**Fight for Bangladesh: Country seeks to retain its identity amid growing Islamic influence | The Indian Express**

Related. With todays elections being held under an Opposition boycott, Shubhajit Roy finds a country seeking to retain its identity amid growing Islamic influence and the unfinished business of 1971 Muntassir Mamoon is a worried man today. The 62-year-old history professor at Dhaka University has warned his children he would snap relations with them if they follow extremist ideologies spread by some political forces in the country. As Bangladesh heads to polls today,to elect its 10th parliament,for Mamoon,and many other citizens of the country,these elections are not about the usual issues of corruption,economy or law and order. Its an election centred around the very idea of Bangladesh should it be a secular democracy or a theocratic state? A Bengali republic or an Islamic nation? In the protests called by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP),which is aligned with the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami,more than 150 people have been killed in clashes in the past two-and-a-half months. The BNP has boycotted the polls,calling them a farce,and asking people to stay away. In a statement on Friday,when it called for a 48-hour shutdown,beginning Saturday morning and including the polling day,BNP chief Khaleda Zia said: No one at home and abroad will recognise it as an election and,through this,the Awami League government will appear anew as an illegal structure. More than 150 lawmakers have already been elected uncontested due to the boycott by the BNP-led alliance and other political parties,who say Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina should resign as elections under her will be rigged. The BNP has also accused the government of pushing the country towards a civil war. Since November,when the poll date was announced,protests,strikes and blockades have led to a loss of 800 crore takas (Rs 645 crore rupees) per day. Mamoon,who was attacked four times and jailed once during the BNP-Jamaats crackdown on liberal voices during the 2001-2006 regime,says the society is polarised. Its a question of ideological warfare between the Awami League-led alliance and the BNP-Jamaat combine. If the Awami Leagues politics is about I am a Bengali first,for the BNP and Jamaat,the identity that counts is being a Muslim first. The Jamaat,that had opposed Bangladeshs separation from Pakistan,was de-recognised as a political party in August 2013 by the Bangladesh Election Commission,but continues to have a bearing on the BNPs poll strategies. The election,predicts Mamoon,will have a long-term impact. Of the 16 crore people of Bangladesh,54 per cent are below the age of 25,which is why he worries for his children. Under such circumstances,the BNPs boycott,ensuring the Awami Leagues return to power in the 300-seat parliament,portends worrying signals. The official reason for the Opposition boycotting the polls is that unlike previous times,when elections were presided over by a non-party caretaker government,the ballot is being cast under the watch of the Awami League regime. Hasina,with her brute majority in parliament,carried out an amendment to change the caretaker system in 2011. Just 10 months ago,Dhaka streets were reverberating to completely different protests. In 2010,the Awami League-led government had established the International Crimes Tribunal to prosecute those who helped the Pakistan army and participated in war crimes during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. In February 2013,the tribunal convicted Jamaat-e-Islami leader Abdul Quader Mollah of killing 344 persons and raping an 11-year-old girl during the war. The life term awarded to him had angered many,who demanded nothing short of capital punishment for Mollah,known as the Butcher of Mirpur. Thousands had held protests at Dhakas famous landmark,the Shahbag Square. With the protests led mostly by those born after 1971,they had been called by some as Bangladeshs Tahrir Square moment. On the Supreme Courts order,the Bangladesh Election Commission de-recognised Jamaat in August. Next month,the court awarded Mollah death,and he was hanged in December. Apart from him,the tribunal has tried and convicted other top leaders of the Jamaat over recent months. This is now the backlash. Many in Bangladesh see the elections,and the events leading up to it,as a throwback to the 1971 Liberation War. Amir Hasan,editor of Daily Sun,a Dhaka-based English-language daily,says,What we are witnessing is a repeat of 1971. This is a war to sustain a secular,democratic and independent Bangladesh. Asaduzzaman Noor,an actor-turned-politician from the Awami League,says 1971 was an unfinished war,the legacy of which is being reflected in todays election. There is nothing like a modern Muslim state. You can either be a secular state or a non-secular state, he says. Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu,who belongs to the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal,also sees his governments prosecution of war criminals as an effort to cleanse the legacy of the 15-year military rule (1975-1990) in the country,during which the ban on the Jamaat was lifted,and the 2001-2006 period in which the BNP-led government was seen to be close to the army. Military rule is linked with bringing religious fanatics into politics. We want to clear the debris of military rule and fanaticism. We had pledged to rectify mistakes made by the military, he says. The Jamaat and the BNP question the criticism directed at them for the countrys ills. BNP vice-chairman and former foreign secretary Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury calls the Jamaat a theological organisation,not an extremist outfit. The Awami League believes in eliminating them. Our view is that instead of eliminating them,we should make them behave. We dont believe that driving them away will solve the problems of this country. We want to influence them to come out of extremism, he says. But is that possible? Only time will tell. Religion teaches us how to co-exist with different views, he says. Seeking to distance his party from the banned outfit,Chowdhury adds that the alliance with the Jamaat is mathematical and electoral,not  ideological. He insists the outfits reach is exaggerated,as it impacts less than 3 per cent of the voters and is crucial in about 40-50 constituencies. But Shahriar Kabir,a filmmaker who made a documentary called The Ultimate Jihad,which was screened in India last month,says thats laughable. The Jamaat has established banks,insurance companies,given motocycles to students. They have established an Islamic bank,an Islamic hospital,a pharmacy,an insurance company and control Dhakas bus service,some 30 to 40 per cent of the buses in the city. It is a massive empire, says Kabir. What worries Minister Inu more is the Jamaats vast terror network. They were organising covert terrorist networks under various names. About 7,000-8,000 Jamaat members were sent to Pakistan in the late 80s through the ISI. A covert armed organisation should be banned from politics. But the BNP even made two of their members ministers in their government, he says. In fact,it was because of the Jamaats influence that India had difficult ties with the Zia regime of 2001-2006. During that period,terror training camps by the HuJI (Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami) in the country mushroomed,while several leaders of terrorist outfits were said to be living in Dhaka. A high-profile case of the time was the interception of 10 trucks in 2004 carrying explosives for the ULFA,in which Jamaat functionaries were found to have been involved. With most of the Jamaats leaders behind bars or underground,their only public face is Abdur Razzak. Speaking to The Sunday Express in a fourth-floor apartment in Dhanmondi in central Dhaka,right opposite Sheikh Mujibur Rahmans memorial,Razzak rubbishes allegations that the Jamaat played a role in terrorist activities against India as propaganda. The Indian High Commission keeps a 1,000-mile distance. I last went to India in 1992,when I met then attorney general Soli Sorabjee and lawyers in the Supreme Court. Now,India has to take the lead. We are open (to talk),and ready to engage. India should not keep a closed mind. Razzak,who is the Jamaats defence counsel,also sees nothing wrong in Bangladesh becoming more Islamic. Its a Western concept that politics and religion dont mix. Religion has social,political strands too. Look at our banks,schools,hospitals. When asked about the Jamaat violence on the streets,he says,We have been denied all political rights; we cant hold meetings,and most leaders are underground. I am the only one who is visible because I dont do political work. If we hold meetings,police come and say we are conspiring against the state. Razzak also calls Mollahs hanging a judicial murder. I want a trial of international standards. The international community is opposing this trial. This trial has divided the nation. Realising the corner it has painted itself into,and the strident tone of the Jamaats brand of politics,the BNP has become more guarded. One of the first reflections of this was its silence on Mollahs hanging. Their only grouse was to the process. If an individual has committed a crime against humanity,the process of justice should be transparent and meet international standards. If necessary,we will allow experts from outside. Its a process of law,not emotion, says Chowdhury. Some media reports lately have talked of the Jamaat distancing itself from the BNP for its silence on its leaders being prosecuted for 1971. Elections being held under Hasina,instead of a caretaker government,is an issue that the BNP-led opposition combine believes can help it claw back in. Bangladesh has not forgotten 1/11, Hasina was quoted by a PTI report as saying,referring to the January 11,2007,takeover by a military-backed caretaker government that stayed in power for around two years. Most observers in Bangladesh note that the bickering over the caretaker government also stems from the personal rivalry between the countrys two leading ladies,Hasina and Zia. While the BNP chief has been confined to her house since last Saturday,PM Hasina has refused to budge. Says Inu,Khaleda Zia has avoided talks. Worryingly for Bangladesh,the international community has questioned the credibility of Sundays election. The United States and the European Union have refused to send observers,saying the conditions are not conducive for transparent polls. What is evident is that todays polls are from being the last word in the Hasina-Zia bout. Hasina herself has hinted that elections could be held after talks with the BNP if it cuts off ties with the Jamaat. Most believe that another round of elections may just be months away. India Matters. India is like a political party in Bangladesh, says a Foreign Ministry official. Whatever it does invokes reactions from the political spectrum. If for Bangladesh,India is an important neighbour,for New Delhi,working with the incumbent Awami League government has been smoother than it was with the BNP-led government during 2001-2006. This was primarily because of the suspected terror links of BNP ally Jamaat-e-Islami. With the help of the Sheikh Hasina government,India has been able to neutralise the terror outfits operating out of Bangladesh soil. But its not a completely rosy picture. While Indias decision to give duty-free access to the Bangladesh textile industry has helped the country become a major player in the global textile busniess,New Delhis inability to deliver on the Land Boundary Agreement and the Teesta river water-sharing deal is seen in Bangladesh as a major disappointment. While the government has now introduced a Bill in Parliament that keeps hopes regarding the ratification of the land boundary agreement alive,Prime Minister Sheikh Hasinas press secretary Abul Kalam Azad says that more could be done. Referring to the water-sharing agreement,Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu says joint management of rivers,can turn water of sorrows into waters of hope. India did give a leg-up to the Awami League government in its bid to pit the countrys Bengali identity against the rise of Islamism. This was through the decision to hold joint celebrations of the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore. But India hasnt closed all doors with the BNP. New Delhi has made it clear that if the party comes to power and maintains a congenial atmosphere,sky is the limit. In her visit to India in November 2012,BNP chief Khaleda Zia had assured the Indian leadership that she wants to look at the future,not the past.