

'That was a good move'—Some remarks on the (ir)relevance of 'narratives of secularism' in everyday politics in Bangladesh

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This article explores the complex role of political ideologies in everyday politics and for urban middle-class Bangladeshis' evaluation of political parties. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research and, more specifically, conversations and contentions around the removal of 'Lady Justice' from the front of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh in 2017, I show that although the Awami League continues to be considered a 'secular party', many people do not believe that the Awami League is implementing secular policy and criticise it for what they perceive as 'hypocrisy'. I argue that this seemingly paradoxical situation can be explained by a political structure that is marked by high factionalism and party competition. Data from research among politicians and the left-leaning, so-called 'culturally-minded' milieu in Sylhet, shows that certain segments of the educated middle class acknowledge the pragmatic realities of politics and do not expect the Awami League to act 'progressively'. Nonetheless, they continue to position the party's 'progressive' and 'secular' ideological basis as a primary reason for supporting the party. The article thus contributes to a deeper understanding of contemporary popular and elite practices and perceptions of party politics, democracy, and what might be labelled the 'party-state effect'.

Keywords: anthropology of the state, outraged communities, party politics, party-state effect, ideology, secularism

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I *Lady Justice*

On the last Friday before Ramadan in 2017, a statue of a blindfolded woman holding a sword and scales in her hand, reminiscent of other renowned personifications of justice as 'Lady Justice', was removed from the front of the Supreme Court in Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka. The removal was widely perceived as a victory for the Islamist group, Hefazat-e-Islam, whose leaders had announced an ultimatum weeks earlier and extended their demands soon after the removal by calling for the removal of all anti-Islamic statues that depicted humans with the exception of those on Hindu premises.

The incident happened during my ethnographic research (15 months spread between 2016 and 2019) studying shifting positions on (non) religion and secularism among Sylhet's middle class. In international media, this incident was mostly represented as a contestation between 'Islamists' and 'secularists'. However, the conversations I encountered during my fieldwork in the streets of Sylhet, at tea stalls, and among my urban and mostly educated interlocutors tended to discuss the incident from a different angle, namely party politics.

Mostly liberal and left-leaning groups criticised the government for giving in to the demands of the 'Islamists' and accused the ruling party, the Awami League (AL), of betraying the secular ideology it regularly celebrates at public events and in speeches that underscore Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's legacy and the party's role during the 1971 Independence War. My interlocutors pointed to the discrepancy between recent actions and official party narratives of their 'secular history', accusing the AL of hypocrisy and of betraying its secular ideology. Significantly, however, many people in Sylhet did not view the statue's removal through the lens of Islam, secularism, or statues as such but considered it instead in terms of electoral politics. The decision to reinstall the statue on a different side of the Supreme Court only two days later was considered a 'good move', a strategy that successfully managed to placate the Hefazat-e-Islam without offending more moderate citizens. Therefore, while a small group on both sides reacted to the statue's removal with outrage, protests, and strong sentiments, many of my interlocutors applied analytical perspectives and avoided open expression of their own views in their nevertheless extensive discussions of the incident. But why should the removal and subsequent

relocation of the statue, formally a Supreme Court decision, be considered an issue for the AL or a reflection of party politics in the first place?

This incident, I contend, provides a productive entry point to explore one of the most salient characteristics of political contestations in Bangladesh: the convolution of party politics and discussions about secularism. This article advances three interlinked arguments. Firstly, there is a tendency to imagine contemporary Bangladeshi society as one divided along party political lines on the one hand and the ideological lines of secularism and Islamism on the other hand. These imagined dividing lines are considered to be at times inherently linked while appearing separate in other instances. Secondly, arguments for ‘secularism’—or their absence—should not merely be taken at face value but also need to be considered within the wider power struggles in which they are embedded. Lastly, the incidence and concomitant debates underscore how narratives of the AL as *the* secular party can be upheld although large segments of the society interpret many of the party’s actions or recent policy decisions as pro-Islamist. This article thus engages with the question of how the idea of a divided society is maintained amidst a messiness in everyday life that defies any simplistic dichotomic reductions.

II

Public narratives of secularism and popular disillusionment

In early February 2017, Hefazat-e-Islam, a Qawmi madrasa based organisation, demanded the removal of a statue that had been installed about 2 months earlier in front of the Supreme Court in Bangladesh’s capital, Dhaka. The issue only became a widely noted public controversy after Prime Minister and AL leader Sheikh Hasina declared her support for its removal while attending a prominent Hefazat-e-Islami meeting on 11 April 2017.¹ Her comment sparked widespread criticism among AL supporters and ‘secular-minded’ persons. Left-wing and secularist activists launched fierce criticism, arguing that the action contradicted AL’s secular orientation and accused Sheikh Hasina of hypocrisy and attempting to please the Hefazat-e-Islam and other Islamic leaders.

¹ See www.dw.com/bn/মুক্তি-অপসারণে-প্রধানমন্ত্রীর-আশ্বাসে-হেফাজত-সক্কেল/a-38403215, accessed 12 April 2017.

While much of the literature on politics in Bangladesh underscores that the two major parties, Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and AL, have little differences in terms of policy and ideological orientation (e.g., Jahan 2015; Suykens 2017b), the AL is nevertheless commonly associated with 'secularism' because of the role attributed to the party during the Independence War and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's position in Bangladesh's history. Most existing scholarly works on 'secularism' in Bangladesh engage with historical narratives or past critical junctures in terms of political change and party politics (e.g., Khan 1985; Rashiduzzaman 1994; Uddin 2006). This narrative emphasises the relationship between 'secularism' and the Independence War, often drawing a linear connection between the language movement (1947–1952) and the independence struggle, depicting it as a 'secular' and Bengali nationalist struggle against an Islam-based state (see Ahmed 1990; Schulz 2012; Uddin 2006).

'Secularism', or *dharmanirapekṣatā*,² was enshrined in the 1972 constitution and became closely associated with the early years of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's rule (cf. Ahmed 1990). Subsequent constitutional changes, such as the removal of the secularism principle from the constitution in 1977 and insertion of the statement of 'absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah' under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman, the now-deceased husband of opposition leader Khaleda Zia and founder of the BNP (in 1978), or the declaration of Islam as the state religion in 1988 during General Ershad's rule, have often been interpreted as autocratic rulers' attempts to increase their legitimacy. These constitutional changes are also considered landmarks that signify shifts in the 'national identity' (e.g., Murshid 1997). Thus, such narratives position the AL alongside 'secularism' and cultural-linguistically oriented 'Bengali nationalism', while the BNP is linked to a territory-based 'Bangladeshi nationalism' and emphasis on Islam as the dominant religion. The BNP's association with a pro-Islam policy has been consolidated by, among other factors, its repeated coalitions with the Islamist party, Jamaat-e-Islam.

However, issues of religion, secularism, or 'atheism' have also been popularly politicised within wider social segments, especially among urban elites after the 1990 democratic revolution. Issues of secularism and Islam have become increasingly contentious in national debates on

² Lit: 'neutrality towards (all) religion(s)', the meaning and usage of both terms will be discussed in detail below.

various issues, including, among others, the controversy surrounding Ghulam Azam's official nomination as the Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer (party leader) and the movement for the punishment of war criminals, specifically the Ekattorer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee ('Committee for Eradicating the Killers and Collaborators of '71'), the 1992 Gana Adalat ('people's court'), or the more recent 'International War Crimes Tribunal', and concomitant movements, the Gonojagoron Mancha (lit: People's Awakening Platform)³ and the mobilisation of the Hefazat-e-Islam (lit.: keepers or defenders of Islam). Such controversies underscore the complicated interrelationship between a series of contestations, over commemorations of history, party politics, popular movements, and the adequacy of (non-)religion and secularism.

These and other well-known contestations, such as those around Taslima Nasreen (cf. Murshid 1997; Riaz 2008) or the politicisation of women's participation in NGO groups, do not necessarily or linearly follow political party lines and cannot be reduced to two opposed positions (cf. Shehabuddin 2008) between 'secularists' and 'Islamists'. Such a reduction reinforces the idea of a 'cultural division' (cf. Murshid 1997; Rashiduzzaman 1994: 987) or a 'Bangladesh dichotomy' (Bandyopadhyay 2004) of two opposed blocks that are seemingly entangled with party politics to some degree. Yet this (imagined) secular-Islamic division and its association with the two major political alliances is reinforced by historical narratives and commemoration events in Bangladesh and among Bangladeshi diaspora groups elsewhere (Mapril 2014; Mookherjee 2015; Schulz 2019; Uddin 2006; Visser in this issue).

This often implicitly or explicitly postulated dichotomy of 'secular-liberal' versus 'Islamist-fundamentalist' is untenable, given both the diversity of empirically observable positions (Devine and White 2013; cf. Shehabuddin 2008) and the problems associated with the term

³ The Gonojagoron Mancha movement began in February 2013 in the context of the 'International War Crimes Tribunal' after the verdict in Quader Mollah's case was announced and he was sentenced to life imprisonment. It demanded death penalties for the 1971 war criminals. It was widely seen as an anti-Jamaat-e-Islami and 'secular' movement in Bangladesh. Mobilization was strongest in Dhaka, where people protested for weeks at the Shabhag junction close to Dhaka University, the so-called 'Shabhag movement'.

'secularism' and its Bengali counterpart, *dharmanirapekṣatā*,⁴ which can be re-translated as 'neutrality towards religion(s)'. 'Secularism' in Bengali has thus commonly been associated with neutrality or the equal treatment of all religions (cf. Murshid 1997: 11) and often used synonymously with non-communalism, which challenges the very analytical distinction of secularism versus religion.

However, my aim here is not to define what or who is 'secular' but to analyse how such contestations are positioned in my research context. While it is important to acknowledge that semantic differences are related to regional histories and other vernacular conceptions, I contend that one should refrain from academic attempts to essentially define or fixate 'secularism' in Bangladesh (as elsewhere) for both political and epistemological reasons. Methodologically national definitions have been developed under the multiple secularisms paradigm, such as Rajeev Bhargava's conceptualisation of a 'distinctively Indian yet modern variant of secularism' as a 'principled distance' (2002: 2).⁵ While these definitions elucidate relevant hegemonic patterns and contribute to decentering universalist notions of secularism that are derived from specific Western contexts, they are problematic in their normative nature and proclaim regional homogeneity, which distracts our attention from the contexts of the political and discursive power within which terms are used and renegotiated. Essentialist definitions of a supposedly Indian or Bangladeshi secularism, and their juxtaposition to a supposedly similarly homogenous secularism in 'the West', do not account for the openness, ambiguities, and multiplicity of meaning with which the term is used and the multiple power structures by which it is shaped (cf. Hirschkind and Scott 2006; Mandair and Dressler 2011).

While secularist groups in Bangladesh often emphasise that 'secularism' is not anti-religious, 'secular' and associated terms are used,

⁴ *Dharmanirapekṣatā* is the most common Bengali term used for translations of secularism. Given its partial but not full semantic overlap, I suggest that both terms be considered linguistic semi-equivalents. Notably, my interlocutors also used the word *sekulār* ('secular') regularly.

⁵ Rajeev Bhargava's case was chosen because of its quality and significance for thinking about 'secularism' in Bangladesh, while the criticism applies to the comparative/multiple secularities paradigm's wider corpus, not exclusively his work. For insights into the entanglement of debates on secularism with political-epistemological questions in India, see Quack (2012: 299–312).

as elsewhere, in multiple, competing, and at times contradictory ways, including connotations of moderate/decreased religiosity, scientism, ‘progressiveness’, or non-practice but also anti-religiosity or amorality. The term might also signify certain phenomena that are also considered ‘spiritual’ and ‘religious’, including *bāul*⁶ or *pīr*⁷ veneration, which indicates its strong interrelation with ideas of Bengali culturalism and nationalism.⁸ To complicate things further, secularism’s close association with the Independence War positions the term as the counterpole of certain *modes* of religiosity, or, arguably more specifically, of the party Jamaat-e-Islami (see, e.g., Ahmed 2011: 132), thereby blurring the boundary between the religious and the party-political Other.

Empirically, this creates a paradox whereby many people in Bangladesh, despite the AL’s common association with ‘secularism’, do not believe that the party is actually pursuing a secular policy (anymore). A common complaint among my intellectually and culturally interested interlocutors was that the AL is emphatically pro-Islam and that Muslim politicians have therefore adopted conspicuous displays of personal piety to increase their popularity among the ‘masses’ and to avoid being defamed as an ‘atheist party’. While such a dynamic has been observed for many previous periods (cf. Ahmed 1990), there was a heightened awareness of such a contradictory positionality during the Lady Justice incident. This was, firstly, because the polarisation around issues of ‘secularism’, ‘Islam’, ‘atheism’, the Independence War, and the Jamaat-e-Islami in 2013 as well as in subsequent debates around ‘terrorism’ (*jangibād*) in the following years had reinforced an awareness of the sensitivity of such issues. It was further assumed that the AL lacks democratic legitimacy, as it had returned

⁶ The term *bāul* designates persons, who are associated with a musical tradition but are also often considered a group that intentionally aims at transcending religious divisions.

⁷ Commonly translated as ‘holy men’ and usually used to refer to a sufi spiritual guide, see Harder (2011).

⁸ This, of course, is not to ignore the history of transregional and translinguistic intellectual exchange, or the need to contextualise reform movements in the context of Western imperialism and enlightenment philosophers (cf. Aydin 2007). Early rationalist movements included the free-thinker movement, ‘Young Bengal’ in Calcutta, and the radical 1920s Dhaka-based humanist movement *Buddhir Mukti Andolon* (‘Freedom of Intellect Movement’) (cf. Khan 2001; Murshid 1992: 125), the Bengali elites’ engagement with August Comte’s ideas of positivism (Forbes 1975), or the proven influence of philosophers like Bertrand Russell. Contemporary academic or popular debates, however, rarely mention these roots, while references to Bengali nationalism, Tagore, or Kazi Nazrul Islam are frequent.

to power in the opposition-boycotted 2014 election during which more than half of the electoral constituencies remained uncontested. Moreover, several policy decisions preceding the removal of 'Lady Justice' were interpreted as AL's attempts to please Islamist leaders and thereby avert popular oppositional mobilisation. The most notable examples include the decision to change school textbooks at the behest of conservative Islamist leaders, who had requested the removal of specific texts they had deemed anti-Islamic or 'atheistic' (*nāstik*) and the decision to consider the Dawra-e-hadith degree of Qawmi madrasas as an equivalent to a master's degree in Arabic literature and Islamic studies. Such moves substantially improve the career prospects of Qawmi madrasa graduates and also put religious education—which does not fall under direct state administration—at the same level as degrees earned at not religion-based universities or state-supervised Alia madrasas. Consequently, complaints about 'hypocrisy' and the AL's empty 'secularism' rhetoric were widespread among educated and self-consciously secularist people during that time.

III

The 'party-state effect': Imagining a divided community

Echoing such popular complaints about lacking 'ideological commitment', recent literature from political studies and political anthropology highlights pragmatic and factional aspects of party politics and its entanglement with violent entrepreneurs (e.g., Jackman 2017; Ruud, Kuttig in this special issue; cf. introduction). Research on party politics has shown a lack of intra-party democracy (e.g., Jahan 2015), highlighting dynastic politics (Ruud and Islam 2016) as well as the entanglement of party political power and organised violence, particularly in the field of student politics (Andersen 2013; Kuttig 2019). The role of *māstān*, *gunḍā*, and other violent enforcers has received particular scrutiny, along with their relation to political power and (moral) orders (e.g., Hoque and Michelutti 2018; Ruud 2010; Suykens and Islam 2013).

As elsewhere in South Asia, ethnographic studies of Bangladeshi politics have focused on clientelistic politics, with a tendency to depict electoral and party politics as being guided primarily by pragmatic-instrumentalist considerations and groupism. Notably, in contrast to India or Pakistan where the strong relationship between caste-groupism, lineages, or 'ethnic groups', and party politics is well documented, parties in Bangladesh cannot appeal to lineages, 'tribes', castes, or linguistic

identities to the same degree (cf. Hoque and Michelutti 2018), not only because of the country's different demographic features but also its policy and legislative decisions.⁹

The emphasis on factionalism, patronage, and 'muscular politics' has led scholars to consider 'ideology' and personal convictions implicitly or explicitly as being insignificant. Despite commonly held perceptions about the Bangladesh political class as being 'opportunistic and profit, rather than policy, oriented' (Suykens 2017b: 198), I contend that such popular descriptions only offer a partial depiction of the observable significance of party politics in everyday lives. Indeed, this discourse of a lack of ideology is in direct tension with literature on secularism and Islam discussed above and national discourses that postulate an ideological division along a supposed secular-religious dichotomy. How should we understand this apparent paradox: Although ideology appears to be irrelevant for party politics, how is it that references to secularism, non-communalism, and the Independence War are seemingly omnipresent?

In his explication of the 'party-state' concept, Bert Suykens writes that in Bangladesh 'the party in power often not only becomes the principal means to connect to the state and access state resources, it also is actively involved in (regulating) economic accumulation through the use of party branches or party-associated committees' (2017b: 189). Suykens develops a 'descriptive model' building on Evans-Pritchard's discussion of the Nuer political system and Fredrik Barth's application of game theory to Swat Pathans, arguing that politics in Bangladesh 'is based on the interaction of segmentary opposition and vertical integration under leader-based groups' (2017a: 1141) as Bangladesh is both divided along party lines and characterised by internal divisions within the parties resulting in a highly volatile and conflictive environment (2017a).

Although these generalising models capture significant characteristics of the political system in Bangladesh, they are problematic insofar as they tend to reify the phenomenon that they aim to describe and thereby erase the nuances and complexities of actual practices. Analysis of factional politics, whether derived from Barthian game theory or not, emphasise profit-maximising strategies and pragmatism in politics. By reducing a complex reality to these factors, these theories fail to sufficiently account

⁹ For instance, India's elaborated quota system has contributed considerably to fostering caste identities and the politics of caste.

for different actors' personal motives, the wider implications of such manifestations, and social dynamics beyond self-interest and schematic models.

Relatedly, I suggest that rather than assuming the all-pervasiveness of a 'bipolar' *structure*, consideration should be given to how the *idea* of an allegedly 'bipolar society' is produced and the structural implications this powerful idea has. I argue that while this *party-state idea* has structural effects resulting in a close entanglement between party politics and access to resources, it is simultaneously entangled with the continuous (re)construction of a dichotomic division of society along *ideological* lines. Thus, although personal convictions and 'party ideology' are deeply entangled with factional political logic, they were never fully determined by it. Such convolutedness and the implications for the emerging public contestation of 'secularism' is discussed in detail below with the example the public debate about the removal of 'Lady Justice'.

I draw on Timothy Mitchell's work on what 'the state' appears to be (cf. 1991, 2006 [1999]) for the conceptualisation of these complex entanglements. The state has been notoriously hard to define because of its nature as a highly elusive, non-concrete entity with simultaneously concrete, manifold manifestations (see also the introduction to this special issue). The separation of an 'idea of the state' and the 'state-system' has guided much of the theorising of the state. Mitchell radically refuses this separation, even for analytical purposes, contending that it is this very distinction that makes the state appear as an entity independent of society, which has notable political implications. Thus, he proposes that we examine how and with what consequences distinctions between 'state' and 'society' are drawn and examine the state as a 'discursively produced effect', taking 'seriously the elusiveness of the boundary between the state and society, not as a problem of conceptual precision, but a clue to the nature of the phenomenon' (2006 [1991]: 170). Rather than assuming that the material manifestations *are* separate from social practices (which they are not) and look at their relations with ideas of the state, he suggests we explore the material manifestations of the *idea* of the state (or the law, or the police) as a separable and non-social entity and 'examine the detailed political processes through which the uncertain yet powerful distinction between state and society is produced' (1991: 78).

As Julian Kuttig and I have argued in the introduction to this special issue, the belief in the separability of 'the state' and 'society' is not as

naive as my short summary of Mitchell's argument here might make it seem. The complexity of the relationship between the state and society can be seen here in how my interlocutors thought about the many 'structural effects' of 'the state' as being interlinked with, if not the same as, another abstract entity, 'the party in power', or less abstractly the AL. Indeed, when 'Lady Justice' was removed from the front of the Supreme Court premises, many of my interlocutors discussed this *as if* it was a party political decision, although Hefazat-e-Islam's original petition for its removal had been addressed to the Supreme Court and the decision-making mechanism was never disclosed. Nevertheless, in convoluting the party and the Supreme Court's decision, the interlocutors merged two formally separate institutions. It seems that many of my urban interlocutors think of the 'state' not as some abstract entity but rather as a 'party-state', and at times as one personified as Sheikh Hasina's leadership.

The important point that I take from Mitchell's work is the acknowledgement that while such an idea should not be mistaken for the material reality, it has powerful effects that manifest themselves materially in ongoing social dynamics. In short, when suggesting the concept, 'party-state effect', I heuristically capture the powerful idea that 'state resources' are fundamentally tied to party power and 'connections'; an idea that can be seen in various social practices and institutionalised conventions and which has material consequences. Simultaneously, this concept emphasises that social practices of resource distribution are embedded in more complicated dynamics than a schematic model or popular idea might suggest. Thus, while the entanglement between discourses of religion and secularism and partisan politics results in the imagination of a two-fold divided society, empirically observable contestations—albeit shaped by such dynamics—can never be reduced to it. Thus, the suggested framework focuses our attention on the work of the internal and ever-shifting boundary demarcation, and the convolution (and its limits) of 'the state', 'the party' and a supposedly ideologically divided society.

Anthropologists have pointed out that Mitchell's 'state effect' 'is reproduced not only through routine operations of bureaucratic practice, infrastructural development, or the application of coercive force, but also through affective engagements of ordinary citizens and non-citizens in relation to agents and state-like activities' (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2015: 7). They insist that scholars thereby need to consider 'the historical specificity of state forms and modes of governance' (*ibid.*). Rather than adding another

neologism to the classificatory terminology mentioned above, the concept of the 'party-state effect' encourages us to ask how the relations between 'state', 'society' and 'parties' are imagined and manifest themselves in such an affective engagement. For this article, the question of how the idea of a society divided along party lines is maintained—amidst structural effects of such an imagination and the messiness of everyday life (which inherently defies any simplistic dichotomic reductions)—is pertinent.

IV

The 'next time they will demand something more'— Beyond outraged communities

At first view, the Lady Justice protests appear similar to those of religiously framed, outraged reactions and polarisations that have framed research on controversies around textbooks in Pakistan in 2000 (Ali 2008), 'Danish Cartoons' (Blom 2008; Mahmood 2009), or Taslima Nasreen in Bangladesh (Riaz 2008). This was also not the first time in the country's history that certain Islamist groups had demanded removal of statues using the argument that sculptures of living beings are un-Islamic. Previous demands had resulted in the removal of the statue of the renowned Lalon Fakir, located close to Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport after an Islamist attack in 2008,¹⁰ the cancellation of the planned erection of an Independence War sculpture at Shahjalal Science and Technology University, and contestations around the large papier-mâché sculptures used during the 'Mangal Shobhajatra' processions on *Pohela Boishakh* (first day of the Bengali New Year).

In this case, Hefazat-e-Islam demanded the removal because they perceived the statue to be of a 'Greek idol', the goddess Themis, which they deemed inappropriate in a Muslim majority country, as it was both foreign to the region and offensive to religious sentiments. Another major reason for their opposition was the specific location, as the statue could be seen from the National Eidgah, the open space where Muslims congregate for mass Eid prayers twice a year. In their protests, the Hefazat-e-Islam received support from other Islamist groups, including the Khelafot Andolon, the Islamic Front, and, remarkably, the Awami Olama

¹⁰ See <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-59780>, accessed 4 August 2018.

League, a not officially recognised sub-organisation of the AL formed by Islamic scholars. They raised their demand first through a written petition addressed to the Supreme Court. Subsequent protests in Chittagong, Dhaka and other cities in February and early March attracted several thousand participants. Although some articles and editorials were published at that time, the issue was mainly discussed among Islamic-religious and left-liberal circles but not the wider public.

After Sheikh Hasina's controversial approval of their protest in April 2017, the Hefazat-e-Islam reinforced its demand that the statue be removed with the insistence that it be done before Ramadan. The issue then became a subject of wide discussion during the final days before Ramadan as it was assumed that the government would try to avoid political unrest during the holy month. On 26 May 2017, the last day before Ramadan began and the ultimatum would go unanswered, the statue was removed at 4 AM.

Though the early morning removal may be interpreted as an attempt to avoid public attention, it promptly sparked public protest. Primarily students and activists from left-wing parties and cultural groups as well as well-known figures of the Ganajagoron Mancha immediately called for a movement against the statue's removal. The protests were much stronger in Dhaka than in other parts of the country. The state reacted repressively: several people were arrested or injured by tear gas and water cannons.¹¹ Smaller protests were held during the day across the country, including in Sylhet. At about 3 PM, some hundred people, most of them directly involved in cultural activism and/or left politics (such as the Communist Party, the Workers Party and the Chhatra Union), met in front of Sylhet's Shaheed Minar in order to protest the statue's removal. With limited time, there were hardly any banners or preparation. Instead, spontaneous but passionate speeches were given, and a human chain was held for about two hours.

The speeches expressed serious fears about increasing communalism (*sāmpradāyikatā*), religious fanaticism (*dharmāndha*, *mulloḃād*, *dharmīya ugratā*), and terrorism (*jaṅgibād*). They also directly accused the AL of acting against its own 'secular' principles, giving in to the Islamists' demands, and compromising their ideology for 'voter politics'. The

¹¹ See <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/cops-silence-protest-over-statue-removal-1411420>, accessed 4 August 2017.

meeting was followed by a rally, during which protesters chanted the slogans, 'Joy Bangla!' ('Victory to Bengal') and 'Why was the sculpture removed?—Sheikh Hasina will have to explain this!'.

In a certain sense, the incident can be interpreted as an example of outraged communities, marked by mobilisation around certain symbols and significant emotions and feelings of 'moral injury' on both sides (cf. Blom and Jaoul 2008). In her essay on the public debates about the Danish cartoons in Egypt, Saba Mahmood argued that Western liberal scholarship does not account adequately for the sense of moral injury among Muslims due to their 'inability to translate across different semiotic and ethical norms' (2009: 860). In other words, it fails to take religious reason seriously and does not question its own 'secular' normative assumptions about 'religion'. Samuli Schielke, however, criticised her for confining her analysis to a duality between 'secular' and 'religious'. Taking the view that the empirical reality might be much more complex, he suggests that as 'an interpretive framework [...] populism may do much better than a juxtaposition of secular/religious reason and affect' (2010: 8). I contend that we ought to take the emotions and reasoning seriously, including the underlying 'semiotic and ethical norms' of those who reacted with outrage as well as the political economy of affective mobilisation or populism (cf. Blom and Jaoul 2008). I also suggest, however, that in order to unravel some of the entanglements relevant to the 'Lady Justice' case, it is methodologically pertinent to focus on the debates and comments around this incident *beyond* outraged reactions.

In fact, only few people in Sylhet at that time aligned themselves directly with any side of the debate and many avoided positioning themselves explicitly or expressing their views in public. The incident nevertheless continued to be widely discussed and analysed in public, particularly among the educated elite for some time. In these conversations, speakers often implicitly and tentatively indicated their position in their choice of Bengali terms and tended to refer to 'Lady Justice' either as *murti* or as *bhāskarya* depending on their position. Though both terms may be translated as 'sculpture' or 'statue', *murti* is also used to refer to the Hindu-goddess idols in temples and may also be translated as 'body' and thus more directly provokes the association between so-called idol worship, 'shape', 'icon', or 'incarnation', while *bhāskarya* more clearly carries the connotation of artistic plastics or sculpture.

The tangible cautiousness in discussing their position, however, does not indicate that my interlocutors were not ‘emotional’ or seriously invested. Instead, I contend, many were indeed strongly aware of the sensitivity of such issues and the involvedness of the statue’s removal with party-politics. The analysis of the comments reveals that many took this incident to be one step in an imagined, and much more fundamental conflict between ‘secularists’ and ‘Islamists’. The prevalent approach to discussing the issue in terms of strategies was guided by the awareness that such allegedly religious and secular ‘symbols’ were linked to contestations around more encompassing hegemonies and power structures.

Moreover, I observed a marked difference between some ‘public’ or ‘official’ statements, such as those articulated at rallies and protests, in Facebook posts and media reports, and those made in casual conversations and ordinary interactions. For instance, a number of public intellectuals published comments in one of the biggest English language newspapers shortly after the incident. As the following statement by Kamal Lohani, a journalist known for his engagement in cultural and left-wing activism, illustrates, the incident was framed as a question of secularism and the role of Islamic groups or values in the public:

It’s a great question why the government could not tell Hefajat that the AL is a secular party and that it cannot allow its [the statue’s] removal. I am worried if we, as a nation, are walking towards darkness. Such a sculpture, which is a symbol of justice, is seen all over the world and nowhere has such a thing [removal] happened. This proves we have not learned to be civilised as a nation yet. (Kamal Lohani, *Daily Star*, 27 May 2017, English in original)

This public statement took a strong and explicit stance against the statue’s removal. Kamal Lohani’s word choice indicates a developmentalist perspective in which secularisation, or having a statue removed or not, was discursively linked to ‘civilisation’ and positioned as a teleological aim. Similarly, the reference to a trend towards ‘darkness’ seems reminiscent of enlightenment-influenced normative ideas of appropriate modes of religiosity, not dissimilar to what Mahmood (2009) terms the ‘secular affect’. Kamal Lohani’s statement discusses the removal of the statue as a question of principle. He further directly appeals to the AL, which he

designates explicitly as a 'secular party' while simultaneously criticising it for not acting accordingly.

One of my interlocutors, also a public intellectual widely known for his/her secular attitude, made similar statements in newspapers. However, when I asked about the incident in one of our recorded but casual conversations, his/her answer had a surprisingly different tone in comparison to the published statements.¹² Such disparity in statements seems to characterise many of my pro-secular and often educated interlocutors and is worth quoting here at length:

See there is a *sculpture* near the cantonment in Dhaka. [...] They [Hefazat or Islamist] have not said anything against it. Nothing. Why not? Because they know it is close to the cantonment. If they say something, the military might mind. (laughing) [...] You ask me what I think about the incident? First of all ... I mean it wasn't a nice sculpture anyway... This depends on you[r taste] of course. [...] it was not right to place it there. See you have to think about it before. You need to consider all points before you install it. Is it the right place or not? [...] but once you have placed it, it should not be removed anymore. [...] Otherwise, every time they will do something, they will become more powerful. Next time, they will demand something more. (Public intellectual, 19 September 2017, translation by the author from the Bengali transcript)

Despite being directly asked about his/her view on the incident, my interlocutor gives a rather indirect answer, taking, in contrast to his/her published statement, an ambivalent position. While s/he also argues against the removal of the sculpture, his/her reasoning is different. The statue is no longer framed as a question of principle but is instead relativistically positioned, for example, by pointing out that the statue was 'not nice', not in the right place, etc. Remarkably and also in clear contrast to the public statement above, his/her comment does not directly reference religion or secularism. Instead, the analogy to the statue in close proximity

¹² Due to the sensitivity of these issues, I have refrained from reproducing his/her original public statement, which is, however, similar to the one by Kamal Lohani, as this could reveal the identity of my interlocutor, whose informal statement is also quoted here.

to the cantonment and the powerful military frames it as an issue of power politics.

In the long conversation I had with him/her, however, it was clear that although s/he was avoiding discussing issues of religion directly, s/he saw the sculpture issue as being related to 'secularism' in principle. S/he nevertheless opposed the removal not on the grounds of ethical or moral principles, but because s/he perceived the 'failure', i.e. the statue's removal, as entailing a loss of power. While the 'they' remains unspecified in the statement, 'Next time, they will demand something more', quite obviously s/he implicitly frames the incident as part of a general fight of 'them' versus 'us'. I suggest that these types of comments indicate and (re)produce such an imagined division of society. It is the vagueness of the 'they' in such debates that results in a blurred differentiation between a secular/religious and a political other. Moreover, such a blurriness of these differentiations and the conceptualisation of such incidences as being part of political contestations allow large segments of the society to maintain that the AL is a secular party while criticising it for not pursuing secular policy. I will elaborate on this in the next section.

V

'A State should never lose'—Secularism and the party-state effect

I also discussed this incident with many interlocutors affiliated with the AL, such as Jayanta Chowdhury,¹³ one of the leading student leaders in Sylhet. For him, a major reason for engaging with politics on AL's behalf was their 'non-communal' and 'secular' ideology. As a Hindu, he witnessed houses in neighbouring villages belonging to minorities being set on fire during his childhood, an experience that served as a major motivational factor for him to engage in politics. Although acknowledging that not all AL politicians were 'non-communal', he considered the AL the party that constituted the best alternative for a more 'secular' and 'non-communal' society in Bangladesh. Personally, he was not interested in religious issues and told me that he is not a practising Hindu.

¹³ The AL politicians' names have been altered to ensure anonymity.

However, when I asked him about the removal of 'Lady Justice', his position was ambivalent. He argued that once it had been placed there, it should not have been removed, proclaiming: 'A state (*rāṣṭra*) should never lose, in any case',¹⁴ Although he was against the *removal*, he also explicitly stated that it had been the wrong decision to place the statue at that location in the first place, as it might be religiously insensitive and hurt the feelings of the demographic majority. Thus, while he was not in favour of the statue in principle, he was against the removal, because—similar to the statement mentioned above—he assumed that giving in to Hefazat-e-Islam's demands would weaken his 'side's' position and open the possibility for further demands. Interestingly, Jayanta Chowdhury's statement uses the word 'state' (*rāṣṭra*) and thus implicitly merges the Supreme Court, the government/parliament, the ruling party, AL, and an abstract entity, the 'state'. At the same time, it posits that the 'winners' in this incident were not to be considered part of the state. Again, the 'who' remains undefined and even whether they are framed as 'religious' or a political Other remains elusive.

Such obscurity, I contend, is not coincidental but illustrative of prevailing state formation in Bangladesh. The entanglement of party politics and an imagined division along secular-Islamist lines was even more explicitly articulated in another interlocutor's statement. In the course of the interview, Ashraf Siddiqui, one of the main AL leaders in Sylhet, stated that he personally welcomes all kinds of statues (*bhāskarya*) in Bangladesh but also emphasised the need to acknowledge that a majority in the society 'is not yet ready' for this. More crucially, he framed the incident mainly as part of a deeper fight in which considerations around secularism and party politics are closely entangled. When I asked him about his personal view of the removal on the day it happened, he stated:

We are in a situation of compromise [...]. In our country, there are really two powerful parties. There is the Awami League and there is the BNP. There is hardly any chance to go outside the two [...] the Awami League maybe cannot do everything [...] due to voter politics they also have to compromise [...] but they are trying to be a 'secular' party... They do not allow reactionary forces [...] Those who build this kind should have a sense of self-censorship [...] We are in a situation

¹⁴ Interview on 29 August 2017, author's translation from Bengali transcript.

of gunpowder. And you have to handle this with care. If there is one mistake ... Then tschh... for this reason, the left, ‘progressive’ or revolutionary, [...] they think that the *murti* ... [...] The event again has proven as a surrender to the ‘*maulabādī*’ (fundamentalist). [...] I think it is better to avoid this kind of situation. (AL Leader, 25 July 2019, translation by the author from Bengali transcript)

His definition of the situation as a ‘compromise’ indicates that he deems the removal as an action that is not in line with the main aims of the AL. However, rather than seeing the decision as being wrong or ‘hypocritical’ *per se*, he views such a ‘compromise’ as an unfortunate, possibly corrupt but necessary solution in the current situation. He views this compromise negatively not only because of the implications for ‘secular principles’ but also because of its consequences of weakening the party. He frames the wider context as being marked by a factional or two-party system, and thus deems it necessary to subordinate the considerations of the specific case, the removal of the statue, to the logics of this more fundamental fight. The language he uses, particularly the ‘gunpowder’ analogy, hints at the highly contentious environment in which he situated the AL’s power at that time, which he interprets as fragile and susceptible to collapse in the face of any major ‘issues’.

For him, however, the party’s power is not an end in itself but is fundamentally linked to the possibilities of finally realising a ‘secular’ Bangladesh. Allowing a statue to be erected at a place where it can be seen from the Eidgah, from his perspective, was not only a problem because it did not sufficiently attend to the religious sensibilities of pious Muslims bothered by the statue but also because it was a serious strategic mistake which placed the party in a bind. Accordingly, Ashraf Siddiqui opines that such a compromise was necessary to avoid what—in his figurative language—could result in a political ‘explosion’ but he also criticises those who take a more radical and public ‘secular’ stance suggesting that they harm the AL and, thereby, strengthen those who are ‘fundamentalists’.

His idea of ‘secularism’ and the AL as a ‘secular’ party is a vision for a future that is not and cannot be realised in the present. Such a vision will also not be realised by regulations that limit religious expressions in public but by the relative weakening of ‘anti-secular forces’. In his framing, the statue’s removal is not a question of principle, but a strategic consideration of risk to ensure success in the long-term fight for a secular Bangladesh, even

if this requires short-term compromises on 'secularism'. In this sense, he views the AL as an essentially 'secular' party that will act accordingly once they are powerful enough to transform society. In a time of compromise, he does not expect the AL to always privilege secular positions over partisan concerns such as 'voter politics'. Crucially, such a view is not limited to party politicians like Ashraf Siddiqui but many of the casual conversations I had in Sylhet with people echoed this sentiment as well.

VI

The (ir)relevance of secularism

In this article, I have shown that the 'Lady Justice' issue was strongly entangled with popular and mainstream politics, not simply in the sense of a misuse of the 'rhetoric' of secularism or the manipulation of popular sentiments through religious symbols, but in more convoluted ways that, as I suggest, can be best understood through the conceptual lens of the party-state effect. The imagination of a party-state and of a two-sided division of society complicates party politics with contestations around secularism and Islam, which in turn shaped the multiple ways that people evaluated the 'Lady Justice' issue.

Despite this prevalent imagination of a division in society, the analysed statements strongly suggest that such a dichotomy between 'secularist' and 'Islamist' is empirically untenable. Positions such as those of Jayanta Chowdhury, who self-identifies as a 'non-practising' and 'secular' Hindu but nevertheless holds ambiguous positions concerning the placement of a sculpture close to the Eidgah, seems to call into question not only the common juxtapositions made in Bangladesh but also academic conceptualisation such as Saba Mahmood's 'religious reason' and 'secular affect'. While some people took strong and outraged positions in which the issue was interpreted as a question of principle, many articulated rather differentiated positions and analysed the incident in terms of party politics. Acknowledging the pragmatics of mainstream politics results in a tendency to be cautious, strategic, and analytical and avoidance of outwardly public expressions of one's opinion on this issue. Ironically, while Hefazat-e-Islam's demands catalysed the statue's removal and popular accusations against the AL for not acting according to its secular principles, the case also illustrates why people nevertheless continue to maintain that the AL is an essentially 'secular' party.

However, even for those who clearly framed the incident as being about power struggles between the different political alliances, the incident was often not unrelated to emotions, personal convictions, and sensibilities related to ‘secularism’. Indeed, the sensitivity and ambiguity that many felt was related to the fact that the incident was perceived to impact party-based political power, on one hand, and a more general fight for a ‘secular’ Bangladesh on the other. Thus, as many of the statements presented in this article show, we need to broaden our analysis of such contestations beyond the realm of ordinary politics and see how this intersects with diverse convictions, value sets, and imaginations of society.

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