Caliphs,' and secondly, to refer to the early six centuries of Islam covering the era of the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates.

In addition, at certain points the demarcation between the Islamic traditions and the pre-Islamic indigenous traditions of the Muslim societies seems to be blurred. The author seems to have overlooked the distinction between the traditions instituted by Islam and the existing pre-Islamic social, religious and ideological heritage of the present day Muslim societies, which considerably influenced the practices of the Muslims living in these societies and still continues to inform them in many ways.

Last, but not the least, there are quite a few statements and assertions in the work that raise eyebrows: the author seems to be implicitly endorsing that there are contradictory statements in the Qur’an since the two distinct voices within Islam representing two competing understandings of gender have been derived from the Qur’an itself. Such contentions have made the work quite controversial.

Tanvir Anjum


What was once unthinkable, has happened. Up to the 1970s, to experts and laymen across the board, Islamic resurgence was the least likely thing to ever take place in Bangladesh. While Islamic resurgence at every level of the polity had become a fait accompli by the early 1990s, since the turn of the century there is nothing unusual about Islamic militancy, terror and even suicide bombing anywhere in the country. The erstwhile “secular and socialist” Bangladesh has turned into “Islamic.” Having Islam as its “state religion” and Islam-oriented parties and groups as important power brokers since the overthrow of the Sheikh Mujib-led one-party rule in 1975, Bangladesh has had a complete volte-face.

What had begun with the official renunciation of the symbolic “secularism” and “socialism” by General Ziaur Rahman (1975–1981) got further momentum during General Ershad’s “benign” military autocracy (1982–1990). Islam-oriented political parties have not only emerged as
legitimate political force having dozens of parliamentarians and ministers, but during the last five years or so Islamic militancy has also emerged as an ominous threat to the polity. The Jamaat-i-Islami [Jamā‘t-i Islāmī], the most well-known and well-organized Islamic party, has emerged as an important power broker or “kingmaker” in the formation of governments in the country. Despite its ideological and methodological differences with the ultra-orthodox Deobandī or “Wahhābī” groups, allegedly the main promoters of the Al Qaeda and Taliban in South Asia, sections of Bangladeshi politicians, intellectuals and laymen love to portray the Jamaat as the main steering force behind the quasi-Taliban terrorist groups in Bangladesh. Although this oversimplification is politically motivated to discredit the Jamaat and its coalition partner, the BNP under Khaleda Zia, by their political opponents under Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League, many Bangladeshis without any political bias also believe in this fabrication.

Professor Monoar Kabir in the volume under review has done a good job in dispelling some of the myths and over-simplified ideas about the nature and implications of Jamaat-i-Islami politics in Bangladesh since the 1970s. This volume is a refreshing departure from popular myths and politically motivated misinformation and half-truths about Islamic politics in general. Those who cannot differentiate between the Jamaat and Taliban-Al Qaeda genre of politics will find this work revealing, enlightening and useful.

This is the only objective study of the Jamaat-i-Islami in Bangladesh after Razia Akter Banu’s excellent work, Islam in Bangladesh (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992). Kabir in his introductory chapter has given an excellent account of global Islamic movements during and after the Cold War. His appraisal of the Bangladeshi Islamists is also very useful; so are his factual accounts and analytical assessments of the rise and evolution of the Jamaat, its role in national politics and relationship with other Islamic and “secular” parties in Bangladesh. His bibliography is impressive. Unlike the average political scientists, who only rely on published sources (books, journals and newspapers), Kabir has profusely used unpublished sources and official publications, reports and private papers of various political parties and organizations, including the Jamaat, to enrich his facts, figures and analyses.

The popular versions of the story as to why Islam has re-emerged in the arena of politics in Bangladesh are sketchy over-simplified narrations of complex issues and problems, devoid of any logic, facts and objectivity. Both Western and Indian journalists and their local counterparts, sections of Bangladeshi political leaders and activists belonging to particular parties and groups author and publicize such sensational stories. Western journalists like Bertil Lintner and Eliza Griswold narrate sensational stories about the
“impending” Taliban takeover of Bangladesh out of ignorance if not malice towards the country. Hence the portrayal of BNP and its political allies, including the Jamaat-i-Islami, as “friends” and “in league with” Bin Laden and his associates is very common.

Many anti-BNP and anti-Jamaat-i-Islami politicians and their adherents find it quite convenient to impute the country-wide terrorist attacks and suicide bombing in 2005 to the Jamaat-i-Islami. The over-heated, sharply polarized politics in Bangladesh, which has roughly divided the polity into the pro- and anti-Awami League parties, groups and adherents is the main bottleneck towards any objective study of political parties including the BNP, Awami League or Jamaat-i-Islami. Similarly a dispassionate, academic exercise on Islamic resurgence, militancy and fanaticism has also become very difficult in the country.

In view of the above, it is indeed an achievement to write anything with objectivity on the Jamaat-i-Islami in Bangladesh. One takes the risk of getting branded as “pro-Taliban,” “anti-Bangladesh,” “anti-Liberation” and “pro-Pakistani” by not subscribing to the popular version of the story about the Jamaat. Consequently there is a lacuna, a big black hole, in the popular narratives on Islamic resurgence, militancy and terror in Bangladesh, especially those narrated by Bangladeshi scholars, politicians and journalists. The volume under review is an exception in this regard. Bhuian Monoar Kabir has taken a bold step away from the black hole of Bangladesh’s contemporary history and over-polarized politics. His findings, analyses and conclusions are helpful towards a timely departure from the realm of subjectivity and politically biased thoughts. This timely, objective study of the Jamaat-i-Islami in Bangladesh is a useful addition to the very short list of standard works on Islam by Bangladeshi scholars.

We need to understand the importance of Islam both in the private and public domains of the Muslims in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, many secular, Islam-bashing Bangladeshi intellectuals think that Islam is just a peripheral, alien concept, subject to subsumption under Bengali Nationalism or what they think is “secularism.” Although apparently Bangladesh came into being in the name of Bengali nationalism and secularism, the country has retained its Muslim/Islamic character for the obvious reasons. Firstly, it is the third largest Muslim country after Indonesia and Pakistan. Secondly, those who believe and promote the primordiality of the Muslim/Islamic identity for the country also argue that (a) the emergence of Bangladesh did not signal the death of the “two-nation-theory” as the Muslim majority East Pakistan, for various reasons, emerged with a new name as an independent country; and that (b) “secularism” was never a raison d’etre for the Liberation Struggle of 1971.
Not only “pro-Pakistani elements” but many leading pro-Bangladeshis also hold similar views. It is noteworthy that while the late Abul Mansur Ahmed (d. 1978), a leading pro-Bangladeshi figure, portrayed the emergence of Bangladesh as the late realization of the “Lahore Resolution” of 1940 for separate Muslim states in the Subcontinent, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (r. 1972–1975) in his first public speech in independent Bangladesh in 1972 proudly asserted that Bangladesh was the second largest “Muslim country” in the world.

Consequently it is hardly surprising that Bangladesh has retained its Muslim/Islamic character and of late has re-asserted its Muslim/Islamic identity by incorporating Islam as the “state religion” through an amendment of the Constitution. This politically motivated, opportunistic legislation of 1988 by General Ershad (r. 1982–1990) has remained intact under the post-military oligarchs of the country. The pervasive influence of Islam culturally, socially and politically has remained intact and has been rather gaining ground in Bangladesh in the recent years. One may explain the Islamic resurgence in Bangladesh in terms of “a global phenomenon,” nothing so unique about the country. One may attribute it to the “failure of the welfare state” as it happened in erstwhile “secular and socialist” Algeria, Egypt, the Sudan, Afghanistan and Indonesia. Islamic resurgence in the post-Cold War era also reflects the growing frustration of the Muslim lower middle classes and urban poor at the failure of the promised welfare state under “secular” nationalist regimes.

Most Muslim countries during the heydays of the Cold War adopted nationalism, democracy and secularism (socialism in selective countries) as parts of the state ideology. A handful of countries like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia clung to Islam and carefully shunned democracy and secularism as the state ideology throughout the Cold War (and afterwards). Muslim kingdoms in North Africa and the Persian Gulf, including Iran, remained autocratic and secular. What is striking is that political Islam emerged as the biggest challenge to the status quo in the Muslim World, in Iran during the last decade of the Cold War; and elsewhere not long after. The so-called national-secular-democratic (and socialist) as well as the Islam-oriented autocracies witnessed the rise of political Islam. It would be too trite an assumption that the phenomenon called Islamic resurgence has been a by-product of pre-modern orthodoxy and backwardness associated with mullahs and their likes.

In fact Islamism, as it is often called, has positive correlations with disadvantaged Muslims having incomplete or no access to modernism, socio-economic and political rights and privileges. Although millennial Islamic ideologues, HECKAN al-BANNÂ (1322–1368/1906–1949), SAYYID QÛTH (1322–
1386/1906–1966), Abū 'l-A‘lā Mawdūdī (1321–1399/1903–1979) or Khomeini [Khumaynī] (d. 1410/1989) could be the main inspirations and militants like Bin Laden, al-Zawāhirī, Shaykh ʿAbd al-Raḥmān or Banglā Bhāʾī the main leaders, Islamic insurgency and fanaticism are primarily political, not spiritual or religious problems. Muslim militants are not just insane fanatics, mindless killers and angry young men (and women) determined to go back to the mythical golden era of Islam. They mostly represent socially backward, politically powerless and economically exploited classes among Muslims. Their perceived enemies could be local politicians, government officials, national or international personalities, governments and organizations supposed to be working against Muslims at local, national or international levels. While born-again-Muslims and de-classed terrorists like Bin Laden, al-Zawāhirī, Muḥammad ‘Aṭāʾ and their likes could be instrumental in organizing terrorist attacks, the real factor behind terrorism is economic (or “class-struggle” in the Marxian parlance) and real activists mostly represent various under-privileged classes among Muslims.

This important work re-appraises the nature of Islamic movements in Bangladesh, shedding light on the background, rise and evolution of the Jamaat, which is the most important Islamic party in the country. Kabir’s contributions include the exploration of the Jamaat’s role as an important power broker in the formation of governments and its importance in the post-Nine-Eleven Bangladesh. Kabir, through this well-researched book, has given an objective appraisal of the various Islamic groups and parties of Bangladesh, highlighting their similarities and differences with the Jamaat. He has succeeded in proving that the Jamaat is neither pro-Taliban nor pro-Iranian; and most importantly, that the party has accepted constitutional methods of politics by participating in elections. And as he has underscored, there has been major shifts in the modus operandi and modus vivendi of the Jamaat vis-à-vis politics and conflict resolution. In the light of this interesting book, one may assume that in the long run the Jamaat will emerge as a liberal democratic political party. The suffix “Islami” will no longer be its political liability as it will cannot something different from the Islamophobic portrayal of Islam.

Since Islam is not going to be irrelevant socially or politically in the Muslim world overnight, Jamaat-i-Islami will continue to play an important role in the body politic of Bangladesh in the foreseeable future. By distancing itself from the “Islamic terrorist” groups, the Jamaat has already gained the confidence of Western governments, analysts and policy makers as a “progressive” and “moderate” Islamic party. This well-researched volume indicates that Jamaat’s biggest liability could be its controversial role in the Liberation War of 1971, as it openly collaborated with the Pakistani
occupation army. On the other hand, it also appears that its main strength lies in its organization, committed cadres, supporters and members, which are lacking in almost every other political party in Bangladesh.

In sum, the importance of this volume lies in the materials painstakingly collected and collated by the author for the benefit of scholars and curious readers. He could have possibly given better appraisals and analyses. Nevertheless, this is an important addition to the corpus of literature on Islam in Bangladeshi society and politics. Both scholars and students will find it useful as not much has been written on Islam in contemporary Bangladesh. Anyone interested in knowing more than what one finds in newspapers and bazaar gossips in Bangladesh about the state of Bangladeshi society and politics, Islamic resurgence and militancy would find this volume useful and refreshing.

Taj Hashmi


There has been no dearth of studies in Western scholarship on Islam trying to decode the mystery known as ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ since the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. The voluminous amount of publications on the topic leaves one with the sense that nothing possibly novel and, equally importantly, interesting can be introduced at this point. Bobby S. Sayyid’s *A Fundamental Fear* dispels this idea by intervening in the debate in an exciting and provocative fashion.

This *tour de force* addresses nearly all facets of the debate about Islamism and the Western response to it. Although a significant portion of the book is devoted to the author’s own critical ideas, the book does engage the traditional repertoire of recent scholarship dealing with the rise of Islamism. Sayyid provides a comprehensive introduction to the major themes and arguments of the literature on contemporary revivalist trends within the House of Islam. But the author’s most powerful stroke lies in his deployment of discourse analysis on the ‘Islamism debate’ in order to show how the political revival of