
The Political History of Muslim Bengal

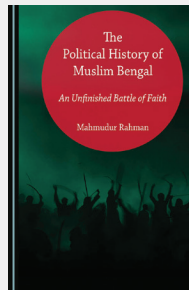
An Unfinished Battle of Faith

By Mahmudur Rahman

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Reviewed by Mohammad Hossain, Ibn Haldun University

The Political History of Muslim Bengal, while speaking of the history of a lesser-known part of the Muslim world, has an interesting story of its own. The author, a former energy advisor to the Bangladesh government and the opposition-associated editor of a well-known news daily called *Amar Desh* (My Nation), wrote this book in ten months while being imprisoned for political activities in Bangladesh. As an attempt to narrate a political history of Muslim Bengal from its earliest origins, the book aims to be ambitious in its scope. Starting as a venture in exploring the roots of the Bengali Muslim identity from the beginning of the thirteenth century, the author attempts



to map out the trajectory of that identity amidst the socio-political undulations of Bangladesh's post-colonial and post-independence period.

In terms of structure, the book is divided into twelve chapters and contains both a prologue and an epilogue, the latter written after the author was released from prison. Despite its claim to being a narrative of political history, however, the historical background starting from the earliest times of the independent sultans, Mughal rule, and the independent *nawabs* to the British colonial period before 1947 is limited to just two chapters, while two more cov-

ers the Pakistan era between 1947-1971, their total being about one-fourth of the book. The rest of the book deals with present-day Bangladesh, from 1971 to date, followed by appendices containing several important historical documents.

The chapter headings give us an idea of the content and the argument in each chapter, while selective sourcing is indicative of who the author trusts and thinks is important. It is notable that while veteran scholars such as Eaton, Mohar Ali, and Karim are used to narrate pre-colonial history, as we move past the 1990s era, many of the observations are from the author's recollections and actions as an insider to major socio-political events, such as the military coup on January 11, 2007, and the events leading up to the anti-*Shahbag He-fazat* mass gatherings in 2013. This begs the question as to why the author began the book as a scholarly treatment of Muslim political history but ended it as a scathing attack on the current authoritarian government's policies and practices. The key to understanding this transition, it seems, lies in the author's treatment of the ups and downs of the history of the region as a "battle of faith" (p. 354).

While 'faith' in this book refers to Islam, the author also uses it as a marker for the lasting political and cultural changes wrought by Muslims and Muslim rule in the Bengal region, rather than a reference to theology or *Sharia*. This 'faith as culture' framework is a reason behind the author's disagreement with Richard Eaton's thesis that the spread of Islam in Bengal was due to the "agrarian revolution" (p. 22). Instead, it is seen as a result of 'cultural evolution' powered by the success of 'political Islam' which facilitated large-scale conversion to Islam, formed a strong political entity, and developed an indigenous national language (pp. 27-28).

The author further epitomizes the period of Muslim rule until 1757 by noting that it was largely egalitarian (p. 26). It is this conception of a Bengali Muslim identity that is later subjugated by the 'Hindu-Company nexus' in Bengal during the colonial period (p. 40). The ongoing "overall feeling of superiority and a patronizing attitude among the Hindus towards the Muslims (p. 78)." Fueled by the 'Hindu Bengali Renaissance' was the main reason behind the failure of Congress in pre-partition Bengal, and the ultimate division of Bengal to form Pakistan under Jinnah's Muslim League (p. 50). However, precarious manipulative politics within the Muslim League meant that the seeds of division between the East and West were sown as early as 1947 (p. 100). While Muslim rulers in the period before 1757 patronized Bengali language and culture, the author points out the attempt by the Pakistani administration to impose Urdu upon the Bengali population, mainly through Jinnah's famous speech in 1948 (p. 104) and the killing of language martyrs by the Pakistan army on February 21, 1952, as indications of the failure of the idea of Pakistan as a home for Muslims. The author argues that these incidents led to the flourishing of ideas of race and ethnicity over religion as the basis of identity and contributed to the victory of *bhadrolok* (Calcutta based Hindu elite) culture-inspired 'Bengali Nationalism' over the Muslim national identity associated with Pakistan's origins (p. 113).

In the latter part of the book, Rahman shows us the development of a secularism-autocracy nexus in post-independence Bangladesh, starting from Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and continuing with the current government of Sheikh Hasina. More importantly, Rahman links this development with the Nehruvian dreams of expansionism leading up to

Akhand Bharat (Undivided India)—he identifies the independence of Bangladesh as the achievement of Nehru’s dream (p. 170) and argues that India and its clients in Bangladesh were the ultimate victors of the 1/11 military takeover in 2007 (p. 302). In exploring the secularism-autocracy nexus in Bangladesh, Rahman notes that it serves Indian interests and is Islamophobic. While the rise of secular forces espousing a Hinduised Bengali nationalism had threatened the Muslim identity that had grown for over a thousand years (p. 175), Rahman sees the ‘faith-based’ Bangladeshi nationalism and model governance associated with General Ziaur Rahman and his nationalist brand of politics as a reawakening of a lost Muslim identity (p. 238). However, it is important to note that despite acknowledging the importance of faith, Rahman makes it clear time and again that he is not an Islamist—the ‘cunning’ Ershad regime is criticized for the uncalled-for move to make Islam the state religion (p. 256), *Jamaat-e-Islami* is criticized for its political follies and collaboration with the Pakistani army in 1971 (p. 177), and the author himself denies any links to Islamism (p. 15).

One could criticize Rahman for his choice of scholarship, particularly his focus on identity politics and great political personalities rather than working toward a socially or culturally informed history of East Bengal. However, it is important to note why Rahman wrote the book in the first place, and for whom. An engaging read, written in clear and succinct prose, the book is intended for general audiences interested in Bangladeshi political developments. It represents his attempt to wake up a nation unaware of its glorious, faith-based roots, since a blind, unaware nation cannot remain politically and intellectually independent (p. 14). This becomes clearer in his final chapter, titled “The Unfinished Battle of Faith,” which serves as a clarion call for a struggle against anti-Islam secular authoritarian forces and their Indian overlords seeking to undermine or destroy the Bengali Muslim identity. In this regard, *The Political History of Muslim Bengal* is more than a mere book on political history; it vividly captures the tensions and intricacies of emerging notions of Bangladeshi Muslim identity in the face of constant socio-political upheaval and adversity.

