest constraint lies in the internal 'intra-religious' ideological divide between modern Islamists and traditionalists: JI versus HeI.

2. Crackdown: AL versus party-based religious opposition (JI)

After identifying secularism as a fundamental constitutional principle in 1972, AL leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman introduced a presidential regime bringing AL together with the country's communist parties in a one-party state: in 1975, all other parties (including JI) were banned. Within six months, however, Rahman was

assassinated in a military coup. The dictator who took over after Rahman's assassination, Major-General Zia-ur-Rahman, replaced Rahman's constitutional reference to secularism with a focus on 'absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah' (1977). He also dissolved one-party rule and restored multi-party elections, including JI as well as a new party known as the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) founded by Zia himself. In 1981, however, Zia was assassinated during a second military coup. But Zia's replacement, General Muhammad Ershad, reinforced Zia's approach to religion-state relations, making Islam the state religion in 1988.

A broad spectrum of political parties, including AL, JI, and the BNP, came together to oust General Ershad in 1990, with subsequent elections (1991) bringing a coalition led by the BNP back into power. In fact, between 1991 and 2013, political power largely alternated between AL, on the one hand, and a BNP-led coalition (typically including JI), on the other. But, since 2013, AL Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina—the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—has moved aggressively to constrain all forms of opposition. In particular, she activated a so-called 'International Crimes Tribunal' (ICT) to prosecute both JI and BNP leaders for 'war crimes' tied to their collaboration with the Pakistan Army during the struggle for independence in 1971. These tribunals led to the state-sanctioned [execution](#) of several JI (5) and BNP (1) leaders.

When former JI Assistant General-Secretary Abdul Quader Mollah and JI Vice President Delwar Hossein Syedee, were sentenced to life imprisonment and death (respectively), JI activists took to the streets. At the same time, however, a rival rally more closely aligned with the rhetoric of AL emerged, simultaneously, in the Shahbagh area of Dhaka. This rival rally demanded (a) the revision of Mollah's sentence (from 'life' to 'death') as well as (b) the cancellation of JI's party registration—ostensibly in keeping with earlier changes in the country's Representation of the People Order 1972 (as amended in 2008-2009), which banned parties that 'abuse[ed] ... religion for political purposes'.

Thereafter, nearly half a million madrasa-based activists associated with HeI also

took to the streets in Dhaka's central business district (Motijheel), protesting what they described as the religiously 'derogatory' language of the Shahbagh protesters and associated bloggers. Inter alia, they called for a new blasphemy law stipulating death for any writer convicted of 'maligning' Allah, Islam, or Muhammad. Extending its deadly crackdown on JI to HeI, however, more than 50 of the protesters gathered near Motijheel were [killed](#) by police and paramilitary forces.

These events greatly exacerbated tensions between AL and the country's religious opposition forces. In fact, these tensions reached a new flashpoint when, heeding earlier Shahbagh demands, the High Court of Bangladesh cancelled JI's party registration (2014). The leader of the BNP, Khaleda Zia—the widow of General Zia-ur-Rahman—was also convicted of corruption and sentenced to jail before the country's 2018 elections. After the Supreme Court upheld the High Court's judgment cancelling JI's political party registration, the subsequent parliamentary election results were quite lopsided: out of 300 seats, AL emerged with 288, limiting the BNP to 9.

3. From crackdown to cooptation: Non-party-based opposition (HeI)

By mid-2013, AL seemed poised to fold HeI into a violent crackdown on religious opposition writ large. HeI leader Allama Shah Ahmed Shafi, however, called for negotiations instead. And, seeking to avoid any action that might threaten to create a united front drawing JI and HeI closer together, AL leaders pulled away from anti-opposition *confrontation* toward a new pattern of 'pro-HeI' *cooptation*.

Specifically, recalling the demands of the HeI protesters gathered at Motijheel, the AL government under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina took up a list of 84 'atheist' bloggers who had ostensibly 'offended religious sentiments' and, amending the country's Information and Communications Technology Act (2006), it jailed several atheist writers. In fact, five years later, the government went on to make hurting or

provoking ‘religious sentiments’ a crime in an even more draconian Digital Security Act (2018) (Clause 28). And, taking up a further HeI demand for laws deterring ‘blasphemous’ public statues that might encourage Muslim veneration of something other than Allah, the AL government moved a statue on the country’s Supreme Court premises. HeI activists had described the statue of Themis, the Greek figure of divine justice (depicted as a woman wearing a sari with a sword in one hand and the scales of justice in the other), as idolatrous.

Moreover, reaching beyond HeI concerns regarding atheism and blasphemy, Prime Minister Hasina sought to fold HeI-affiliated ulema into larger networks of state patronage, with expenditure for her Ministry of Religious Affairs increasing more than 250 percent between 2011 (US\$16M) and 2020 (US\$42.5M) alone. In 2014, the government offered 33 acres of prime state land held by Bangladesh Railways to HeI’s flagship Hathazari Madrasa in Chittagong. And, in 2017, the government recognised what is known as the ‘tamil’ or ‘dawra-e-hadith’ degree (the highest level of qawmi madrasa education) as equivalent to a state-recognised Master’s degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies, allowing millions of non-state qawmi madrasa graduates to apply for government jobs.

HeI’s response to this AL campaign of conciliation initially appeared quite congenial. In 2017, HeI leaders [promised to refrain from staging any major anti-government protests](#). And, in November 2018, an HeI ceremony in Dhaka recognised Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina as a ‘Qawmi Janani’ (Qawmi Mother) to acknowledge her support for qawmi madrasas. But, as an effort to deter religious opposition, the success of this shift from crackdown to cooptation was brief.

Just a few days before he stepped down as the leader of Chittagong’s Hathazari madrasa and died in September 2020, HeI leader Allama Shah Ahmed Shafi confronted student protests calling for the removal of his pro-AL son, Madani, from the Hathazari madrasa board. (Madani was accused of removing Hathazari staff on the instruction of AL leaders and benefitting, personally, from AL patronage.) Shafi’s decision to remove his son, however, cleared the way for new leadership under

Junaid Babunagari, who had long resisted government co-optation in favour of qawmi autonomy. In particular, Babunagari opposed HeI's recognition of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina as 'Qawmi Mother'. And, alongside another madrasa-based party (Islami Andolan Bangladesh), he [opposed](#) Sheikh Hasina's push to erect statues of her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, across the country.

Under Babunagari, HeI returned to a pattern of energetic street protest. In November 2020, HeI protesters criticised the French President, Emmanuel Macron, for eulogizing a Paris school teacher who had been killed by a Chechen Muslim migrant after showing his students cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad that many Muslims considered blasphemous. In March 2021, HeI protesters confronted Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a state visit marking the fiftieth anniversary of Bangladesh's independence. AL had long maintained close ties with India but, within India, Prime Minister Modi was criticised for abetting (or failing to deter) several Muslim murders at the hands of Hindu-nationalist vigilantes.

HeI's anti-Modi activism, however, was met with violence. Police killed at least 10 HeI supporters. In fact AL abandoned any pretence of HeI conciliation or cooptation, returning to confrontation. Specifically, claiming that some of members of HeI's central committee maintained ties to the militant group HuJI-B, they dissolved the committee. But, just two months later, Babunagari set those accused of HuJI ties and convened [a new committee](#). (Since Babunagari died in August 2021, his maternal uncle and successor, Muhibullah Babunagari, has actively sustained his views.)

From crackdowns to cooptation and back again, AL tried to tame the madrasa-based protesters of HeI. But it failed. By 2021, both JI and HeI were strongly opposed to AL. But, even then, the Islamist and traditionalist opposition forces of Bangladesh failed to cooperate with one another.

5. When crackdown and cooptation fail: What constrains opposition cooperation in Bangladesh?

Blanket political ‘exclusions’ like the crackdowns associated with the increasingly autocratic regime of AL are generally considered [more likely](#) to facilitate cross-ideological cooperation than periodic bouts of political ‘inclusion’, particularly when that inclusion is based on selective and thus [divisive forms of regime co-optation](#). But, even with respect to political exclusion, anchored in repression, it may be that what really matters is not the lethal intensity of that repression but its structure. Scholar [Elizabeth Nugent](#), for instance, has argued that ‘undifferentiated’ repression that fails to distinguish between various groups is *more* likely to facilitate cross-ideological cooperation than ‘differentiated’ forms of repression that actively distinguish between otherwise similarly placed opposition groups.

In Bangladesh, however, AL repression is generally described as ‘undifferentiated’ and, thus, more likely to push groups such as JI and HeI closer together. Specifically, AL and its supporters routinely [conflate](#) HeI and JI within made-up names like “Hefazat-Jama’at”. Precisely insofar as this is the case, however, the key question arises: why, even *after* AL’s failed effort to co-opt HeI, has AL’s *undifferentiated* repression *failed* to spur intra-religious modernist-traditionalist JI-HeI cooperation?

When JI Secretary-General Mia Golam Porwar and former JI parliamentarian Shahjahan Chowdhury were spotted in the funeral cortège of HeI leader Shah Ahmed Shafi in 2020—and, in 2021, when JI activists joined HeI’s anti-Modi protests—many began to [wonder](#) whether the madrasa-based traditionalists of HeI might be prepared, not merely to co-exist with the party-based Islamists of JI, but also to pursue new forms of potentially transformative opposition cooperation and coordination. Yet, building on the comparative experience of Muslim modernists and

traditionalists elsewhere, we argue that this is unlikely. Responding directly to questions about Shafi's funeral cortège, HeI spokesman Allama Azizul Haque Islamabadi [asked](#), '[w]hy is there so much discussion about the participation of some leaders of Jama'at' when '[m]illions' attended the funeral? 'Jama'at has ideological differences with Hifazat', and '[w]ith this, the question of ... friendship does not arise'. Further, taking up AL claims about coordinated protest action, one intrepid reporter [noted](#) that, during HeI's anti-Macron protests, a more significant role for JI was actively thwarted due to police-Hefazat 'joint steps'.

Under Junaid and, later, Muhibullah Babunagari, HeI responded to AL repression whilst simultaneously refusing to consider any form of 'opposition cooperation' with JI. And, in their own words, they did so for *intra-religious ideological reasons*. 'All my life ... I have been making the people aware of the erroneous beliefs of [the] Jama'at', [noted](#) Junaid Babunagari in 2020. In fact five months later his Joint Secretary-General Moinuddin Rumi [reiterated](#) that, '[i]deologically, our disagreement with Jama'at-e-Islami is long-standing'. And, then, after Junaid died, Muhibullah [added](#) that 'Hefazat ha[s] no ideological connection with Jama'at'. 'Jama'at's distance from the Qawmi is historically recognized for ideological reasons', he said, stressing that 'Jama'at has not ... formed any alliance with Hefazat'.

It would be difficult to miss HeI's effort to explain that its ideological differences with JI were a key factor underpinning its lack of opposition coordination. Like the intra-religious ideological differences separating the Islamist Khomeini from the traditionalist Shariatmadari (Iran), the Islamist Jamiat-e-Islam from the madrasa-based Taliban (Afghanistan), or the Muslim Brotherhood from Egyptian Salafis and the madrasa-based leadership of al-Azhar (Egypt), these ideological differences reflect [competing views about the proper relationship between religious and political power](#). 'What seem like trivial disagreements to outside observers', argues [Sultan Tepe](#), are often deeply divisive 'ideological commitments' that 'prevent religious groups from acting as a unified bloc'.

Briefly, religious opposition forces across the Muslim world are caught up in a two-level game. As one HeI leader explained to us (Anonymised Interview, 6 July 2017), recognising the importance of common religious struggle against AL in Bangladesh, both the Jama'at and Hefazat reject secularism and 'believe in the possibility of establishing peace ... through the implementation of Islamic law'. But, despite this common attachment, he added that JI and HeI sustain persistent differences *within* this focus on Islamic law 'regarding the method of implementation'.

Conclusion

This article argues that intra-religious ideological differences are a key barrier limiting sustained forms of opposition cooperation in Muslim-majority electoral autocracies such as Bangladesh. Focusing on religious opposition under AL Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, we pull away from arguments that explain failures of opposition cooperation in terms of top-down political opportunity structures (e.g. regime repression or co-option) to argue, instead, that cooperation is more directly constrained by bottom-up ideological tensions—especially, ideological tensions separating modern Islamist parties (e.g. JI) from traditional madrasa-based social movements (e.g. HeI). As one Bangladeshi journalist [noted](#), observers often 'confuse Hefazat-e-Islam and Jama'at-e-Islam [sic]'. Although '[m]any leaders of Hefazat-e-Islam are involved in politics', they do not 'do Jama'at politics'. 'Jama'at', he stressed, 'believes in [the] Maududi doctrine', whereas Hefazat is a staunch opponent of ... [that] doctrine'.

The Muslim world is filled with Islamists and traditionalists arrayed against a common political enemy: in Iran (versus the Shah); in Afghanistan (versus the Soviets); in Egypt (versus President Mubarak); in Yemen (versus President al-Salih); and so on. But, as in Iran, Afghanistan, Egypt, and Yemen, so too in Bangladesh: the degree to which modernist and traditionalist religious opposition forces might prevail depends, not merely on their ability to recognise a common enemy, but also—and primarily—on their ability to sustain forms of cooperation despite

enduring ideological differences.

It seems unlikely that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will cultivate a vibrant multi-party democracy in Bangladesh anytime soon. Instead, she seems more likely to sustain vibrant but highly fragmented forms of religious-cum-political opposition. Neither sticks nor carrots have allowed AL to settle enduring questions regarding the shape of religion-state relations in Bangladesh. But, having said this, the country's religious opposition forces are unlikely to collaborate in ways that might allow them to resolve those questions for themselves: '[t]he ulema are inherently different from JI', [noted](#) HeI in 2013; traditionalist ulema have 'vehemently opposed the [modernist] ideology of JI since the colonial period'.

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Image: Police during a nationwide strike following deadly clashes with police over Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, March 28, 2021.

Credit: [Mamunur Rashid/Shutterstock](#).