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Religious Politics and Communal Harmony in Bangladesh: A Recent Impasse

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Keywords: *islamism, communal harmony, secularism, ramu.*

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I. Introduction

Much has been written on the massive havoc committed at Ramu on 29 September 2012.It is well known that within half days about 12 monasteries and 50 Buddhist houses destroyed by the hooligans of the Cox's bazaar district. Within a day the heinous events have been spread to the nearest Uapzilla Ukia, Teknaf, Patia in Chittagong district. Uttom kumar Barua a Buddhist young man tagged a picture in the facebook by defaming holy Qur'ran. The reaction to this event, the mass of the Cox's bazaar district irrespective of their political ideologies participated in the destruction process of the minority Barua and Rakine (Mainly followers of Buddhism).

Historical literature like *Abul Kashem's Ramur Etihas* has been suggest us that such type of communal clashes never occurred in the land of ramu. According to local, even in the heyday of the communal clash between Hindu & Muslim in 1971 none of the military personnel of Pakistan and their local surrogates *Rajakar* and *Albadar* did not attack in the resource of Minority Buddhist Community of Cox's bazar.

Generally speaking, the question would raise why *such phenomenon have taken place?* Though, two religious group (Muslim & Buddhist) have been living side by side for centuries. *How Islamism as an ideology bad for a non-Islamic religion? How, when & why Islamism developed in Bangladesh?* By analyzing existing secondary data and a few primary case studies ongoing papers will attempt to answer these questions.

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II. Historical Legacy of Islamism in Bangladesh

There was a good historical reason to develop a separate linguistic and religious identity in the east Bengal (present day Bangladesh).During the thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth century most of Hindus of the east Bengal were converted to Islamic religion by a Sufi and religious cleric of the afghan, Arab and Persia. Muslim preachers at that period had to compete with the Hindus about to protect the existence of Islam in the land of present Bangladesh.

a) British Period

After the battle of *Palashi* in 1757 East India Company had controlled lion's share of the governance of the Bengal. Two significant steps of the British government alienated the Muslim community from the mainstream society. One of these was a Permanent settlement of Land revenue in 1773 under Lord Cornwallis. Another was an alteration of the court language Persian to English in 1823 by Lord William Benetick1[1] . The benefit of later reformation went to the Hindu community. Moreover, several Islamic revivalist movements were witnessed in Bengal in the nineteenth century notably the faraizi movement under the leadership of the Dudu Miyan (1819-62) & Titu Mir (1782-1831) and the Tariquh–i–muhamadiya movement. Most of the members of these movements came from a lower class of the society.

W.W. Hunter found out the basic causes of the Indian Muslim especially Bengal Muslim in 1871 by publishing his book *INDIAN MUSALMAAN.* Although as many as Muslim were compromised of 65 percent of the population but they controlled only 30 percent of the land. After the partition of the Bengal in 1905 Hindu elite of the Calcutta have expressed their reaction negatively. East Bengal Muslim was united under the political umbrella of Muslim league in 1906 to uphold their voice against British as well as Hindu community of the Bengal. Finally in 1946 election, east Bengal Muslim

[1] See Ahmed, Rafiuddin 'towards a national identity' in Rafiuddin Ahmed (eds.) Religion. Identity & politics- Essays on Bangladesh, Colorado, USA, 2001, page 10-11.

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gave their vote for creating a separate Muslim state in the Indian subcontinent.

b) East Pakistan (1947-71) Dilemmas of forced Islamism vs. Bengali nationalism

After independence from Britain in 1947 Pakistan experienced with a few military dictator. These rulers had promoted significant numbers of artificial policies to keep a strong bondage between the two parts (West & East Pakistan). Some scholars like Zillur Rahman Khan described that artificial bondage as Ummah[2]. Pakistan government imposed the Urdu language over Bengali. Although Bengali were the majority 56 percent of the Pakistan.

Another effort to integrate Bengali to the wider Umma was taken by Ayub khan by Bureau of national reconstruction (BNR). [3] This organization provided an incentive to the intertwine marriage, to the artist, a musician who perform for integration of the Pakistan. All of the efforts of the West Pakistan were failed as because of their oppressive policies toward East Pakistan.

c) Bangladesh Period

Dilemmas of secularism vs. Islamism (1971-75)

Academicians noted several reasons behind the emergence of Bangladesh at 1971 in the south Asian context. It was a first regional state in the post-colonial era and built on the secular idea and ethnic nationalism based on one linguistic group (Bengal).The ruling Awami league (Al) inserted four basic principles of the state were Secularism, Socialism, and Bengali Nationalism and finally Democracy. However, this notion especially secularism was rejected by the majority of the people [4].The Bengali meaning of Secularism is *darma-niropekshata* (Religious neutrality). Mujib's opponents misrepresent the word secularism by coining it as anti-god and anti-Islamic. Mujib reply was

> *The slanderous rumor is being circulated against us that we are not believers in Islam. In reply to this, our position is very clear. We are not believers in the label of Islam. We believe in the Islam of justice. Our Islamis the Islam of the holy and merciful prophet..*[5]

In order to insure nationalism would bring about secularism, Mujib had added a specific provision to the 1972 constitution. The principle of secularism article 12 shall be realized by the elimination of

- Communalism in all its forms
- Granting by the state of political status in favor of any religion.
- Abuse of religion of political purposes
- Discrimination against or persecution of person practicing a particularreligion.[6]

In 1973 Abidullah Ghazi penned an insightful essay where he pointed out the strong Islamic nature of Bengal and observed that the rejection of Pakistan was only a rejection of an inconvenient political bond. Bangladesh negated the fundamentalist interpretation of Islam as promoted by the Pakistani state, but it did not in any way deny its Muslim identity.[7] We can make assumption from above that; new independent society's citizen did not forget the religious identity of them for which they struggled for long. Strictly speaking, Shiekh Mujib and most of his close associates were the products of the communal politics of the British and Pakistan periods. They played a significant role to create Pakistan. Besides Awami league Manifesto for the 1970 election sympathetic on the question religion. It thus stated:

> *The favored religion of the vast majority of the population is Islam. On this matter the Awami League has decided that there will be in the constitution very clear guarantees that no law will be formulated or enforced in the Pakistan contrary to the law of Islam well established in the holy Qur'an and the sunnah. There will be guarantees firmly established in the constitution for preserving the purity of the numerous religious institutions. Adequate arrangements will be made for extending religious instruction at all levels.*[8]

However, in order to appease the critics of secularism, Mujib had to take several steps. In 1974, he formed the Madrassa Education Commission (Qudrat-i-Khuda Commission).Later; in March 1975 the Islamic foundation act was passed[9]

However, neither Sheikh Mujib nor his party members clarify the definition of the Bengali Nationalism. In a speech, he said 'my civilization of Bengal, and my Bengal nation- these constitute Bengali nationalism' [10] Article 9 of the constitution defined Bengali nationalism to be based on Bengali culture and

[2] See Khan,Z. Rahman, Ialam and Benglai Nationalism (1985) in Rafiuddin Ahmed eds , Bangladesh: society, Religion and politics, Barnarekha Press, Chittagong.
[3] Ibid p. 22
[4] Ibid
[5] Ibid p.26

[6] Constituent Assembly of Bangladesh, *Constitution of the people's republic of Bangladesh* Article 12 (Dhaka: Bangladesh government Press, 1972)
[7] Ghazi, Abidullah "Muslim Bengal: A Crisis of Ident ity", in Barbara Thomas and Spencer Lavan (eds.), *West Bengal and Bangladesh: Perspectives from 1972*, South Asia Series, Occasional Paper no. 21, East Lansing, Michigan, Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1973, p. 152.
[8] See, "Manifesto of the Awami League," in MujibarerRachana Sangraha, p.120.
[9] See, Rahman, M. Sajjadur, Islamism in Bangladesh, Journal of International Relations, vol 8,Num. 1,2010.
[10] The Daily Ittefaq,June 8,1972.

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language.[11] Sheikh Mujib changed his ending word by adding *Khuda Hafez* with *Joi Bangla.*

Mujib government improved their relations with the Muslim world. On the other, few countries like Saudi Arabia did not recognize Bangladesh because he banned all religious based political parties. Though, one day after the death of the founder of Bangladesh on 16th August 1975, Saudi Arabia recognized Bangladesh.

State Sponsor Islamism (1975-90)

Ziaur Rahman took support from the entire opponent of the sheik mujibur Rahman and directly patronized to establish Islamism in Bangladesh. He formed new political party Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) against Awami League with the mixture of rightist Islamic party to leftist party. He promoted anti-Indian and Islamic politics in the country. By withdrawing constitutional barriers he opened the door for the Islamic parties to run their politics.

Zia and his party introduced the new form of nationalism in the Bangladesh politics based on territory that was Bangladeshi nationalism.[12] It drew a distinction between the Bengali-speaking people of Bangladesh and those of West Bengal in India who are predominantly Hindu. One observer points out that such an action meant a "reassertion of the distinct and separate identity of Bengali Muslims vis-à-vis the Bengali Hindus" and thus revived the question of identity which had vexed the Muslims of this region during the colonial period.[13]

Though the definition of the Bangladeshi nationalism was not clear until the 21st February 1976 when on the occasion of the language day bangle academy organized a seminar where *Khondokar Abdul Hamid,* a journalist and a former cabinet member presented a paper which provided a definition of the Bangladeshi nationalism. The prime points of this paper were as follows:

> *Bengali nationalism would mean multi-state nationalism, for several million Bengali live outside Bangladesh who cannot be included within the concept of Bengali nationalism; we cannot think in terms of pan-Bengalism or supra-nationalism.*
>
> *The people of Bangladesh, west Bengal and other Bengali speaking areas may speak Bengali, may eat rice, may have commonalties in manners and customs, but they have not only different but also contradictory features in their cultures, national identity and national ideology.*
>
> *There is a perpetual difference between East Bengal (present day Bangladesh) and West Bengal (a state of India) – it relates to blood, mind, inheritance, food, clothing, way of life, and so on.*
>
> *Bengali nationalism is not only a mistaken term but also historically unrealistic; it is without any substance as a political philosophy.*
>
> *Our nationalism should appropriate / term "Banglade shi" Nationalism, for this has gotten a glorious identity, legacy, history, tradition, faith, language, art, literature, sculpture, music, and so on and so forth. There are innumerable features in the "Bangladeshi" mind and life that distinguish this notion from the rest of the world and make them different from other speakers of Bengali as well as followers of Islam in other areas.*[14]

By this process, early days of the Ziaur Rahman government had been encouraged the communalism in the constitution. The story did not stop here "*Bismillahir Rahmanur Rahim"* was added before the preamble of the constitution. In 1977 "total faith and belief in Almighty Allah" was become the fundamental principle of the constitution instead of secularism. And a number of Religious schools (*Madrassa, Maktabs)* and Islamic institutions like Islamic University were established by Ziaur Rahman to spread the voice of political Islam.[15]

Zia's successor General H M Arshad followed the same path of Islamisation in Bangladesh. He further declared Islam as the state religion in 1988 to appease the Islamic sentiment. He admitted that-

> *Bangladesh is not for fundamentalism at all. We cannot take our country backward….Our people have never believed in the fundamental variety of Islam. But, at the same time, they are religious minded and want to see Islam's ideology and ideals reflected in society. That is why we made it the state religion.*[16]

Friday declared as the holiday to observe the prayer of the *Musalman*. He directly supported the Bangladeshi nationalism on the basis of Islamic identity.

Political Islam and Islamic Politics (1990-present)

Located in the arc of Muslim countries stretching from Afghanistan to Indonesia, any sign of political upheaval, socio-economic instability and resulting chaos in Bangladesh can make it susceptible to the spread of extremist ideology.[17] It was in post-

[11] Constituent Assembly of Bangladesh. Op. cit p 5.
[12] See, The Dainik Bangla, 26 march,1972.
[13] Murshid, Tazeen M "The Sacred and the Secular: A C risis of Governance in Bangladesh",in Subrata K. Mitra and Dietmar Rothermund (eds.), *Legitimacy and Conflict in South Asia* ,New Delhi, Manohar, 1997, p. 159.
[14] The Ittefaq, 21 February, 1976.quoted in chapter 2, M.Anisuzzam, The Identity Question and politics in Rounaq Jahan (ed) Bangladesh: Promise and Performance (UPL: Dhaka: 2000) p..57
[15] Ibid p.25
[16] Interview with the far Eastern Economic Review, vol, 23, March 1989, p.23.
[17] Bertil, Linter, "Religious Extremism and Nationalism in Bangladesh", in Satu P. Limaye,MohanMalik & G. Wirsing (eds.), *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia* , Honolulu, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2004, pp. 413-436;

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military regime Bangladeshi society experienced with the rise of the Islamic party and the mainstream political party like Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh nationalist party (BNP) have been continuously supporting the process of islamisation in Bangladesh. That ultimately helps to create a better environment for the religious extremist.

Before the election of the 1991 two major party of the Bangladesh had competed for each other about to use the Islamic icon in the political arena. Awami League which is popular among the secular intelligentsia of the country started to use Islamic jargon in the political meeting and chief leader Sheikh Hasina frequently visited Saudi Arabia for taking a religious pilgrimage. She also was carrying of prayer beads and wearing of scarves[18] to catch the attention of the public. She also began to use Islamic phrases like Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim, Khoda Hafez, and Inshallah in her public speeches.

Before the heyday of the 1991 election political parties of Bangladesh had been used Islamic slogan in the election campaign. Suppose, BNP Supporters chanted, La ilaha illallah, dhaner shishe Bismillah (there is no god but Allah, vote for paddy-sheaf saying God the merciful); Awami League supporters came up with slogan La ilaha Illaah, nauker malik tui Allah (There is no god but Allah, the boats belongs to Allah); and finally Jamat supporters slogan was ; vote dilly pallay, khusi habe Allah (Allah will be pleased with you if you vote for the scale).Thus secular party like Awami league had become communal in the new democratic arena of Bangladesh.

BNP had gotten support from Jamat –i- Islami to wi n the 1991 election. Thus a political party which was played a controversial role in the liberation war had become the legitimate party in Bangladesh. A few events had occurred in the BNP's first democratic regime (1991-96) that spreads debate among the intellectual vs. Islamist. For instance, Taslima Nasreen a female writer had declared hectic by the Islamist fo her book Lagga (Shame) and finally she left the country because of fear of death. Secondly, *Fatwas* [19] become an integral part at that time in the Bangladeshi society.

Moreover, before the 1996 election Awami League (AL) run their caretaker government movement with making an alliance with Jamat-i- Islami. In 1998 during the Awami league government terms NGO had faced problem from the fundamentalist Islamist who had come from the battle of Afghanistan.

During the interim government in 2001, religious extremist had destroyed the home and assets of the religious minority of Bangladesh, especially Hindu community. During the election of 2001 when people had known about the victory of BNP, started to run the violence against Hindu. Teams of the daily star English daily of Bangladesh summarized their finding; from Bhola to Pirujpur, from Laxmipur to Jessore to Bagerhat…..the findings were strikingly and, frighteningly, similar. All the Hindus had to say was how they had been subjected to looting, harassment, assault and in some cases, rape. It was quite clear that the attackers were after the valuables and lands of the Hindu. And in the process, the Hindu women were the easy pretty" [20]

Ali Riaz thus notes about the Hindu community; The Hindu community in Bangladesh has been weak owing to its lack of access to resources and hence has never been able to mount resistance to the institutional persecutions faced.21[21]In 2001 after the election a large number of Hindu from the three districts (Barisal, Pirojpur and Bagerhat) primarily moved to nearest Gopalgang district for the safe haven. In the absence of secured palace, they crossed the Bangladesh-India border to India. After the 2001 election, the first time in the history of Bangladesh, Jamat-i- Islami had come power as the coalition of the BNP. This period (2001-2006) had been sawing an unprecedented rise of Islamist groups like Jam'atul- Mujahiden Bangladesh (JBM), Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), Harkat- UL - Jihad- Islami (Huji) in Bangladesh. Government after the grandee attack in 2004 against the opposition leader Shiek Hasina, rejected the involvement of the Islamist fundamentalist. But we knew from a newspaper that JMB had gotten support from the local MP and administration in the north Bengal. The massive destruction had been occurred in 2005 by JMB by attacking sixty tree districts out of sixty-four districts of Bangladesh.

> *The JMB emerged as an extremist organization in 1998 with the objective of establishing Islamic rule in the country. Between 1998 and 2003, the group recruited, trained and mobilized members, raised funds and undertook operations across the country. The areas where the JMB emerged in strength were located in the northern and southwestern regions of the country.*[22]

During this period systematic persecution of Hindu community was acute in Bangladesh. Though, the annihilation of Hindu population in Bangladesh is not a new event at all. After the 1947 government systematically had been taking policy against the

[18] See ali riaz, god willing: politics of Islamism in Bangladesh (Rowman & Littlefield: Oxford: 2004) p.38
[19] Ibid p.8

[20] Ibid p.51.
[21] Raiz, Ali, How Did We Arrive Here? Forum, vol. 6 issue 11. Nov 2012. p. 7
[22] Zaman, Rashed Uz, Bangladesh- Between Terrorism, Identity, and Illiberal Democracy: The Unfolding of a Tragic Saga. PERCEPTIONS, Autumn 2012, Volume XVII, Number 3, p. 160.

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interest of the Hindus. Ali Riaz had shown in his book (God Willing: The politics of Islamism in Bangladesh, 2004) that about 5.3 million Hindu had migrated to India in last 25 years.

Table1: Bangladesh Population, 1951-2011

Year	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Christian	Others
1951	76.9	22.0	0.7	0.3	0.1
1961	80.4	18.5	0,7	0.3	0.1
1974	85.4	13.5	0.6	0.3	0.1
1981	86.7	12.1	0.6	0.3	0.1
1991	88.3	10.5	0.6	0.3	0.1
2001	89.7	9.2	0.7	0.3	0.2
2011	90.4	8.5	0.6	0.3	0.1

Source: Ali Raiz, How Did We Arrive Here? Forum, vol. 6 issue 11. Nov 2012

The census report of the last 60 year shows the steady diminish of the Hindu populace. This decline is not consistent with the growth rate of the country. For instance, population growth rate in 1961-74 was 3.13 percent, 3.08 percent for 1974-1981; 2.20 percent for 1981-1991; 1.58 percent for 1991- 2001.

It cannot be accused to low Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of the advocates of the Hindu religion. Even if one argues that the TFR among Hindu women is estimated at 13 percent less until 1991 and 15 percent after 1991, the average annual growth rates of the Hindu population would have been 2.72 percent during 1961-74; 2.68 percent during 1974-1981; 1.92 percent during 1981-1991; 1.34 percent during 1991-2001, and 1.14 percent during 2001-2011[23]

If we reconsider these statistics and applied these by 1991 the Hindu population should have reached 16.5 million as opposed to 11.16 million. The current population growth is 13.47 million is far short number one should expect based on population growth rate. The decline of the religious minority in Bangladesh acute because of continuous use of Islamic icon and symbol in the state mechanism. And not to mention annihilation of secularism from state principle and Islam still exists as the state religion after the 15th amendment. Ali Riaz has coined the decline of Hindu population as the *missing million*.

Ramu: Road to Islamism

Press report, editorial, op-ed, political analysis has been written rapidly after the incident. Most of the articles about Ramu were apologetic to the Buddhist people of southern Chittagong. Neither of these attempted to justify the event with the lens of Islamism. Moreover, the Present government has added a lot of hope in the mind of the secularist after the massive victory in 2009.She banned the Hijbur Tahrir (HT) in 2009 a fundamentalist organization wants to reset the Khilafat in the world.

But in 2011 we saw the attack in the religious statue of Hindus at Nandirhat in Chittagong. After the occurrence, the government has done their formalities but didn't publish who is the main guilty behind these events. It is now common in Bangladesh that religious minority would be attacked by the majority Muslim.

The event of ramu is totally unique in a few senses.

First time irrespective of political identity including Awami supporters took part in the ramu tragedy.

- Peace loving Buddhist minority has been attacked for the first time in Bangladesh.
- Before the incident, Awami League has passed the 15th amendment but irony is that they didn't alter Bismillah-r-Rahmanir-Rahim and state
- religion Islam from the constitution. That ultimately legalizes the Islamization by the secular Awami League.
- First-time minority Buddhist community had lost their support to the Awami league.

III. Case Study

"Friend lost forever"

It was about 11 pm in Arakan road at Ramu in Cox's Bazar, I was waiting for Siddik and his cousin Salman in the Dark road. After a while, Siddik came with a smile. He brought me to his house.

He noted all party participated in the atrocities. After the incident, century-long communal harmonies between Muslim and Buddhist in Ramu have been changed in a negative way. In previous he could easily take participate in the annual programs of the Buddhist. He notes it was totally a mockery for to believe that these nonsense local people thought it was their religious responsibility to annihilate the temple of the local Buddhist people.

He later urged that he could easily attend in the religious programs of the Buddha. But after the incident, they (Buddhist friend) didn't invite him to their cultural program. It was really backlash for the communal harmony in this area.

[23] Ibid p.7

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The local authority was silent about to stop the events rather they watched the heinous job of the madness Muslim mob. Some of his friends called him to take action against the Buddhist after the defamation of the holy Qu'ran. But he didn't join the rally to destroy the age old statue of the peace loving Buddhist people. He believes the future generation will suffer more because of these atrocities. Finally, he lost a group of his friend from the Buddhist community who will never become easy to meet with the young Muslims.

"A tragic knight without Sleeping"

I was entered in the house of Saki Barua about 1:23 pm. she welcomed me, brought me to her reading room. First of all, she was very happy to receive me as a guest in her house but after hearing my purpose (Research about the Ramu Tragedy) her face turned dark within a few second. She narrates the dark story of that night……

I was reading on my table as usual after the evening of the 29th September 2012.Suddenly, My uncle informed us that a meeting would run in the nearest market (Chaumuhoni Bazar), about to the reaction of the Holy Qu'ran defaming by a Buddhist young man. First of all, I ignored the news and concentrate on my study again. After an hour, I heard the voice of the slogan Na Rayer Takbir Allah Akbar, Buddader Astana Zalea Dow, Puria Dow (By calling, Almighty Allah is great, Fire the area of the Buddha) near my house besides the Lal Shin and Sada Shin (two Buddhist temple near the Saki Barua's house).Within a few seconds, I was felt scared to move from my reading room. These hooligans have continuously chanted their slogan and moved forward towards our main gate to enter the house.

My younger sister Shampa about 10 years old was crying because of fear. Most of the relatives of ours have taken shelter in our house for a safe haven. We called the local administration, local politician and police for security, but they gave false promise to rescue us. This uncertain tension has continued for eight hours until 5:00 am before police and fire brigade come to the spot.

I believe politician especially ruling Awami league (AL) is responsible for this tragedy. This incident was totally a pre-planned task to persecute the Buddhist people of Ramu and southern Chittagong. Most of the fire instruments like Gunpowder and other firearms were not possible to use within an instant plan. I lost all of my respect to the state mechanism of Bangladesh. A few of our relatives from Rakhine community have left Bangladesh because of fear of persecution.

IV. Concluding Remarks:

The myth of communal harmony in Bangladesh had been annihilated by this phenomenon. Though, there is two previous events these were responsible for the Ramu saga. One happened in the month of June 2012 in the Rakhine State of Myanmar where a great portion of Rohingya Populace had been attacked by the Rakhine Buddhist. As about 3 lakh number of Rohingyas are living in the Cox's Bazar district. So there has a chance of involving of Rohingyas in this event. Second, the phenomenon occurred in September of 2012 when an Egyptian-American made a video "Innocence of Muslim" by defaming Prophet Mohammad (PUBH).By the reaction of this, Islamic party of the Bangladesh called half day hartal.

Though during my field work, the local have commented that the ruling party is responsible for the demise but until this writing, the issue is unresolved and the government didn't publish the name of the guilty. And still, the blame game of the political party to each other is continuing. Though, nobody attempt to prevent future havoc.

To conclude, it's necessary to reach a consensus among the political parties of Bangladesh to change the mentality against the minority by constitutional change and must be banned & punished the fundamentalist of the religious party. Need not to mention that secular discourse should be included in the primary to a higher level of the education system. Otherwise, such event might take place routinely in Bangladesh. Aren't we really waiting for another ramu??

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