Religious conflict sensitivity and the Shahbagh-Gonojagoron moncho Movement in Bangladesh: A Critical Overview

Kazi Sameeo Sheesh

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Preface

The author, KaziSameo Sheesh indeed took up a challenging task in this research monograph to analyze Shahbag-GanajagoronMoncho Movement in terms of religious conflict sensitivity. His understanding of the concept of religious conflict sensitivity is the application of ‘religious sentiment’ in politics. It was not an easy journey for him to analyse the issue since the movement itself became a paradox for all the political forces in the later period of its evolution. The movement emerged in reaction to a judgment of the International Crime Tribunal (ICT) without any formal political leadership or organization. In the verdict, the war criminal and collaborator QuaderMollah was given life imprisonment.

The aftermath of the Shahbag Movement witnessed a sharp polarization among the political forces over the movement. The “pro-liberation” forces branded this movement as “secular/progressive” movement while the traditional “pro-Islamic” forces as anti-Islam/atheists’ movement. The dynamics of this movement could not take a different turn avoiding the usual impact of the exploitation of religious sentiment by the mainstream political parties in the national politics of Bangladesh and the global rise of transnational Islamic political culture.

Against the above-described backdrop, the author delves into the analysis of the Shahbag Movement by raising two important questions: why was ‘religious sentiment’ used against the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement and how did the activists of the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement resist the use of ‘religious sentiment’? In answering the questions, the author undertakes a series of thematic explanations and also reflects on what role the academia should play given the current context of the use of religious sentiment in politics and the global rise of transnational political culture of religiosity.

I am happy that I had the opportunity to supervise the researcher for this monograph. It was a pleasant experience for me to guide Mr. KaziSameo Sheesh who undertook the research under the Square-CGS fellowship programme. I am sure this research monograph is a significant addition to the existing literature on Shahbag-GonojagoronMoncho Movement. It is also a valuable work done by the author in the context of the growing dominance of identity politics in South Asia and the world.

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Abstract

In this study, I seek the answers to two questions: Why was ‘religious sentiment’ used against the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement? How do the activists of the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement resist the use of ‘religious sentiment’? To find the answer to these research questions, I talked with different groups of people, who can broadly be divided into pro, anti and analysts or third view groups.

Different counter explanations were put forward by the participants on why ‘religious sentiment’ was used as a weapon against the movement. I sorted the answers according to different themes, such as, diverting the issue and creating divisions, defaming the movement, legitimizing killing and violence and blaming government manifested movement provision, questioning the liberation war of 1971 and attempting to justify war crimes.

Regarding the question on resistance from the activists of the movement, they took several initiatives, for example, unveiling the truth, reciting from different scriptures, using liberal Islamic thought to counter violence, not deviating from the non-violent character of the movement, continuing processions and marches, and standing up for the victims of communal oppression.
Introduction

Since 2013, the Bangla term ‘Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho’ (literal meaning, Shahabagh: name of a place, Gonojagoronmoncho: stage for a mass uprising) has created a new meaning in the political vocabulary of Bangladesh. Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho is a movement to demand the punishment of war criminals from the 1971 war of independence of Bangladesh. Apparently, this movement was started without the support of any established or dominant political party. When it first began, there was no stage or central leader, authority or organizing body, hence, new media (blogs, Facebook etc.) played a vital role in spreading the spirit and message of the movement (Zaman 2014). I view this movement as being constructed on the streets and spread through new media. People from all walks of life, without any explicit political party affiliations, spontaneously participated in the movement. However, when the movement reached its peak momentum, its opposers started to use religious sentiment as a weapon against it. The Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho (GM) movement had different dynamics, and a number of controversies emerged. This resulted in simmering tensions, and the movement experienced a shift in its dynamics, one it never really recovered from.

The dawn of February 5, 2013 was just like any other day. Of course, the month of February is a different one in Bangladesh, when a month long book fair called ‘Omor Ekushe Grontho Mela’ (Book Fair commemorating the immortal 21st), the biggest book fair in Dhaka, is held at the Bangla Academy, a place that is very close to Shahbagh. On that morning, the International Crime Tribunal (ICT) announced the verdict against a war criminal and collaborator Quader Mollah, who was given the moniker ‘Butcher Quader’ by his accusers, for leading and executing killings, rapes and lootings, helped by the Pakistani Army, during the war of independence in 1971. His other, more official identity, was that he was the Joint Secretary General of the Jaamat-e-Islami Bangladesh, a political party which stands accused for its antagonistic role during the independence of Bangladesh, and subsequent terrorist activities in the name of Islam (Sabur 2013). The ICT announced lifetime imprisonment for Mollah for his involvement in crimes against humanity in 1971.

Many Bangladeshi youth believed that the verdict of the ICT was insufficient for the degree and volumes of crimes committed by Mollah. They contended that capital punishment can be the only appropriate punishment for this case. Some of the bloggers and cyber activists wrote on Facebook and other individual blogs (some bloggers who had formed Bloggers and Online Activists Network- BOAN, amar blogs, somewhereinblog and so on had started to work on these issues long before this) that they were going to meet at Shahbagh to protest against this verdict. In the evening, some bloggers, cyber activists, cultural and political activists and other general people came to Shahbagh, where they made a small stage (moncho) and expressed their dissatisfaction. The crowds began to grow, and in the next few days it can safely be said that they made the nation tremble. This was the beginning of the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement. One of the unusual circumstances was that several
ministers and leaders, including the Prime Minister, expressed their support for the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement in parliament. The BNP-led opposition party alliance rebuked the movement, and the Chairperson of BNP slammed the youth of Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho as “Nastik (atheists) and Noshto chele (reprobates)” (Chowdhury and Barna 2013; Sabur 2013). This also indicates some of the different dynamics of the movement, and the emergence of a counter force such as Hefazot Islam. In Appendix-1, I have also illustrated how a newspaper manipulated the news and pictures to ignite religious sentiments against the movement. The movement might move forward to face an issue of conflict, such as using religious sentiment for gaining votes or using the religious sentiment to defame the spirit of movement.

The use of weapons or the exploitation of religious sentiments did lead to violent outcomes. On the night of February 15, Ahmed Rajib Haider, an activist of the movement and a blogger who was accused of being a prominent atheist and anti-Islamic writer by some media, was attacked and brutally killed (Rayhanrana, 2013). His mutilated body was found lying in a pool of blood. Though the attacks against atheist and secular writers are not at all a new phenomenon in Bangladesh, the death of this 30-year-old architect and a member of the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho, took the struggle of Bangladeshi freethinkers to a different level. The murder of Rajib Haider can be seen as a part of a larger attack against ‘atheist bloggers’ in Bangladesh.

Given this backdrop, it is urgent to address how and why religious sentiments were used as a tool during the movement. Though the activists of the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement vowed to carry over the principles of a non-violent struggle for social justice, a reactionary parallel movement was also created to destroy the morale of the Shahbagh movement by exploiting religious sensitivities. Of course, the issues of religious conflict sensitivity, social movements and education systems demand a wider and more dynamic scope of discussions. Again, this study has a very specific focus towards the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement. The questions for this study are, why was ‘religious sentiment’ used against the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement? How do the activists of the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement resist the use of ‘religious sentiment’?

**Methodology**

To explore the question of why religious sensitivities were applied against the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement, I started conversations with several relevant personalities. In some cases, due to convenience, I took written interviews as well.

In a broader sense, the participants can be divided as follows.

One: the leaders, organizers and bloggers actively involved in and supporting the Shahbagh Gonojagornmoncho movement - here, identified as pro-GM;

Two: political analysts, Islamic experts, media activists, academics and human rights activists who observed the Shahbagh-Gonojagornmoncho movement but were not actively involved with it - here, identified as analysts.
Three: the critics of the Shahbagh-Gonojagornmoncho movement who are against the movement - here, identified as critics or third view.

Here, participants are identified as Xi (for example, X1, X2....). I have promised the participants that all ethical procedures will be followed for the research, such as confidentiality, rights of withdrawal and so on.

On the basis of these conversations, I have derived themes to explain the causes of using religious sentiment against the Shahbagh-Gonojagornmoncho movement. Here, it is worth mentioning that many participants emphasized on the role of academia, so I added it as a separate section in the following research paper.

Context of the Shahbagh-Gonojagornmoncho movement and religious conflict sensitivity

Immediately after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, a section of citizens took initiatives to demand trials for those responsible for committing war crimes (a brief description is discussed later). In this sense, the demands of the Shahbagh-Gonojagornmoncho movement are not new ones. However, the distinguishing character of this movement is that almost all the leaders, organizers and activists belonged to the post-1971 generation; they were not born during the liberation war of Bangladesh.

Let us first give a brief contextual background of the long struggle and movement to bring to justice those who committed crimes against humanity during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971 (In Appendix 2, I briefly discuss the Pakistan period as part of this background). Along with the outline of such movements, I also show how Islamic extremists were emerging during this time and actively worked to suppress such demands by using religious sentiments.

Emergence of anti-liberation and religious fundamentalism versus demand for trial of war crimes in 1971

This section illustrates the political context and citizens’ struggle for the trial of war criminals and collaborators for crimes against humanity, and the state’s response towards them, as well as the emergence of the use of religion, particularly Islam, in Bangladesh.

Immediately after independence (1971-75)

After independence, Bangladesh adopted secularism as one of the four fundamental principles of the constitution, created on the 4th of November, 1972. The objective of this constitution was to abolish communalism and the use of religion in politics. Since Islam-based political parties, such as Jamaat-e-Islami, Muslim League and Nizam-e-Islam had anti-liberation stances, and were defeated forces, it was easier for the actors of domestic politics at that time to ban the use of religion (mainly, Islam) in politics (Hossain, 1992; Shareef, A., Nuruzzaman, K. and Kabeer, S., 1992). However, global politics at the time was not in favour of this. This was the height of the Cold War and also the oil crisis. As we know, USA, China and most of the oil-rich countries of the Middle East and Islamic nations were not in favour of Bangladesh during the liberation war.
Right after his release from Pakistan’s prison, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first President of the Bangladesh government, articulated that Bangladesh is a new addition to the Islamic world, and later on, Bangabandhu joined the OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) conference in February in 1974 (Hossain, 1992, p. 13). On several different occasions, he attempted to clarify this stance, stating that secularism does not necessarily mean the denial of religion. It does not at all mean that Bangabandhu talked about a future Islamic state. Rather, considering the importance of recognition from the Islamic world (and more importantly, the demand for fuel energy from the oil-rich middle eastern countries), it was an essential political and economic strategy (Hossain, 1992). However, in a bilateral meeting with then Saudi King Faisal in Algiers in late 1973, King Faisal expressed his support for Pakistan and tried to impose two conditions for Bangladesh in order to get their recognition; one is to declare Bangladesh as an Islamic republic and the other is the unconditional release of all Pakistani prisoners of war (Mukul, 1992). In this conversation, Bangabanghu articulated that release of Pakistani prisoners of war is a bilateral issue between Bangladesh and Pakistan. Moreover, he also pointed out that even the title of Saudi Arabia does not signify an Islamic Republic and Bangladesh does not consist of only Muslims; there were people from other religions and so he stood for the secular position of Bangladesh.

Though the international community, particularly the oil-rich countries and Islamic nations, were not in support of the trial of war criminals of the Bangladesh liberation war, concerned citizens led by Zahir Raihan formed the ‘Inquiry commission to investigate the murders of intellectuals’ on 29th December, 1971. It should be noted that Zahir Raihan disappeared on January 31, 1971 and to this day no trace of him has been found.

The state enacted the ‘Bangladesh War Collaborator Act 1972’ on 24th January, 1972 and also formed the International Crime Tribunals Act 1973 on 15th July, 1973. One of the major loopholes of this act was that according to the provision, only convicted persons, not the victims or prosecutors, could appeal against the trial to the High Court (Shareef, A., Nuruzzaman, K. and Kabeer, S., 1992). It is very surprising that after four decades, the problem of this provision again reappeared and boosted the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement.

Shareef, A., Nuruzzaman, K. and Kabeer, S. (1992) made several crucial criticisms of the act. For instance, the tribunals followed the traditional provision of the ‘Evidence Act’, which was actually created to try offences that occurred during the time of peace (not war). While investigating the cases, it was very difficult to prove the crimes because of the complexities arising during the period of the liberation war. Despite this, about 37,471 cases were filed under this law till October, 1973. On 28 March, 73 tribunals were formed to put the collaborators on trial. About 2,884 cases were solved. 752 of them were found guilty and only one of them was sentenced to capital punishment. As many as 2000 were acquitted after the trial (Shareef, A., Nuruzzaman, K. and Kabeer, S., 1992).

During this period, one important incident occurred on November 30, 1973, when the Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh declared a general amnesty for the convicted and punished prisoners under the Collaborator Act. According to the Act, the criminals convicted under Section 302 (killing), Section 304, 376 (rape), 435 (causing damage
by using bullets or explosives), Section 436 (burning homesteads), and Section 448 (setting fire to water transport or explosion) were not supposed to be considered under this act (Pial, 2012). However, Shareef, A., Nuruzzaman, K. and Kabeer, S., (1992, pp. 21-22) showed the severity of its implications, as within one week of the declaration, members from the Malek ministry, central members of the Peace Committee, planners behind the killing of intellectuals and many prominent collaborators were freed.

Bangabanghu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, on a radio broadcast and television telecast on December 15, 1973, announced that the people of Bangladesh do not believe in a policy of jealousy and revenge, and so those who were arrested and convicted under the Collaborator Act had been shown general mercy. He also asked the ‘persons misguided by others’ to be repentant and to participate in building this nation (Pial, 2012). This might sound very generous, but such initiatives of reconciliation also acted as a strategy to rescue the Bangalis who were then still stuck in Pakistan. Omar (1975) was severely critical of this turn of events, writing that this so-called general amnesty showed the emergence of a pro-US, anti-Soviet bloc and communal force within Awami League (Omar 1975 as cited in Shareef, A., Nuruzzaman, K. and Kabeer, S., 1992, p. 22). Shareef, A., Nuruzzaman, K. and Kabeer, S.(1992, p. 22) also asserted that it was possible for Bangabanghu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to show this personal generosity towards the collaborators due to their similar class positions.

Military regimes (1975-1990)

After 1975, the regime was changed with the bloody killings of Bangabandhu and his family (August 15, 1975) and four major national leaders (November 3, 1975), and military rule was again brought back to Bangladesh. Alam (2008) and Hossain (1992) assert that both military regimes, Zia (1975-81, Lt. General Ziaur Rahman became President on 21 April, 1977) and Ershad (1982-90, Lt. General Hussain Muhammad Ershad became President on 11 December 1983), tried to overcome their legitimacy crises by “manipulating the political issue of Islamic identity. During the regime of Zia the principle of ‘secularism’ was replaced by ‘Faith in Almighty Allah’” (Hossain, 1992; Alam, 2008). This initiative was supported by the Muslim League, Jamaat-e-Islami, Islamic Democratic League, Nezam-e-Islam and Khelafot-e-Rabbani (Hossain, 1992, p. 14). The reader should note that these parties were banned in the immediate aftermath of independence because of their anti-liberation activities (Hossain, 1992, p. 14), but during the Zia regime, these parties were rehabilitated into politics. The use of Islam in politics was extended during the Ershad regime, in 1988, Islam was declared as the state religion by amending the constitution (Alam, 2008). The underlying cause behind this was to create an aura of political legitimacy as well as to win support from the oil-rich Middle Eastern Muslim countries, especially from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, in order to get aid and export labor (Alam, 2008; Hossain, 1992). In domestic politics, we have seen the notorious collaborators became powerful politicians, and some of them were even selected as ministers for the cabinet.

Thus, in the history of Bangladesh, we have observed a correlation between the capture of power by the military and the use Islam in politics. Despite the hostile domestic and international conditions, on 21 March 1981, Chairman of Muktijoddha Sangsad Kazi Nurizzaman placed a seven points demand and announced a movement to back the demands for the trial of collaborators (Rajakar, Albadr, Shams). Considering the severity of the situation, then President Ziaur Rahman asked Minister Majedul Haque to look into the matter
From the 1990s, the so-called democratic era started in Bangladesh. There remains a regular five-year election process to change the government in power. From the 1990s to the present, the subsequent democratic governments could not overcome the tactics of using Islam in politics, rather two major political parties, the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), in order to attract voters and maintain a strategic relationship with Islamist political organizations, began a competition of “Who is more Islamic?” (Alam, 2008). This so-called tactical relationship and coalitions have its effects on vote banks, public policy and in the daily lives of the average citizen (Alam, 2008). In the general election of 1991, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the Awami League (AL), Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and Jatiya Party (JP) won 140, 88, 18 and 35 seats, respectively. Since no party secured enough of a sole majority to form a government (at least 151 out of 300 seats), Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) played a key role by extending support to the BNP and forming a coalition. As a result, JI got the chance not only to demonstrate its strength in voting politics, but also to create a support base for militant fundamentalists and anti-liberation forces in politics (Alam, 2008). In the general election of 1996, the seats for AL, BNP, JI and JP were 146, 116, 3 and 32, respectively, and AL formed a government with the support of JP. Later on, JP withdrew its support and BNP, JP, JI and Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ, an umbrella front of different, smaller Islamic organizations) formed a four-party alliance. This alliance won landslide victory in the subsequent election in 2001, in which AL won only 62 seats, whereas the BNP led four-party alliance won 230 seats, out of which BNP, JI and JP won 193, 17 and 18 seats, respectively. During this period (2001-06), the two leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami became full ministers in the cabinet (both of them are now in prison, convicted for crimes against humanity by the International War Crime Tribunal of Bangladesh), and Bangladesh experienced a prolific rise in militant fundamentalist Islamic organizations (e.g., Harkatul Jihad Bangladesh (HUJI), Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Ahle Hadidh Andolon Bangladesh (AHAB) and so on) (Alam, 2008). Moreover, the activities of transnational Islamic organization Hizb-UT-Tahrir Bangladesh (HTB) also became more visible during this time (Khan, 2011, pp. 192-215).

During this period, one of the most significant people’s initiatives for the demand of trials of war criminals was the formation of the Ghatak-Dalal Nirmul Committee (Mazumdar, 2013) in 1992. This committee called for the trial of people who committed crimes against humanity in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War in collaboration with the Pakistani forces. The Ghatak-Dalal Nirmul Committee set up mock trials in Dhaka on 26th March 1992, known as Gonoadalot (court of the people), and announced a verdict against Ghulam Azam for his role in the atrocities perpetrated against Bangladesh during the liberation war. The initiative was opposed by the then BNP government and the activities of the Ekattorer Ghatak-Dalal Nirmul Committee, led by Jahanara Imam, were deemed unlawful by the Government of Bangladesh. Shaheed Janani Jahanara Imam and others were charged with treason (Kabeer, S., 1993). This charge was, however, dropped in 1996 after her death by Chief Advisor Mohammed Habibur Rahman of the Caretaker government of that time. The committee is still working with their demands.
At this stage, a notable factor to look at is the change in the landscape of global politics during the 1990s. During the Cold War period, the phenomenon of religion received less attention from mainstream and critical thinkers placed at both ends of the political spectrum. Conversely, during the post-Cold War era, the questions of religious identities as important variables in conflict resolution and peace received more attention (Heywood 2011, pp. 181-205, Garred 2011, Reychler 1997). The demise of the Soviet Union, 9/11, the ‘war on terror’ and the emergence of different fundamentalist groups, specifically, the rise of political Islam, have brought its lessons, and there is a greater focus on religion, particularly Islam, as an important component in peace and conflict, in Bangladesh and beyond (Garred, 2011, Heywood, 2011, Reychler 1997, Alam, 2008). This ‘religious revivalism and conflict’ is a current matter of concern for the world, and Bangladesh cannot remain apart from this.

Moreover, Huntington’s (1993, 1996) famous but controversial ‘clash of civilizations thesis’ states culture as the prime force for conflict in the twenty-first century. Huntington alleged that in the twenty-first century, the causes of conflict will primarily be neither ideological nor economic; rather, it will be cultural conflicts between different civilizations, and pointed to Islam as a ‘fault-line’ (Reychler 1997, p. 5). Here, it is worth mentioning that Huntington’s doctrine has been sternly criticized for its epistemological and methodological position by many academicss (e.g., Said 2001, Fox 2005 Henderson and Tucker 2001, Mungiu-Pippidi and Mindruta 2002). For example, Said (2004) addressed Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ as a ‘clash of ignorance’. He argued against Huntington’s misguided views of Islam, and classed the intention of Huntington’s thesis as “…of the purest invidious racism, a sort of parody of Hitlerian science directed today against Arabs and Muslims” (Said 2004, p. 293).

Nonetheless, while Huntington has been criticized for his empirical, logical and ideological positions by many scholars, the influence of this thesis cannot be ignored in this era of post Cold-War global politics. It has been significantly revisited in light of 9/11 and the consequent so-called ‘war on terror’, which has been cited as evidence of an emerging ‘civilizational’ struggle between the West and Islam. We have seen that this notion has also been reflected in politics related to Islam since the 1990s. Alam (2008) pointed out the following notions about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism during the so-called democratic regimes of the last two and half decades:

- One, more Islamic organizations came to the public sphere more prominently after the 9/11 incidents;
- Two, transnational Islamic political culture has become evident;
- Three, incidences of political violence in the name of Islam have become a serious concern, with a manifesto of intolerance towards differing beliefs and critical views, especially towards Sufi shrines and the Ahmadiyya sect of Islam.
- Four, for the vote banks, the Islamic parties are now considered important players by the major political parties.

So now, when the choice presents itself between the freedom of thought and speech of liberal, critical thinkers and their demands for justice, and the allegations of hurting religious
Use of religious conflict sensitivity against the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement: Why?

On the basis of the afore-mentioned conversations, the following themes were derived to explain the causes of using religious sentiment against the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement.

Divert the issue and create divisions

The supporters of the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement embraced the first few days of the movement as an awakening of the people, unprecedented in the history of Bangladesh. People of all ages and walks of life participated and shouted slogans together with one demand: punishment of the collaborators of the liberation war of Bangladesh. In such circumstances, to suppress any movement, its opponents often use three weapons: religion, charges of financial corruption, and sexual abuse allegations and the subsequent scandal/image/character assassination (participant X4 and X10). In the case of the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement, the anti-party (meaning those who were against the movement) attempted to exploit religious sentiments, along with allegations of sexual misconduct and corruption, to undermine the spirit and verve of the movement. The use of these weapons has certain advantages as an anti-campaign tool. Rumors can create and spread confusion. Out of these three, religion is the most sensitive. Participant X4 alleged:

“Religion is a sensitive issue, especially, in our [Bangali] culture. So it is easy to attack using religious aspects. And we (pro-Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho activists) are fighting against the stream, it is purely their (anti-liberation force) own weapons. They use religion as they have developed it in their politics. Religion is their business. They do politics by selling religion. Religion is their capital.”

According to the organizers of the movement, the anti party used this to divert the focus of the movement from its core issue and to create division among the participants, since many of the people who came to the movement carried with them a sense of religious sentimentality.

Conversely, the critics of the movement alleged that the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho organizers forgot their ‘boundaries’ and showed ‘great audacity’ (participant X5). According to the critics, though the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho started with a specific demand on a particular issue, they soon expanded their list. For example, the demand for the ban of religion based politics. They expressed the acts of Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho as fascist and undemocratic. X5 alleged that from the beginning, Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho showed no respect and created no room for differing opinions, and they used slogans like ‘pokkho nile rokha nai’ (if you take a side, you will not survive). They added that in a functioning democracy, everyone has the right to participate in politics and form political parties with a collective belief, and their policies and agenda may be based on (any particular) religion. They argued that the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho has no right to dictate the
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The analysts commented that Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho was an emotionally driven movement. Of course, emotion has a great deal of value in creating the groundwork for any given movement. However, they had organizational limitations, especially since the anti-party had paid bloggers who are heavily involved in undermining this movement. The analysts think the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho leaders and activists might have failed to calculate what their counter-strategy could be. As X9 expressed, some people have the tendency to rally against religion in order to show themselves as ‘progressive’ and in many cases, they do not differentiate between criticism and bullying. They might have failed to understand how much it could cost a movement in the context of Bangladesh. Moreover, the topic of the liberation of Bangladesh has been divisive since the country’s inception. After independence, the then government party AL tried to reinforce Bangali nationalism and secularism in the constitution (participant X9). The effects of such a policy were not easy to deal with, and political vision and willingness remained inadequate. Thus, it is obvious that anti liberation forces tried to exploit this context by creating a division between ‘pro-liberation forces’ and ‘Islam’ for their own interests. Therefore, the attempt to create division in the movement is a representation of the overall politics of Bangladesh.

**Defame Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho**

The pro-Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho activists said that the movement is an expression of the people’s dreams, one that spoke of a new wave and change in the politics of Bangladesh. People also regained the hope that the punishment of anti-independence collaborators of the liberation war would finally occur. Outside the main political parties, the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho was considered to be a platform. So, the opponents needed to conceive such rumors to create a loss of faith and appreciation for the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho. To tarnish the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement, propaganda was quickly spread that the trials and its supporters were against Islam (participant X10). Many Bangladeshis are rather gullible with regards to religion, specifically the relationship of religion and the state. The anti-Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement collected some write-ups posted by some bloggers who were involved with Shahbagh, highlighting the seemingly religiously offensive content. They promulgated anti-Islam as a general position of the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho, although this had almost no, if any, relationship with the movement (participants X8 and X10). Even so, such religious propaganda about Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho was successful, to some extent, in defaming or creating confusion around it (participants X2, X1, X8).

The critics said that the writings of thabababa and others have no intellectual elements and only showed an offensive stance against religion and religious figures. They also blamed some bloggers of writing vulgar words against Islam. This was hard for the average pious person to accept. Moreover, the critics alleged that the demand for capital punishment and the slogan of ‘fashi fashi’ (“hang, hang”- the collaborators) are clear violations of human rights and illegal. In addition to this, the ‘use of children’ (according to their words) in the movement...
Shahbagh-Gonojagoron moncho Movement in Bangladesh

was not permissible. Participant X11 referred to the popular picture of two children demanding punishment, and other instances of participation of school children in the movement. He (participant X11) vehemently defined this as a violation of human and child rights. This coalesced with subsequent degrading acts by the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho, leading to the subsequent loss of traction in the movement.

The analysts said that the slogans should be taken as rhetoric, and not literally. These were the expressions of historic demands. The issue of ‘human rights’ is merely propaganda to save the collaborators. The activists (X1, X3) espoused that Jamaat-e-Islami and war criminals spent a huge amount of money for this sort of propaganda. However, the role played by media here is slightly complicated. Of course, the media portrayed the events of Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho with utmost importance. One of the appeals from Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho was the boycott of Islami Bank, although none of them refused to accept sponsorship from Islami Bank. Thus, discussing the spirit of Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho vis-a-vis Islami Bank sponsorship sometimes made the issue somewhat complicated, and the counter-party to the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho used this opportunity to wield the verbal weapon of ‘Munafiq’ (a dual character or hypocrite), who are considered to be the highest enemies of Islam.

Legitimize killing and violence and blame AL provocation

According to Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho activists, there is no evidence that the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho showed any violence or were involved in killings. Rather, they were victimized by violence and killing. Even then, the anti-Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho group contended that the movement was patronised by the ruling party Awami League (AL) and raised questions about government support in providing security and other amenities. The Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho activists argued that the allegations of AL government support have no validity at all. Many were highly critical of the AL government. Even then, they argued that the government needs to provide security and support because the circumstances were such that if any violence occurred there, it would be impossible for the government to remain in power. Nonetheless, the government played a dual role. The law enforcing agencies broke down the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho platform on the night of May 5. On the same night, they took control over the Hefajot congregation. This shows the government’s dubious position on the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement and religious sentiments. Moreover, branding the movement as ‘anti-Islamic’ provided a platform to legitimize violence against or even the murder of Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho activists in the name of ‘Islam’.

On the other hand, the critics argued that the slogans of Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho did not display any degree of tolerance. They mentioned the frequently uttered slogan of Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho ‘If you take a side, you cannot survive’ (Pokhho nile rokha nai), saying it incited violence as it was clearly a threat to others with different views. They also spoke of how the government gave security to the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho platform. According to critics, it was a ‘manifested movement’, where a group of people gathered together and chanted violent and offensive slogans with the financial support of the AL-led government (participant X11). He (X11) argued that the government staged this movement to divert attention from crucial political issues and hide their failures. X11 even
disagreed with the narrative that Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho is a non-violent movement. Rather, he described it as ‘government supported verbally and physically violent acts’. In his opinion, this sort of violence begets violence.

The analysts described the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement as characteristically non-violent. The anti-Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho activists wanted to counter this non-violent movement with violence. They wanted to intimidate people in order to suppress the movement. Moreover, by using the term ‘nastik’ or atheists, they attempted to legitimise the killings of its activists. In addition, this also placed the government in a political dilemma - if they protected the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho, the government would be labeled as the protector of anti-Islam rhetoric, but if they did not protect the movement, Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho would blame the government for being a patron of extremists and to some extent, protector of the collaborators. In this way, the violence and killings would be presented as legitimate. Furthermore, this strategy also put the non-violent principles of the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement in a complicated position.

Questions about the liberation war of 1971 and attempts to justify war crimes

The Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho activists argued that the anti-Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho party wanted to question the legitimacy of the liberation war. They accused the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement of being nothing but a manifestation of the ruling party Awami League (AL), as mentioned previously. If people disregarded the spirit of the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement by considering its intention to be of solely serving the purposes of AL, they would start to show suspicion about the liberation war, especially since AL often presents themselves as the party that led the liberation war of Bangladesh. At the same time, if anti-Islamic sentiments are thrown into the mix, that will also provide support to their opponents (X11, X8, X7). As a result, if the pro-liberation factions of the liberation war lose their credibility, it will create a chain effect and give anti-liberation forces a more positive image. The use of religious sentiments against the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho could give the anti-party the weaponry required to bring about such circumstances.

However, the critics of the movement said that AL tried to present the liberation war of 1971 as the triumph of a Bangali nationalist and cultural force. The Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho also has the same position. Thus, they do not allow any critical discussions of the liberation war. With this, they sell Bangali nationalism as a national cult and exploit people’s sentiments in order to serve their purpose. According to the critics, religious sentiment is a global cult. So, the global cult has been pitted against a national cult.

The analysts argued that any political movement has multiple sides. There is a grand narrative about the liberation war that describes two sides: pro and anti-liberation. In this case, one should look into history to understand the contradiction in the role of religion in defining classes, and the emergence of nationhood based on religion, in terms of Pakistan as a nation-state. Pakistan was conceived with a vast working class population in the east (now Bangladesh) who were majority Muslims and felt oppressed, and the oppressor class was predominantly Hindu feudal lords. However in Pakistan, the elite Muslim Nawabs and landlords (many of whom were members of the Muslim League) deprived the masses in turn. The politics of anti-Hindu and anti-Indian sentiments have not yet been removed. Thus, if the anti-liberation forces can claim that India and the Hindus are the culprits responsible for the
division of a so-called Muslim Pakistan - denying or undermining other facts and factors of the liberation war, it could help them to gain a political advantage. The same weapon has been used against the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement.

**Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement as resistance**

The use of religious sentiment is a very old formula for the anti-liberation forces. During 1971, they labelled freedom-fighters as anti-Islamic (e.g. Hindu, agents of India, communists and so on) to legitimize the genocide, torture and atrocities committed by the Pakistani occupying forces and their local collaborators. The same formula was used against the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement. This time, the internet was added as a powerful instrument of propaganda. The Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho activists commented that those who supported the collaborators made use of their money to employ others to produce content in their favor in social, electronic and print media, and they also fed the influential international organizations with distorted truths about the trials. However, even without any strong, regimented and professional support, the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho activists did, and are still continuing their rebuttals. During the peak of such propaganda against Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho, they battled it in different ways, which are explained in the following sections.

**Unveiling the truth**

The anti-Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho bloggers manipulated (photoshopped) pictures, used fake captions, dressed up content and spread them through social media to rouse fanaticism and exploit sentiments in order to prove the innocence, and also the spiritual power, of some Jamaat-e-Islam leaders who were convicted for their crimes against humanity. They also attempted to present the collaborators as saviors of Islam. In order to do so, they did not hesitate to utter lies, using many sacred places of Islam.

Manik (2014, p. 8) exposed how the photos of different Islamic ceremonies were purposefully manipulated by anti-Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho bloggers and activists. For example, changing the Gilaf (cover) on the Kaba is a traditional ceremony and every year, it is held with due religious solemnity, but the anti-Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho faction presented and translated that falsely with the caption, “The imam of the Holy Kaaba here vouches for Sayedee’s good character”. The Naye-e-Ameer of Jamaat-e-Islami Delawar Hossain Sayedee is considered to be one of the main collaborators with Pakistan and is a proven criminal according to the International Crime Tribunal for his acts against humanity during the liberation war of 1971. One of the strategies of the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho activists was to expose the truth. They browsed the origin of the event and then exposed how the anti-Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho group misled the people by spreading utter lies (For illustrations, please see Appendix-1).

When the verdict of capital punishment was given to Sayedee by the tribunal (at first, the capital punishment verdict was given by the tribunal and after the appeal, it was downgraded to a life sentence), his supporters spread different rumors. One was ‘Sayedee on the Moon’, - the rumour that some people had seen Sayedee on the moon. A photo of ‘Sayedee on the Moon’ was spread throughout the internet. The Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho activists
provided another, more mocking take on this and exposed that through photo editing software, it is easily possible to create such images and show any face appearing on the moon, or elsewhere (For illustrations, please see Appendix-3).

**Recitation of different scriptures and liberal Islamic thought**

During and since the war of independence in Bangladesh, a narrative has prevailed that the collaborators supported Pakistan and took an anti-Bangladesh role to save Islam. In order to do so, they often needed to use violence. They also used their Islamic thinking and narratives to legitimize this. Another supporting narrative is that ‘Hindu India’, with the support of their local Bangali agents (who stand for secularism), divided ‘Muslim’ Pakistan. Thus, anti-Hindu, secular and other narratives (such as anti-communism) were used to agitate people’s sentiments in support of the spirit of Islam.

It was important but complicated to counter this while the same weapon or ‘allegation’ was used against the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement. The movement introduced new slogans like, ‘Dhormo jar jar, rasthro shobar’ (Religion is for the individual, but the state is for all). Moreover, soon after the use of the weapon of religious sentiment against the movement, it was observed that Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho adopted a new strategy of starting their functions and events by reciting from different religious scriptures. This action may, to some extent, align with the secular principle that religion is a personal matter and the state should not be involved with religious concerns. However, a solely secular discourse might not be strong and effective enough to counter such prevailing narratives. Some pictures of namaj prayers of Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho activists were also posted on Facebook and other social media platforms to claim that the movement is not anti-Islamic.

**Not deviating from the nonviolent character and the core principle of the movement**

As we have mentioned earlier, according to the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho activists, the movement is characteristically a non-violent one. They hypothesised that the intention of the anti-group was to deviate people’s attentions from their core principles of non-violence and the demand for capital punishment of the culprits of 1971. The anti-party may also have thought that the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho would concentrate more on proving themselves as Islamic and becoming diverted from their core concerns. However, the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho organizers and activists decided to stick with their core principles and demands and not falling for the trap.

The spirit of Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho also spread and was reflected in their activities with a march to stand for the victims of communal oppression in some regions of Bangladesh. This walk started from Shahbagh and went to the peripheries of Bangladesh, for example, in Dinajpur and Jessore, as a protest against communal politics (X2, X4). Such activities reflect that the demand for communal harmony is aligned with the spirit of the struggle to liberate Bangladesh and the core struggle of the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement.

**Role of Academia**
Shahbagh-Gonojagoron moncho Movement in Bangladesh

It is often said that Bangladesh is lacking in open-minded academic research on Islam, peace building and social justice issues. There seems to be an obvious division between the secular academics and the religious ones. Sometimes, it is assumed that an Islamic academic is likely to have opposed Independence and the trial of the war criminals, and vice versa. These divisive binaries can be catastrophic for a state. Academic activists (AA) with broader and more in-depth views, with respect for both Islam and the independence of Bangladesh, need to take on serious research and disseminate them to the grassroots in order to form objective opinions and views. The information must drive home that putting Islam and war crimes under the same banner is an anathema and the two cannot co-exist. Diverse issues can be brought out by setting the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement at the centre, and AAs can play vital roles regarding this.

Start a culture of emancipation for the role of academia in Bangladesh

The Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement and its subsequent events open up a world of opportunities to explore, for example, how a movement can be constructed via the wave of youth, the post-modern movement, religious conflict, war crimes and so on. Professors, researchers, students and others from different disciplines can work on this. In this way, a new and dynamic tradition of research in our academia can be started. A number of research studies should be done on the different dynamics of the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement, so that the people can enrich their analytical abilities and perceive an event with a broader lens. Moreover, the notion of academia living in a so-called ‘ivory tower’ should be broken down. Thus, in any people’s movement, the academics should not stay in isolation. Rather, they have to be actively involved in the dissemination of the philosophy and the principles of the movement, as well as in the future of the movement.

Documentation of the times in academic text

The Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement represents a specific period of time. Like any movement, it can have its ups and down. Academic publications regarding this could give this movement a permanency for the field level intellectuals and activists from all over the world. Learners from multiple disciplines can know about the movement. For example, one may want to know about non-violent movements, religious conflict, new media, war crimes and so on. Whenever, the person browses these keywords, they may learn about the different dynamics of the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement. Thus, Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho can stay alive and inspire people all over the world as an example of a spontaneous uprising of the people. Moreover, the contribution of the activists and participants of the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement would remain documented, so that the spirit of the movement can be conveyed for generations to come and give people all over the world who fight for justice a flashpoint they can express solidarity with.

Exposing the politics of religion in Bangladesh

The AA must have knowledge and liberal attitudes about Islam, culture and the political history of Bangladesh. They should produce more research papers on how to promote the spirit of the people’s movement in Bangladesh for the masses. The Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement faces problems, especially since it is trying to break the
bee hive of fundamentalists and collaborators of the liberation war. It is apparent that the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho has not proceeded with any philosophical ideology. Therefore, if its supporters cannot solve the equations of Islam philosophically, it will be to their own jeopardy. Some people are criticising Islam and using slang to describe it - this is hardly a solution of any kind. We need to counter the issues of religious politics philosophically and rationally. The AAs have the scope to do this. They should express solidarity among religions and explain to the general masses how the anti-liberation forces of Bangladesh are exploiting their religious sentiments by using Islam.

**Fight for anti-fundamentalist and anti-imperialist politics**

There is a greater practice among the global powers that exploits religious sentiments, beliefs and narratives for their own interests. Perhaps academic activists can play a role in unearthing these. The Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement and everything that resulted from it had an impact on the present political culture that we are all a part of. We need more questions, more discussions, more awareness and more defiance against dominant political practices. In this scenario, it is important to avoid the pitfall of exposing and illustrating Bangladesh as a vulnerable and fundamentalist state. If AAs portray Bangladeshis as ‘Islamists and terrorists’, it can provide imperialists with solid foundations on which to intervene. Therefore, AAs need to have a broader, more critical lens so that people can receive some direction in fighting against fundamentalism as well as imperialism.

**Revival of liberal cultural heritage of Bengal**

To counter the fundamentalists and imperialists, AAs should look at the liberal cultural heritage and literature of Bangla. There remains a wide range of examples in the arts (literature, music and other cultural traditions) that are embedded with a deeper philosophy about human life, creation and society (e.g. Lalon, Baul, Sufi, Baishnab and so on). However, in many cases, the academic traditions that we have inherited as a former colony undervalue this. The AAs could analyze how the immense resources of the liberal cultural heritage of Bangla have the potential to lead the way in creating societies where people can live in peace and harmony, as well as fight for their rights.

**Creating a knowledge-based and tolerant society**

The AAs have the potential to impart and share a world of knowledge, opinions and progressive thought. Their professional fields, for example the class-rooms, can be a place from which the students can get the opportunity to learn about diverse ideas, interact with each other, engage in critical thinking and learn empathy. Educating students and the people around them through discussions and writing can play a vital role in creating and building a knowledge-based and tolerant society. If such a society is created, it could influence the collective psychology of the population. The AAs have the scope to do this, as education is one of the core fields in their respective professions. With commitment, knowledge and passion, they could definitely bring some positive changes to the society and the state.

**Bibliography**
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Appendix 2

Pakistan Period (1947-1971)
One noticeable factor is that there remained a difference in the views on Islam between West and East Pakistan. The Islam in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) was influenced by the Sufi-humanistic spirit, whereas in West Pakistan, Islam was more orthodox and Sharia law based (Hossain, 1992). Islam entered the regions of West Pakistan with the sword, and it was these political victories achieved there that started the establishment of Islam, but in the Bangla-speaking territories, Islam was first spread by the Sufis, and politics entered later.

This difference is reflected in the literature and culture of these two territories. In Bangla, we have found a great deal of evidence of liberal interpretations on Islam, but in Urdu we find less evidence of liberal and critical literature about religion (Hossain, 1992). This issue of language has played a crucial role in the politics of the Pakistani period (1947-1971). As a matter of fact, the language movement, particularly the incident of 21st February, 1952, not only became a milestone event for independence, but also an inspiration for all pro-people movements in this territory. Here, a noticeable fact is that the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement started in the month of February. In Bangladesh, people observe February as the month of the Bangla language movement. The events of the language movement and the Shaheed Minar (literal meaning Martyr Monument, a national monument built in the memory of the language martyrs of 21st February) are still playing an inspirational role for pro-people movements in Bangladesh. From the very beginning, the Pakistani ruling coterie attempted to destroy this monument and during the war of liberation...
Shahbagh-Gonojagoron moncho Movement in Bangladesh

In 1971, the Pakistani army demolished the Minar and placed a signboard there with the word 'Mosque' written on it (Rafique, 2015). So, it may not be a mere accident the the Shahbagh-Gonojagoronmoncho movement was started, as well as targeted to be attacked by the fundamentalists, in the month of February, because it has a historical backdrop.

The belief that Muslims would be vulnerable in undivided Bengal or the Indian sub-continent, and therefore be liberated through the partition of India in 1947, has proved an absolute fallacy. Rather, the population of Bangladesh found that Bangali Muslims and other religious communities were far more vulnerable and oppressed in the Muslim-majority Pakistan than they have ever been (Khan, 2014). During the Pakistan period, the people of the eastern territory had to struggle for their language and cultural rights. And for demanding their rights, the people of this territory have been identified as ‘Hindu’ or ‘Conspirators from India’ by the powerful classes (Hossain, 1992). So, the use of religion in politics to dominate and delegitimize people’s movements is not a new one in this territory. During the war of liberation, The Maududidi philosophy-based party Jamaat-e-Islami, along with Muslim League and other Islamic parties, collaborated with the Pakistan army to ensure Pakistani occupation over Bangladesh (Shareef, A., Nuruzzaman, K. and Kabeer, S., 1992). So, the people of Bangladesh did indeed experience political and brutal military oppression in the name of Islam.

Appendix-3
Example of Manipulation and Counter: Sayedee on the moon, mockery of the event and exposure

Source:
https://www.google.com.bd/search?hl=bn&site=imghp&tbm=isch&source=hp&biw=1366&bih=667&q=Sayedee+moon&oq=Sayedee+moon&gs_l=img.3..0i19.3472.9578.0.10039.18.8.2.8.10.0.290.1246.2-5.5.0....0...1ac.1.56.img..7.11.968.MC1Fuvl2Z2Y#facrc=_&imgdii=_&imgrc=5_2oKg49tNv0M%253A%3BRAWnl7tnr5b2YM%3Bhttp%253A%252F%252Farchive.thedailystar.net%252Fph oto%252F2013%252F03%252F04%252F201304__fr04.jpg%3Bhttp%253A%252F%252Farchive.thedailystar.net%252FnewDesign%252Fnews-details.php%253Fnid%253D273D271242%3B400%3B3B302 04__fr04.jpg%3Bhttp%253A%252F%252Farchive.thedailystar.net%252FnewDesign%252Fnews-details.php%253Fnid%253D273D271242%3B400%3B3B302 04__fr04.jpg%3Bhttp%253A%252F%252Farchive.thedailystar.net%252FnewDesign%252Fnews-details.php%253Fnid%253D273D271242%3B400%3B3B302
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