Essay in ‘Representation of Peace and Conflict’

*Uprising’s Dialectic Pedagogy:*

*Gramsci, Scott and Mandela against the 2013 Hefazat-e-Islam Movement in Bangladesh*

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**Title, Abstract and Keywords**

**Title**

*Uprising’s Dialectic Pedagogy: Gramsci, Scott and Mandela against the 2013 Hefazat‑e‑Islam Movement in Bangladesh*

**Abstract**

The essay revisits the 2013 Hefazat-e-Islam protest experiences in Bangladesh, a religion‑based social movement that infused activism in a people that were rather shying away from activism tendencies, and seeks lessons thereof. The first angle of inquiry looks into the Gramscian counter‑elite that acts against the hegemony of the powerful as well as the powers‑to‑be in Bangladesh during that period and compare analytics with the autobiographical experiences of Nelson Mandela in South Africa. A wider lens thus developed helps to explain why despite initial success—evident in the speedy formation and flare‑up of the movement among various social strata in Bangladesh—the Hefazat gave way to the traditional and demands for alternative cultures eventually petered out. The second string recognizes the movement as social activism, observing how from mundane, Scottian, ‘everyday resistance’, protests turn into mass revival.

**Keywords**

*Bangladesh; Hefazat-e-Islam; resistance; Gramsci; Mandela; Scott*

Uprising’s Dialectic Pedagogy: Gramsci, Scott and Mandela against the 2013 Hefazat-e-Islam Movement in Bangladesh[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Opening proposition**

The language and the tone of the title will need clarifying first. They propose re-reading, if not redefining, the provocative term that ‘uprising’ is, and introduce to the anthropological readers newer narratives of a phenomenon which in itself remains confrontational. The arguments build from two major works completed in two separate halves of the twentieth century, by Antonio Gramsci (*Prison Notebooks*) and James Scott (*Weapons of the Weak*) respectively, which are compared with the autobiographical findings of Nelson Mandela (*Long Walk to Freedom*) during Apartheid era. While Gramsci and Scott expound on the mass culture—and especially Scott on the ‘culture of resistance’—Mandela, arguably the most successful politician and resistance leader from the last century, sees through the political and the very acts and styles of struggle. The paper thus links between sociology and anthropology in its political commentary of resistance (distinction between these social sciences being as much blurred in the last century as they are today, and accordingly the lateral shifts come rather easy). My ultimate object of inspection, however, is the 2013 Hefazat-e-Islam (HI) protest experiences in Bangladesh which, despite a spectacular start, ended abruptly owing to alleged ‘massacre’ act by the state against own subjects—unarmed Hefazat protesters, under-aged madrasah students, and general supporters of the Islamic movement—in a brute intervention that may have allowed Sheikh Hasina (Bangladesh’s Prime Minister then and until now) a rapid quelling of the uprising on the one hand and a clear run to the next parliament on the other (Desh Rights 2013; International Crisis Group 2015; Khan 2016, 26 & 29-32; cf. The New York Times, 28 July 2017).

The Hefazat incidents were widely covered in the media, albeit for a brief span of time.[[2]](#footnote-2) The way both local and international media added to the pedagogic experience surrounding this popular Islamic movement, however, introduces a particular dimension to the study of the mass; and this involves curious—or rather convenient—broad‑brushing of Islamic political events first as *Islamist actions*, and eventually *terrorism*. Bülent Kenes calls such misrepresentation as ‘international injustice,’ and Khalid Sultan, a ‘negative signifier’ (Sultan 2016); Javier Rivera explains this within a symbiotic relation where the mass media is keen to ‘capitalize from the confusion and consternation caused by terrorist attacks to produce the kind of dramatic news that draws attention,’ i.e. by convoluting terrorism with non‑terrorism (Rivera 2016). Accordingly here I shall engage with a various manners of representation of Islamic political events and seek lessons in light of the 2013 Hefazat-e-Islam experience in Bangladesh. Through interrogations that are cross‑disciplinary in orientation—but hopefully anthropological in analysis—I shall also look into a few possibilities that may theoretically explain the movement and the religion‑based social activism that it championed. Specific to those events of 2013 in Bangladesh, I shall look for, on the state’s side, the probable key reasons for handling the uprising with an iron‑fist, one indeed of a rather preposterous, brutal, kind; and on the protesters’ side, the political and religious triggers that may have been in play throughout. Within the discussion I shall also include short summaries of actions, counter actions and aftermath of those incidents (starting roughly from the month of April 2013 and leading to the finale on May 5/6th same year) that may come handy for the initial readers of the Bangladesh politics; for the analysts, I hope they will contain helpful clues toward better grasp of events that have hitherto pushed Bangladesh’s political future toward uncertainty.

My principal argument will be that the 2013 uprising in Bangladesh under the banner of the Hefazat-e-Islam has multiple narratives, and they call for multiple theoretical viewpoints. While resistance elsewhere—for example the 2011 Tahrir movement at Cairo or the Occupy Wall Street movement at New York—may be read in the same page as these protests in Dhaka and also elsewhere in Bangladesh (in terms of popular passion or motivation if not media coverage, which, for the Bangladesh events was rather paltry and ‘reserved’; cf. Khan and Eqbal 2014), the analytics ought to be different. I would propose that theoretically only a selective reading of Gramsci, Scott and Mandela may meaningfully engage with the Bangladesh incidents, and any broader analyses without due epistemological caution may render a study unhelpful or even misleading (for instance, a normative adoption of Gramsci or Marx to explain the Dhaka events will likely miss out on the futility of the working class lens in a situation where pressing ideological issues were able to sidestep class differences—otherwise a hallmark of the Bangladeshi societies since independence (Mondal 2014, 343)—and brought protesters, organizers and funders to a same interacting platform which proved to be crucial for the movement’s initial success).

**Background: the 2013 Hefazat-e-Islam incidents in Bangladesh**

A series of popular protests took place in Bangladesh in April and May 2013. Agitated by the incumbent Awami League’s questionable policies and arguably anti-Islam stances, several Islamic parties united to form an unprecedented coalition without allegiance to major parties—in Bangladesh which are the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Awami league (AL), having shared power in monochromic consistency between the two since the formal restoration of democracy in 1991[[3]](#footnote-3)—and declared non-cooperation. There were mass gatherings in April in a number of districts across the country which left at least one dead. In the following days, the Islamic coalition (led by the HI) came up with a 13-point demand list (see Aamra24 2013) which the government wasn’t willing to consider and instead, when the coalition decided to convene a mass gathering at the capital on the 5th of May (from where further programs would be announced), it decided to go the hard way. On the day of 5 May, there were sporadic clashes between the police and the protesters at various parts of Dhaka until they gathered at Motijheel, for address by Mufti Ahmed Shafi, the HI leader, and eventually decided for a night halt in and around the thoroughfare (Mustafa 2013). The brute intervention occurred then. After midnight, at about 2am, the members of Bangladesh Police, Border Guards and Rapid Action Battalion were ordered to take on unarmed people—a thousands of them, in fact, having reached the capital following marches from various parts of the country (many of them elderly people or under-aged students who bore no political affiliation but religious zeal only). There are differing accounts of what followed, and a good part of it cannot be traced back for confirmation. What can be confirmed, however, is that live ammunition were fired on civilian people, unknown numbers of people died (their bodies being allegedly ‘removed’ from the streets by ‘government forces’) and unspecified measures were taken by the state to ensure subsequent cover-up (Aamra24 2013; The Brethren of Black Lotus 2013; The Desh Rights 2013).[[4]](#footnote-4)



Figure 1: View of the crowd around the Shapla Monument in Motijheel, Dhaka, on May 5, 2013, hours before the government crackdown

*Photo Source: Feb28.org image archive[[5]](#footnote-5)*

Happening largely in Dhaka, and to a lesser degree in the other districts of Bangladesh, the Hefazat incidents offer a classic case of conflict representation where government, political parties, protesters, and media outlets, all take part. In the ensuing discussion I explore their background and a few theoretical expositions. To begin with, I look into the available literature with a view to locating historical clues to Bangladesh’s recent political turmoil. This, however, remains an exercise without end since the Hefazat events are still alive in Bangladesh in the popular talks, media and political discourses; among other effects, they have convoluted between the political, the religious and the secular in Bangladesh, and in the paper I try to look at their nexus in search of individual characteristics. By presenting the three in a single platform I do not mean to ascribe them similar weights, though; rather, as the discussion will show, the religious and the political (practices) in Bangladesh have for long existed side by side, while the secular were only relived time to time by people either too close to the power block or by parties too much on the political fringe (Khan 2016, 19–24); the latter, thus, is largely non-representative of the Bangladeshi society.

**Approaching Bangladesh’s Islamic politics in literature[[6]](#footnote-6)**

Considerable literature have engaged Bangladesh’s Islamic politics and political events, although often through issue-specific queries, for instance, electoral (Riaz 2016), party political (Ahmed 2014; Hashmi 2010; Jahan 2014), and security (Ullah 2014; Venkatachalam 2016). Some have looked into Bangladesh’s Islamic political experience as academic tool to understand international relations (Mohsin 2004), or as an alternative reading of neoliberal capitalism (Islam 2015; cf. Kuru 2014). There, however, is often more to see beyond these typical inspections of Bangladesh’s Islamic political journey. Approximated at 148.6 million, the country is abode to a Muslim populace that is second only to Indonesia, Pakistan and India.[[7]](#footnote-7) Apart from demographic considerations, Bangladesh’s locational importance also deserves attention. Placed at a geographical wedge between the South and Southeast Asia (regions that are together home to over 60% of the world Muslim),[[8]](#footnote-8) Bangladesh appears as an excellent model for a wider inspection of Islam’s political journey in South Asia.

Past a period of ‘unhelpful generalization’ in the 1990s, Bangladesh’s problematic politics has seen global audience in the new century. Scholars have taken fresh looks on the causality of factors that have lead Bangladesh to today’s political impasse. Ali Riaz (2016), in his commentary on elections and coalition outcomes in Bangladesh looks into the religio-secular divide and believes that the current situation may be a result of Islamic empowerment in the hands of the traditional (major) political parties (more recently a Brussels-based political forum has also forwarded similar views; see South Asia Democratic Forum 2017). According to this narrative, Bangladesh is a country inherently of secular dimension, and secular ideals would have been instrumental in its secession from Pakistan in 1971 (Riaz 2010, 10). Such a view, however, has been contested by a wide array of scholars. Mohammed Yunus, for instance, maintains that all accounts of Bangladesh’s independence are ‘agreed upon to the point that the reason for the split had *nothing to do* with religion’ or, for that matter, secularism (Yunus 2003, 244; emphasis added). Dealing with Bangladesh’s history of independence, Craig Baxter lists out linguistic and cultural divides between Pakistan’s two wings to be the prime movers for its seeking of independence (Baxter 1997, 62). Willem van Schendel also blames the language issue (and not the religious ones) to have created ‘a more general cultural and political divide within the fledgling state’ (Schendel 2013, 179). Rehman Sobhan, however, points out to the economic inequalities in pre-1971 Pakistan for fueling mass discontent in the Eastern province (then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh; see Sobhan 2013, 187). David Lewis, however, acknowledges a ‘longstanding tension’ between the religious and the secular in Bangladesh, but believes the country to have remained a moderate, Muslim majority, nation with its people an important antidote to Samuel Huntington’s civilizational clash theories (Lewis 2011, 2–6; cf. Huntington 1993, 22–23).

Basing on these studies and drawing also from one of my past researches (Khan 2016), I would like to argue that in Bangladesh the secularist streams were historically short-lived and the latter’s so-called liberal appeals were often short of impression to the local people who proved themselves inherently religious in character. And this is more evident in the individual and group behaviour dynamics if not in the social and political structures governing them. The same is also replicated in the character and mode of operations of the local Islamic political parties.[[9]](#footnote-9) People here are, however, divided in that religiosity just as they are divided in their politics, and hence it is the religio-political fault lines that need looking into (cf. Islam 2015; Guhathakurta and Schendel 2013). Tracing Bangladesh’s Islamic politics in these literature also reveals another important aspect related to our current investigation. The pronounced mesh of the Islamic with the so-called democratic political in Bangladesh demands that any Islamic political event or activity is investigated through traditional (Islamic) as well as modern (democratic) lenses (Islamic revivalism needs would have to be considered vis-a-vis electoral contingencies, for instance). Also, the occasional confrontations between the religious and the secular in the country are indicative of added layers of multiplicity within the political milieu, and in order to understand them one would need incorporating views of people from across the political, social and religious divides.

**The 2013 incidents: a review in Gramsci, Scott and Mandela**

Selected readings of Gramsci, Scott and Mandela may help to reveal certain sociopolitical undertones of the Hefazat incidents. Although anthropologists’ attentions to Antonio Gramsci have often hovered over his adoption of Marxian concepts, their relevance have not always remained unchallenged. Donald Kurtz (1996) believes that use of ‘working class lens’ in examining many of the twentieth century struggles has not often been helpful, and at times proved to be superficial. The topicality of Gramscian theories with regard to popular movements has also been questioned by John Gledhill who found it ‘peculiarly difficult to understand Gramsci without paying any regard to the fact that he wrote as a political strategist who dedicated his life to the working class's conquest of state power’ (Gledhill 1996; Gramsci and Buttigieg 2002). In analyzing the Hefazat movement in Bangladesh also, it would be difficult for one to place it within class narratives; throughout the buildup of the event the working class appeared as involved as the middle class (on-site news reports often showed protesters in the capital and in other major cities representing both social strata); more so, the movement was supported by a section of the elite as well—although only during the later stage when it rose to prominence already—mostly from the opposition political block (cf. Allchin 2013; Burke and Hammadi 2013; Molla 2013; Prio TV 2013). Yet—and I find this significant—throughout the two months of April and May 2013 no claims of intra-party feud or inter-class conflicts were reported from within the HI platform. Also the movement itself did not claim for any change of power at state level (which is why the major opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), may have not extended it any support, at least officially, until only at the eleventh hour) (Molla 2013).[[10]](#footnote-10)

A re-reading of the Hefazat incidents within the narratives of popular resistance and mass struggle—if not class struggle—can, nevertheless, explore other resistance paradigms, and in this James C. Scott may be helpful. In *Weapons of the weak* (1985), Scott makes an engaging commentary of popular resistance vis-à-vis hegemonic power, albeit in alternative forms. His peasant and ‘slave’ societies in Malaysia use creative styles of resistance, although channeled through mundane and often unobserved but effective corridors of protest as they strive to thwart domination by the local rich. The men and women of Sedaka village (under Kedah state of Malaysia) thus sidestep direct confrontations with the powerful using passive techniques like ‘combine harvesters’, petty theft, killing of animals (of their oppressors), *inter alia*. Scott describes these acts within expressions of cultural resistance and as a ‘non-cooperation over a prolonged time-period’ (266-273; see also his review in Yee 1994). In Bangladesh, and in the case of the Hefazat resistance, we witness efforts to effect a symbolic balance of power by the various underrepresented groups; however, different from those Malaysian examples, Bangladesh’s protesters—madrasah students, teachers and general participants of the HI movement—do not strive for economic or hard power; instead they aim to salvage what may be enumerated as: prestige, recognition and respect (take, for instance, the fact that at least 7 out of 13 points put forward by the HI leadership to the government related to various claims of soft power; cf. Aamra24 2013). The scholars and students from the Madrasah, also known as the *ulama*[[11]](#footnote-11) who represent the traditional in the country, indeed waited for decades for a number of recognitions by the state (in education, social power and policy participation) and had sustained prolonged domination by the so-called modern (both politics and the political) within a system that never contained much for them to flourish. More so, post-2009, with a newfound secularism under the aegis of Shiekh Hasina and several other leaders of the ruling coalition, these people would have been pushed to feeling vulnerable and unsecured (Ahmed 2014; Baxter 1997; Burke and Hammadi 2013; Dutton 2014).

The language of the Hefazat protests was also remarkable, which at times changed with needs and interests. In Malaysia, the rich rationalize their exploitation by claiming to be poor themselves, while the poor justify their commitment of petty thefts against the rich (both show interests in economic gains). In Bangladesh, the HI (as a campaigner of traditional Islamic values) shows more concern on the issues of ‘free mixing’ or ‘equal share of property between men and women’ or simply on the question of ‘respect for the religious lot’ (Aamra24 2013; cf. Allchin 2013); their interests are heterogeneous although mostly religion-inspired, which again are not so highly regarded by the people with political claims (by the opposition party leadership or Islamic ‘political’ party leaders, for instance). However, unlike in Malaysia where the poor villagers blame their richer neighbours for what is happening without laying claims of obligation to their Chinese landlords or to the Malaysian government (Yee 1985), in Bangladesh it is the government who must be held responsible and protested against (all the more due to historical lack of trust, as we have followed in the re-reading of literature), although, notably, its removal is not sought. And in both cases—whether the ‘hideous’ protesters in Malaysia or the ‘angry ones’ in Bangladesh—the so-called menacing face of revolution is missing (the latter usually draws more scholastic interest; Scott ascribes reasons for this to ‘academic romance with wars of liberation’). Thus at a first glace the protests in Malaysia or Bangladesh would not look like being able to create awe in a hegemon (whether their target is a rich and exploitative person in Malaysia or an arrogant, oppressive, state in Bangladesh); however, as the resistance consolidates—which happened very much in Bangladesh, as it did in other global examples, for instance with Mandela and the ANC in South Africa which we shall read subsequently—and the spectacle created by the participation of thousands of oppressed from village (often poor and peasants) alongside those from the city proves to be real and ‘truly menacing’, the hegemon gets to be unnerved and unsettled. This eventually produces unimagined reactions, which we observe in the state’s excessive countermeasures to the 2013 Hefazat movement in Bangladesh.

In Nelson Mandela’s (1994) autobiographical reflections from the South African apartheid experience we locate further, and in fact complicating, dichotomies. Not all very different from the African apartheid, in Bangladesh the madrasah education system is seen contrasted with the national (state-coordinated) system, and therefore not often recognized by the employers, thus affecting job prospects literally for millions of madrasah students and teachers.[[12]](#footnote-12) Despite having developed for themselves a standard educational curriculum (which was, in fact, recognized by the state), the graduates from madrasah and Islamic colleges (the latter also known as *Alia Madrasah*) were often deprived of higher education opportunities (since some universities would not accept their credentials); and this pushed them toward further grievances. To make things worse, the so-called secularism-driven cultural performers at times targeted the madrasah community for humiliation in their performances, a concern that featured in their 13-point demands as well (Aamra24 2013). While in general the Hefazat objectives were peaceful and non-violent (which their central leaders spelt out time to time during the movement), the local leaders and protesters, however, often expressed them aggressively—and interestingly that was the part often highlighted by a section of the international media. And this way of reportage continued not only before and during but also *after* the government clampdown on the protesters on the 5/6th May (2013) despite widespread allegation and fears of huge civilian casualties in the hands of the security forces (a few of them are referred to in this essay).

At this stage we may expound further on Mandela’s reading of resistance and that of the hegemony of the state and international order and how they may interact within a single platform with respect to the Hefazat incidents. Mandela’s idea of resistance—as expressed in *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994)—is, to say in one word, ‘history-driven’:

The idea that history progresses through struggle and that change occurs in revolutionary jumps was similarly appealing [to the ANC]... Our problems, while distinctive and special, were not unique, and a philosophy that placed those problems in an international and historical context of the greater world and the course of history was valuable (Mandela 1994, 138).

While Mandela insistence on a historical reading of resistance appears critical to study of the ANC under the apartheid, temporal approaches was apparently sent to the backstage with the various media commentaries on the Hefazat struggle. Thus, stick-wielding and pebble-throwing protesters who were visibly defending themselves from a viciously-engaging and intimidating police and border guards on the day of May 5 were only dubbed as ‘terrorists’ or ‘radicals’ (see Bouissou 2013; Mahmud 2017; cf. also Mustafa 2013). And if there were retaliatory actions from both sides during the day, by the time the protesters announced their night halt in the streets of Motijheel, things were visibly calm. And yet, with most of the protesters asleep during the later part of the night, the security forces were ordered to launch the hitherto infamous *Operation Flush Out* (the naming particularly suggestive of the hegemon’s intention) to have the protesters remove from the capital ‘at any cost’ (BBC 2013; Bdnews.com 2013).

As we revisit the possibility that Mandela may have authorized the military wing of the African National Congress (ANC) to use ‘whatever means necessary to speed up the erasure of human prejudice and the end of chauvinistic and violent nationalism’ (138), the analysis complicates. It should be noted that in the South African case Mandela and the ANC were representing a people who had their democratic rights to defend, and, as we shall read in more details, they were willing to do that ‘at any cost’. In fact, a number of subversive acts including a car bombing in Pretoria in May 1983 was reportedly conducted by the MK (*uMkhonto we Sizwe*, ANC’s armed wing that was co-founded by Mandela following the Sharpeville massacre); the last incident left nineteen people killed and more than two hundred injured. But even this visibly terror act received a degree of endorsement from Mandela in his memoir, who saw it as an act of ‘subversion’ (336):

Our strategy was to make selective forays against […] targets that not only would hamper the military effectiveness of the state, but frighten National Party supporters, scare away foreign capital, and weaken the economy. […] The killing of civilians was a tragic accident, and I felt a profound horror at the death toll. But as disturbed as I was by the casualties, I knew that such accidents were the inevitable consequence of the decision to embark on a military struggle. Human fallibility is always a part of war, and the price for it always high (617-18).

Looking back to the proceedings in Bangladesh in 2013, one may be willing to explore similar dynamics in the Hefazat resistance. However, using a different, and hopefully meaningful, twist I would like to make a newer analysis here: let us look at Mandela not as one representing ‘resistance’, but as one who, at least on that occasion, was valourizing—and thus confounding—the ‘acts of terror’ with the ‘acts of war’. This is significant, since this resonates more as a technique that a hegemon or oppressor would usually employ, trying to justify coercion or violence not a-priori, but post-priori (note that Mandela’s memoirs were published only after he had risen to power, and thus his comments would represent more a statesman than rebel). Let us call it retro-justification of violence (cf. ‘retro-justification’ in Goodin, Pettit and Pogge 2007, 268)—although in this case employed by none other than Nelson Mandela. Accordingly, while in Bangladesh the protesters flouted law by carrying sticks, hurling stones and setting fires on tyres in the middle of a capital thoroughfare; we see the state taking over the role of the ‘valourized terrorist’—note the difference from the South African context here—and launched a night assault on unarmed, sleeping, protesters in order to remove them forcibly (‘flush out’) by killing and injuring them en masse.[[13]](#footnote-13) Here the hegemonic government (or ruling party) in Bangladesh is keen to hold on to unchallenged power on the one hand and abuse own clout over the media and international partners in order to effect establishment of an alternative version of ‘truth’ on the other. This is a practice that at times is also exacerbated by further oppression and—as Appadurai would say—‘selective execution of the oppressed’ which, in Bangladesh, is understood from several reports by rights agencies concerning the state of extrajudicial killings, tortures and judicial excess in the country since 2013 (see Amnesty International 2013; Odhikar 2016; cf. Appadurai 1998).

**Conclusion**

Any analysis willing to impress upon Bangladesh’s Islamic political events will need to grapple with varied local realities. As the preceding discussion showed, the Islamic political parties as well as the general people in Bangladesh bear several characteristic uniqueness compared to global counterparts. Their geographical separation from the traditional Middle East or other Muslim majority countries at times keeps them also physically apart—if not ideologically removed—from some of the direct effects of global Islamic politics (Khan 2016; cf. Ullah 2014; Ahmed and Nazneen 1990). While the country has not had a clean break from the pervading effects of global terrorism (to which the IS-motivated attacks at a restaurant in Gulshan, Dhaka, in July 2016 will be a latest proof),[[14]](#footnote-14) the Islamic politics in Bangladesh have more or less maintained a moderate and compromising track. Veering between traditional and revivalist ideas and often playing second fiddles to stronger and quasi-democratic political parties, Bangladesh’s Islamic political parties were mostly adaptive to the country’s institutional structures rather than trying to oppose them (notably, the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), the largest Islamic party was known for long for intra-party democratic practices in which they may have surpassed the traditional parties; see Islam 2015; cf. Ahmed 2005). However, starting from 2011 the ruling party-initiated war crimes trial had put several top leaders of the JI to imprisonment, threatening them for life. Their executions had, in fact, already began by 2013 (the first taking place in February that year, only three months prior to the May incidents); this had the JI’s political performance greatly hampered—to the extent that the party has not been able to recover till date—and which, in turn, created an Islamic political vacuum in the country. In such a backdrop Hefazat-e-Islam’s rise to prominence by championing popular religious demands does not come as much surprise (Dutton 2014; cf. Progress Bangladesh 2015).

Brief review of Bangladesh’s historical literature also suggested that, recovering from a religion-based divide from the British India in the 1940s and a culture and language-based further divide from Pakistan in the 1970s, the political thoughts of the Bengali people have generally come to be shaped by the discourses of democracy, equal rights, and social justice. Islam’s perceived role in this formation may be a mixed one, but is undeniable and located in the manner in which the Islamic political parties (especially the JI) easily integrated democratic or modern practices. It is in this context that this essay delved into exploring the 2013 Hefazat-e-Islam (HI) movement and considered a few academic expositions in order to unveil the state-people-protester nexus in political anthropology. Thematically it did not embark on any exploration of ‘facts’ surrounding the HI movement; the goal was not to determine what exactly happened in Bangladesh in the months of April and May 2013 surrounding those protests or how the state-sponsored killings were committed, but rather their *representation* and how representation itself had a cognizable role in shaping their discourses.

The study also sketched out another possibility concerning Bangladesh’s Islamic journey. The madrasah-based ulama in Bangladesh, facing repressive governments, display a struggle for assertiveness in the various predominantly Muslim societies through alternative practices by sidestepping the traditional, which was evident in the acts by the Hefazat leaders. At the end this also explains why or how the orthodox find a due place in the Muslim imagination and in their religious aspirations in Bangladesh.[[15]](#footnote-15) With regard to the Hefazat protesters, again, they may have been victim to the HI leaders’ naiveties which may have resulted from the latters’ lack in political experience and the movement’s ideological mismatches compared to the traditional political currents. Considering how such a lack may have been key to the movement’s tragic end facing a merciless hegemon, further scholarly attention will be required on the issue.

In light of the study it will not be inappropriate to comment that the political activism displayed by the Bangladeshi citizens under the banner of the HI was, in a way, long coming. The movement itself may have grown as inevitable consequence of the ruling party’s (AL) anti-Islam stances, evident from its questionable policies or non-participatory decision making (we notice that despite existing since 2006, the HI started organizing sizeable protests only since 2010 or 2011 i.e. having gathered momentum during the AL’s second mandate which commenced from 2009). Acts like the removal of the Islamic phrase *Bismillah* (meaning, ‘I start in the name of God’) from Bangladesh’s constitution and political promotion of secularists within the AL-led coalition would also point toward the possibility that the religious status quo in the country was abruptly tipping to the favour of a smaller number of people brandishing secular slogans. This would have unnerved the more pious section of the general people as well as the (Islamic) revivalists, from where the Hefazat leaders only steered the people toward specific (non)political claims. That they failed to chart a sustainable political agenda or display inclusive ideological stances in order to claim greater international support will need to be blamed to their indecisiveness and lack of political insight; the major blame for the security and humanitarian situation will, however, be due to the rogue measures employed by the state in trying to wipe them out altogether.

Overall, the Hefazat experiences in Bangladesh also pointed toward the fact that secularism as a trend never had easy sailing in the country before or after its 1971 independence from Pakistan—a status that may not have radically altered in the new century. The story of Bangladesh has accordingly been one *with* religion, than *without*. This will also be reason why, despite forcible removal from the political scene in 2013, the Hefazat-e-Islam has shown signs of return lately (see Prothom Alo 2017). In these backdrops, the enthusiasm by the international media or political commentators to brand Bangladesh’s Islamic as ‘Islamist’ (the latter often used derogatively with terrorism-inclined activism) will be questioned. If the preceding discussions will be any lesson, a truer representation of the rise and fall of a political movement like that of the Hefazat-e-Islam can be best attained through historical questioning and taking into fold not only the suitable or readily found ‘official’ narratives of events, but their in-house, and often informal, background tales.

*Total words (excluding Bibliography and including footnotes): 5,893*

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1. Theme for this paper was first developed in the *International Conference on Representation of Peace and Conflict* at the Liverpool Hope University (UK) in July 2016 where I spoke on the representational discourses of the 2013 incidents in Bangladesh. Later I benefited from participating at a course in political anthropology at the KU Leuven, offered by professors Filip De Boeck and Steven van Wolputte (2016-17). Ideas cemented also at the IAPSS (International Association of Political Science Students) world congress at the Central European University, Budapest (2017). Throughout, I profited from comments by fellow participants and audience. I also remain thankful to Florian Zollmann, the Liverpool conference convener and director of Desmond Tutu Centre; and Catalina Montoya Londoño, the co-convener and current director. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. To cite an example to this, a recent report by the Amnesty International (2017) may be mentioned. The report details on the lack of freedom of expression in Bangladesh and includes major incidents in between February 2013 and December 2016 where people lost lives due to expressing opinions. It, however, does not include the Hefazat incidents despite people being killed directly by the security forces (discussed later). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Until 2006, when a military-installed caretaker government held power for two years (2006–8), following which the AL came to power. In a significant turn of events in 2014, however, the AL decided not to hold a participatory election that was due on that year and have held on to power since. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As per government figure, 27 people died in the incident; the unofficial estimations have ranged within several hundred death and many more injured (Desh Rights 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Accessed at the Ceasefire Magazine website <http://bit.ly/2wgCesl> on August 9, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The literature review benefits from a previous study I completed at the University of Edinburgh, supervised by Dr. Thomas Pierret at the dept. of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies (see Khan 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 2011 figure, making Bangladesh by far the fourth largest Muslim populated, and third largest Muslim majority, country in the world (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Estimated account in the ‘Muslim Population in the World’ website (http://www.muslimpopulation.com) (accessed 13 August 2017). According to Pew Research Centre, it was 62.1% in 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For instance, excepting the Jamaat-e-Islami—which maintains ideological, if not institutional, links to cross-border Islamic movements, notably with the Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood—most Islamic movements in Bangladesh are homegrown and home-operated (cf. Ahmed 2005). There are also differences in organizational structures and member-traits. For instance, unlike some of the Islamic political parties in the Middle East, the Bangladesh’s do not maintain any armed wings or martial affiliates; also unlike many war veteran members from those Middle Eastern counterparts, hardly anyone from an Islamic party registered in Bangladesh would have war experience (see Khan 2016, 14–15). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The HI leadership, in fact, stated at some point that they would be satisfied if the current government (i.e. the Awami League under Sheikh Hasina) agreed to sustain their 13-point propositions, to the apparent unease of the BNP who would rather be happy to see them calling for an early election or resignation of government (Burke and Hammadi 2013; cf. Riaz 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. From Arabic, meaning ‘the learned ones’ (plural form). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. According to a research in 2015, a total of 1.4 million students were studying in the 13,902 Qawmi madrasas across Bangladesh; a smaller number of students from Aliah madrasahs would also add to the total figure (Ahmed 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I am reminded of the physical barriers that the Muslim Brotherhood protesters raised in a camp at Rabaah in early August 2013 using sandbags, tires and concrete blocks, in support of a deposed Mohammed Morsi (see Michael 2013). Apparently unaware of any possibility of ‘attacks’, the Dhaka protesters had nothing like that in place. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Islam 2016 for a narration by a witness, and Venkatachalam 2016 for an analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Read Thomas Pierret (2013) for a similar study in a Middle Eastern (Syrian) setting. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)