

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SECULARISM AND RELIGION IN BANGLADESH

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This chapter deals with some questions which may be of general interest in the context of subcontinental political economy. It does this by posing some specific questions about the role of religion in Bangladesh. To answer these questions, we examine the role of what we call clientelist surplus appropriation. The role of religion and secularism in Bangladesh raises some puzzling questions. Why did a country which ostensibly fought so hard to achieve a secular constitution achieve so little in the way of substantive changes in the role of religion in society and politics in the next twenty five years? The ostensibly secular constitution of 1972 was diluted by successive military and civilian governments without much public protest after Mujib's government was toppled by a military coup in 1975. His party, the Awami League led eventually by his daughter, did come back to power 21 years later in 1996. Although still ostensibly committed to secularism, Mujib's daughter was even more careful than her father to emphasize her personal religiosity. She undertook the pilgrimage to Mecca, and donned a version of the *hijab*. This helped her to acquire a public image as a more conservative Muslim than her arch-rival Khaleda Zia of the centre-right BNP who appeared in dress and demeanour to be more liberal and modern. While still officially committed to secularism defined as the rejection of the use of religion in politics, the new Awami League is clearly making a point of using religious symbolism in defining itself.

The ups and downs in the use of religion, religious identities and religious symbolism in the politics of Bangladesh over the last twenty-five years raises interesting questions for political economists. How do we explain the mass support for the much more assertive secularism of the Awami League in the late sixties followed by the subsequent fragmentation of this "secular coalition" in the eighties? Why did support for an ostensibly secular party, admittedly a much more watered down secular party, re-emerge in the mid-nineties? Are these changes essentially non-economic in their motivation? Or are these changes in fact driven at least to some extent by economic interests and conflicts? If so what is the nature of these economic conflicts?

While not denying the importance of non-economic forces and motivations, including the influence of developments in the wider world, we argue that the domestic political economy provides at least an important part of the answer. On the other hand we reject the implicit class and social analysis which claims that secular political parties and movements are

necessarily “progressive” while parties using religious symbols are “reactionary”. Instead we argue that the dominant patterns of both secular and religious mobilizations in Bangladesh and in the Indian subcontinent as a whole often have very damaging developmental effects and secular parties are not necessarily more “progressive”. On the other hand this does not suggest that we should be *politically* neutral in judging communal as against secular parties.

A brief discussion of the nature of this political economy constitutes the theoretical component of this chapter. We argue that in the typical developing country, religious and secular demands do not emanate from distinct classes. Instead, they emerge in the context of specific types of patron-client politics which in the context of the Indian subcontinent we describe as clientelist politics. Here pyramidally organized multi-class political organizations led by “middle class” organizers compete for power and access to state resources. Competing factions use religious, secular, ideological and even personality based identities to mobilise support and distinguish themselves from their competitors. We describe the surplus appropriated by competing factions through such mobilizations as “clientelist surplus appropriation”. We argue that this is a major component of the political economy driving political mobilizations in Bangladesh and indeed in other parts of the Indian subcontinent.

The dominance of clientelist as opposed to class mobilizations in the Indian subcontinent explains why the same individual or party can frequently change ideological and political affiliations without too much personal or political difficulty. The fact that ideological associations are fluid and have little effect on the substantial behaviour of their adherents is a well known phenomenon of Bangladeshi and indeed of subcontinental politics. The political economy behind this fluidity is less widely recognized and is the central theme of this chapter.

We should stress that to say that religious or secular ideologies have been primarily used in the course of factional competition is not to deny that the banners under which people are mobilized do not matter. Movements have a life of their own once they start. They build on and often accentuate pre-existing affiliations, hatreds and identities. Nevertheless, it is important to attempt to locate clientelist politics within the broader class and social evolution of the subcontinental economy. We can do this by drawing a useful contrast between the social mobilizations behind religious and secular philosophies in the South Asian context and the conflicting classes arrayed behind the Church and its opponents during the Reformation conflicts in Western Europe. This is particularly important because the identification of secular politics as “progressive” and of religious politics as “reactionary” derives from an analytical reading of European history.

Our basic argument is that it is a mistake to see the conflict between secular and religious ideologies in a country like Bangladesh in terms of a conflict between clearly defined class interests. It is certainly not explicable in terms of a conflict between the economic interests of a progressive bourgeoisie supporting secularism and a reactionary feudal and pre-capitalist classes supporting the sanctions and powers of religion. Indeed we would argue there is no simple class dichotomy between the supporters of secularism and those of other ideologies. On the other hand, the use of religious and secular ideologies by competing factions does map into competing economic interests but they are the economic interests of competing *factions* led by the upwardly mobile middle classes. What is important is that the leadership of these competing factions are quite similar in class terms and moreover they mobilize social groups below them which in turn are quite similar to each other.

The competition between these multi-class alliances led by competing factions of the middle class is often structured around ideological or philosophical debates. Yet we argue that it is a mistake to see these rival positions as much more than incidental to the real political economy of factional competition. In the clientelist case, the ideologies themselves are not fundamentally important to the economic interests of the faction. What is perceived as more important by the protagonists is the need to distinguish their faction from others and to prevent rival factions from challenging them if they happen to be in power. The economic implications of the differences in the ideological positions of competing factions have been secondary and indeed have been treated as secondary by the participants themselves. This is demonstrated by the readiness with which they have often changed their ideological allegiances in response to changing alignments of factional political power.

Not surprisingly these ongoing factional conflicts have failed to transform society in any fundamental way because the contending ideologies did not represent substantive material interests of competing economic classes. This may seem surprising given that ideological positions are tenaciously defended at any one time and the victory or defeat of particular political parties does seem to result in changes in economic performance. Nevertheless, these differences in performance are more plausibly explained by the fact that new individuals and policies are brought in and sometimes new rounds of primitive accumulation takes place as well, all of which can have consequences for performance. On the other hand, the victory or defeat of particular ideological positions does not usually seem to be associated with significant changes in the class nature of the state. There is even stronger support for the claim that particular ideologies are not the preserve of particular classes. There is much evidence that competing groups and individuals are able to change their ideological affiliations flexibly in response to changed circumstances which we would not expect to the same extent if their professed ideologies truly reflected class interests. Victory

or defeat for particular positions may of course have unintended effects on the cultural and political space. Our argument does not deny the significance of these effects even though we would argue that lasting changes in culture and politics have to be based on changes in the material conditions of society.

Finally, we argue that although clientelist faction fighting did not change the broad class character of the state, the overall economic effects of clientelist conflicts have been unqualifiedly regressive. It has used up scarce investible resources and has prevented accumulation and growth. The conflicts and contests have of course been very useful for small groups of individuals who have succeeded in rising up the social scale and their success has attracted others into the fray. This is after all the whole point of organizing factional conflicts. But for the economy as a whole the results have been little short of disastrous over time. The failure to analyse the implications of the political economy of this process even when the process itself is widely recognized has hampered serious analysis of the implications of these conflicts for growth and accumulation and therefore for social progress in the long term.

Section 1 discusses the different ways in which religion can be used politically, contrasting the conflicts between secularism and religion in the European Reformation with similar conflicts in South Asia. Section 2 looks at the path dependant evolution of secular and religious ideologies in Bangladeshi politics in a way which is consistent with the competition between clientelist factions. Section 3 discusses in outline the key features of clientelist political economy and how it helps to explain the changing fate of secularism in Bangladesh.

1. Religion, Secularism and Class Interests

Any analysis of the political economy of religion in the Indian subcontinent or elsewhere must preface itself with the recognition that the role of religion in society does not simply depend on material interests. Nevertheless, the material interests of evolving and conflicting classes have been at least *one* of the major factors influencing the changes in the role of religion in the politics of countries. In the advanced capitalist countries of the West, the conflict between the Church and secular social forces during the Reformation is rightly recognized as one of the defining components of the transition to modernity. The popular association of secularism with social progress is quite clearly based on a reading of this European history. Yet there were some very specific social factors which ensured that secular demands in Europe were associated with the development of science and technology and consequently with rising living standards which ensured its support by wide sections of society.

The specific features of the Reformation differed from country to country in Western Europe but nevertheless there are some broad features which these countries shared in common. Productive capitalist classes were emerging in these countries based on long-distance trade and finance and at the same time, states were being constructed which could exercise territorial jurisdictions within which capitalism could grow. The declining social forces based on landed property, the wealth of the Church and the political ambitions of a Church-based empire were part of the social coalition which was opposed to these changes. As a result there were relatively sharp economic conflicts between monarchs, the Church and emerging capitalists over their material interests which in this context put the Church on one side and a collection of progressive economic forces on the other¹.

The most obvious economic conflict between monarchs and the Church was over the vast amounts of land owned by the Church. These assets not only reduced the access of the monarch to revenues but created a powerful competing political force often allied to Rome which prevented national consolidation. Secondly, there was a conflict between merchants and the Church over the theological acceptability of income from usury in Christianity. Here capitalist accumulation which was driving productivity growth faced obstacles from a pre-capitalist Church-based system of maintaining social order with notions of justice which were not appropriate for the new order. Finally there was a conflict between Church and state over their respective jurisdictions when it came to appoint officers to lucrative administrative and judicial positions. In this case too, territorially defined emerging modern states faced competition from a parallel set of jurisdictions organized around the Church. Thus the economic interests underlying the ideological conflict between Church and secular social forces were based on radically different ways of organizing production. This is what we mean by saying that religion and secularism represented conflicting class interests in Reformation Europe. This in turn ensured that the victory of one side or the other would have economic consequences for the mode of organizing production in Western Europe over a period of several centuries.

The emerging economic supremacy of the secular interests which challenged the Church during the Reformation resulted in much more rapid economic growth and this ensured that political *practice* eventually became more or less secular across Western Europe. This is despite the fact that in many European countries, including England, the formal constitutional separation of Church and state has not emerged to this day. The Western European story is important because the theoretical association of secular movements with the liberal bourgeoisie and therefore with social progress is based on a reading of this history.

¹An excellent analysis of this period is in Tawney, R. H. 1938. *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

The political economy of religion in contemporary developing countries is clearly somewhat different. In the Indian subcontinent neither Hinduism nor Islam had an organized church with large land-holdings along the European pattern either in pre-colonial or colonial times or indeed subsequently. Nor had there been any ongoing competition between “church” and state over their respective jurisdictions in appointing office-holders along the European pattern. The weakness of religious control and the possibility of profit-sharing as a way of avoiding the ban on usury meant that the restrictions on usury in Islam did not lead to intense conflicts between emerging merchants and religious leaders even in the early days of the emergence of merchant capital in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In independent Pakistan or Bangladesh, the merchant and capitalist classes have certainly not felt threatened by the anti-capitalism implicit in the Islamic ban on usury. Similarly, while some aspects of Hinduism such as the caste system may in principle appear to be anti-capitalist, emerging Hindu traders and capitalists have not felt threatened by these anti-capitalist aspects of Hinduism and have certainly not been in the forefront of the secular movements in India. These differences in the role of religion in the rise of capitalism clearly have something to do with the formal institutional strength of the Christian church in pre-Reformation Europe compared to Islam and Hinduism in the contemporary subcontinent.

On the other hand, religion and religious identities have played a prominent role in subcontinental politics. But they have done so as part of the armoury used by competing factions to distinguish themselves from each other and to mobilize broadly defined “mass” social groups sharing pre-existing identities and primordial loyalties. It is useful to contrast the relatively sharply defined economic interests of Church, state and merchants in Reformation Europe with the way in which factions in the Indian subcontinent have used religious and secular ideologies.

On the one hand, *dominant* factions in India have used religious identities (along with other identities) to construct or reinforce national identities when they have been in power or close to power. Their aim in doing this has been to reduce centrifugal tendencies within society and no less important, to reduce opposition to their own authority and right to rule. On the other hand and apparently diametrically opposed to this has been the use of religion (as well as of other identities) by *excluded* factions to form groups which contest existing elites. Their aim has usually been to threaten to *increase* centrifugal tendencies to force dominant groups to make concessions in the form of payoffs or to overthrow them entirely.

An example of the use of religious identities by incumbent factions was the attempt by the Muslim League in the fifties to create an Islamic identity in Pakistan. A more recent example

is the attempt to forge national cohesion in India by the incumbent BJP and its allies in the late nineties using the symbols of Hindu revivalism. On the other hand, an example of the use of religion by excluded factions to organize alternative power bases was the activism of the Muslim League in India in the forties or indeed the BJP in India in the eighties. Examples can also easily be found of the use of secular ideologies by both dominant and excluded groups in exactly the same way. For instance, Nehru's Congress Party in India in the fifties and Mujib's Awami League in Bangladesh between 1971 and 1975 attempted to create legitimacy for the incumbent factions in each country using secular ideologies. In contrast, secular Bengali nationalism was used by Mujib's Awami League in Pakistan during the sixties to enable the excluded East Pakistani elites to mobilise a mass following around them in their bid to challenge the West Pakistani monopoly over economic power.

Yet although the strategies of dominant and excluded groups appear to be quite contrary, the pyramidal organization of multi-class clientelist factions in subcontinental politics means that the *class* differences between incumbent and excluded groups are much more muted and complex. In many cases, the incumbent and excluded factions may be quite similar in the mix of classes they mobilize. In other cases there may of course be differences in the mix of classes mobilized. But in general we do not find clear cut economic interests which are promoted or hampered by the substance of religious rules or the relative dominance of the "church" which serve to distinguish the class interests of the supporters of religious as opposed to secular politics. Indeed this is true for the way in which most ideological affiliations are used most of the time in subcontinental politics.

The ideological affiliations of the groups in and out of power rarely *directly* reflect the material interests of competing classes. Secularism for instance is not the ideology of an emerging capitalist class which feels its interests are constrained by the fusion of church and state or by religious injunctions against certain kinds of market transactions. Nor is socialism primarily the expression of working class or peasant demands. Instead both secularism and socialism, together with Islam and other ideologies reflect material interests only indirectly. They do this by consolidating and identifying shifting groups or factions within the emerging middle classes who are competing against each other for access to state power which in turn is the most important source of access to a share of the social surplus given the political economy of the subcontinental economies. Thus the ideologies competing for political domination do not seek to change economic policy in ways which could be read off from the substance of the ideologies themselves. Instead ideological labels appear primarily as labels distinguishing competing middle-class-led patron-client networks in their on-going and periodically intensifying struggle over resources. On the other hand, a by-product of this

competition has been that *social policy was* often affected, since competing groups did make changes in the legal and constitutional position of religion for instance.

Consistent with our hypothesis, one of the characteristic features of the use of religious and other ideologies in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the Indian subcontinent is the fluidity of affiliations and stated beliefs. There are several features of these changing ideological affiliations of groups which strike any observer. What distinguishes these ideological conflicts in the developing country context from those of the European Reformation (with which they are often unconsciously compared) is that in developing countries, often the *same* individuals and factions have organized around diametrically opposed ideological values over a period of time. We will see examples of this in the next section. In fact such re-alignments should not be surprising if we are right in supposing that the purpose of ideologies is to serve as mobilizing symbols for multi-class groups which are *essentially quite similar to each other*. Observers have often responded to the apparent spinelessness or lack of conviction of subcontinental political leaders or parties by berating the lack of principles on the part of leaders. The fact that Bangladeshi political leaders have often been able and willing to rapidly change their ideological affiliations in response to political realignments has led to their ideological quarrels often being described in terms of the “politics of rhetoric”². However, the systematic nature of such re-alignments suggests that we have to look beyond the principles of individual leaders to find systematic and structural explanations for this phenomenon.

Factional conflicts and the organizational logic of factions can explain these realignments to a great extent. They have resulted in a particular trajectory of religious and secular politics in Bangladesh which is not accidental in the sense that the trajectory *is* explicable. Yet the conflicts have not been between clearly defined class interests which can be identified as progressive or reactionary in terms of their relationship to growth and development. This is not to say that the competing philosophical positions in themselves cannot be characterized as progressive or reactionary, only that the economic interests of the groups which support these competing positions are in fact surprisingly similar. Clearly, the political economy underlying these mobilizations does *not* share the sharp class divide which characterized the conflict between religious and secular ideologies in Western Europe. Moreover, the evidence suggests that clientelist faction fighting as a whole has had regressive economic implications for developing societies. From a materialist perspective, the support for

² Siddiqui, R. 1984. *Kathamalar Rajneeti 1972-79* (Politics of Rhetoric 1972-79). Dhaka: Nawroze Kitabistan.

“progressive” ideologies in this context does not necessarily promise social progress. The task of constructing progressive political movements in countries such as Bangladesh is actually much more difficult than supporting one side or the other in ongoing factional conflicts. A precondition for constructing a progressive politics is to identify the material interests of the poor and to create political movements which promote the forces of production while ensuring that a bigger share of the national pie really goes to the poor.

2. Path Dependence in the Evolution of Mobilizing Ideologies

One of the factors which determines the range of ideologies and political philosophies which are brought into play by competing factions is clearly the pre-existing social and cultural history of a nation which determines the latent beliefs, identities, prejudices and conflicts which new mobilizations can draw on. If factional conflicts are an important determinant of the choice of ideological symbols then whether religious or secular symbols are chosen by incumbent or contesting groups will clearly be *path dependent* in the sense that at any point the choice of ideologies by one group will depend on the prior choices of other groups. This is because if the adoption of ideologies by factions serves primarily to *distinguish* the faction and mobilise its supporters, we would expect each group to define itself in ways which differentiated itself from its main opponents. This in turn will depend on how its opponents have defined themselves in the past.

The ideological shifts which are the subject of our analysis include both the shifts in the affiliations of dominant political groups as well as of individuals within those groups. The first set of shifts is dramatic enough on its own. The ideological affiliations of the ruling group in Bangladesh has see-sawed between "secular" identities based on language or class and "religious" identities based on Islam. Their opponents who have been excluded from power have also selected a changing set of ideologies to describe themselves depending on who they were contesting. What is interesting is that the ideological label which the *same* group has used has often changed substantially in content and emphasis over the cycle of opposition and power or in response to other groups changing *their* identities. As a result, instead of evolution towards a national identity based on an amalgam of the different cultural and religious constituents of the nation, we find a sustained oscillation between variants of these positions over the last fifty years or so.

It is important to stress that the instability has been due not only to the number of groups competing for access to state power who have adopted or possess different ideological identities, but also due to changes in the ideological position adopted by each group over time. The same individuals have often moved from positions which were overtly Marxist to positions which were overtly religious or from positions of religious nationalism to ones of

linguistic and secular nationalism and back again. These oscillations are too systematic and widespread to be attributed to the weakness of will or intellect of particular individuals. Groups and political parties too have changed their explicit ideological affiliations or split to form new parties with directly contrary affiliations. Thus the secular Awami League was constructed in the fifties out of the communal Muslim League. Later the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) with its stress on an Islamic identity for Bangladesh drew heavily on recruits from the Awami League, as did the Jatiya Party which was ideologically quite similar to the BNP. In time many of them returned to the secular fold, although over time the secular commitments of the Awami League itself have dimmed and become less important.

These oscillations at the level of individuals are important for our story. If individuals adopted ideological positions because the ideology in itself reflected something which was consistent with their economic interests it would be unusual to see rapid and frequent changes of position. For instance if the politics of secularism was driven by an emerging class of merchants who found usury laws a great hindrance to their material well-being, a few representatives of this class interest may occasionally have moral or other qualms which may make them change their position but such events would be relatively rare. On the other hand, if secular positions were adopted by individuals not because they reflected their fundamental material interests but because the faction in power had adopted a contrary position, we would expect a much more fluid set of ideological affiliations. Current affiliation would depend on the individual's assessment of the payoffs available under alternative affiliations. Thus factional competition may explain the volatility of ideological positions in the context of clientelist surplus appropriation.

The evidence from Bangladesh on the trajectory of religious versus secular ideologies does tend to support such a path dependence in the evolution of ruling and contesting ideologies. For instance, the first major *political* polarization which involved religion in what is now Bangladesh was the one which led to the creation of East Pakistan in 1947. This *political* polarization of communities into Hindu and Muslim was relatively new and emerged over a period of a few decades prior to the partition of India in 1947. Before that time, in the thirties, politics in Bengal had been organized around essentially secular but mutually competitive factions based on patron-client peasant politics. The coalescence of Muslim leaders of the Bengali peasants around the Muslim League in the mid-forties was relatively sudden. The prior involvement of leaders such as Fazlul Huq or Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy in essentially secular politics suggests that their sudden affiliation with the Muslim League could not have been based on deeply-felt religious goals alone or on any essential contradiction between the principles of secularism and their personal class interests.

A more plausible explanation is that the numerical majorities of the Muslim peasantry of Bengal and the fact that most landlords happened to be upper caste Hindus offered middle class Muslim leaders an irresistible opportunity of organizing large movements to propel them to power in the context created by the Lahore Resolution of the Muslim League. This mooted the demand for Muslim states in the Muslim majority areas of India in 1940 and created a new range of organizational possibilities³. The exclusivism and short-sightedness of the largely Hindu leadership of the Bengal Congress of that time and the fear of the incumbent Hindu elites that their political position was about to be fatally challenged resulted in the politics of the Bengal Congress becoming even more communal and exclusivist. The polarization and communalisation of Bengal politics in the forties thus affected both communities and marked a sharp break in the secular class politics which had been dominant in rural Bengal from the inception of modern politics in the early twentieth century⁴.

What is remarkable is the second and no less dramatic shift in the politics of East Pakistan soon after its creation. By the mid-fifties the *same* mainstream East Bengali politicians who had been critically instrumental in the creation of Pakistan began to assert a secular Bengali nationalist ideology against the new Pakistan state. The Bengal Muslim League split in the fifties and a large section which till very recently had been “communal” suddenly discovered that they were really “secular”. Under the leadership of the same Suhrawardy and subsequently his lieutenant, Mujib, they split from the Muslim League to set up the Awami Muslim League as early as 1949. What is interesting is that the word Muslim was not dropped from the name of the party till 1955. Once again, what is likely to have propelled the split and the gradual shift towards a secular identity for the Awami League is the conflict between the new incumbent elites based in West Pakistan and the East Pakistani Bengali middle class which once again found itself excluded. The need to define the group identity of this excluded middle class faction in opposition to the Islamic state is the most plausible explanation of the rapid emergence of “secular politics” in East Pakistan in the fifties rather than any fundamental incompatibility between religion and capitalist development. Thus the secular Awami League which led the breakup of Pakistan in 1971 was a direct offshoot of the communal Muslim League which had created Pakistan in 1947.

The creation of Bangladesh in 1971 led to further rapid changes in the attitude of ruling and excluded groups towards religious and secular identities. As soon as Bangladesh was

³ Kabir, M.G. 1995. *Changing Face of Nationalism: The Case of Bangladesh*. Dhaka: University Press Limited, pp. 30-121 provides an excellent summary of this period.

⁴This does not imply that Bengal *society* was secular in the modern sense of sharing a widespread belief that religion should not define social and political status or rights. Nevertheless, parties such as the Krishak Praja Party *were* secular in not limiting their mobilization to particular religious groups.

created, the Awami League stopped being the instrument of an excluded faction and became instead power base of the new incumbent faction. The secular Bengali nationalism of the Awami League had proved very successful in mobilizing mass support to aid the political goals of the excluded Bengali elites. But once the League came to power, everyone who had supported the Bengali nationalist cause could clearly not be accommodated. A new state ideology had to be constructed which would legitimize a new ruling elite while offering the fewest possible opportunities for new coalitions to find easy symbols to organize around in protest. In this environment, it was far too risky for the Awami League to allow its opponents to organize discontent on the grounds that the Awami League was out to destroy Islam. Mujib's subsequent actions suggest that he was making precisely these calculations.

On the one hand, the 1972 constitution embodied the goal of secularism in Article 12 which aimed to eliminate "communalism" and the abuse of religion for political purposes⁵. On the other hand, to outflank opponents within his own party, Mujib and the ruling group began to court the defeated Islamic political forces. As early as 1973, between 30 and 40,000 alleged collaborators in the war with Pakistan were released without investigation or trial⁶. In 1974 Mujib travelled to Pakistan to attend the Islamic Summit held at Lahore and returned home proudly proclaiming Bangladesh to be the world's second largest Islamic nation (ahead of Pakistan). In the same year a Madrasah Education Commission was formed to advise on how religious education could be improved. In 1975 Mujib set up the Islamic Foundation to promote Islamic studies and to manage mosques.⁷ Even in terms of the narrow definition of secularism in the Bangladesh constitution, some of these moves at least were suspect.

These developments would have been truly astounding if Islam and secularism represented the actual economic interests of competing classes locked in conflict. They are easier to comprehend if we recognize that the Awami League and its opponents were in fact mobilizing essentially similar multi-class groups. We can then interpret these concessions as Mujib's search for allies to sustain his hold on power. In the context of clientelist competition, the class interests of these competing groups would not be very dissimilar. For the ruling party, the issue would be to judge the relative cost of buying support from one

⁵ Murshid, T.M. 1996. *ibid* pp. 360-1.

⁶ Kabir, B.M. 1988. "Jamayer Rajneeti: Ekti Jelabhittik Porjalochona" (The Politics of the Jamaat: A District-Level Evaluation) in Khan, B.A. ed. *Bangladesh: Dhormo o Shomaj (Bangladesh: Religion and Society)*. Chittagong: Centre for Bangladesh Studies. pp. 83-84.

⁷ Murshid, T.M. 1996. *The Sacred and the Secular: Bengal Muslim Discourses 1871-1977*. Dhaka: University Press Limited, pp. 362-3. Kabir, M.G. 1995. *ibid*, pp. 188-190.

faction rather than another with the aim of ensuring a large enough coalition to stay in power. According to this logic, concessions to the defeated “Islamic” factions were cheap because these groups had just been defeated and were likely to be grateful for any payoffs or even with just being allowed to survive and were certainly not able to immediately threaten Mujib’s power. On the other hand, concessions to factions which identified with “left-wing” symbols were potentially more expensive since these groups enjoyed greater legitimacy and could demand much bigger payoffs.

This helps us to make sense of the apparent paradox of the “secular and progressive” Awami League offering a general pardon to Jamaat supporters under the order of November 30, 1973 but excluding from this pardon the thousands of supporters of “left-wing” parties who were also in prison at that time. Instead of trying to accommodate the left, the Awami League literally went to war with them, killing tens of thousands of Maoists as well as supporters of the “left-wing” *Jatiyo Shomajtantrik Dol* (JSD) which split from the Awami League in 1972. The Awami League’s strategy is also exemplified by the Daud Haidar case of 1974. Daud Haidar was a poet who wrote a so-called blasphemous poem and was hounded out of the country with the tacit approval of the Awami League who identified him as an atheist communist. Bhuiyan Monowar Kabir has provided a local-level account of the Pabna Awami League organization leading the hysteria against Daud Haidar in alliance with the recently pardoned Jamaat supporters in a bid to isolate the local JSD and Communist factions⁸. The Pabna alliance between the Awami League and the Jamaat proved to be a long-lasting one. In 1987 when a violent conflict broke out between the Jamaat and a left wing student alliance (Chhatro Moitri), a Jamaat office was burned down. The Awami League denounced the “burners of the Koran” and joint meetings were staged against the “atheists”⁹.

Despite its flexibility and its willingness to dilute secularism in practice, the Awami League’s search for a “national identity” which would stabilize its hold on power did not succeed. The Awami League itself began to fragment. A large group left the party under the banner of socialism in 1972, though the claim of the JSD to represent a different class is also suspect if we examine their subsequent actions. Many of their leaders eventually found their way back into power by supporting the military government of General Ershad in the eighties. The breakdown of a united political vision and the failure of Mujib’s attempts to hold the facade together by instituting a one-party state in 1975 was the prelude to his assassination and a long spell of military and quasi-military rule.

⁸ Kabir, B.M. 1988. *ibid*, p. 85.

⁹ Kabir, B.M. 1988. *ibid*, p. 92.

Mujib's assassination in 1975 was followed by two decades of a string of governments which tried to construct a new political unity by stressing the Islamic heritage of the nation. In 1977, two years after Mujib's assassination the constitution was amended to remove secularism as a fundamental principle. In 1988 the constitution was further amended to recognize Islam as the state religion. Nevertheless, once again we will be closer to the truth if we interpret these shifts as attempts by the new regimes to distinguish themselves from their old foes in the Awami League while adopting a unifying ideology which minimized the opportunities for opponents to mobilize large numbers of people. As before, old politicians and parties very frequently made the apparently undignified jump across the trenches depending on their personal assessments of the rewards being offered and the likelihood of making it back to power if they stuck to the old party. The military governments and their civilian successors absorbed many defectors from the Awami League who saw no contradiction in the new less secular identity of the ruling group. They also attracted old Maoists like Kazi Zafar and JSD socialists like Abdur Rab who argued that the developmental agenda of the military was more in tune with socialism. The secular agenda, to the extent that it was ever implemented, was correspondingly attenuated. Yet the stability even of this new equilibrium was short-lived.

During this period, the "progressive" socialist parties were often found in alliance with the military while ranged against them were often an alliance of "progressive" secular parties and the "reactionary" Islamic parties. A local-level study done by Shapan Adnan in a Pabna constituency during the 1986 elections under President Ershad shows these alliances and calculations in operation. In the Pabna constituency he was looking at, the conflict was a 3-way one between a JSD candidate, a Jamaat candidate and an Awami League candidate. Although Ershad was in power at the centre, his local candidate had no hope of winning.

The polling happened in 60 centres but there was violence in three of the centres and votes had to be recast in these centres. After the votes in the first 57 centres had been counted the Jamaat candidate was leading. The overall turnout was 57%. If the turnout was similar in the other 3 centres the Jamaat candidate would win. As it turned out, the turnout in these 3 centres turned out to be 93.2% out of which 76% voted for the JSD candidate who won a surprise victory. Adnan argues that the most plausible interpretation of the delayed counting and the violence is that the military administration had rigged the last three centres to help the "left" candidate win against the "Islamic" candidate who was in theory closer to their class and national identity positions¹⁰. Alternatively, the payoff required to placate a mere

¹⁰ Adnan, S. 1987. *The Roots of Power: A Re-Study of Daripalla in Rural Bangladesh*. Unpublished manuscript, pp. 347-453.

“socialist” was likely to be far less than the payoff required either for the Awami League or the Jamaat. Indeed the 7 JSD votes in parliament were later critical for Ershad. Thus we have the apparent paradox of a “right wing” general doing deals with socialists just as we have seen the secular Awami League frequently allying itself with Islamic parties to isolate the “left”. In each case, the examples show how irrespective of professed ideologies, a ruling party may prefer to ally with forces which were weak nationally and therefore had limited bargaining power but which could nevertheless deliver valuable local support.

By the end of the eighties the ideological divisions had become much more confused with alliances between strange bedfellows becoming more and more common. Often tactical arguments were offered justifying apparently unprincipled alliances but more often no attempt at justification was thought necessary. As before none of this seemed to have any effect on the fundamental organization of society except incidentally in terms of increasing political instability, strikes and general disruptions. Thus in the late eighties, the BNP which had played a major part in reversing the moves towards constitutional secularism and the officially secular Awami League formed an alliance to fight the ruling Jatiya Party of Ershad which was ideologically indistinguishable from the BNP. Ershad’s long hold on power had essentially deeply agitated the two main opposition parties who sunk their apparently unbridgeable ideological differences in their fight to remove the dictator.

An even more astounding alliance occurred in the early nineties between the Awami League and the Jamaat, the avowedly Islamic party seeking the creation of an Islamic state. In this instance, both parties formed an informal alliance against the then-ruling BNP government. It was around this time that the Awami League’s secular claims became muted, Sheikh Hasina the leader of the party began to wear a head scarf and carry prayer beads. She even went on a pilgrimage to Mecca. None of this is necessarily anti-secular in the constitutional sense, but since symbolism is important in the politics of a country where the majority is still illiterate, Sheikh Hasina’s message to the people and to her opponents should not be misread as purely personal devotion. At this stage Sheikh Hasina certainly had a much more demonstrative Islamic persona than her arch opponent, the then prime minister Khaleda Zia who led a party committed to a Bengali Muslim national identity. Khaleda Zia was nevertheless a modern Muslim woman who did not wear a head scarf but only covered her head as many Bengali Muslim women do on ceremonial or religious occasions.

Given what little actually separates them, new ways had to be devised to express the uniqueness of the major parties. The ideological markers distinguishing the Awami League from the BNP and other parties eventually turned on a distinction being established between *Bangladeshi* and *Bengali* nationalism. *Bengali* nationalism is supposed to be the nationalism

of the Bengali-speaking people and *Bangladeshi* nationalism the nationalism of the Bangladeshi people. Since more than a third of Bengalis live in West Bengal in India and since Bangladesh includes tiny but politically important minorities like the Chakma, it may seem that someone who professed Bengali nationalism as opposed to Bangladeshi nationalism was actually supporting a very different programme of state construction in the long run. On the other hand since Bangladesh is a territorial unit which primarily contains the Muslim population of Bengal, secular groups could argue that support for a specifically Bangladeshi nationalism amounts to a *de facto* acceptance of Jinnah's two nation theory and the Lahore resolution of 1940¹¹. Supporters of the Bangladeshi nationalism school do not disagree and believe that this does distinguish them from the secular group.

On the face of it, therefore, the distinction appears to be a significant one. But is there a substantial disagreement on anything of substance which is likely to have any real impact on the operation of the Bangladeshi state? Since a substantial number of Bengalis live in the Indian state of West Bengal, one might have thought that supporters of Bengali nationalism would at least profess as a distant aim something amounting to re-unification or even closer political alliance or cooperation over time. After all this is what Korean nationalism means to the majority of Koreans who support it and what German nationalism meant to the supporters of the latter. But in fact, the Awami League does not define its Bengali nationalism in terms of any goal of forming an actual nation-state with the West Bengalis nor does it even propose closer governmental links or power sharing along the pattern being established in Ireland. In practice therefore it does not reject nor seek to alter the fact that Islam was the factor which historically justified the creation of a separate state which is now called Bangladesh and which is distinct from West Bengal. But this is exactly what Bangladeshi nationalism means for the BNP.

The paradox is that in the context of clientelist politics there is no advantage to any faction leader or their clients on either side of the border in supporting a political merger where they are likely to become smaller fish in a bigger pond. The significance of the differences in their professed ideological positions, if any, has to be sought in the identity of the individuals who subscribe to one or other nationalism. This is indeed the function of this ideological divide, to distinguish competing groups from one another. Thus the new ideological divide is another example of the way in which the substance of ideological divisions is far less important than the necessity of making distinctions between competing groups. The fact that the substance of these ideological divisions may be incomprehensible to observers is actually irrelevant.

¹¹ The Lahore Resolution of 1940 moved by the Bengali Muslim premier of Bengal, Fazlul Huq, resolved that the Muslim-majority areas of north-west and north-east India should be constituted into separate independent states (in the plural). See Kabir, M.G. 1995. *ibid*, pp. 84-89.

The political economy generating these divisions is much more comprehensible and it is to this that we now turn.

3. Ideology, Religion and Clientelist Surplus Appropriation

Religion clearly existed in developing countries long before the mass mobilizations organized by competing political factions which is the subject of our enquiry. While the conscious motivation behind the beliefs of the masses may be spiritual, there may also be strong material factors which bolster and sustain religious beliefs. Our purpose is not to explore the possible economic factors behind the deep roots of religions in the Indian subcontinent but rather to explore the use which middle-class-led factions have made of such primordial beliefs and identities. The hold of religion may be particularly strong in poor countries because poverty generates great uncertainties about the physical and political environment which in turn may make religion both valuable and necessary for many people to go about their daily lives. In the absence of a tradition of civil regulation, religion also structures many interpersonal relationships within families and between generations though the importance of such relationships clearly varies between classes. Finally religion may be important in sustaining social stability and economic interaction at a decentralized level by providing human networks with shared beliefs and rituals.

Thus “economic” motivations may have been at least partly behind the spread and tenacity of religious beliefs in the first place even though the types of religious beliefs have varied widely over time and place even for the same religion. But more importantly, once in place, the existence of shared beliefs and sources of identity may provide new opportunities for economic mobility for those who prove to be successful political entrepreneurs. Electoral politics requires the mobilization of large numbers of people and the existence of group loyalties based on religion, language or caste significantly simplifies the task of mobilization faced by political entrepreneurs.

The characteristic feature of clientelist surplus appropriation is that competing patron-client networks compete for shares of the social surplus by attempting to gain control of the state apparatus. Analytically, this representation stresses the significance of faction building followed by factional conflicts based on their relative organizational power. This approach to modelling subcontinental political economy may be contrasted with Bardhan’s model for India which stresses the competition between a number of conventional classes, namely the industrial capitalists, professionals and landlords¹². In contrast, in the case of clientelist surplus appropriation the competition takes place between competing multi-class factions

¹² Bardhan, P. 1984. *The Political Economy of Development in India*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

each of which is composed of more elementary patron-client groups organized in a pyramidal fashion. Each faction may include members of many different classes but they are typically organized and led by members of the educated middle and lower middle classes.

The ability of any particular primary faction to get included in a party or coalition depends on its perceived ability to deliver organizational power at least cost. Organizational power is defined as the ability of the primary faction to impose costs on its opponents through its power to disrupt. The coalition as a whole wants to have the maximum number of such factions within it but not without limit because the more factions that are incorporated, the more thinly will the available spoils of office have to be distributed. The success of the coalition or party in turn depends on the organizational power it can field and its holding power in continuing the process of opposition till it is accommodated. For this pattern of accumulation to explain what we see in terms of the ideological and political instability we need to address several further questions.

The first question we have to answer is why individuals at the bottom of the social pyramid identify with particular elite factions. It may appear that supporting a faction at best offers the poor a redistributive payoff at the whim of their leaders if and when the latter succeed in getting access to state power while straightforward collective action based on class politics may seem to give a more assured set of benefits.

One answer could be that poor people in developing countries such as Bangladesh are *irrational* in the modern sense and are swayed by emotive symbols which they are insufficiently modern or educated to see through. This is not a satisfactory explanation. The electorate in more advanced countries also respond to symbols and prejudices and yet seem to learn much faster that some policies work better than others when it comes to their fundamental material interests. A more plausible explanation may be that individuals at the bottom of the pyramid in countries like Bangladesh behave in the observed way because what little they can potentially get through the success of their faction is greater than the expected payoffs from class action.

For instance it may be that the poor believe on the basis of past experience that inclusive collective action would be extremely difficult to organize. This is because the poor rightly perceive that they are fragmented, that the class policy relevant for them would alienate both the very rich and the not so rich, and that the latter would use many different strategies to divide them. We know from psychological and economic theories of *cognitive dissonance* that rational individuals often do not want to aim to achieve things which cannot be achieved as this causes psychological distress. Beliefs about what is desirable or preferred such as

non-class based redistributive strategies may then be constructed to rationalize the strategies which are perceived to be possible. In other words, the poor may be participating in patron-client redistributive strategies not because they hold on to particular ideologies, rather the types of ideologies we observe may be there because they work in mobilizing feasible redistributive factions.

A more fundamental problem may be that the poor (and indeed their intellectual leaders) may not be able to visualize a credible change in the productive system which could make *everyone* who was poor better off. In that case, upward mobility and surplus appropriation would truly be a zero-sum game for some of the poor. If only some of the poor are likely to benefit from redistributive strategies given the perceived size of the pie to be redistributed, there may be a “inverse-U-shaped” relationship between the size of the group you belong to and the payoff you get. If the group is too small, its bargaining power is negligible and the payoff it gets is zero. If it is too big, involving for instance all the poor, the payoff is again very small because the payoff has to be widely distributed. The typical patron-client faction may offer the best payoff to the individual poor person, providing that he or she succeeds in selecting the right one. Belonging to a faction and participating in this gamble may be attractive given the very limited opportunity cost as perceived by the poor themselves.

In one sense, this situation reflects the underdevelopment of a capitalist industrial economy. The absence of a sufficient social surplus which can credibly be redistributed or re-deployed to benefit the poor as a whole makes redistribution by necessity an intensely contested game where the groups demanding redistribution or reallocation of public resources are in intense competition with each other.

The question from the point of view of the middle class/petty-bourgeois organisers of factions is why *they* choose a strategy of populist mobilization based on a degree of redistribution to their mass supporters instead of independent class politics of their own. Once again, if upwardly mobile middle class political entrepreneurs could envisage better strategies of accumulating surplus through class organizations of their own, the clientelist strategy would be hard to explain without recourse to irrational behaviour or ignorance. In fact, there are good reasons to believe that their possibilities of accumulation through alternative strategies may be rather limited. Unlike the middle class based in the professions in the advanced capitalist countries, the intermediate classes in developing countries do not by and large have productive positions which they seek to defend or expand. Their resources often come in the main from redistributions through the state, a tradition which goes back to the roots of this class as an administrative creation of the colonial state to administer colonies and maintain political stability.

Finally we need to ask why this process does not result in an institutional solution which entails less conflict and risk for the organizers, say through the creation of a big enough coalition which incorporates all the major factions. This might in principle allow redistributions which could satisfy everybody and there is at least the possibility that the political peace which may follow would allow some semblance of development to occur. The answer to this is a contingent one, rather than one which follows from the accumulation process itself. It is simply that economies like Bangladesh or indeed India and Pakistan are *too poor* to satisfactorily accommodate their emerging intermediate classes as a whole, while factions led by the intermediate classes are *too powerful* to have any solution imposed on them which they think reduces the payoffs which they perceive they *may* have got through competitive struggle¹³.

Occasional attempts have in fact been made in the past in Bangladesh to stop the internecine conflicts by processes of either forced inclusion or forced exclusion of factions. Both strategies have failed. An example of the former was the creation of BAKSAL, the Bangladesh Workers' and Peasants' Awami League by Mujib in 1974 as a last desperate attempt to keep his coalition together. This was the only party which would be allowed in his proposed one-party state and everyone in any organizational position had to belong. It was a simple calculation for the competing factions that this solution would permanently reduce the payoff for each to a very small amount even though it would guarantee this payoff forever. The forced inclusion may have worked for a brief time if the middle class organizations which were being forced to participate were relatively underdeveloped organizationally and if the party in power was a true revolutionary party which monopolized violence. Neither was true for the Awami League and the attempt simply made groups within the Awami League conspire in his assassination and many welcomed the army as saviours of the nation.

The army in turn has repeatedly used strategies of *exclusion* to manage the system by imposing martial law and banning political activity. These strategies too work very temporarily in Bangladesh and once again the answer has to be sought in the power of excluded groups to force their selective inclusion through the imposition of huge costs on the regime through programmes of civil disobedience and protest.

¹³ See Khan, M.H. 1998. Patron-Client Networks and the Economic Effects of Corruption in Asia, *European Journal of Development Research* 10 (1) for a comparison of how clientelism has been occasionally controlled in some countries with a similar configuration of social forces. The article compares clientelism in the Indian subcontinent with patron-client relationships in Malaysia, Thailand and South Korea.

This brings us to a brief evaluation of the economic consequences of the process of clientelist surplus appropriation. The answer should be obvious by now, the consequences are severe and negative. This is partly due to the loss of investible surplus from potentially productive uses and even more so to the losses caused by perennial political instability and economic cycles. Economic cycles are generated as the party in power is forced to accommodate a growing number of factions over time. This in turn leads to unhappiness on the part of some incumbent factions who see their payoffs shrinking as a result of greater accommodation. Some of them may eventually begin to leave to join the opposition, or the opposition on its own will eventually collect together enough discontent to bring down the ruling coalition. The regime eventually collapses, either through the democratic process or through military takeovers and cycle is repeated for new incumbents.

The political economy of clientelist surplus appropriation may offer a more convincing explanation of the volatile political conflicts in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the Indian subcontinent. The rapidly changing ideological positions of the dominant groups in Bangladesh can be related to these clientelist processes of accumulation and accommodation in the Bangladesh economy. The ideologies serve as focal points at each stage in the contest for included and excluded groups. While the range of ideological and religious symbols are defined by the values and symbols inherited from the past, what is interesting for us is the way in which each group chooses the precise mix of symbols and values in line with the changes in the array of insiders and outsiders.

This does not necessarily allow us to predict the precise ideologies which will be emerging over time but it does allow us to predict that the existing ones will not survive. More than that, it allows us to say that the content of the ideology does not matter in a substantive way for the *economic* interests of the competing groups. The victory or defeat of a faction determines *who* is getting a share of the social surplus, not *how* the social surplus is being generated.

While our examples have been drawn from Bangladesh, a similar fracturing of political identities is happening on a bigger scale though more slowly in India and Pakistan. What is interesting about the Bangladesh experience is that it shows how political fracturing can happen even in relatively homogenous regions of the Indian subcontinent where the bulk of the politically active population is not divided by language, religion or caste. This forces us to ask if there are economic imperatives which may be persuading competing factions to look for new identities in ways which prevent the resolution of conflicts. While such an explanation does not detract from the importance of a substantive analysis of culture and ideology, it suggests that the roots of the political instability facing the Indian subcontinent

may lie in the accumulation strategies of upwardly mobile classes who use a variety of ideological symbols to differentiate themselves from competing groups.

If the economic motivations behind the fragmentation of identity formation are a substantial part of the true picture, this clearly has consequences for political attempts to enforce new national identities in the countries of the Indian subcontinent and in similar political-economic contexts elsewhere. If the underlying determinants of these accumulation strategies are not addressed, political stability may not be achievable even in relatively homogenous countries like Bangladesh. The argument may be even more relevant for India and Pakistan to the extent that they share a political economy similar to that of Bangladesh. In the long run these processes may prove to be even more important in the other two major countries of the Indian subcontinent simply because their national, religious and caste diversity provides many more potential fissures for group formation than are available in modern Bangladesh.

Conclusion

We have argued that the tussle between secularism and religion and the contradictory stances adopted by the participants in the context of Bangladesh needs to be evaluated in the context of a specific political economy which we have described as clientelist surplus appropriation. Our analysis implies that any simplistic association of secular forces with social and economic progress is misguided. Such an association is based on inappropriate parallels being drawn with the Western European historical experience which we have briefly described. The historical evidence in Bangladesh (supported by that from India) has been that the economic processes which are supported by competing factions of different ideological hues are not essentially different. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we should be neutral between explicitly communal policies and those which are secular. We should not be neutral but our opposition has to be based on the political side-effects of some types of religious mobilizations, and indeed some types of linguistic or caste mobilizations. The more fundamental point is that *all* these types of clientelist mobilizations are in a broader sense regressive, including the apparently progressive secular ones. The political economy of the Awami League in Bangladesh suggests this only too clearly. It is difficult to argue that it will promote a faster and more sustained economic and social transition given what we know about its own history and the clientelist processes on which its power is based. The construction of viable alternatives to the productive process which can convince the poor majority of these countries that they will do better by supporting class politics rather than factional politics is the most important challenge facing progressives in the Indian subcontinent.