

## The Politics of Faith and Force: A Micro-Foundational Analysis of the transformation of Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh

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### Abstract

*The research goes through the heart of Hefazat-e-Islam's (HI) transformation from a non-violent religious movement to an agent of political violence, highlighting how its leadership strategically harnesses emotionally charged religious discourse to mobilize support and gradually escalate ostensibly peaceful activism into violent confrontation. The study finds that while HI initially emerged as a non-violent religious movement, its leadership gradually utilized evocative religious rhetoric and symbolic frameworks to mobilize followers. This strategic use of religious discourse transformed ostensibly peaceful activism into potential flashpoints of escalation, where participants—whether intentionally or not—began to prioritize rigid religious or ultranationalist identities over-inclusive or pluralistic values, shaping their decision-making within the movement. In this process, HI propagated narratives opposing Bengali cultural ideology, promoting anti-secular sentiments, communal agendas, and portraying sculptures as idolatrous rather than artistic expressions. These ideas were disseminated through a range of mechanisms, including sermons, social media, da'wa, manhaji, and the Qawmi madrasa network. Consequently, followers, often consciously or unconsciously aligned with HI's messaging, mobilized en masse to demonstrate strength, ultimately contributing to the rise of religiously motivated extremism and political violence.*

**Key Words:** Hefazat-e-Islam, Political Violence, Non-violence, Religious Extremism, Violence and Bangladesh

### Introduction

Religious extremism and political violence are closely tied with each other as part of the historical intensity and struggle between religion and politics (Armstrong, 2000), especially in Middle Eastern and South Asian countries, though theorists illustrate that the hardliner groups in the South Asian countries, including Bangladesh are not at 'absolute extremist levels', but they are in the emerging stage. However, the recent strategies and activities of these groups, particularly HI and several others, have become highly controversial in Bangladesh. They display a kind of braggadocio reminiscent of extremist factions in the Middle East, although they differ from militant extremist parties in their approach. This

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article illustrates and unlocks them as an extremist group and the process that leads to a religious extremist level. The emergence of religious extremism often relates to contemporary Middle Eastern incidents, and this tendency could be seen mostly among Western writers who are inspired by the incidents of 9/11, *Al Qaeda*, and Islamic State (IS); however, this correlation hardly captures the real story of religious extremism. For many analysts, it is frequently linked with "the totalitarian movements to which they gave birth in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These developments were the outgrowths of extreme hostility to religious belief" (Weinberg & Pedahzur, 2005, p. 1). However, some researchers have shown that when religious people partake in violence for religious purposes, they believe that such ideology and acts are respectful of the faith and represent God and that they will be able to find everlasting peace because of their actions (Iannaccone, 1999, p. 21).

Furthermore, the word 'ideology' here connotes radicalism or beliefs that are very similar to extremism in terms of religion or politics. This credo infers that the connection between religious extremism and violence is clear, with "religious supremacists" ready to murder because they believe in theologies that sanction violence in the name of God. They show no compassion for their victims and they consider them to be 'God's enemies'. "And they are willing to give up their lives because they seek massive and immediate benefits in the afterlife in exchange for martyrdom" (Berman & Iannaccone, 2005, p. 2). On the other hand, there is a huge contradiction among theorists about the nature and conception of political violence, where several scholars challenged the classical theorists of the 1960s and they illustrated the "political violence not as a *sui generis* phenomenon or as a social pathology, but as a collective effort to pursue goals with intelligible strategies"(Bosi & Malthaner, 2014, p. 3). As a result, they see political violence as a module of "broader repertoires of action," an outburst of relational dynamics, and finally, political violence as a component of larger political and social conflicts. Nevertheless, some scholars try to neutralize the term using words like "civil strife," "internal war," and "a breakdown of some dimension of legitimate political order" (Mars, 1975, p. 221); others, on the other hand, appear to suggest religious convent or potentially violent behaviors such as "non-cooperation, passive opposition, and the threat of force as integral components of potentially violent actions"(Mars, 1975, p. 223). Several scholars emphasize more violent types of brutality, such as military conflict, which involves "guerrilla war, insurrection, insurgency, and other events including real physical property destruction and individual injury"(Mars, 1975, p. 224). Thus, political violence denotes actions that necessitate any opposition and coercion to effect reform within the political sphere, or the political system. It may result in property destruction and vandalism, as well as individual anxiety. Furthermore, some religious extremist violent acts, such as armed resistance, protests, attacks, and other less severe actions, like agitation, demonstration, and vandalism, will be portrayed as political violence in this article.

Nonetheless, HI, an Arabic term that translates into "Protectorate of Islam" (Griffiths & Hasan, 2015; Mostofa, 2021), however, its vandalism to the center stage of the political arena becomes a special concern for the government and liberal mass people as well (Wolf, 2022). Primarily, this organization emerged as a religious fundamentalist pressure group, but when it demanded 13 points of Islamic principles (to them), many were stunned by its rise to fame, which sparked street protests (Khalidi, 2013), and thus it has outgrown as a more coercive

group. Besides, the method by which this group demonstrates protests is the very well-orchestrated and unusual radical outfit, which includes strikes, riots, and sabotage, though this organization claims it is their right and strategy that seems unconstitutional; sociologists along with anthropologists "problematize this dichotomy in several ways, recent academic works often deem traditionalist Islamic groups like HI as a threat to and crisis for national identity in Bangladesh" (Raqib, 2020, p. 236). The activists and the target people are mostly uneducated, lower-class people and in most cases, *Madrasah* students, and teachers are basically from Arabic schooling, and most significantly, they take absolute assertions on Islamic fundamentalism (Khalidi, 2013). In this regard, this paper aims to explore the transformation of HI from a non-violent religious movement into an agent of political violence. It highlights how the organization's leadership strategically harnesses emotionally charged religious discourse to mobilize support and gradually escalate ostensibly peaceful activism into violent confrontation. Most importantly, it examines how the micro foundations of leadership—individual motivations, perceptions, and strategic choices—contribute to both mobilization and the turn toward violence. Through an analysis of these elements, the study contributes to the literature by shedding light on individual agency in the context of HI's use of both peaceful and violent tactics in social movements. While earlier analyses have largely focused on the macro-level bases of non-violent methods, this study offers a new perspective by examining the micro-foundations of both non-violent and violent discourses within HI. Moreover, this paper follows a structured approach: it first explores the concept of political violence and religious extremism through the lens of the micro-foundation assumption. It then examines the historical evolution of HI and how it adopted violent strategies as a driving force for its principles. Finally, the paper outlines strategies and tools such as sermons, social media, da'wa, Manhaji, and Qawmi Madrasahs, drawing on existing literature to provide an empirical foundation for the study's discussion.

### **Literature Review**

The literature of this paper focuses on significant areas of social movements dealing with individual agency as micro-foundation, which relates to the theoretical framework. Conversely, the historical framework of HI is examined in the later part, where how HI emerged and gained a ground for political violence that led to religious extremism. It explores the nature of transformation from a non-violent to a violent one that occurs within a social movement mechanism.

The micro-level foundations of social movements often promote violence through individual actions, which can escalate into extremism—particularly in the context of religious violence. Scholars such as Goffman (1959), McAdam (1982), Jasper (1998), Tarrow (1998), and Tilly (2008) have offered valuable perspectives on how individuals drive social change, how their networks function, how emotions are managed, and how collective goals are pursued. Tilly, McAdam, and Tarrow especially emphasize the crucial influence of individual agency in mobilizing social movements and shaping collective actions. This agency reflects the strategic decisions made by activists, leaders, and other participants within contested arenas, closely linked to organizational structure, resource allocation, alliances, and the sustainability of the movement (Jasper, 2003).

Moreover, Popkin (1979) and Jasper (2010) argue that important concepts, like micro-foundations, focus on how individual actions and interactions influence group decisions. When individuals envision the prospects for change driven by subjective desires, they discern a logic of shared individuality controlled by emotional and cultural aspects as participation derives (Jasper, 2010). Emotions serve as a thriving force consistently in the case of revolutions and social movements through deliberate strategy. These emotions trigger the movements, including primary engagement, goal orientation, establishment of social networks, and execution of decisions, sacrifices and its subsequent outcomes (Goffman, 1959, 1974; Jasper, 1998; Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta, 2001). Goffman argues that emotions are not a strategic action but a sustained matter beyond the initial catalysts. Emotional cultures sustain group activism that shapes group solidarity and shared conviction. Jasper explains that emotions are integral to the mobilization process in movements, where anger, outrage, and moral outrage can ignite group members to sustain the movement's procedure, shaping their interpretations and experiences of events (Jasper & Polletta, 2001).

However, the discourse from non-violent to violent nature is a circumstance of debate among scholars, where some concentrate on state-centric repression, while others contribute to structural and ideological factors leading to radicalization. This section explores the catalysts that prompt the non-violent to violent conundrum of HI in Bangladesh and how that process shifts towards violent approaches. While discussing the nature of HI, this paper explores how non-violence leads to violent catalysts. The scholarly literature on the multifactor process of violent transition, as indicated by Trejo (2012), suggests that the nature of non-violent resistance may lead to violent outcomes; however, this outcome depends on the regime's character, particularly the autocrats' behavior, and the protestors' movement style, which can be either peaceful or armed. Moreover, Stephan & Chenoweth (2008), Chenoweth & Ulfelder (2016), and Gleditsch et al. (2023) argued that non-violence is not an active form of goal-achieving strategy but the fraction within a movement resort violence that divided into hardliner and other factions whereas propelling the hardliner to endorse violent methods (Chenoweth, 2023). That process indicates that authority often disintegrates the system and divides the non-violent movement into a violent mechanism. Furthermore, the conflict within a group or individual escalates the radical factions, leading to violence (Gleditsch et al., 2023). However, these studies principally focused on the macro-level analysis of violence and extremism and less explored the role of individual agency from the micro-foundation approach.

In analyzing the transition from non-violence to violence, individual agency is a key steering force that drives the organization of strategic preferences, bargaining, and pursuit of specific objectives within the social, cultural, and institutional context. However, the identity of individual agency occurs from its self-existence, which is called the stimulus for violence (Sen, 2006; 2008). That selfdom within usual religious and race groups brings forth the propensity of fidelity and belonging, advancing to defend and shield it. However, the strong feelings of identity construct the connotation of "us versus them" ethos where that individual agency considers the outsiders as a menace (Sen, 2006) fostering violence against the perceived threat. That "otherness" tagging among groups or leaders accelerates terror and wrath motivating conflict and ferocity.

In this context, the existing literature on non-violence and its theories predominantly focuses on macro-level approaches relating to state-level oppression and government mechanisms that suppress non-violence entities and lead to violent ones. Yet, these theories mostly disregard the micro-foundations of non-violence catalysts, less exploring the activism of individual agency's impulse and distinction within the movement triggering the violent one. This study highly concentrates on this gap in the micro-foundation idea of non-violent catalysts which expedite the violent nature of individual agency. To explore the role of HI in Bangladesh as an individual agency and how that case leads to understanding the identities and stimuli of that agency, its activists' actions, and its contribution to violence from a non-violent nature.

### **Theoretical Framework: Micro Foundations and the Dynamics of Radicalized Movement**

Micro-level foundations work as central catalysts whereas single agency demonstrated the roles of leaders, defectors and decision makers in the area of collection action (Jasper, 2004). This perspective underscores the centrality of individual decision-making in shaping both the internal dynamics and broader outcomes of collective mobilization. Throughout this process, participants are persistently confronted with strategic and moral choices that not only reflect but also reproduce the cultural logics, affective dispositions, and interpretive frameworks embedded within both individual and communal contexts (Abbott, 1992; Sewell, 1996). Moreover, when making decisions, people are often guided by their emotions, personal relationships, and shared group identities, all of which influence the development of social movements. The individual who acts for diverse networks, as well as their decisions and behavioral patterns, are affected by contesting social pressures (Goodwin & Jasper, 1999). Emotions play a central role in social movements, functioning and emerging, shaping participants' involvement and their ongoing engagement. Emotional experiences are crucial for building and maintaining movements and for attracting and keeping members involved. Feelings such as anger, fear, outrage, love, and solidarity can motivate individuals to participate in or start protest activities. These emotions are frequently triggered by external events like moral injustices or sudden crises and are often temporary. Additionally, deeper emotional ties—such as loyalty to a group or fear of consequences—also influence how people emotionally respond to such events (Jasper, 1998).

Conversely, many academics concur that peaceful protests run the risk of degenerating into violent ones, especially when governments step up their use of force against nonviolent protesters. When the state becomes more authoritarian, the activists change the way of demonstration and possible results of sticking to non-violent tactics (Chenoweth & Ulfelder, 2017; Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008). In some cases, limited or moderate repression might provoke greater mobilization, as it highlights injustice and draws public sympathy. However, when authorities demonstrate a readiness to use excessive or lethal force, it can undermine confidence in the effectiveness of peaceful protest. Faced with brutal crackdowns and rising danger, many participants may conclude that non-violent tactics no longer offer a viable path forward. Under such conditions, the costs of continuing peaceful resistance outweigh the perceived benefits, often prompting a turn toward violent confrontation as a means of self-

defense or achieving political goals. This shift from non-violent to violent resistance can occur when activists begin to believe that peaceful strategies are no longer effective in reaching their objectives, especially when they are met with severe violence from the state, forcing them to consider self-defense (Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008). While we acknowledge that government repression can be a key factor in this transformation, it is not the only one. The choices of individual activists, particularly leaders, along with their emotional responses, can also influence the movement's trajectory. Emotions often shape one's sense of identity within a movement—whether tied to nation, religion, ethnicity, or gender—and these overlapping identities can sometimes generate tensions. When one identity is emphasized at the expense of others, it may contribute to internal divisions or provoke violence. In this context, emotions serve as crucial signals, reflecting how individuals interpret and prioritize their identities in different social and political environments (Sen, 2006). We anticipate that state repression can contribute to a movement's metamorphosis from non-violent to violent approaches; however, this is not always the case. In some instances, non-violent activists may resort to violence contrived by personal agency, a heightened essence of ultranationalist identity, perceived threats from opposing clusters, or fear of marginalization or elimination. In such cases, leaders often leverage emotionally resonant narratives and instruments to mobilize followers. These shifts can occur regardless of whether activists are guided by principled non-violence or adopt non-violent strategies for tactical purposes. This perspective underpins our hypotheses.

*H1: Social movements are more likely to escalate from non-violent to violent strategies when individual participants prioritize the supremacy of their religious or ultranationalist identities over inclusive or pluralistic values, guiding their decision-making within the movement.*

*H2: Movement leaders, in pursuit of religious dominance, strategically employ emotionally charged religious narratives and symbols to mobilize followers, whose engagement intentional or not can transform ostensibly non-violent actions into potential sites of escalation.*

### **Emergence of Hefazat-e-Islam: Non-violent Mobilization to Extremism**

Deobandi devout schooling, known as *Qawmi Madrasah Shikkha* in Bangladesh as a Muslim reformist movement, rose in popularity during the British period, especially in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Furthermore, after the end of the colonial period, Deobandis, along with many other religious communities such as Barelawis and Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JIB), became involved in political parties and under a variety of non-political banners, they eventually continued their involvement in Bangladesh politics after the independence in 1971 (Nesbitt-Larking, 2015, p. 10). “Despite the presence of a number of political parties that emerged from Deobandi tradition in Bangladesh, a large chunk of the *ulama* tended to distance themselves from joining such parties, preferring to be occupied in providing a traditional Islamic education, and practical and spiritual guidance to produce good Muslims” (Raqib, 2020, p. 238). Even so, in this modern period, traditional Islamic schools, Islamist groups, Islamist movements, and other Islamist social organizations have become the flag-bearers in the open circle to demonstrate their efficiency (Rahman, 2018, p.

1). What's more, as part of this, these Islamist groups sought to assert their presence in the streets, with some claiming that the Bangladeshi government's draft "Women Development Policy" served as a catalyst for the formation of Hefazat-e-Islam in Chittagong. It has been claimed that HI has such a firm consolidation that a dozen or more Islamist organization have come together to determine their principal devout objectives beneath this umbrella. Accordingly, it has traditionally not sought authority through voting influence, preferring instead to leverage its street strength to transform Bangladesh's traditions, culture, and legislative systems by imposing *Shariah law*, which it considers to be legal Islamic ways. More than 25,000 madrasahs, or devout schools, across Bangladesh, are host to the organizations that play significant roles in unifying the HI (Mustafa, 2013). In 2008, the proposed equal inheritance rights for women flared and clashed with the police calling for *Shariah law* in Bangladesh advocated by the Ahkame Sharia Hefazat Committee, including the "Islami Law Usage Committee" and the "Committee for Avoidance of Anti-Koranic laws" (Reuters, 2008), sponsored by the Islamic party, JIB. While HI stakes its ideological bottom with JIB, predominantly in resisting women's rights, HI upholds religious contrasts and a separate identity (Mustafa, 2013). So, HI is an umbrella where all the 'non-political' and Deobandi "tradition"-based (Asad *et al.*, 2009, p. 36) *Qawmi* teachers and students, along with several Islamist political parties, promote the Islamic fundamentalist principles through peaceful protestation under Allama Ahmed Shafi, with its headquarters located at the Hathazari Madrasah in Chattogram.

However, Hefazat-e-Islam (HI) accumulated substantial mass backing in 2013 during its antagonism to the Shahbagh Gonojagoron Moncho (GJM) and so-called "Islamophobic atheist" bloggers. Though originally nurturing friendly demonstrations, HI shifted toward extensive mobilizations, heavily leaning on the Qawmi madrasah network, where students rigidly follow their religious leaders, enabling prompt street meetups (Lorch, 2019, p. 13). The GJM promoted secularism and justice for war criminals, clashing with HI's religious agenda. In response to GJM's demands and the critical blog writings on Prophet Mohammad, HI issued a thirteen-point demand and launched a series of sustained protests across various parts of the country (Raqib, 2020, p. 238). Mass people were taken aback by these demands similar to the Taliban's rule, which included demands like "Reinstate the phrase 'Absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah' in the constitution as one of the fundamental principles of state policy," "Pass a law-keeping a provision of capital punishment for maligning Allah, Islam and Prophet Muhammad and smear campaigns against Muslims," "Punish the 'atheist' leaders of Shahbagh, bloggers and anti-Islamists who make 'derogatory comments about Prophet Muhammad,'" "Stopping infiltration of all 'alien culture including 'shamelessness' in the name of individual's freedom of expression, anti-social activities, adultery, free mixing of men and women and candle-lighting," "Make Islamic education mandatory from primary to higher secondary levels canceling the women policy and anti-religion education policy," "Officially declare *Ahmadiyyas* as non-Muslim," and so on (Mustafa, 2013; Hossain, 2013; The Daily Star, 2013).

Moreover, Hefazat-e-Islam (HI), under its central leadership, mobilized hundreds of thousands of supporters in Dhaka to demand the implementation of its 13-point agenda, representing an unprecedented unification of various conservative Islamic factions (Bouissou,

2013). The protest, however, turned violent as HI activists clashed with pro-government groups, engaged in vandalism, and called for the government's overthrow. In response to the escalating unrest and HI's prolonged occupation of Motijheel, a joint operation by security forces was launched to disperse the demonstrators (Prothom Alo, 2021b). Those 13-points sparked debate for demanding the 'death penalty of those who insulted Islam,' 'the ban on sculpture in the country,' 'the abolition of the secular education policy,' and the most astonishing one was 'the free mixing of men and women.' Women's and secular rights groups and liberal forces reprimanded the agenda as unconstitutional and anti-progressive, worrying they would harshly undermine women's liberties (DW, 2013). Despite the across-the-board fuss, the government treated HI cautiously due to its all-around Islamist backing. Sheikh Hasina's regime operated a dual strategy—comprising repression through security sentry and harassment with negotiation and dialogue to avoid escalation. This soft practice led to HI refraining from major protests in 2017 (Mustafa, 2013; Lorch, 2019, pp. 5, 14).

However, this paper has focused on several case studies of religious extremism in Bangladesh. In September 2014, Abdul Latif Siddiqui (Ex-Minister and MP of the Awami League government) was broadly criticized for his comments about the Muslim pilgrimage, the Hajj, and the Islamic affiliation, the Tabligh Jamaat. In response, HI called for protests, appealing his public exemplary punishment, tagging him an "enemy of Islam" as well as calling for Siddiqui's retribution as a religious duty by General Secretary Junayed Babunagari (Ruud, 2019, pp. 112–113). Following widespread protests and episodes of violent unrest, Siddiqui was forcibly removed from office, highlighting HI's formidable capacity to mobilize mass support and demonstrating its entrenched extremist influence and coercive power. Moreover, HI condemned the national education curriculum for allegedly promoting atheism and Hindu theological perspectives, intensifying its campaign by demanding the removal of 17 secular academic texts authored by non-Muslim scholars (BDnews24, 2017). In 2017, prior to the national elections, the government subdued HI by admitting the Dawra-e-Hadith (a Qawmi madrasah degree) as analogous to a Master's phase, despite condemnation from secular rings and civil communities (Nag, 2020). Besides, HI ushered protests and strikes threatening the dumping of the Lady Justice statue from the Supreme Court, noting Islamic proscriptions on metaphorical art. The government eventually dragged the statue, and HI leaders forewarned against any installation of any future public sculptures (Barry & Manik, 2017; Islam, 2017). Government acquiescence to Islamist ultimate, such as acknowledging Qawmi grades and extracting statues, emboldened extremist masses like HI, coaching to boost drudgeries to drive for an extreme Islamic Bangladesh (Economist, 2017; Nag, 2020). Tensions intensified in late 2020 over the edifice of a Bangabandhu sculpture in Dhaka's Dholaipar area, with hardline leaders like Maulana Mamunul Haque and IAB's Syed Fazlul Karim terrorizing its disposal. Fierce rhetoric and marches ensued, including the trashing of a parallel statue in Rajshahi. Nevertheless, communalism in Bengal, entrenched in historical socio-economic grudges, continues to be exploited by religious extremist factions for political gain (Das, 2014; Das, 1991). A notable benchmark emerged when HI loyalists attacked at least 75 Hindu dwellings in Sunamganj's Nagaon village over a Facebook post criticizing HI leader Mamunul Haque. The violence followed a recent HI rally where leaders delivered incendiary remarks. The incident illustrated how HI deliberately fuels communal unrest to

assert dominance and expand influence, often using minor provocations as justification for sweeping acts of aggression (Daily Star, 2021).

Furthermore, HI, though proclaiming to be apolitical, has invariably displayed political rationales cloaked in religious grandiloquence. A critical illustration of this was HI's tremendous anti-France demonstration in Dhaka, triggered by French President Macron's shield of cartoons portraying Prophet Muhammad following the murder of teacher Samuel Paty. HI pressed the Bangladeshi administration to sever diplomatic connections with France within twenty-four hours, showcasing its power to mobilize mass marches on global matters (Paul, 2020). Despite France's constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression, HI's response accentuates its extremist standpoint and intent to meddle in sovereign affairs under the camouflage of sacred sensitivity. HI directed fierce anti-Modi marches during the golden jubilee celebrations of Bangladesh in March 2021, clashing with security forces in Dhaka, Chattogram, and Brahmanbaria. Protesters charged Indian PM Narendra Modi with anti-Muslim acts and reprimanded his invitation to Bangladesh. The demonstrations resulted in at least ten casualties and overall vandalism of cultural and government establishments, including the historic Allauddin Music Academy. HI declared a nationwide hartal (shutdown), during which its leaders, including Mamunul Haque, issued incendiary speeches calling for a Bangladesh aligned with HI's religious ideology. These acts reflect HI's increasing religious extremism and its interference in Bangladesh's secular foreign policy, which has traditionally promoted "friendship to all, malice toward none" (Manik & Schmall, 2021; Ethirajan, 2021; WION, 2021).

Finally, the simplistic understandings of the discussed HI's emergence and its policies until the recent incident suggest that HI of Bangladesh was established in January 2010 as an Islamic fundamentalist organization to protest the "Women Development Policy." In that protestation, they primarily showed their stance through some conventional techniques of demonstration, which included rallies, statements, and several other techniques that could be illustrated as peaceful rather than violent or unconventional ways of protest. But in 2013, it emerged as an umbrella organization, which could be described as a close-knit alliance of a dozen or so Islamist groups that had banded together under one banner. However, it has been reported that the organization is apolitical, as most of its members have affiliations with other political parties. Under this alliance, they aim to achieve their political goals, which have already been demonstrated through their activities and policies. HI's leaders are using religion in a quite strategic manner to achieve certain political objectives. Following the assassination of young blogger Rajib Haider in February, HI exploded onto the scene and demanded 13 points. HI's supporters say since then, it has been working to "save Islam" in Bangladesh, but critics fear it will plunge the nation back into the dark ages. Yet, the events of May 5 and 6, 2013, marked a turning point, as HI lost its momentum and has since resorted to demonstrating force on the streets in pursuit of its objectives. On the *Shapla chatter* incident, HI showed atrocities, vandalism, and firing on the book shops and attracted the other groups who were tackling them through the "ready network" of HI, which has already been discussed. Following the government's overt compromises to HI on the previously stated textbook amendments, the Islamist group Khilafat Andolan, which shares membership with HI, initially sought to storm the *Ekushey* Book Fair. In response, government authorities

imposed the aforementioned constraints, the editor of *Sharia law Bitorko*. Following HI's protests in May 2017, "Lady Justice," a statue of a woman wearing a sari, sword, and scale, was removed from the Supreme Court grounds. The concessions granted by the government to HI emboldened them, and the madrasah's curriculum and the awarding of Dawra-e-Hadith certificates also contributed to HI's popularity and success among its followers. It also made them confident that the muscles' power on the street led to these events. As a result, this umbrella organization became very adamant about gaining its political as well as religious goals, which could be seen when wide-scale protests rocked Bangladesh because of the incident in France of Charlie Hebdo-related killings. Meanwhile, the HI Chief, Babunagari, has issued a four-point demand/ultimatum to the government, among them a significant is the "closure of the French Embassy in Dhaka and passage of a resolution in the Bangladesh parliament condemning France's anti-Islam acts" (Mukharji, 2020). Experts are concerned that HI would widen its demand for Bangladesh to lose its secular identity, and that anti-Modi sabotage, communal riots, and protests against the installation of the Bangabandhu sculpture are all examples of this radical character. Besides that, in the name of protecting Islam, HI carried out disruptive and violent activities across the country on March 25-26. The present leadership of HI misused the tender-hearted students and general teachers of the madrasah and used them to vandalize the portrait of Bangabandhu, and set fire to government offices-courts, land offices, police stations, electricity offices, children's schools, and private vehicles. On April 26, 2021 in a video clip Junaid Babungari, the Islamist extremist group's central Ameer (chief), disbanded the central committee. "HI's operations will begin in the future," he said, "through a convening committee." HI's central leaders have been detained in connection with the unrest that has erupted across the region. Over the instances of abuse, at least 77 cases have been filed against HI leaders and activists in various districts across the region. In these cases, over 69,000 individuals have been charged (Prothom Alo, 2021a). It's their revivalism trick, according to experts, and the group is following such an agenda and discussing a new convening committee since the majority of the executives are being arrested and resigning. This is, moreover, the stance of their current reorganization. Where the next generation of leaders will lead the charge in claiming a new look. There will be no improvement in policies or processes, and ultimately, extremism, to achieve their lofty aims. So, it could be said that primarily, the HI emerged as an Islamist fundamentalist group, but through its hardliner Islamist policy as well as political violence within a decade, it has become a religious extremist group in Bangladesh.

### **The Strategies of Mass People Infatuation**

Building on Talal Asad's argument that Islam constitutes a distinct historical totality organizing various aspects of social life—including belief systems and political conduct—it becomes evident that HI's religio-political stance is neither incidental nor separable from its broader ideological mission (Asad, 2009, pp. 2–3). Rather than existing as a purely spiritual movement, HI operates as an apolitically political entity whose agenda intricately weaves religious doctrine with strategic sociopolitical aspirations. This synthesis allows HI to tap into multiple layers of society, especially by appealing to communities historically marginalized in mainstream political discourse. In line with this, movement leaders within HI have strategically deployed emotionally charged religious narratives and symbolic references to

mobilize followers, particularly targeting students from Qawmi madrasahs and economically disadvantaged rural populations. These narratives often emphasize religious victimhood, threats to Islamic identity, and glorified depictions of martyrdom and resistance. Through such framing, HI effectively converts religious sentiment into political activism. Followers—many of whom are uneducated, low-income individuals from rural regions long ignored by the urban middle class (Bouissou, 2013)- are thus drawn into the movement not necessarily through an overt political lens but through a shared religious ethos. However, the emotionally infused narratives they internalize can transform otherwise peaceful demonstrations into volatile flashpoints, turning symbolic protests into arenas of potential escalation. HI's dominance over a vast network of Quranic schools further amplifies its influence, enabling it to cultivate a steady base of ideologically primed and action-ready supporters.

In this context, HI's mobilization strategies reflect a calculated use of religious emotion and symbolism to create a potent collective identity, fostering conditions under which ordinary adherents, often unwittingly, become instruments of an extremist agenda. HI has taken advantage of favorable circumstances to pull together a host of well-established political groups and organizations that have never worked together before (Bouissou, 2013). Although the overwhelming majority of protesters, especially from HI Fester's Dhaka, were teachers and students of *Qawmi* Madrasahs, controlled by HI leaders. Notably, Students depend heavily on and follow whatever they say on their religious teachings/leaders. Therefore, the Islamists would stand "like an army" if they had to go into the streets. Along with these students and the mass community who are mostly religiously cowardly feel stimulated when they hear the exaggerated religious stories of cultural aggression of pagans from these teachers. Together with those students and the masses that truly are religiously traditional, feel mostly true when they hear the teachers' exaggerated stories of polytheistic cultural aggression. Thus, the leaders, as well as the teachers of the *Qawmi* Madrasah, create a "cultural hegemony," where the followers consciously or unconsciously believe the stories and take the streets to protect Islam from alien cultures without any justification. As Gramsci argues, ways of thinking and knowing are essential for something to become hegemony (Al-Amin, 2021). Whereas the tradition of transcendence searches for philosophical "truth," Islam searches for "truth" by revelation (Evans, 2011, p. 1758). In this process, the HI leaders instigated propaganda against the foreign culture, which could reanimate the non-Islamic tradition, including sculpture installations, non-Islamic writer's textbooks, poems, and stories as well as the dress codes. HI even instigated that for Muslims, the celebration of *Mangal* procession culture in the name of Bengali New Year must be abandoned. It further propagated that they will be atheists if one wishes goodness and happiness to the gods of animals and wild animals in this *Mangal* procession. Besides, HI demanded that the Department of Education withdraw its directive to organize a *Mangal* procession in *Pahela Boishakh* from all government schools and colleges nationwide. Apart from this, not only did it promote women's leadership as haram in Islam, but it also propagated combined working outside the home women with men as adultery. Even in this modern age, HI emphasizes more on women's veils as well as in cases of rape or indecency, they blame the dresses of the women, not the evil eyes of the men. In a sermon ex-chief, Shafi said "you women should stay within the four walls of your houses. Sitting inside your husband's home you should take

care of your husband's furniture and rise your children, your male kids. These are your jobs. Why do you have to go outside?" He contrasted women to tamarind, a fruit that any guy would like to try, and made lewd comments in an unabashed use of obscene words (Manik, 2013). Furthermore, there is an allegation against this organization for instigating hatred against the other religious believers and even one point of its 13 points demands ("foreign conspiracy to separate the Chittagong Hill Tracts from Bangladesh and make it is Christian state") also indicates that instigation. Thus, the common mass and the followers without any justification took this propagation as a non-Islamic one and they took to the streets for the protection of Islam. In this discussion, the focus will be on the mechanism of infatuation of the followers, which HI leaders imply.

### **Sermon**

A sermon indicates a long discussion where someone tells others about how to act to be a better devout person in a religious way; in Bangladesh, there are several types of sermon-like *Fatwa* and *Waz Mahfil*, but among the theorists, there is a huge controversy about these two types of mechanism for delivering spiritual Islamic lecture would be illustrated as a sermon or not. However, we are not going to solve this controversy, but we would like to describe them as a sermon in this discussion. Theoretically, the sermon is delivered in front of an audience. It's a performance piece. The preacher's goal in this sermon, though, is to talk of God and to address the congregation with God's Word. In a dialogical relationship, the preacher and the audience are closely linked (Pieterse, 2010, p. 115). In Bangladesh, "extremists often exploit religious spaces to recruit and spread their radical ideas" (Bashar, 2017, p. 19), and in this process, sermon or Fatwa or Waz Mahfil played a vital role in recruiting the followers as well as motivated them in the way of Islam. Furthermore, in keeping with popular culture, which glorifies death and the afterlife, they cast a magical spell on their viewers, often instilling fear of hell (Rahman, 2018, p. 12). In the name of Islam, HI leaders have instigated political agendas and HI's own agenda, which are common among senior and junior leaders of HI, particularly for emerging leaders like Mamunul Haque and others who seek to implement their political agendas. In a sermon in Gazipur Kaliakair, Mamunul Haque inspired the followers with warning, and he preached several issues that do not support peace rather than extremism;

*"On November 2, the Tawhidi crowd of the Prophet's lover, HI, led by Qaed Millat Allama Junaid Babu Nagri, hoisted the flag of the Prophet's honor and raised it all over the world as the Royal Bengal Tiger... I would like to predict that Europe is not far away that day, the flag of Qalimah will fly in the streets of your kingdom and the streets of Ally, Inshallah... Macro, I am warning you, you will be family less and it will become extinct, your France will fall apart."*

Audiences and followers were cheering with "Allahu Akbar." He again told the audience, "I have served my guru (Religious Teacher) for 22 years. Now my students are ready to grab my shoes. You see the wind blowing from afar. Attack me and see that they are ready to give life." The followers again were cheering by saying, "Naraye Taqbeer, Allahu Akbar." He further added to motivate the followers to say that "my previous generation liberated this land in the hope that the next generation of this country will not be atheists. It is not because the

Christian missionaries will buy the next generation of this country with money, but because of the open space for the next generation of this country to shout in the name of Allah." This time, followers again were cheering very loudly to say "Naraye Taqbeer, Allahu Akbar" (Jadid Media, 2021).

In another *Waz* HI leader, Mamunul Haque along with HI chief and Syed Faizul Karim showed their atrocities and threatened to demolish the sculpture of Bangabandhu. Excited Mamunul Haque said in that *Waz*, "If any idol of Bangabandhu is constructed anywhere, it will be demolished if we can afford it." After Mamunul, the same words were echoed in the speeches of Babu Nagri and Syed Faizul Karim. In the wake of this threatening statement, the under-constructed sculpture of Bangabandhu in Kushtia was smashed at night. During preliminary interrogation, arrested defendants that "they did so in the light of statements made by HI leaders including Mamunul" (BDnews24, 2020). For experts, this type of sermon or *Waz* isn't permitted in Islam and it's a sort of motivating the followers to be misled in the name of Islam. In another sermon ex-chief Ahmed Shafi opposed women's rights, education, and jobs in a society that celebrates women's equality and finds their inclusion a gateway to global growth. The 93-year-old principal of the Chittagong-based Hathazari Madrassah was seen counseling women very disrespectfully in a video clip of his sermon, which is now available on *Facebook* and *YouTube*. His indecent words towards women are being followed literally by the followers; because of this, Shafi's supporters threatened *Banglanews24.com* journalist Jakia Ahmed, while another party attacked *Ekushey* Television's Nadia Sharmeen. The two had traveled to *Shapla Chattar* to cover the protest. The Hefajat men told Nadia as they pounced on her with zeal: "Don't you know about our 13-point demand? Being a woman, why are you here? Just get out of here"(Manik, 2013). So, this is the ultimate effect of a sermon of the HI. They use the sermon to propagate hatred against the opposition and the women and most importantly it is a policy to motivate the common people who believe in the patriarchal system and followers as well.

### **Social Media**

The term "Islamic modernism" refers to reform projects aimed at reorganizing Muslims' lifeworlds and social institutions in conversation with those created by modernity. It also refers to activities whose primary objective would be to bring religious beliefs and practices within the conformity of Islam's core concepts by preventing and eliminating novelty and amortization, as well as the interference of "local tradition" (Osella & Osella, 2007, pp. 247–48). Interestingly, in the case of HI Islamic modernism has hardly been seen, where the followers and the think tank's beliefs remain like as middle age, but there is a crucial modernization that could be seen in the case of using modern technology like social media for instigating and propagating as well sharing their traditional customs. In this modern and frequently changing era, social networking like *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *YouTube* are more than just a contact medium; rather, it is a gathering place for people to socialize (Chowdhury, 2018, p. 474), most importantly these mediums are being used in spreading ideological social movements since its origin. The HI's latest trend movements are mostly street-based, where they can demonstrate their mass popularity and muscle strength. However, in cases of propagation, ideological viewpoints, goals, timetables, and target audiences, as well as

campaigns about the group's initiatives, are instigated through social media. On December 21, 2020, a *Facebook* page called *Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh* (in Bangla) was officially launched, which was inaugurated by Junaid Babungari following the Quran recitation. He stated in the video message that, "the current era of media, the era of saying nothing, the era of science and technology...HI has taken this initiative to spread the word of truth in this age of sedition. From now on, all the news of HI will be broadcast from this page, but the condition is that there is no anti-Islamic news or non-Islamic news that will be spread from here." Since then, every action and activity of HI and their leader's video voices have been spread on this page. From the time of its inception to the anti-Modi campaign, news of the detention of leaders and activists, as well as their release, was also demanded from here. Supporters were even called to join various rallies, demonstrations, and sabotages. The most important thing is that the number of followers exceeds a million, and each status and news post receives millions of likes and shares within minutes. Moreover, its followers comment on the pros and cons without distinguishing between truth and falsehood, but the number of comments against the opponents is not less at all. Besides, there are hundreds of anonymous videos in the name of the organization's leaders on *Facebook* and especially on *YouTube*, which mostly express quite violent sentiments than Islam, although this is not so for all of them.

### ***Da'wa***

*Da'wa* is commonly referred to as a call to Islam, in which Muslims invite non-Muslims to abandon their old convictions and convert to Islam (Ali, 2017, p. 35), but this is understanding. In a general sense, it is a Quranic term concerned specifically with God's call to the prophets and mankind to believe in the real religion, Islam. *Da'wa* simply means "call, request, petition, or summon. Tablighi Jamaat is the largest and most powerful of Bangladesh's existing *da'wa* movements" (Rahman, 2018, p. 7), though it has a relation with HI and in 2013 Tablighi Jamaat supported HI's demand (Siddiqi, 2018, p. 287), Interestingly, this *da'wa* trends could be seen among the HI's followers and leaders but in different formats. HI follows two types of *da'wa*; firstly they invite non-Muslims to receive Islam through conversion and abandon their common religious practice. On February 16, 2021, a *Facebook* post on the official page of HI shared news of this type of conversion, where they titled it: "Hindu families have converted to Islam at the hand of HI Junaid Babungari," the page further added detailed description with some images of the family members and the incident as well. There, they described that, "Alhamdulillah! Today, on Tuesday, February 16, 2021 after Asr in front of Darul Uloom Hathazari's Honorable Director of Education, HI's Amir Allama Junaid Babungari Hafizahullah, five members of a higher caste Brahmin family of the Hindu community, including parents, two sons, and a daughter, by reciting the holy Kalima, they have shunned Hinduism and taken refuge in the cool shade of Islam... May the Almighty Allah grant 'Jajaje Khayer' to all and give strength to all to participate in the *da'wa* of Islam. Amen" (Hefazat-e-Islam, 2021). Here, two key aspects are noteworthy: firstly, the campaign showcased their *da'wa* activities, motivating followers to participate, and additionally, it increased the number of members under the HI banner. HI, on the other hand, follows a different format of *da'wa* from Tablighi Jamaat, inviting people publicly under their banner to achieve their agenda. This sort of *da'wa* could be seen before their program, where

they called the Muslims by spreading leaflets and posters, announcing around the program area and the recent trends posted on social media. Thus, the HI created a plot and support base to take to the streets and implement their agenda.

### ***Qawmi Madrasahs***

Madrasahs (Islamic liturgical traditions) are an interesting component of Bangladesh's schooling institutions, with one out of every three students who attend it. There seem to be two sorts of madrasahs in the country: *Aliya* and *Qwami* (Rahman, 2018, p. 10). HI, the support base mainly belongs to *Qwami* madrasahs; these philosophical educational programs of the *Qawmi* madrasahs overwhelmingly take after the Islamic Deobandi demonstration. Furthermore, the Deobandis follow the Hanafi school of thought and subscribe to the doctrine of Taqlid (conformity to legal precedent). The term "tradition" of Talal Asad is much related to the Deobandis, and in explanation of this term, he said, "the variety traditional Islamic practices in different times, places, and populations indicates the different Islamic reasoning's that different social and historical conditions can or cannot sustain. The idea that traditions are essentially homogenous has a powerful intellectual appeal, but it is mistaken"(Asad, 1986, p. 16). In addition to reforming the traditional Deobandi formation, madrasah religious scholars have attempted to align the curriculum with current demands (Bano, 2014, p. 923). Although it attempted to modernize until 2017, it received no recognition from the government. The then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina reaffirmed on April 11, 2017 her contribution to the earlier acceptance of Dawrae Hadith certificates by *Qawmi* Madrasah Education Boards as comparable to a master's degree in Islamic Studies and Arabic (The Daily Star, 2017). According to a recent survey, Bangladesh had approximately 25,000 registered *Qawmi* madrasahs, with 200,000 teachers educating 4 million students. These organizations employ teachers at these madrasahs, and all students are mobilized to engage in street demonstrations and marches, which are already discussed in the previous section. Besides, the research found (Lorch, 2019, p. 13) that students at *Qawmi* madrasahs are extremely reliant on their religious educators and will do whatever they suggest. Moreover, the majority of madrasah students are financially disadvantaged or orphans. In this situation, their survival is dependent on the teachers' supervision of the *lillah boarding* or orphanage's feeding house. As a result, if the students do not join the campaign, the teacher threatens to stop feeding them, and this anxiety motivates them to do so. Furthermore, as students are admitted into the madrasah, their parents arrive to say, "The son is mine, but the flesh and bones are yours to make him a decent human." As a result, the teacher has the power to control these pupils. As a consequence, if the Islamists summoned them to the streets, they would be ready to fight like such an army. It predicted that a typical *Qawmi* madrasah could draw thousands of people into the streets and that the Islamists who headed these madrasahs had comprehensive social contacts. Due to these factors, HI has an effective platform, enabling it to rapidly rally its participants for protests, making it an important player in Bangladesh's street and power politics.

### ***Manhaji***

In terms of religious politics and extremism, those who seek to build a so-called caliphate by expressly calling for *jihad* are called *Manhaji*. Despite claiming to be a non-violent

organization, authorities confirmed to have discovered connections between HI and *Manhaji*. In a recent *Facebook* post, Mufti Harun Izhar, who has been accused of being a *Manhaji* chief leader, challenged HI's passive position in the current squabble over the sculpture problem- "What official message have we (Hifazat) been able to send to the nation in all these squabbling's? Can we be a saint by putting all the burdens on Amir's shoulders? That was the old way of doing it." Police had earlier arrested Harun Izhar for calling for jihad in a statement because he was attempting to create a so-called caliphate by promoting militant ideologies as before. He was the one who was attempting to take HI into extremism. Harun Izhar and an associate from Jamiatul Uloom Al Islamia Madrasah in Lalkhan Bazar, Chittagong, were arrested by Elite Force RAB on April 29, 2021. Moreover, security forces claimed that HI's violence, demonstrations, and strikes (March 26-27, 2021) during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit were "guidance" to extremists who have joined the group. Furthermore, authorities asserted, "Several Afghan returnees are among HI's *Manhaji* faction. They believe in extremism. This group was primarily responsible for HI's vandalism and aggression in the Chittagong district"(BDnews24, 2021). Former members of the outlawed rebel group *Harkatul Jihad* (Huji) are among the Afghan returnees. Authorities have verified a number of them, with the visionary intention of turning Bangladesh into a Jihadist state. The *Manhaji* extremist group of *Qawmi* Madrasahs is mainly pursuing its interests by propagating extremism under the banner of HI. Most interestingly, among all the organizations under HI, this *Manhaji* holds and nurtures such kinds of extremist views, which would not be irrational to illustrate them as a militant extremist group. It is worth mentioning that the discussed mechanisms of infatuation are not the only way they follow; however, HI also follows some other means of techniques for strengthening its support base and increasing its followers, which include TV talk shows, Activists' Meetings, weekly *Halkaye Jikir* (Softly Chanting the Name of Allah in Mosques) gatherings. However, these are not as influential as the previously discussed methods.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Existing research suggests that nonviolent movements can escalate into violence when the state intensifies its repressive actions against unarmed demonstrators, shifting the perceived balance of risk and benefit associated with peaceful protest. However, many of these studies neglect the movement's micro-level dynamics. This analysis addresses that gap by focusing on the micro-foundations of HI in Bangladesh, supported by empirical evidence. It reveals that individual agency is a key force behind social mobilization, with participants often drawing on emotionally charged religious symbols and narratives. The choices and behaviors of movement leaders and activists are thus instrumental in determining the direction and nature of the movement.

HI, from its origin, has been contended that it's an apolitical stakeholder believing in a purely nonviolent religious movement without political ambitions. It has been observed that those who allied under this banner, most of them either a central member of an Islamic political party or chiefs of an Islamic political party, or supporters of these Islamic political parties. Interestingly, leaders and their actions and activities already proved that they have political goals and they are doing politics under this banner, but not in open spheres. HI strategically

employs leadership figures who deliberately harness emotional attachment to mobilize support for political objectives despite its apolitical nature. When HI first emerged in 2010, it exerted pressure to overturn policies perceived as anti-Islamic through peaceful methods such as public speeches, rallies, and other forms of nonviolent protest. However, it also observed that the alliance mobilized an array of widespread dissents against the government's approaches to women's policy at first; however, it reached its pinnacle of popularity in 2013 when it stood up against the GJM and the "Islamophobic secular" bloggers. Indeed, during this period, HI eventually lost its flow of nonviolent protest and so-called long marches, and finally, it demanded 13 points implementations, which were unconstitutional as well, and if it had been implemented, the country would be in a Dark Age. May 5 and 6, 2013, were very remarkable because in that day's HI, in the name of the Dhaka siege, it carried out massive political violence, which included clashes with the opponents, fire in book shops, vandalized shops and banks in Motijheel *Shapla Chattar* and surrounding areas (Lutful, 2023), finally another point it demanded fall of the government; thus this Islamic organization became an extremist religious organization for implementing their controversial demands and after then government took action against them and cleared the violent area in an operation on May 6. Since then, the former Awami League government has maintained a symbiotic relationship with HI by enforcing several demands, including textbook changes, the relocation of a statue of 'Lady Justice' from the Supreme Court's front lawn, and the acknowledgment of the *Qawmi* Madrasah degree as equal to a Master's in Arabic studies. These forms of government concessions emboldened the HI to believe that any demand could be met by demonstrating muscle strength on the street as well as by extremism. However, following the anti-France demonstration issue, Bangabandhu's sculpture issue, and anti-Modi protests, HI displayed severe extremism, which led to political violence against the government. HI used a variety of unorthodox methods of agitation during that period, including communal riots, sabotage, arson, strife, and a deadly strike across the country. Several media outlets recorded ten deaths in the clash, as well as a large number of economic losses and the suffering of ordinary civilians. This form of anti-Modi protest was just an excuse, but it had political aims that they wanted to achieve. On either side, HI has a sizable loyal following, which includes millions of *Qawmi* Madrasah students and teachers, as well as common Islamic believers without any kind of political agenda. However, in their pursuit of religious dominance, HI's leaders captivate followers by strategically employing emotionally charged religious narratives and symbols. This approach effectively mobilizes supporters, whose involvement—whether intentional or not—can transform seemingly nonviolent actions into potential flashpoints for escalation. They employ various religious tools that evoke strong emotional responses, such as *Waz-Mahfil*, *Fatwa*, *Da'wa*, social media promotions, *Qawmi* Madrasahs, *Manhajii*, and a variety of other tactics such as TV talk shows, Activists' Meetings, and weekly *Halkaye Jikir* gatherings, but these strategies did not turn out as well as previous methods. HI used these tactics to campaign against rivals to achieve their predetermined aims in the name of the "Protectorate of Islam." When they learned dramatic religious tales of pagan cultural aggression, students and the general public, who are politically apathetic, accepted what these leaders said. The common mass heard the teachers' sensitive stories of polytheistic cultural violence; they, along with those students and the masses that are genuinely religiously orthodox, believed them to be mostly real. As a result, the leaders and teachers of

the *Qawmi* Madrasah created a cultural monopoly in which the adherents knowingly or unwittingly accepted the stories and took to the streets to defend Islam against foreign civilization and other religions without reason. Thus, HI mobilized the public and its student followers to take to the streets. Through the previously mentioned strategies, it incited hatred against its opponents and fostered the rise of extremist groups devoted to its cause. This ultimately led to political violence in Bangladesh rooted in religious extremism.

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