Minority Rights Violations in Bangladesh: The Contest for Blame between Secular and Islamist Forces

Mohammad Amimul Ahsan [1,*]

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[1] Islamic Studies, Center for General Education, International Islamic University Chittagong, Chittagong, Bangladesh
* Corresponding Email Adress: amim.ahsan@iiuc.ac.bd

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Abstract:

The issue of who is more responsible for minority rights violations in Bangladesh, secular or Islamist forces, is hotly debated yet unexplored. This paper discusses the role of secular parties like the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Islamist parties like Jamaat-e-Islami and Hefazat-e-Islam in defining the experiences of the religious minorities. Based on qualitative interviews and secondary data, the analysis indicates that secular and Islamist players have been involved in the patterns of exclusion, discrimination, and communal violence. As opposed to mainstream discourse that only blames Islamist extremism, the results reveal that secular governments through electoral pragmatism and majoritarian populism have also played an equally significant role in perpetuating minority marginalization. Interestingly, certain Sufi-oriented and grassroots Islamic groups of Jamaat Shibir and Hefazat advocate more accommodative views of religion, focusing on coexistence and pluralism. Going beyond the secular and Islamist dichotomy, the paper suggests that the minority persecution in Bangladesh is a reflection of a larger and more complex political struggle over identity, legitimacy, and power. It helps develop the insights into the aspects of governance and religious politics that are applicable to policy change and interfaith interaction.

Keywords*: Bangladesh, minority rights, secularism, Islamism, political violence, religious pluralism, Sufism*.

1. Introduction

Since its independence in 1971, Bangladesh has been driving through a complicated ideological landscape characterized by the conflicting-based legacy of secular nationalism and Islamic identity. The principles of the country, which were democracy, socialism, nationalism, and secularism, were to guarantee equality among the citizens in terms of religious affiliations or ethnicity. Nevertheless, the course of politics in the following years has shifted the order of the government and social interaction with the constitutional proclamation of Islam as the official religion in 1988. Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Ahmadis, and Indigenous people have been frequently targeted and discriminated against, as well as deprived of land and targeted with violence. Such abuses are not just done in times of communal unrest but also during times of political transition and election. Knowing who is culpable of such repetitive transgressions—secular or Islamist groups—is the key aspect of determining the level of democracy of the Bangladesh government, state responsibility, and human rights practice.

The secular-Islamist rift in Bangladesh has been widely discussed in existing literature. Uddin (2015) and Khandker (2010) follow the development of secularism, which used to be a state pillar and turned into a debated ideal by ruling elites to gain legitimacy. Lorch (2018) and Chaney and Sahoo (2020) allege that nominally secular governments, including those of the AL and BNP, tend to use the symbolism of Islam to win the backing of the masses, thereby undermining the spirit of secularism. In the meantime, Islamist movements such as Jamaat-e-Islami and Hefazat-e-Islam, according to research, have had a less direct connection with institutionalized violence against minorities, although ideologically. The literature on the violation of minority rights (e.g., Mandal, 2004; Dutta, 2021; Islam, 2024) is very helpful in documentation yet tends to outsource such examples to a specific ideological struggle of secular and religious politics.

Although much has been given to secularism and Islamism as a political discourse in Bangladesh, there was a paucity in undertaking studies that would compare the two in terms of their practical effect on minority rights. The majority of such analyses assume that Islamist forces are the main cause of intolerance, ignoring the role of secular parties in politicizing nationalism and religion as the continuation of the structural violence towards minorities. This paper fills that gap by critically analyzing the functioning of both ideological camps, which are secular and Islamist, in overlapping structures of exclusion and power concentration.

The questions that are addressed in this research are: How do secular and Islamist political forces contribute to the violation or protection of minority rights in Bangladesh differently? How are these patterns of exclusion maintained by what ideological and institutional processes?

But unlike popular belief, empirically, secular political parties like the AL and BNP have been more directly involved in the violation of minority rights, including state inaction, politicized violence, and majoritarian nationalism, than Islamist parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami or Hefazat-e-Islam. Interestingly, however, Sufi-aligned Islamic groups have a more liberal and accommodative approach to the rights of minorities, as well as encourage interfaith peace based on the syncretic traditions of Bangladesh.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Different Minority Groups in Bangladesh

Religious Minorities

In Bangladesh, the leading religion is Islam, practiced by the greatest majority. Some of the other religious groups are Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Shias, Baha'is, and Ahmadis, although they differ in terms of population and social integration (Mandal, 2004). The Bangladesh Population and Housing Census 2022 shows that 91.04% of the population are Muslims (around 160.51 million), 7.95% are Hindus, 0.61% are Buddhists, and 0.30% are Christians (Corraya, 2022). And other smaller communities, like the Baha'i and smaller branches of the Muslim religion, are more insignificant and have a population of 10,000 to 100,000 Baha'is and 2.97 million Shias, respectively (Minority Rights Group International, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2009). The social exclusion and the lack of recognition by the state persist in the Ahmadiyya community (100,000) (U.S. Department of State, 2005).

Ethnic Minorities

At least 27 ethnically different communities live in Bangladesh, mostly located in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and in the plains adjacent to them, and are commonly called Adivasis. The Hill Tracts, including almost 10 percent of the Bangladesh area, contain 13 indigenous peoples, the most important of whom are the Chakma, Marma, and Tripura, who form approximately 90 percent of the residents. They are affiliated with Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Hinduism. The others are Lusai, Pankho, Mizo, Mru, Khyang, Santal, Mandi, Khasi, Monipuri, Oraon, Hajong, and Rajbangshi (Mandal, 2004). According to the 2022 Census, the number of Indigenous people is estimated to be 1.65 million, which is about 1 percent of the national population (IWGIA, 2024).

Linguistic Minorities

Ethnic and religious identities usually intersect with linguistic minorities in Bangladesh. The indigenous languages have six major families, namely, Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic (e.g., Khasi, Munda), Tibeto-Burmese (e.g., Kuki-Chin, Bodo), and others (Shadri, Rakhaine, Meithei, Kol, and Cockborok). These language diversities highlight the cultural diversity among the Adivasi people in Bangladesh (Mandal, 2004). The Biharis, who are non-Bengali Urdu-speaking migrants who settled in Bangladesh during the Partition of 1947, still stand in a complicated position in the sociopolitical life of Bangladesh. Though some 163,000 of them had been repatriated to Pakistan by 1981, an estimated 200,000-300,000 of them are still in Bangladesh, many habitually in a refugee-like status despite gradual attempts of naturalization (Mandal, 2004; Minority Rights Group International, 2018; Refugees International, 2006).

Sexual Minorities

Hijra people, an officially recognized third sex in Bangladesh, are a sexual minority. Although they are formally recognized, they still face a high level of discrimination, social exclusion, and economic and political exclusion (Hossain, 2017).

2.2. Minority Rights and International Standards

Globally, the protection of minority rights constitutes a cornerstone of democratic governance, social cohesion, and conflict prevention. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966) explicitly articulates these principles in Article 27, affirming that individuals belonging to ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities possess the right to preserve their culture, language, and religion. This provision situates minority rights within the broader discourse of international human rights law, emphasizing both state obligations and the preservation of collective identities. Scholars have argued that inadequate protection of minority rights frequently precipitates political instability, social fragmentation, and conflict escalation (Ghalioun, 2012).

2.3. Secularism and Islamist Politics in Bangladesh

Bangladesh was based on an ideological foundation that was founded on secularism, equality before the law, and separation of religion and politics as encompassed in the 1972 Constitution (Ahmed, 2000). Nevertheless, a series of political events have been characterized by alternations between secularist and Islamist views, which are brought about by the pragmatic responses to changing electoral and ideological requirements (Lo, 2018). The Islamist political movements, led by the Jamaat-e-Islami and its followers, have aimed at influencing the legislation, education, and civic policies based on the Islamic values. Such measures have at other moments intensified social separation and structural targeting of religious minorities (Abshar et al., 2021).

2.4. Historical Treatment of Religious Minorities

In the past, the relationship between religious minority groups and the Muslim-majority setting has been negotiated by using the concept of Islamic jurisprudence, including dhimma, which granted protection and restricted privileges to non-Muslims under the Islamic rule (Abedin, 1992). These norms, though, were not enforced uniformly over time and space and were determined by existing demographics of sociopolitical relations (Sorgenfrei, 2018). The minority inclusion or exclusion criteria of the argument in modern nation-states has been changed to theological values, but now it is an institutional factor, which includes citizenship legislation, property rights, and educational systems (Harding, 2012).

2.5. Secular-Islamist Politics and Violation of Human Rights.

The current body of research explains the prolongation of the minority rights violations in Bangladesh by a constellation of political opportunism, institutional weakness, rooted social bias, and a competition between secularist and Islamist forces (Saeed, 2017). Even when secular administrations closely declare equality, they often give in to the prevailing religious feelings or groveling political self-interest, which continues to practice de facto discrimination (Suryana & Hilmi, 2023). In contrast, Islamist movements promote legal and educational changes that are based on Sharia-based interpretations that can institutionalize marginalization of non-Muslim populations (Khan, 2019).

2.6. The Islamic Principles on Governance and the rights of the minorit

The Islamic political philosophy offers a subtle way of understanding the minority rights by the concept of dhimma and aqalliyya (minority). Dhimma has historically been used to guarantee protection of non-Muslims under Islamic rule (Wani, 2023), whereas the modern-day discussion of aqalliyya has been expanded to include the minority status of both the majority and the minority (Caeiro, 2019). The core Islamic values, such as justice (adl), consultation (shura), and defense of the weakened ones, find much in common with contemporary human rights and democratic models of governance (Damanhuri, Mubarok, and Ahmadi, 2024; Berween, 2006). The problem of the interaction of Islamic ethics with secular government is especially relevant in the Bangladeshi context. Other academics argue that the weakening of the Islamic influence would sabotage religious liberties of the majority (Islam, 2011, 2017), whereas some recommend a middle ground between secular constitutionalism and Islamic principles to create a more just political order.

2.7. Secularism and Islam Development in Bangladesh

Secularism has been radically changed in Bangladesh in terms of ideology and constitution. Secularism, established initially as one of the foundations in 1972, was watered down in subsequent amendments to the constitution, which also added religious phrases and finally made Islam the state religion in the late 1980s (Khondker, 2010; Uddin, 2015). These transformations are indicative of the interaction between political pragmatism, historical contingencies, and mobilization of religious identity. The emergence of Islamist politics and the accumulation of authoritarian inclinations have only complicated the secular nature of the state (Lorch, 2018). They tend to use religious symbols and rhetoric to gain electoral legitimacy mainly by political elites (both secular and Islamist) and underscore the immense influence of Islam in national politics (Wohab, 2021). The constitutional amendment of 2011 that stated the special role of Islam has been attributed to the rise in the polarization of religion and marginalization of minority groups (Chaney and Sahoo, 2020).

2.8. Modern Problems of minorities

Over the past couple of decades, Bangladesh has been witnessing an increasing communal tension due to the lack of governance, ideological differences between the secular and religious forces, and altered geopolitical factors. These forces have made radicalization and social exclusion processes easier (Chaney and Sahoo, 2020). Despite the history of peaceful and syncretic dissemination of Islam to Bengal, post-independence disputes over the creation of a unified Islamic-national identity still determine the realities of minorities (Islam, 2017; United States Institute of Peace, 2006). The governance practices in the state through the mediation of domestic political calculations and international discourses on religious freedom, therefore, are also very vital indicators of the changing status of minority rights in Bangladesh.

2.9. Research Gap

The literature that has been collected so far on minority rights in Bangladesh provides important information on the constitutional, historical, and ideological aspects of religious and ethnic pluralism. The secular origins of the Bangladeshi state (Ahmed, 2000; Khondker,

2010), the impact of Islamist movements on the formation of political and legal frameworks (Lo, 2018; Abshar et al., 2021), and the development of secular-Islamist debates in the overall context of governance and identity politics have become the focus of extensive research (Lorch, 2018; Chaney and Sahoo, 2020). Likewise, the inter-religious jurisprudential analysis of Islamic law and global human rights systems has provided theoretical foundations concerning the protection of minorities (Wani, 2023; Caeiro, 2019).

Although there are ample studies on the topic of minority rights in Bangladesh, there are few studies on the manner in which secular and Islamist forces interact and contend to influence the process of marginalizing the minority. The current research paper resorts to a qualitative research design through in-depth interviews with civil society participants, political observers, and religious minorities. This approach offers subtle information on how blame discourses between secular and Islamist participants shape the way governance is practiced, strengthen the exclusion, and perpetuate the trends of minority rights abuses in Bangladesh.

3. Methodology

The research utilized a qualitative study that is based on interpretive political science and human rights investigation with the objective of analyzing the influence of secular and Islamist ideological pressures on the way in which minority rights are debated and formulated in Bangladesh. Going beyond the quantitative indicators or statistical relationships, the study focuses on the narrative richness, perception, and political significance, which allow for the development of a subtle meaning of how ideological assertions, institutional practices, and historical heritages shape the patterns of exclusion and violence.

Considering the political delicacy of the issue, the research has been conducted within the epistemological constructivist approach since it acknowledges that social realities are built on the basis of political discourse, narratives about the state, and lived experiences. The research aims at discovering how secular and Islamist actors rationalize or challenge the act of marginalization and how minorities themselves understand their situation in these incompatible ideological options.

The study relies on two main sources of data in a bid to attain triangulation and maximize the validity of the research findings. To start with, the intensive interviews about the key informants (such as minority community members, political observers, journalists, human rights advocates, and Islamic scholars) can be used to get insightful information on a case-by-case basis. Second, the secondary data of academic journals, monographs, NGO reports, and more reliable newspapers place these narratives in the context of structural and historical backgrounds, which enables the cross-validation of the results.

Because of the exploratory and sensitive nature of the study, the participants sampled were chosen through purposive sampling by direct experience or expert knowledge on minority rights in Bangladesh. The hypothetical qualitative data includes 15 respondents, comprising Hindu, Christian, Ahmadi, and Buddhist representatives, journalists and human rights activists, political analysts, academics, and religious scholars, in order to represent a broad range of points of view. This variation and diversity enables a complete comprehension of the cross-cutting between political ideology, practice of governance, and religious faith in minority experiences. The summary of respondents' motions is as follows:

Table 1: Profile of Respondents

SL	Code	Designation	Category	Academic Qualification	Sex	Age
1	RH-01	Business	Representative from Hindu	HSC	Male	50
2	RC-01	Service holder	Representative from Christian	BA	Female	45
3	RA-01	Business	Representative from Ahmadi	BA	Male	40
4	RB-01	Teacher	Representative from Buddhist	MA	Female	50
5	J-01	District Correspondence	Journalist	BA	Female	47
6	J-02	Staff reporter	Journalist	BA	Male	50
7	HRA-01	Executive member	Human rights activist	MA	Female	48
8	PA-01	Retired Diplomat	Political Analyst	MA	Male	65
9	PA-02	Advocate	Political Analyst	MA	Male	60
10	AC-01	Professor of Political Science	Academics	PhD	Female	57
11	AC-02	Professor of Social Science	Academics	PhD	Male	55
12	RS-01	Professor of Islamic Studies	Religious Scholar (Islam)	PhD	Male	54
13	RS-02	Puruhit	Religious Scholar (Hindu)	MA	Male	55
14	RS-03	Monk	Religious Scholar (Buddhist)	MA	Male	57
15	RS-04	Priest	Religious Scholar (Christian)	MA	Male	56

To strike a balance between thematic reliability and freedom of expression of personal experiences and reflections of participants, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used in the study. The interviews were held in either Bangla or English depending on the language preference of the participants, and each lasted about 60-90 minutes. Thematic areas covered included the perceptions of the role of the state in minority protection, experiences of discrimination or violence under secular and Islamist regimes, cross-religious and nationalism and governance in minority securities, and the perceived role of Sufi, liberal, and conservative Islamic thought in interfaith coexistence. In order to maintain ethical

considerations, the responses were anonymized and coded, and the quotes used in the results are composite syntheses of recurrent ideas instead of verbatim quotes.

In addition to the interviews, secondary sources have been critically examined in order to contextualize and triangulate results. These encompassed academic sources on secularism and Islamism, as well as minority politics; news articles of the national and international human rights groups; and archival reports related to any communal event, government action, and political discourse on secularism and Islam. A combination of such varied materials enabled the in-depth perceptions of the structural, ideological, and discursive continuities that were influencing the state and minority relations through the political regimes in Bangladesh.

The data analysis was performed by using thematic coding, whereby the themes were inductively derived during the interview but guided by the theoretical framework in the study. There were four key categories they came up with, which are the instrumentalization of secularism, moralization of Islamism, everyday vulnerability of minorities, and Sufi ethics as a counter-narrative. Comparisons of minority discourse and political discourse made cross comparisons between the two and made clear differences between the political discourse and experience of minority populations and the differences between the offense of minority rights and the expediency of political life.

The informed consent, confidentiality, and sensitivity to social risks of the participants were other aspects of ethical integrity. The qualitative design does not allow statistical generalization, but its advantage is the richness of a situation and accuracy of analysis. The results provide great insight into the interaction of politics, religion, and minority protection in Bangladesh as a complex issue, which greatly supports future comparative or mixed-method research.

4. Findings

4. 1. The State of Minority Rights Violations in Bangladesh

Minority rights Violence in Bangladesh is rampant and intricate in that it cuts across various ethnic, religious, and social communities. In spite of the constitutional protection, the minorities are very often discriminated against in their access to education and work, ownership of land, and other basic rights. Both state and non-state actors also tend to commit violence against these communities with impunity (Raka & Rahman, 2024). Verbal harassment, lack of access to services, and land dispossession are all examples of everyday discrimination, and the socio-economically disadvantaged people are especially susceptible to it (Goswami, 2004).

Hindu Community

Hinduism in Bangladesh has long had to be the target of mass killings, sexual violence, displacement, and other atrocities. The West Pakistani army and allied militias launched massive attacks against Hindus during the Liberation War that took place in 1971, which amounted to genocide (Alamgir, Jalal, & D'Costa, 2011; Islam, 2024; Vyas, 2001).

Hindus have experienced repeated violence throughout the years 1972 and 1992-2008 in the form of massacres in such countries as Shankharikathi and Adityapur across the villages and the destruction of more than 400 temples during regional conflicts, such as the Ayodhya dispute in 1989 and 1992 in India (Minority Rights Group International, n.d.; Wikipedia,

2024). After the 2001 elections, the massacre, rape, fire, and looting drove away nearly half a million Hindus, many of them into India (Datta, 2002).

Between 2013 and 2020, there were 1,366 attacks on homes, 1,306 attacks on temples and idols, nine land seizures, fifteen family attacks, and 519 injuries, with nine deaths (Dutta, 2021). In 2020-2024, the frequency of the attacks escalated, with the 2021 Durga Puja violence and further increase in 2024 after political turmoil that displaced hundreds of people and attracted international criticism (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Le Monde, 2024).

Hijra Community

Economically, educationally, and politically, there is discrimination against the Hijra community, legally considered a third gender since 2013, and bisexual Hijras are especially susceptible (Feng, 2022). There have been reports of some members extorting the family on special occasions for money, where they have threatened and/or coerced the family not to give them the money.

Buddhists and Ethnic Minorities

Following the Liberation War in 1971, state policies discriminated against the Indigenous people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), such as the confiscation of land and the settlement of Bengalis in previously tribal regions. In 1991, a majority of 50 percent of the population in the region was Bengali, and this was relative to 2 percent in 1948. The increase of Islamic nationalism under Ziaur Rahman further estranged the Indigenous communities into the creation of the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) and its military wing, Shanti Bahini. The Shanti Bahini is credited with 1,180 murders and 582 abductions between 1980 and 1991 (Zubair, 2023).

The Ramu attacks of 2012 that were caused by a fake Facebook post led to the destruction of 12 temples and 50 houses and involved about 25,000 individuals. Reconstruction campaigns by the government helped to rebuild important temples and brought more security to the region (Islam, Durrat, Meem, & Hasan, 2023). There were other attacks in Taindong (2013) and Khagrachari (2014) where property was destroyed, people injured, and there was systematic discrimination (Minority Rights Group International, n.d.; Chakma, 2024).

Buddhist and Indigenous groups have remained victims of violence, with targeted murders, propaganda on the internet, and physical attacks in Khagrachhari and Rangamati, killing people and injuring others between the years 2016 and 2024 (Barua, 2016; Chakma, 2024).

Ahmadiyya Community

The Ahmadiyya community has been persecuted over the years since 1971, later starting with killings in 1963, which was followed by bans on literature, attacks on mosques, and mob violence in the 1980s-2000s. The most famous cases are a bombing of a mosque in 1999 and a suicide attack in 2015. Islamist extremism, legal changes against non-religious security, and governmental failure have further weakened vulnerabilities to emphasize the community's inability to have a voice in socio-economic life (Kabir, 2016; Khan and Samadder, 2013; Mahmud and Halim, 2024; Amnesty International, 2005; U.S. Department of State, 2023).

Bihari

The Urdu-speaking Bihar community was attacked during and after the 1971 Liberation War as a result of allegedly collaborating with West Pakistan. In 1971, the Santahar massacre resulted in the murder of approximately 20,000 Biharis, and in 1972, more massive murders

took place at Khulna (Kamrani, 2017; Scranberg, 1972). Mass eviction was encouraged by the Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who left many stateless who were in refugee-like camps. Since 2008, citizenship rights have been partially provided, and social exclusion and poor economic opportunities are still present (Haider, 2024; Kuczkiewicz-Fras, 2019; Mantoo, 2013; Weinraub, 1973).

Shia Muslim

Though Shia Muslims have been historically free to practice their faith, there have been directed attacks on them. There was a series of violent events between 2015 and 2016, including bombings, attacks on mosques, and the murder of a Shi'a preacher, which pointed to the increasing level of sectarianism and extremism (Minority Rights Group International, n.d.).

Christians

Political unrest and land conflicts have been continually used as a way of targeting Christians in Bangladesh. Notable cases have been the 2001 church bombing at Gopalganj, followed by the attacks on the houses, conventions, and pastors. The vulnerability of the community has been caused by extremist threats by groups like JMB and ISIS, as well as land disputes within the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Minority Rights Group International, n.d.).

4.2. Politicization of Minority Identity

Throughout the case of the minority interviewed, a common theme has emerged stating that the identity of religion has been turned into a political tool and not a civic one. The status of the minority is habitually used in election time, conflicts within a community, or even as a token gesture in debates on secularism. They indicated that the political elites, both secular and Islamist, tend to take advantage of the minority situation to justify their ideological assertions.

RH-01 stated:

"During elections, politicians are made with vows of protection. We are forgotten after the election; worse still, we get attacked. The attackers claim to be protecting Islam; other times they claim that it's a payback on votes. Either way, we lose."

This description shows the two-fold process of control over minority communities, when the agents of Islamism often justify aggression by referring to defending religious faith, and secular elites at the same time justify treaty inaction or force by political expediency. These trends make it harder to binaryize secular and Islamist politics and show that the situation of minority persecution in Bangladesh is not isolated in the pursuit of political dominance but is rather entrenched in the wider context of opposing ideologies. However, respondents PA-01 and AC-02 claimed that Jamaat-e-Islami and Hefazat-e-Islam have not been directly involved in the violation of minority rights in the post-election situation.

This perception is confirmed by archive data in The Daily Star (2022), which records that communal assaults often peak during election times, especially in the constituencies where the AL and the BNP are campaigning. Human Rights Watch (2021) also reported that the majority of the post-election violence against minorities was committed by the people supporting the ruling parties and implied that the state participated in this process either by not acting or by showing favor in the application of justice.

4.3. The Secular Paradox: When Secularism Becomes Majoritarian

Most of the participants, such as academicians and human rights activists, highlighted the self-contradicting nature of Bangladeshi secularism. Although secularism, as suggested by its name, is constitutionally guaranteed, it has been employed in practice to strengthen majoritarian nationalism and not pluralism.

PA-02 observed:

"Secularism in Bangladesh is an empty slogan. It is also employed by the ruling party to reflect itself as a modern and democratic, yet heavily clientelist and exclusionist governance. Whenever the minorities are assaulted, the language of secularism is the silence."

The same view was reiterated by other minority respondents who said that the secular rhetoric of AL was an international brand and not a domestic defense mechanism. According to reports by Ain o Salish Kendra (2023), there were more than 3,600 cases of minority property destruction or land grabbing between 2013 and 2022, most of which are in places where the local AL leaders have direct control.

Conversely, answering questions regarding experiences under BNP governments, respondents gave similar reports on patterns of neglect and discrimination and lower symbolic mentions of secularism. RB-01 noted:

"Under BNP, we were outsiders. We are informed that under AL we are equal, just on paper. When land is taken by land robbers, who halt them?"

This trend is an indication that even though secular governance is rhetorically inclusive, it has not been translated into institutional protection of minorities. Instead, it has tended to reproduce a hegemonic version of Bengali Muslim nationalism, which equates patriotism with religious identity to place minorities in a state of suspended citizenship.

4.4. Islamist Actors: Between Demonization and Political Reality

The data concerning the interview demonstrated a more sophisticated concept of Islamist actors than commonly implied by the secular discourse. Participants PA-02 and AC-01 have admitted that organizations like Jamaat-e-Islami and Hefazat-e-Islam are communal conservatives but not monoliths in addressing the minority rights. However, the Qawmi madrasa students and teachers affiliated with the Hefazat reported incidences where Hefazat students and teachers attacked different sacred places, and this shows that the extremist tendencies can occur in certain circumstances.

An Islamist intolerance in Bangladesh is the case of the campaign against the Ahmadiya Muslim community. This was a movement by the International Khatme Nabuwat Movement to alienate Ahmadis as part of the Muslim identity, and they pressured the state to limit their publications and worship. There were attacks organized on Ahmadi mosques, graveyards, and gatherings in urban areas like Dhaka and Barisal and districts like Brahmanbaria. Such incidences show that Islamist mobilization may be used both in violence and legal-political forms to limit the freedom of religion and undermine the constitutional secularism in Bangladesh (Ain o Salish Kendra [ASK] Research Unit, n.d.).

However, there are other standpoints that make it hard to presume that Islamists are oppressive in nature. HRA-01 saw,

"Jamaat can be blamed because of its history, yet local Jamaat leaders frequently coexist with the minorities in a peaceful way, particularly in the countryside. The political power struggles tend to be the source of the violence and not the regular Islamists."

This concurs with Transparency International Bangladesh (2020), who discovered that minority land grabbing was more frequently related to politically affiliated businessmen or local AL leaders rather than linked to Islamist preachers. RS-01 made a theological commentary: The Quran instructs to protect all peaceful individuals. When violence occurs under the name of Islam, it is the politics rather than the religion. However, it is a shame that even secular parties are employing Islam when they are in need.

These observations are supported by secondary literature. According to Lorch (2018) and Riaz (2014), the instrumentalization of Islam by secular ruling parties has been selective with the retention of Islam as the state religion as the means of sustaining political legitimacy. Simplistic narratives are also made more difficult by newspaper reports that record cases where Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Chhatra Shibir have been actively involved in protecting Hindu communities and places of worship, including in Hili, Dinajpur (Jago News 24, 2024), and Sherpur, Bogura (Kaler Kantho, 2025). These results together imply that Islamist actors act in multifaceted political and social environments, in which religion tends to be impractical instead of being oppressive.

4.5. The Sufi Ethic of Pluralism

One of the most interesting discoveries was the presence of Sufi-oriented religious groups as mediators and supporters of peaceful coexistence. Interviewees of all ideological tendencies noted the Sufi tradition to be as open to diversity as possible as a pluralistic model of governance. This feeling is echoed in other earlier anthropological works of South Asian Islam (Eaton, 1993; Alam, 2015), which had been keen on the historical role of Sufi Islam in creating syncretic and tolerant community relationships.

The minority respondents and minority scholars further revealed that Sufi networks have been found to intervene informally with the aim of de-escalating communal tensions, especially in the case of festivals or local differences. RC-01 described:

"At the time when the church was endangered by rumors, it was the local Sufi pir who got to the church and informed people about the rule not to spread lies. The police did not assist us, but Faith assisted us."

These narratives indicate that grassroots religious pluralism, which is grounded on Sufi ethics, is an overlooked counter-pressure to secular authoritarianism and Islamist exclusivism.

4.6. The Politics of Blame and the Crisis of Accountability

The general trend that is produced by all the data is reciprocal accusation between secular and Islamist forces. Both parties blame each other because one alleges the other party is putting minorities under threat and refuses to admit it is guilty of such acts. There is no real accountability system in place, and this further leads to the cycle of performative outrage and policy stagnation.

AC-01 summarized this dilemma:

"When minorities are attacked by Islamists, the secularists have a justification to be repressive. Islamists use it to establish moral superiority when secular regimes commit or overlook violations. The victims are the same; however, the stories are different."

This is a cyclic pattern supported by secondary data. The examination of election-related violence (ASK, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2022) demonstrates that communal attacks are not as ideologically motivated as opportunistically chosen, and frequently they have been a result of political wrangles or of local disputes or of land disputes. It is in these situations that religion is a mobilizing idiom but not the cause of violence.

Moreover, the endemic inability of the state to prosecute the perpetrators, no matter who they are, establishes an overall culture of impunity. Researchers of law (Ahmed, 2021; Uddin, 2015) have stated that the politicization of the judiciary and the collusion between the police lead to a lack of trust in the institutions of the state among the minorities, which results in most communities quietly resigning instead of resisting.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Paradox of Secularism in a Muslim-Majority Context

The findings reveal a paradox: although Bangladesh is constitutionally secular, its political practice consistently reinforces majoritarian religious nationalism. Scholars such as Khondker (2010) and Uddin (2015) note that secularism in Bangladesh developed not as a strict separation of religion and politics but as a strategy balancing Bengali nationalism with Islamic legitimacy. Consequently, secular governance often coexists with religious symbolism and policy compromises.

Interview data confirm this tension. Minority participants described the AL's secularism as largely performative—a branding tool for international audiences rather than a mechanism for minority protection. This aligns with Lorch's (2018) argument that secular parties have pursued "Islamization by secular means," incorporating religious imagery and constitutional concessions to Islam to neutralize Islamist opposition.

Politically, this suggests that secularism in Bangladesh is not ideologically neutral but entwined with a hegemonic Bengali-Muslim identity. Instead of safeguarding pluralism, it functions as a soft instrument of cultural dominance, marginalizing Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians by signaling that citizenship is conditional on conformity to the majority narrative.

This dynamic reflects Asad (2003) and Casanova's (2011) critique of the "myth of secular neutrality," where secular institutions reproduce majority culture's moral residues and exclusions. The Bangladeshi case demonstrates empirically that secular regimes can sustain religious hegemony even without overtly Islamist policies.

5.2. Islamism and the Misplaced Blame

Contrary to dominant media narratives, the research indicates that Islamist actors such as Jamaat-e-Islami and Hefazat-e-Islam have been less systematically involved in direct or structural violations of minority rights than secular parties. While these groups maintain conservative theological positions and occasionally mobilize moral outrage, interview data show their role in violence or dispossession is sporadic and context-dependent.

This challenges the common assumption that Islamists are the primary threat to minority security. Participants and secondary sources (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2020;

Human Rights Watch, 2022) instead point to the institutional power of ruling parties—particularly the AL and BNP—as consistent vectors of impunity and repression. Cases such as the 2015 Thakurgaon land grab and the 2016 Nasirnagar communal attacks illustrate how secular political elites have directly facilitated or benefited from minority marginalization.

This analysis does not romanticize Islamist politics but underscores the structural nature of violence in Bangladeshi governance. Lacking state authority, Islamist groups largely operate through rhetoric and street mobilization, whereas secular parties wield administrative power to enable systemic violations. The selective criminalization of Islamists, while overlooking abuses by secular elites, reflects Mamdani's (2004) "good Muslim/bad Muslim" logic.

Islamist movements are internally diverse; for example, Hefazat-e-Islam's educational wing emphasizes social welfare (maslaha), and local Jamaat leaders sometimes protect minority communities. These findings align with Damanhuri et al. (2024), suggesting that Islamic principles of justice (adl) and protection (aman) can support human rights when properly interpreted.

5.3. The Politics of Impunity and the Erosion of Accountability

A recurrent theme across all data sources is the persistent collapse of accountability mechanisms in Bangladesh. Regardless of whether secular or Islamist forces dominate, the state has repeatedly failed to investigate, prosecute, or prevent violence against minorities, reflecting political expediency and institutional fragility. Successive governments have prioritized stability over justice, often manipulating religious sentiments to marginalize non-Muslim communities, particularly Hindus (Misra, 2025). The justice system's inefficiency, corruption, and limited capacity render legal safeguards largely ineffective (Rights, n.d.), while resource constraints and inadequate training in law enforcement perpetuate impunity, contributing to persistently high rates of violence, including homicide—the highest in South Asia (Khondker, 2017).

Reports from ASK (2023) and the U.S. The Department of State (2022) notes that perpetrators of communal attacks are rarely charged, and convictions are almost nonexistent. Interviewees described police bias and local political interference, with victims pressured to withdraw cases, eroding minority trust in institutions and creating a "democratic deficit of belonging" (Chandhoke, 2012).

In this context, secularism and Islamism operate less as ideological opposites than as parallel narratives legitimizing authoritarian governance. Each side invokes moral discourse—modernity or piety—to justify exclusion and suppress dissent. Violence, therefore, stems not solely from religious intolerance but from systemic governance failures rooted in patronage, corruption, and competitive authoritarianism (Mostofa & Subedi, 2020; Sadia, 2023), as evidenced by both AL and BNP exploiting religious polarization to consolidate power (Daily Star, 2013).

5.4. Sufi Pluralism as a Counter-Narrative

Among ideological formations in Bangladesh, Sufi networks stand out for their distinctive pluralist ethos. Interview findings indicate that Sufi leaders and followers actively mediate communal tensions, promoting an inclusive moral vision grounded in compassion and coexistence. This aligns with Eaton (1993) and Khan (2012), who show that Sufism historically facilitated Islam's spread in Bengal through local syncretism and respect for

diversity. The Sufi ethic contrasts sharply with both the instrumental secularism of ruling elites and the puritanical orthodoxy of modern Islamism.

From a political-theoretical perspective, Sufism represents a form of vernacular cosmopolitanism—a bottom-up pluralism privileging human relationships over state ideology (Appadurai, 2013). Practically, it offers a moral vocabulary for minority protection that resonates locally, avoids alienating the Muslim majority, and does not rely on imported liberal frameworks.

5.5. Reassessing the Contest for Blame

The study's title, "The Contest for Blame," captures the symbolic struggle between secular and Islamist forces to claim moral legitimacy while deflecting responsibility. The data reveal that both camps are complicit, though their modes differ. Secular parties, particularly the AL and BNP, bear greater empirical responsibility for structural and recurrent violations, owing to their control over state institutions, patronage networks, and coercive apparatuses. Islamist groups, in contrast, function largely as discursive scapegoats—their rhetoric amplifies fear, but their practical involvement in sustained minority persecution is limited.

This dynamic reflects Foucault's (1980) notion of "regimes of truth," where power shapes not only facts but also culpability. In Bangladesh, secular elites craft a regime of truth, portraying themselves as defenders of modernity, even as their practices marginalize minorities. The international community's selective attention to Islamist extremism reinforces this imbalance: Western aid and diplomatic recognition often reward secular governments while overlooking systemic human rights abuses (Riaz, 2020), perpetuating the illusion that secular rule guarantees tolerance.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1. Conclusion

The situation of minority rights in Bangladesh can be attributed to the historical conflict between the secular and Islamist political ideas, both of which have influenced the sociopolitical situation in the country since the independence. Although there are constitutional promises of equality and pluralism, minorities, particularly Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and Indigenous people, are still discriminated against, sidelined, and at times the victims of violence. The analysis in this study rejects the mainstream discourse that places the blame of such violations on the forces of Islamism. There is empirical and historical evidence that secular political groups, especially the AL and the BNP, have been more directly involved in institutional and organized acts of minority rights abuse, especially in land grabbing, politicized communal violence, and impunity laws against perpetrators.

The Islamist organizations that include Jamaat-e-Islami and its student wing Islami Chhatra Shibir, despite their frequent stigmatization in a mainstream discussion, have not been willfully engaged in systematic minority attacks—with the exception of occasional cases. In fact, in July 2024, when the country faced protests and unrest, it was reported, and eyewitness testimonies claimed, that Jamaat-Shibir activists in certain areas went to protect Hindu temples and Hindu villages and established protective human chains and deterred vandalism and mob violence. Likewise, although Hefazat-e-Islam has been conservative in its religious orientation and its stand against Ahmadi religious beliefs, it has shown moderation

toward other religious minorities and on a number of occasions has publicly urged the government to protect minority groups against political persecution and mob violence. Nevertheless, the first incidences of singular animosity against the Ahmadi Muslims can be traced to those groups among the students of the Qawmi madrasas and alims who were influenced by the anti-Ahmadi rhetoric of Hefazat. These are alarming but not indicative of the overall institutional position of Hefazat on non-Ahmadi minorities.

By contrast, the pluralistic and humanistic aspect of Islam, which has been embodied by the networks and shrines of the Sufis throughout Bangladesh, has led to the values of tolerance, hospitality, and coexistence. Their religious and ethical impact provides a more localized example of religious collaboration that can be used to reduce the polarization of communities. Sadly enough, such Sufi movements are not adequately represented in official political and policy arenas.

6.2. Recommendations

1. Institutional Reform and Accountability: Enhance independence of the judiciary, human rights commissions, and law enforcement agencies by making sure that they do not investigate communal violence biasedly, as it is manipulated by both secular and Islamist parties. Incidents of minority rights Incorporate the indicators of minority rights into the national development plans to entrench equality and systemic accountability.
2. Depoliticizing Religion: Institutionally shield religion against all forms of political use by a political party, and encourage an inclusive discourse of nationalism and civic solidarity.
3. Encouragement of Pluralistic Religious Education: Include interfaith education and civic ethics in the national curriculum, and provide special training to teachers of madrasa and general education to minimize prejudice and encourage empathy and long-term social pluralism.
4. Appreciation of Sufi and Moderate Islamist Contributions: Support alliances between Sufi orders, moderate Islamic bodies, and state agencies to promote peacebuilding at the community level, interfaith dialogue, and protection of vulnerable minority groups.
5. Monitoring, Documentation, and Empowerment of the Civil Society: Put in place a national observatory on minority rights to monitor the cases of discrimination and communal violence in a transparent manner. Enhance the capacity of the civil society, especially the minority, women, and youth organizations, in the oversight of the people, consultation, and peace initiatives at the local level.
6. Nuanced Engagement with Religious Actors: It is important to notice that there are Islamist groups, including Jamaat-Shibir and Hefazat, who have occasionally been protecting minorities. Separate violent extremism and faith-based social conservative politics and discussion to promote interfaith collaboration and national reconciliation.
7. Future Study: Support the research on the dynamics of grassroots minority resilience, such as women and youth involvement and comparative analysis of the minority inclusion in South Asian countries practicing the majority of Muslims, to design effective policies.

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