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ARTICLE



Re-Examining the Nexus between Madrasa Education and Politics in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the dynamics between madrasa education and party politics in Bangladesh using data gathered through in-depth field interviews with madrasa students and teachers, and it examines the nature of madrasas' political engagements, views and orientations. It argues against the conventional wisdom that madrasas in Bangladesh do not have political affiliations and, explicitly, do not organise activism with political parties. The survey supports the argument that the government Aliya madrasas are aligned with Bangladesh Jamaat-i-Islami politics, whereas the private Qaumi madrasas' political alignments vary depending on the strength of the political party in the area in which the madrasa is located and the madrasa's economic condition. However, Qaumi madrasas exhibit their political activism by controlling the 'true' meaning of Islam, by maintaining a monopoly of authority on Islam, and by mobilising for Bangladesh to become a Sharia-based Islamic state.

KEYWORDS

Bangladesh; madrasas; politics; Sharia; social Islamisation

Introduction

Extant studies on Islamic seminaries (madrasas) in Bangladesh have examined the linkage between madrasas and Islamist militancy, reforms of the madrasa system, the causes of the proliferation of madrasas since the 1980s, the social values of these institutions, the construction and reconstruction of their distinctive cultural identity, sources of funding, and the possible contribution of madrasas to the national economy.¹ However, none of this research looks at the nexus between madrasa education and politics in Bangladesh. This paper seeks to address this issue drawing on data gathered

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1. See Ali Riaz, *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh* (Lanham, MD/Boulder, CO/New York/Toronto: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004); Ali Riaz, *Faithful Education: Madrassahs in South Asia* (New Brunswick, NJ/London: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Ali Riaz, *Lived Islam and Islamism in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Prothoma, 2017); Humayun Kabir, 'Diversity and Homogeneity of Islamic Education: Colonial Legacy and State Policy towards Madrasas in Bangladesh', in *The Journal of Social Studies*, Vol. 120 (Oct.–Dec. 2008), pp. 1–24; Masooda Bano, 'Madrasa Reforms and Islamic Modernism in Bangladesh', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 48, no. 4 (2014), pp. 911–39; and Mohammad Niaz Asadullah and Nazmul Chaudhury, 'Religious Schools, Social Values, and Economic Attitudes: Evidence from Bangladesh', in *World Development*, Vol. 38, no. 2 (2013), pp. 205–17.

through in-depth field interviews with madrasa students and teachers in an attempt to understand the nature of madrasas' political engagements, views and orientations.

It is commonly perceived, but not academically established, that of the two categories of madrasas in Bangladesh, the government-supervised Aliya² and the privately-managed Qaumi,³ the former is engaged in political activities while the latter have remained apolitical and act only as socio-educational institutions. This paper challenges this conventional wisdom and argues that both categories of madrasas do have political inclinations, and that their students and teachers are engaged in activism, including being directly involved in party politics. The findings of the survey support the prevailing view that Aliya madrasas tend to have political associations with the Bangladesh Jamaat-i-Islami (BJI), the largest Islamist political party in the country. However, the data also reveals that students and teachers at Qaumi madrasas are affiliated with political parties too, both Islamist and others, though the specific choice of party depends on the strength of the party in the area in which the madrasa is located and the madrasa's economic condition. The primary means for political activism by the Qaumi madrasas are through controlling the 'true' meaning of Islam, insisting on a monopoly of authority over Islam, organising in favour of the establishment of a Sharia-based Islamic state, and through social Islamisation movements. By this I mean the collective efforts of madrasas to transform society in an 'Islamic' direction by facilitating piety and encouraging other 'Islamic' practices in everyday social life such as wearing Islamic dress, growing a beard, and celebrating important days of the Islamic calendar. They reject established local traditions and cultures and try to popularise an 'authentic' Islamic culture derived from the Middle East.

The paper considers the definition of politics expansively, as opposed to narrowly limiting it to an explicit association with political parties. Instead, group activism with political implications is considered political even without an explicit association with political parties. Mandaville's definition of political in the context of political Islam is relevant in this context as well. Mandaville is of the opinion that unless politics is defined in a broader manner, various social forces that play a significant political role in Muslim societies will remain unrecognised. He argues that all actors and activities involved in the establishment, maintenance or contestation of particular visions of public morality ('the good') and social order must be regarded as political.⁴ He rejects the definition of politics that sees it as a particular sort of political act where power is exercised from the top down via the institutional channels of government for the assurance of public good and the maintenance of social order. Instead, he argues that politics, public good and morality need to be understood from the bottom up.

The paper is divided into six sections. After introductory remarks, the second section highlights the extant literature on madrasa education in Bangladesh with a discussion of the historical legacy of the institutions' political engagements. The third section explains the methodology of the field study. The fourth section reports the findings, categorised into three sub-sections, namely a state ruled by Islamic law, multiplicity of

2. Aliya madrasas are established and patronised by the government; they are modelled after the Calcutta Madrasa, which was founded by the British colonial administration in 1780.

3. The Qaumi madrasas are privately managed and modelled after the Deoband Madrasa (Darul Uloom Deoband) of North India, which was founded in 1866.

4. See Peter Mandaville, *Global Political Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 6.

political beliefs, and students' political orientation. The fifth section analyses the results of the survey, and the final section summarises the arguments.

Madrasas and political activism: An overview

The political associations and activism of South Asian madrasas have long been debated, but it was only in the 1970s that madrasas featured as a subject of rigorous research.⁵ They began attracting substantial amounts of attention after 9/11, when Western policy-makers sought to find links between madrasas and the rise of transnational terrorist organisations, particularly Al Qa'eda. The escalation of religious extremism in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan was traced to the growth of the madrasa education system.⁶ While local and international media have singled out madrasas as a key to radical Islamisation in Pakistan and Bangladesh,⁷ more detailed studies have argued that the supposed linkage between madrasas and militancy is exaggerated.⁸ Bangladeshi madrasas in particular drew global attention in 2005 with the rise of Islamist militancy after the country experienced unprecedented simultaneous explosions of 450 homemade bombs around the country and a series of suicide attacks killing scores of local judges and lawyers.⁹

Ali Riaz's extensive study of South Asian madrasas demonstrates how political parties manipulate madrasas for electoral advantage, and indicates links between madrasa education and militancy,¹⁰ although other scholars claim that there is little evidence to corroborate the claim of a connection between Bangladeshi madrasas and radical politics or militancy.¹¹ Parents' choice of religious schooling in Bangladesh is popularly perceived as a response to poverty and lack of mainstream schooling alternatives,¹² but madrasas have not thrived just in poverty-stricken rural areas, they have also emerged

5. Barbara Metcalf, 'The Madrasa at Deoband: A Model for Religious Education in Modern India', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 12, no. 1 (1978), pp. 111–34.
6. Mumtaz Ahmad, 'Views from the Madrasa: Islamic Education in Bangladesh', in Matthew J. Nelson and Mumtaz Ahmad, *Islamic Education in Bangladesh and Pakistan: Trends in Tertiary Institutions*, NBR Project Report (2 April 2009) [<https://www.nbr.org/publication/islamic-education-in-bangladesh-and-pakistan-trends-in-tertiary-institutions/>, accessed 22 April 2020]; Eliza Griswold, 'The Next Islamist Revolution?', *The New York Times* (23 Jan. 2005) [<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/23/magazine/the-next-islamist-revolution.html>, accessed 5 Jan. 2018]; and Jessica Stern, 'Preparing for the War on Terrorism', *Current History*, Vol. 100, no. 649 (2001), pp. 642–50.
7. Mohammad Niaz Asadullah and Nazmul Chaudhury, 'To Madrasahs or Not to Madrasahs: The Question and Correlates of Enrolment in Islamic Schools in Bangladesh', in *International Journal of Educational Development*, Vol. 49, no. C (2016), pp. 55–69.
8. C. Christine Fair, *The Madrasa Challenge: Militancy and Religious Education in Pakistan* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2008); Peter Bergen and Swati Pandey, 'The Madrasa Myth', *The New York Times* (14 June 2005) [<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/14/opinion/the-madrassa-myth.html>, accessed 12 Jan. 2018]; and William Dalrymple, 'Inside the Madrasas', *The New York Review of Books* (1 Dec. 2005) [<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2005/12/01/inside-the-madrasas/>, accessed 13 Feb. 2018].
9. See '459 Bombs in 63 Districts in 30 Min', *The Daily Star* (18 Aug. 2005) [<http://archive.thedailystar.net/2005/08/18/d5081801011.htm>, accessed 15 Jan. 2018].
10. Riaz, *Faithful Education*.
11. Matthew J. Nelson and Mumtaz Ahmad, *Islamic Education in Bangladesh and Pakistan: Trends in Tertiary Institutions*, NBR Project Report (2 April 2009) [http://www.nbr.org/publications/specialreport/pdf/Preview/PR09_IslamEd.pdf, accessed 20 Dec. 2017].
12. Alexander Evans, 'Understanding Madrasahs: How Threatening Are They?', *Foreign Affairs* (1 Jan. 2006) [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/india/2006-01-01/understanding-madrasahs>, accessed 10 Jan. 2018]; Alexander Evans, 'Madrasah Education: Necessity or Rational Choice?', in *Harvard International Review*, Vol. 30, no. 3 (2008) [<http://hir.harvard.edu/global-education/madrasah-education/>, accessed 5 Jan. 2018]; and Abul Barakat, R. Ara, M. Taheruddin, F.M. Zahid and M. Badiuzzaman, *Political Economy of Madrasa Education in Bangladesh: Genesis, Growth and Impact* (Dhaka: Ramon Publishers, 2011).

in cities, even in upscale neighbourhoods where students from wealthy families enrol. C. Christine Fair has demonstrated that parents do not send their children to madrasas solely or mainly due to poverty because both madrasa and public school students come from families with similar economic profiles.¹³ Riaz has argued that parents' choice of Qaumi madrasas is primarily determined by their desire for religious education.¹⁴

Asadullah and Chaudhury's study on the social values of Aliya madrasa students found that madrasa students do not reject modernity entirely. Madrasa-schooled girls oppose military rule and favour democracy, although they simultaneously express a preference for Islamic rule.¹⁵ This study finds evidence that Aliya madrasa graduates nurture patriarchal values and favour sending boys for higher education rather than girls, they consider women to be better suited to raising children (as opposed to working outside the home), and they value the creation and maintenance of large families. The study also finds that the impact of government incentives on Aliya madrasas have been twofold: first, the incentives helped to transform a large number of traditional madrasas into reformed ones, and second, these reforms attracted female students into madrasas which changed the dynamics of madrasas from being an all boys' milieu to a significant number being co-educational.¹⁶

The two categories of madrasas in Bangladesh have a long history, so a review of their historical political affiliations and activism will be useful in understanding their contemporary political engagements.

Aliya madrasas

The first Aliya madrasa, established in 1780 under the patronage of the British colonial administration, was intended 'to conciliate the Mahomedans of Calcutta ... to qualify the sons of Mahomedan gentlemen for responsible and lucrative offices in the state and to produce competent officers for Courts of Justice to which students of the Madrassah on the production of certificates of qualification were to be drafted as vacancies occurred'.¹⁷ Indian Muslims were employed early in the British administration, but they lost their jobs when English replaced Persian (then the medium of madrasa education) in 1835.¹⁸ The Aliya madrasa system had to adopt English as a medium of learning and accept a reformed curriculum. Those madrasas which adopted the reforms were called new-scheme madrasas, whereas those that did not were known as old-scheme madrasas. The colonial administration removed the old-scheme madrasas from the government assistance programme. After Independence and Partition,

13. C. Christine Fair, 'The Enduring Madrasa Myth', in *Current History*, Vol. 111, no. 744 (2012), pp. 135–40.

14. Ali Riaz, 'Parental Choice of Qwami Madrassahs in Bangladesh', in S.S. Andaleeb, H.R. Khan and M. Ahmed (eds), *Education and National Development: Selected Papers from the 2008 and 2009 Conferences on Bangladesh at Harvard University* (Dhaka: The University Press Ltd, 2011).

15. Mohammad Niaz Asadullah and Nazmul Chaudhury, 'Religious Schools, Social Values, and Economic Attitudes: Evidence from Bangladesh', in *World Development*, Vol. 38, no. 2 (2010), pp. 205–17.

16. Mohammad Niaz Asadullah and Nazmul Chaudhury, 'Holy Alliances: Public Subsidies, Islamic High Schools, and Female Schooling in Bangladesh', in *Development Economics*, Vol. 17, no. 3 (2009), pp. 377–94.

17. Syed Nurullah and J.P. Naik, *A Students' History of Education in India (1800–1973)* (Poona: Modern Book Store, 1973), p. 30.

18. Riaz, *Faithful Education*.

the Aliya madrasas in Pakistan continued to receive government patronage; the system also continued after Bangladesh emerged as an independent country in 1971.

In Bangladesh, several reform attempts were initiated for Aliya madrasas. The Ziaur Rahman regime (1977–81) integrated madrasas into mainstream secular education. The establishment of a separate directorate within the education ministry in 1977 and the establishment of the Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board in 1978 were key steps in mainstreaming madrasas. The Ershad regime (1982–90) kept previous policies unchanged, and subsequent governments followed suit. The mainstreaming of Aliya madrasas as a part of major reform ensured the implementation of a modern curriculum in the system, which has been strongly applauded, and analysts have argued that the reform can be replicated in other contexts.¹⁹

The Bangladesh Jamaat-i-Islami (BJI) political party established its dominance over Aliya madrasas in the late 1970s by setting up new institutions and enlisting supporters from them into its student organisation, the Islami Chattra Shibir (ICS), so increasing its support base. The party also established a national organisation of teachers in Aliya madrasas to spread its influence.²⁰ Masooda Bano's study, which draws on extensive fieldwork and which originally sought to look at the impact of the reform of Aliya madrasas, found that the BJI has supported Aliya madrasas, not Qaumi madrasas.²¹ However, she does not elaborate on the nature of the political engagement of Aliya madrasas in the country. According to Riaz, when the BJI was banned in the early 1970s, it used the Aliya madrasas to organise its support base.²² Moreover the removal of the constitutional provision banning religion-based political parties helped the BJI to emerge as an organised force within the Aliya madrasas.

The BJI has been able to maintain links with the Aliya madrasas by cultivating networks with the teachers there.²³ The party has been at the forefront of initiatives to secure the recognition of madrasa degrees, and to ensure equivalence between the madrasa and the general secular education systems. The educational structure of the Aliya madrasas is best suited to the ideology and world-view of the BJI because it underscores the necessity of having knowledge of both *deen* (religion) and *duniya* (the world), and views these two as complementary; as well, support for the Aliya madrasas fits well with the underlying philosophy of the BJI.²⁴ The party does not believe in studying Islam only for the sake of becoming an imam or religious teacher. Moulana Maududi, the founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami, was keen to attract to the organisation educated, middle-class professionals who would become prominent and influential in all professions, most importantly in the shaping of the state, and have a good understanding of Islam as well. As one BJI leader claimed: 'The person who comes out of the

19. Bano, 'Madrasa Reforms and Islamic Modernism in Bangladesh'; and Sanchita Bhattacharya, 'The Perspectives of Madrasa Education in Bangladesh', in *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 10, no. 1 (2006), pp. 224–34.

20. Humayun Kabir, 'Beyond Jamaat-e-Islami: The Political Rise of the Deobandis, the Mystic Leaders, and Islamism in Bangladesh', in I. Mattson, P. Nesbitt-Larking and N. Tahir (eds), *Religion and Representation: Islam and Democracy* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2015), pp. 50–78; and Riaz, *Faithful Education*.

21. Bano, 'Madrasa Reforms and Islamic Modernism in Bangladesh'.

22. Ali Riaz, 'Islamist Politics and Education', in A. Riaz and C.C. Fair (eds), *Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh* (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 115–35.

23. Bano, 'Madrasa Reforms and Islamic Modernism in Bangladesh'.

24. *Ibid.*

madrassah should be able to go to Oxford [University]. The question is that Islam does not forbid you from learning English, Mathematics, etc. Islam is a modern religion'.²⁵

Qaumi madrasas

The term Qaumi is derived from the notion of '*qaum*' (nation), and the Qaumi madrasa tradition emerged as the Muslim community in British India sought to regain its social, cultural and political dominance. This madrasa system began at Deoband (currently in Uttar Pradesh, India) in 1866. It derives from the nineteenth-century Islamic revival movement that came about in response to the Western-style education installed by the colonial administration.

'Deobandi Islam' and its 'traditionalist Islamic activism'²⁶ are one of many Islamic revivalist-reform movements that have had a pervasive influence, both practically and ideologically, on Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. The Deobandi interpretation of Islam has many things in common with the ideas of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624) and Shah Waliullah (1703–62) who strove to eliminate all practices in the Muslim community that did not conform to the Prophetic role model or the Sunnah.²⁷ The Deoband school was also at the forefront of the pan-Islamic movement, particularly the Deobandi clerics Mahmud al-Hasan, Husain Madani and Ubaidullah Sindhi, who took the seminary in the direction of transnational political activism. The most radical pan-Islamic scheme instrumentalised by the three became famous as the 'silk letter conspiracy' of 1914–16.²⁸

The Deobandi *ulema* (Islamic scholars) also propagated their pan-Islamic outlook from the rostrum of the Association of Religious Scholars (Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind, or JUH), co-founded by them in 1919 and later virtually appropriated by the Deobandi school. Dietrich Reetz argues that because the JUH saw itself as the reformist advance guard of the Muslim world, it sought to bring about such a system through consultations between Muslim leaders from various countries.²⁹ During Partition, it provided moral and spiritual guidance for Muslims and was a pragmatic promoter of 'composite nationalism', denouncing the idea of a separate nation-state based on religious community. The JUH favoured a non-territorial solution to Partition based on religious rights and it opposed the creation of the separate state of Pakistan. It evolved into a regular political party shortly before Independence and participated in elections, but without much success.

Because the JUH could not help solve the political conflict between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, it was sidelined at Partition.³⁰

25. *Ibid.*, p. 930.

26. Barbara Metcalf, *Traditionalist Islamic Activism: Deoband, Tablighis, and Talibs* (Leiden: Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World, 2002), p. 3.

27. Sana Haroon, 'The Rise of Deobandi Islam in the North-West Frontier Province and Its Implication in Colonial India and Pakistan, 1914–1996', in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 18, no. 1 (2008), pp. 47–70.

28. Dietrich Reetz, 'The Deoband Universe: What Makes a Transcultural and Transnational Educational Movement of Islam?', in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 27, no. 1 (2007), pp. 139–59; and Faridah Zaman, 'Revolutionary History and the Post-Colonial Muslim: Re-Writing the "Silk Letters Conspiracy" of 1916', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 39, no. 3 (2016), pp. 626–43.

29. Reetz, 'The Deoband Universe'.

30. *Ibid.*

Consequently, the nationalist-secular political leadership assumed that the role of the Deobandi *ulema* would be confined to the sphere of private religious practice rather than politics or the public arena. Having withdrawn from political affiliations, the Deobandi *ulema* concentrated on facilitating true Islamic education and cultivating Islamic social norms.³¹ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, however, challenges this assumption: he argues that not only has the scholarly class been impacted by modern socio-political conditions, it has also been too engaged with the contemporary challenges of colonialism and post-colonial nation-building through focusing on public and political participation.³² Zaman's work shows that along with modernist Islam and Islamism, there is a third force in the contemporary Muslim religio-political milieu—the traditionally trained *ulema*. He demonstrates how the *ulema* have used all the tools of their trade—ranging from *fatwas* (legal opinions) to scholarly literature to educational reform—to assert the validity of this tradition and their role as its gatekeepers in a way that is politically effective and socially persuasive.³³ Zaman has concentrated on the juridico-political aspects of the Deobandi *ulema* in establishing their authority over Islam.

In Bengal, the role of the *ulema* and the movements they led had an impact on Bengali Muslims for whom Islam was embodied 'in a syncretistic frame of reference'.³⁴ Among these movements were the Faraizi movement of Hazi Shariat Ullah and the Taiyuniya movement led by Karamat Ali Jaunpuri, a derivation of the Tariqah-i Muhammadiyyah movement of Sayyid Ahmad Bareilwi of North India. Although these movements had internal differences, all wanted to remove all the non-Islamic accretions, innovations and 'Hinduized' customs practised by Muslims.³⁵ They tried to establish Islamised societies in Bengal ruled by Sharia. The cumulative effect of all these reform movements was the opening up of a chasm between the 'Bengali' and 'Islamic' identities of Bengal's Muslims.³⁶ The movements were trying to find a way to sustain the Muslim community at a time when it no longer had state power, faced the challenges of Westernisation, and felt socially threatened by a thriving Hindu society.³⁷

The Deobandi movement arrived in Bengal in the late nineteenth century and became visible through the establishment of Qaumi madrasas in Chittagong in the southern part of current-day Bangladesh. The madrasas remained outside government control, not receiving any government assistance, but they were not isolated from the social sphere. Through private donations, they were able to maintain their own brand of Islam and gradually generate their own identity. Humayun Kabir's research argues that because they have been influenced by the revivalist Islam of Deoband, Qaumi madrasas are involved in the implications of 'authentic' Islam, which could lead to the

31. Ali Riaz, 'Madrasah Education in Pre-Colonial and Colonial South Asia', in *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 46, no. 1 (2010), pp. 69–86.

32. Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

33. *Ibid.*

34. Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Dhaka: Academic Publishers, 1983), p. 7.

35. Sufia M. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity, and Language in an Islamic Nation* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006); and U.A.B. Razia Akter Banu, *Islam in Bangladesh* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992).

36. Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*.

37. Francis Robinson, *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 218.

‘othering’ of various Islamic denominations that they consider ‘inauthentic’.³⁸ Kabir further asserts that madrasas in Bangladesh are involved in the construction of a particular Islamic identity via the propagation and interpretation of specific Islamic tenets and concepts.³⁹ This Islamic identity contrasts with many local understandings and practices of Islam.

Although Qaumi madrasas were first established in Chittagong, they quickly spread across the country. At present, the number of Qaumi madrasas is around 14,000 and they educate about 1.4 million students.⁴⁰ In the early days of Bangladeshi independence, the ulema of the Qaumi madrasas were not politically active. They had played almost no role in the Bengali nationalist movement; and only a few *ulema* had opposed Bengali nationalism until the emergence of Bangladesh.⁴¹ However, the Islamisation projects of post-1975 Bangladeshi governments, remittances and aid from Middle Eastern countries, and the role of Islamic non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have helped them thrive.⁴² As they emerged as an organised group in the country and were able to establish networks among themselves, the Qaumi madrasas gradually enhanced their political engagements as well.

Maulana Muhammad Habibullah Hafezzi Huzur, a noted Deoband-educated *alim* (learned person) and a Qaumi teacher, became an important political actor in the early 1980s. He contested the country’s presidential election in 1981, securing third place, and later founded an Islamic political party, the Bangladesh Khilafat Andolon (Bangladesh Caliphate Movement).⁴³ Subsequently other political parties based on Qaumi madrasas stepped into the political arena and, in 1990, the Islami Oikya Jote (Islamic United Front, or IOJ), a coalition of seven factions of Qaumi-based Islamist parties, evolved into one of the alternative forces of Islamism outside the dominant BJI politics.⁴⁴

Qaumi madrasa-based political activism became visible after the 1990s. *Shalish* (informal adjudication) and *fatwas*, issued primarily by the Qaumi madrasa-based *ulema* and backed by other Islamists, became a concern because they engendered violence. The *fatwas* and *shalish* did not remain limited only to Islamic legal aspects, but instead emerged as a tool of social control and protest against anything considered ‘violently anti-Islamic’. Riaz points out that the transformation of *fatwas* from a tool to control the ‘immoral’ behaviour of an individual into an apparatus to battle organisations and implement an ideology became clearly noticeable in late 1993, when several local clerics in the northern districts of the country initiated a campaign against NGOs

38. Humayun Kabir, ‘Replicating the Deobandi Model of Schooling: The Case of a Quomi Madrasa in a District Town of Bangladesh’, in *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 17, no. 4 (2009), pp. 415–28.

39. *Ibid.*

40. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS) 2015, the number of Qaumi madrasas was 13,902. See Mustak Ahmed, ‘1.4m Students Study in 14,000 Qawmi Madrasas’, *Prothom Alo* (24 May 2015) [<http://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/news/67081/14-lakh-students-study-in-14-000-Qaumi-madrasas>, accessed 12 May 2018]. Beyond the registered madrasas, there are thousands of unregistered Qaumi madrasas in different parts of the country. Abul Barkat’s research claims that the number of Qaumi madrasas was 39,612 in 2011. See ‘Why are Madrasas Mushrooming?’, *Dhaka Tribune* (16 Jan. 2018) [<http://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/special/2018/01/16/why-are-madrasas-mushrooming/>, accessed 12 May 2018].

41. A. Riaz and C.C. Fair (eds), *Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh* (London/New York: Routledge, 2011).

42. Riaz, *Faithful Education*.

43. Kabir, ‘Beyond Jamaat-e-Islami’, pp. 60–3.

44. *Ibid.*

for their so-called anti-Islamic, anti-people and anti-state activities, and demanded that they be banned.⁴⁵ The Qaumi students of the Jamia Islamia Yunusia Madrassah in Brahmanbaria violently attacked NGOs several times, accusing them of engaging in un-Islamic activities. The secretary general of the IOJ, Fazlul Haque Amini, even called upon the public to kill on sight Qazi Faruque Ahmed, the chief of Proshika, a prominent NGO in Bangladesh.⁴⁶ In January 2001, a court verdict declared *fatwas* illegal; in retaliation, the Islamists, with the IOJ at the helm, launched a considerable number of violent demonstrations in the capital and elsewhere. The student wing of the Islamist alliance, the Islamic Constitution Movement, described those who died as martyrs of jihad and vowed: 'No power on earth can stop the Jihad for Islamic rule in this country'.⁴⁷ In addition, Islamists rallied against popular feminist author Taslima Nasrin for her alleged 'anti-Islamic' writings. An Islamist group based in Sylhet, a city north of Dhaka, issued a *fatwa* sentencing Nasrin to death and put a bounty of Tk.50,200 (approximately US\$1,250) on her head.⁴⁸ Riaz argues that the *ulema* became central to this battle because the subtext to the violence was to provide a model of society in which they would reign supreme as the custodians of the moral order, and in which their authority would thereby be legitimised because it derived from their 'knowledge' of 'Islamic tradition'. Recent examples of Qaumi *ulema* political activities are the 2008 Qaumi madrasa-based violent agitation against the National Women Development Policy (finally enacted in 2011),⁴⁹ the May 2013 mass demonstrations in which they presented their controversial thirteen demands,⁵⁰ asking the government to change secular textbook content,⁵¹ and the removal of a woman's statue personifying justice from the premises of the Supreme Court.⁵² They currently demonstrate their activism under their umbrella organisation, Hefazat-e-Islam (Protector of Islam), launched in

45. Riaz, *God Willing*.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Riaz, *Faithful Education*, p. 151.

48. Riaz, *God Willing*.

49. For details, see 'Bangladesh Islamists Protest Women's Inheritance Law', Reuters (11 April 2008) [<https://www.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-32988120080411>, accessed 12 Jan. 2018].

50. Under the banner of the Hefazat-e-Islam, Qaumi madrasa students and teachers demonstrated in a rally in Dhaka on 5 and 6 May 2013, when they brought the city to a standstill. They announced their thirteen-point list of demands, which included passing legislation in parliament to introduce the death sentence for defaming Islam, halting the activities of NGOs, and stopping the installation of sculptures at intersections, schools, colleges and universities across the country. See 'Hefajat Demands', *The Daily Star* (6 April 2013) [<http://www.thedailystar.net/news/hefajat-demands>, accessed 10 Jan. 2018]. To end the demonstration, government law enforcement agencies carried out a violent operation that left dozens dead. *The Telegraph* reported the death toll at 36, Human Rights Watch claimed it was around 50, and *The New York Times* reported it at 22. See David Bergman and Dean Nelson, '36 Killed in Dhaka as Islamic Militants Clash with Police', *The Telegraph* (6 May 2013) [<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/bangladesh/10039795/36-killed-in-Dhaka-as-Islamic-militants-clash-with-police.html>, accessed 10 Jan. 2018]; 'Bangladesh: Independent Body Should Investigate Protest Deaths', Human Rights Watch, 10 May 2013 [<https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/05/10/bangladesh-independent-body-should-investigate-protest-deaths>, accessed 10 Jan. 2018]; and Jim Yardley and Julfikar Ali Manik, 'Anti-Blasphemy Protests in Bangladesh Turn Violent', *The New York Times* (6 May 2013) [<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/07/world/asia/two-days-of-riots-in-bangladesh-turn-deadly.html>, accessed 10 Jan. 2018].

51. Ellen Barry and Julfikar Ali Manik, 'To Secular Bangladeshis, Textbook Changes Are a Harbinger', *The New York Times* (22 Jan. 2017) [<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/22/world/asia/bangladesh-textbooks-radical-islam.html>, accessed 12 Dec. 2017].

52. Julfikar Ali Manik and Ellen Barry, 'Statue of Woman Removed from Bangladesh's Supreme Court', *The New York Times* (26 May 2017) [<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/26/world/asia/bangladesh-statue-justice-supreme-court-islam.html>, accessed 12 Dec. 2017].

2010.⁵³ The organisation emerged as such a potent force that, in 2018, it successfully stopped Maulana Muhammad Saad Kandhlawi of India attending the Biswa Ijtema of the Tabligh-e-Jamaat, one of the largest gatherings of devout Muslims in the world, because of his anti-Qaumi madrasa statements. Afsan Chowdhury comments: ‘Hefazat took to the streets, caused a major traffic jam, confined Saad to a mosque and forced the Tabligh Jamaat leaders to cancel his sermon and leave Bangladesh’.⁵⁴

Some studies of madrasas in Bangladesh state that the Aliya madrasas are political, while scholars in general argue that Qaumi madrasas are apolitical because they are not associated with a specific political party.⁵⁵ However none of the studies examine the connection between madrasa education and politics in Bangladesh as a separate and rigorous research project—which is what the present research does. By interviewing madrasa students and teachers, the paper tries to understand the nature and processes of political orientation and activism in madrasas in Bangladesh.

Methodology

This study attempts to understand the relationship between madrasas and politics in Bangladesh by exploring madrasa students’ and teachers’ political views gathered through in-depth interviews.⁵⁶ Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were used to collect information regarding perceptions of issues related to politics. There were five structured questions and three open-ended questions. The enumerators then recorded the follow-up conversations. The structured questions were:

1. Do you think every citizen in the country should participate in politics?
2. Are you satisfied with the activities of the present political parties in Bangladesh?
3. Do you think Bangladesh should be an Islamic state?
4. Do you think Bangladesh should be ruled by Sharia?
5. Are you involved with any political party?

These structured questions were followed by three open-ended questions:

1. Why are the respondents involved with a particular political party?
2. How did they become associated with this party?
3. What activities do the political parties or their student wings hold at their institutions?

53. The Hefazat-e-Islam is a tightly-knit coalition of a dozen or so Islamist organisations that have come together under one umbrella. It has not sought power through traditional elections, but looks to use its street muscle to change Bangladesh’s traditional secular culture and politics through the imposition of what it believes are proper Islamic ways. The organisation calls itself a non-political pressure group. See Sabir Mustafa, ‘Hefazat-e-Islam: Islamist Coalition’, BBC News, 6 May 2013 [<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22424708>, accessed 12 Feb. 2018].

54. Afsan Chowdhury, ‘Round One to Hefazot as Tabligh Steps Back’, *South Asia Monitor* (15 Jan. 2018) [<https://southasianmonitor.com/2018/01/15/round-one-hefazot-tabligh-steps-back/>, accessed 12 May 2018].

55. Bano, ‘Madrasa Reforms and Islamic Modernism in Bangladesh’; and Ahmad, ‘Views from the Madrasa’.

56. Although interviews of both students of different educational levels and teachers were undertaken, we did not measure the correlation between educational level and political consciousness, instead measuring their political engagement in a holistic sense.

Our focus was on comprehending our respondents' political aspirations from individual points of view. The students interviewed were from different educational levels, from higher secondary to the Master's level. A total of 172 interviews were conducted between June and December 2016 in eleven madrasas. These institutions were located in Chittagong district, Gopalganj district (in the south-west) and Khulna division (in the south-western region).⁵⁷ Five of the madrasas were Qaumi and six were Aliya. The eleven institutions were Kattale Baitus Sharaf Madrassah, Jamia Ahmadia Sunnia, Jamia Islamia Potia and Jamia Darul Ulum Mainul Islam, all in Chittagong; Siddiqia Fazil Madrassah in Khulna; Chadkhali Qawmi Madrassah in Satkhira, Khulna; and Gohor Danga Madrassah, Court Masjid Madrassah, Gopalganj Aliya Madrassah, Gimadanga Fazil Madrassah and Gopalganj Model Mohila Madrassah, all in Gopalganj.⁵⁸

Respondents belonged to different education levels, gender groups, economic status and length of madrasa association, as shown in Table 1.

Findings

The findings of the structured questions are demonstrated in Table 2.

The findings from the data can be divided into three sections:

1. Whether the respondents perceive Bangladesh as a state ruled by Islamic laws and precepts;
2. Whether they support any specific political party; and
3. The ways in which the political views and ideologies of the madrasa students are shaped during the course of their education.

A state ruled by Islamic law?

Nearly 95 percent of the respondents of both Qaumi and Aliya madrasas want Bangladesh to be an Islamic state ruled by Sharia. These findings should not come as a

57. These madrasas were chosen from two parts of the country for the following reasons: Qaumi politics is largely dominated by a few select madrasas in Chittagong. Although south-western Bangladesh is largely dominated by madrasas that claim to be dominant in Islamist politics in the region, no relevant study has yet appeared that has been conducted on madrasas there. Apart from big quantitative data surveys such as that conducted by Asadullah and Choudhury in 2016, relevant interview-based, semi-structured or ethnographic studies were conducted mostly in Dhaka and Chittagong, such as by Bano (Dhaka and Chittagong, 2014) and Kabir (Brahmanbaria and Chittagong, 2009). Madrasas in Gopalganj were selected to see if their political orientation was influenced by the domination of particular political parties because the area is known for parliamentary seats always being won by a particular mainstream political party. The choice of these madrasas could also be seen as convenient because the researchers and interviewers live in these two parts of Bangladesh and hence are familiar with the local language and culture—it was assumed that they could easily approach and engage in informal discussions on political issues in these areas.

58. Among the madrasas chosen in Chittagong, Jamia Darul Ulum Mainul Islam and Jamia Islamia Potia are two of the leading Qaumi madrasas in Bangladesh and are known as centres of Qaumi politics, while Kattale Baitus Sharaf Madrassah and Jamia Ahmadia Sunnia are two of the leading Aliya madrasas in Chittagong. Siddiqia Fazil Madrassah, Koyra, Khulna, is the leading Aliya madrasa and claims it makes a significant contribution to BJI politics in the area. Chadkhali Qawmi Madrassah, Satkhira, is a significant institution that is assumed to make a contribution to the dominant local Islamist politics in Satkhira. Among the madrasas in Gopalganj, Gohor Danga Madrasa is historically significant and the largest madrasa in south-western Bangladesh. Gopalganj Model Mohila Madrassah is the first women's madrasa in Gopalganj. The other two madrasas in the area were selected from constituencies in which a particular political party's representatives had been elected in the past three elections.

Table 1. Characteristics of the interview respondents.

				<i>N</i>
Gender		<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	
		155	17	172
Period of association with madrasa	<i>>2 years</i>	<i>2–5 years</i>	<i><5 years</i>	
	10%	26%	64%	172
Economic class	<i>Lowest</i>	<i>Middle</i>	<i>Upper</i>	
	47%	38%	15%	172
Level of education	<i>Higher secondary</i>	<i>Undergraduate</i>	<i>Graduate</i>	<i>Teacher</i>
	8%	44%	12%	36%
				172

Note: The economic class division is in accordance with 'Politics, Governance and Middle-Income Aspirations: Realities and Challenges' (Dhaka: Power and Participation Research Centre and UNDP Bangladesh, 2016) [https://www.bd.undp.org/content/bangladesh/en/home/library/democratic_governance/politics-governance-and-middle-income-aspirations-reality-and-.html, accessed 1 May 2020], in which the lowest-class monthly average income is less than Tk.10,000 (US\$125), middle-class average income is between Tk.10,000 and Tk.25,000 (US\$125–312), and upper-class average income is more than Tk.25,000 (above US\$312).

Table 2. Political aspirations of madrasa respondents (students and teachers).

Questions	Answers						<i>N</i>
Do you think every citizen in the country should participate in politics?	Yes		No		No comment		
	Qaumi	Aliya	Qaumi	Aliya	Qaumi	Aliya	
	53%	69%	33%	16%	14%	15%	172
Are you satisfied with the activities of the present political parties in Bangladesh?	10%		80%		10%		172
Do you think Bangladesh should be an Islamic state?	95%		2%		3%		172
Do you think Bangladesh should be ruled by Sharia?	83%		5%		12%		172
Are you involved with any political party?	AL	BNP	BJI	Other	No	No comment	
	10%	3%	15%	1%	14%	57%	172

Note: AL: Awami League; BNP: Bangladesh Nationalist Party; BJI: Bangladesh Jamaat-i-Islami. The Awami League was the incumbent party during data gathering.

surprise because the respondents are students of Islamic seminaries. In response to the question why they prefer an Islamic state, the respondents offered no single justification but, rather, a variety of reasons. About 60 percent of them indicated that Islam is a religion of peace, reflecting the idea that only a state ruled by Islamic law can be prosperous and free from violence and corruption, which was cited as the most prominent reason for the desire for an Islamic state.⁵⁹

Many of the respondents from the Aliya madrasas claimed that Islamists are not corrupt; they cited the example of the anti-corruption drive of the caretaker government between 2007 and 2008,⁶⁰ when leaders of both the ruling Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) were arrested and tried for corruption.

59. We asked several more questions following the question about political affiliation. We particularly asked why respondents answered 'Yes' or 'No' or remained reluctant to make comments about their political affiliations. We found that their arguments for an Islamic state were derived from the fact that they perceive Islam as a peaceful religion.

60. The interim government, known in Bangladesh as the Caretaker Government (the CTG system was abolished in 2011), initiated a massive drive in 2007 against corruption in which hundreds of people, including two former

Leaders of the BJI, the largest Islamist party and members of the ruling coalition, were not accused of any wrongdoing. The respondents argued that Islam was the only solution to the crisis that the country faced currently. Some respondents also commented that human rights, democracy and respect for women are intrinsic to Islam. Consequently, a state with true Islamic laws and norms would be the best system of governance.

Evidently, the end goal of both madrasas is similar: establishing an Islamic state in Bangladesh or, in other words, transforming the state into an Islamic state. But there were differences regarding the ideal disposition of an Islamic state and how to achieve this goal. Aliya madrasa students believed that an Islamic state could not be established unless they actively participated in politics. Participation in a democratic political system could help them gradually advance towards their goal. They said that without controlling state power, it would be impossible to establish an Islamic state governed by Sharia. Their strategy, it appears, is Islamisation from above by working through the state.

In contrast, Qaumi madrasa students insisted that in order to establish an Islamic state, society must be Islamised first. Therefore, their strategy remains social Islamisation. They argued that as a prerequisite to establishing an Islamic state, societies need to be governed in accordance with Islamic values and norms. Their comments indicate that once society is Islamised, they would shift their focus to seizing state power. These comments reflect statements from Maulana Moinuddin Ruhi, the central secretary of the Hefazat-e-Islam, who stated: 'Hefazat wants Bangladesh to be ruled by Islamic laws. Right now, Bangladesh is a Muslim state, not an Islamic state. The country will be an Islamic state only by the implementation of Sharia. For that, an Islamic party should be in state power'.⁶¹ He continued: 'Hefazat will not participate in the upcoming election directly, but the organisation is thinking of championing candidates who are pro-Hefazat ideology among the existing political parties'. Respondents also emphasised that Islamist groups with diverse political views and adherents of different *madhhabs/maslaks* (Islamic jurisprudence) within the Muslim community need to be united for an Islamic state to be established. Mufti Tofael Ahmed of the Chadkhali Qwami Madrassah clarified the argument: 'If Islamists of different views can be brought together in a position of dialogue and discussion in one platform, [an] Islamic state can easily be established'.⁶²

However, Qaumi madrasas' activism is not limited to social Islamisation. The interviewees also opined that they have a responsibility to monitor political activities and ensure that the state does not adopt anti-Islamic laws. Hefazat-e-Islam has expressed concerns about and objected to the adoption of laws perceived to be anti-Islamic and

prime ministers, were arrested. For details, see C. Knox, 'Building Trust Amidst Corruption in Bangladesh', in *The Round Table*, Vol. 98, no. 403 (2009), pp. 449–59.

61. See Harun ur Rashid Swapan, 'Hifazat's Dream of Establishing Islamic State' (Bangla), DW.com, 15 April 2013 [<http://www.dw.com/bn/%E0%A6%B9%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%AB%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%A4%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%B8%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%AA%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%A8-%E0%A6%87%E0%A6%B8%E0%A6%B2%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%BF-%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B7%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%9F%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%BE%E0%A7%9F%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%AE/a-16744193>, accessed 2 Jan. 2018].

62. Interview with Mufti Tofael Ahmed, Chadkhali Qwami Madrassah, Satkhira, Khulna, 25 June 2016.

reprimanded anyone who has spoken or written against Islam. Respondents too insisted that it was their moral responsibility to compel the government to not pass any anti-Islamic legislation. If the government did not listen to them, they would rally against this *jaheliyya* (ignorance). Few respondents expressed a preference for radical change to replace the existing so-called secular government with an Islamic state. Nevertheless, some of them boasted: 'We [have] already demonstrated [to] the government what we can do in 2013'.⁶³ However, a teacher at the Qaumi madrasa, Jamia Darul Ulum Mainul Islam, was more circumspect:

Hefazat-e-Islam is a non-political organisation; it was established during the regime of the Caretaker government (2006–08) when we saw that the 'anti-Islamic' women [development] policy was going to pass in the parliament. Hefazat is an organisation with a vision to safeguard Islam; it is not affiliated with any existing political party in Bangladesh. Many accuse us of committing violence at Shapla Chattar, Dhaka, in 2013; it is a conspiracy against us, the peace-loving *ulema*. There is no solid evidence that madrasa students were engaged in violence.

Support for a specific political party

In response to the question of their involvement with political parties in Bangladesh, 57 percent of the interviewees did not disclose their political affiliation.⁶⁴ The majority of these respondents were from Qaumi madrasas. Their argument is that because formal party affiliation is not supported by Qaumi madrasas, if they were to disclose their political affiliations, it might damage their studentships or professional growth.

Among the respondents who stated their party affiliation, 90 percent belong to Aliya madrasas; 15 percent of total respondents said that they were involved with BJI politics. One of the fundamental motivations for their preference was that they consider the BJI to be the most trustworthy Islamist party in Bangladesh, and they argue that the BJI has maintained an unwavering ideological position for years. The Aliya madrasa students' support of Islamist politics occurs mostly through their engagement with the BJI. Their arguments in favour of political participation and their ideas on an Islamic state, discussed above, are akin to the political ideology of the BJI.⁶⁵ Some respondents drew parallels between the Prophet's plight during the early days of Islam and the BJI's current plight of being 'persecuted' by the ruling party. They claimed that the BJI was

63. They were talking about the Hefazat's mass demonstration of 5–6 May 2013: see footnote 50.

64. Despite the reluctance of around 57 percent of the respondents to reveal their political affiliations, it should not then be assumed that these 57 percent respondents do not have political affiliations. During fieldwork, it was observed that madrasa students and teachers feared revealing their political affiliations. Their apprehension mounted after the Shahbag protests and the rise of the Hefazat-e-Islam, and the subsequent killings of bloggers and the extremist attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery in July 2016, which led to thousands of madrasa students and teachers being arrested for alleged connection to the extremism and violence of 2013, and coincided with our fieldwork, from June to December 2016. So, although the respondents did not reveal their political identities while responding to our structured questions, we tried to elicit this information through our informal discussions, leading us to base our major argument on this question. For the scale of arrests after the Holey Artisan Bakery attack, see Sajeeb Wazed, 'Wave of Arrests Reveals Bangladesh Terror Threat Is Home-Grown', *The Diplomat* (28 June 2016) [<https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/wave-of-arrests-reveals-bangladesh-terror-threat-is-home-grown/>], accessed 15 April 2019].

65. Bano, 'Madrasa Reforms and Islamic Modernism in Bangladesh'.

being victimised because of its attempt to establish the 'true Islam'. Other reasons for their support included BJI supporters' strict adherence to the Islamic way of life, and the party's unceasing activism for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate.⁶⁶ Some respondents cited a verse from the Quran in support of their argument: 'All Muslims have been created with a responsibility of establishing the Caliphate'.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, not all Aliya madrasas subscribe to the BJI's politics. For example, discussions with students and teachers of the Kattale Baitus Sharaf Madrassah and the Jamia Ahmadia Sunnia Madrassah in Chittagong revealed that these two madrasas contain predominantly Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ) supporters and activists. Respondents from these madrasas claimed that both students and teachers openly propagated IOJ politics within these institutions, and used the mosque and the madrasa premises for political meetings and gatherings of the IOJ. The respondents claimed that the contents of lectures at these madrasas are sympathetic to the IOJ ideology, and that disagreement with that ideology results in harassment.

Qaumi madrasa students' political affiliations are more diverse. Although politics is officially proscribed by the madrasa authorities in many Qaumi madrasas, students do become involved with political parties. Interestingly, the widespread assumption that madrasas are affiliated with Islamist politics is not borne out by our field study. We found that the political affiliations of Qaumi madrasas depend on various factors rather than being exclusively determined by the religious credentials of a party. Some respondents from the Qaumi madrasas argued that their institutions are not affiliated to any political party; therefore, they themselves can be associated with any political party so long as it does not hold anti-Islamic views.

Qaumi students interpreted BJI politics in various ways. Some of them supported the party, while others believed that the party had problems with *aqida* (creed) because of its deviation from the 'actual tenets of Islam'. Nonetheless, there was unanimity among the respondents that the BJI's right to participate in politics should not be curtailed and that the party should not be proscribed by the government.⁶⁸ A respondent from the Jamia Darul Ulum Mainul Islam in Chittagong argued that banning a party for its use of Islam in politics was not justified because Islam was never apolitical. In the discussion on political Islam, a teacher from Jamia Islamia Potia in Chittagong, who also claimed to be a young writer and scholar, commented: 'It cannot be political Islam; it should be Islamic politics. It is not the case that Islam has suddenly become political but rather politics is inherent in Islam'.

Among other factors explaining the Qaumi madrasa students' various political affiliations, one of significance is the regional variation in political parties' dominance. Our interviews revealed that madrasas in Gopalganj are associated with the politics of the Awami League (AL) due to the area's overwhelming support for the party; both the present prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, and her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, often called the father of the nation, belong to Gopalganj. It was also revealed that though the largest Qaumi madrasa in the Gopalganj region, the Gohor Danga Madrassah, claims that it does

66. A caliphate is an area under the territorial jurisdiction of a caliph or an area with an Islamic steward known as a caliph. The rule of the four immediate successors of the Prophet Muhammad is considered the Caliphate.

67. The respondents cited two verses, Surah Hajj, verse 41, and Surah Nuh, verse 55.

68. We asked the question about the proscription of the BJI in order to understand the respondents' perceptions of the BJI because it is assumed that Aliya and Qaumi madrasa students have different views about the party.

not propagate any particular political ideology, some of its students asserted that it has affiliation with AL politics. A student at the madrasa claimed: ‘That is why [the] prime minister of Bangladesh accompanied Moulana Ruhul Amin, the director of the madrasa, as one of her visitors during her visit to UN General Assembly Meeting in 2014’.

Economic factors also influenced the Qaumi madrasas’ political affiliations. It is evident that the majority of madrasa graduates are employed in professions either related to mosques or teaching in madrasas. However, recruitment is not always through the *ulema*; in fact, it is dominated by the local political elites who patronise the madrasas. Our interviews found that the Qaumi madrasas’ political affiliations, especially those of the small madrasas, are influenced by local politics; the *ulema* have to comply with local politics for fear of losing their positions. A student from the Gimadanga Fazil Madrassah in Gopalganj stated that teachers in local Gopalganj madrasas had been fired because of their alignment with BJI politics. He claimed dejectedly that Qaumi madrasa teachers and students are often helpless because of their dependent economic position and that they thus must strategically conceal their political involvement.

Respondents’ political orientation

The BJI’s student wing, the Islami Chattra Shibir (ICS), has a dominant presence on the Aliya madrasa campuses and it has active organising committees in the large madrasas. The ICS often garners support from teachers and madrasa authorities while propagating BJI ideology, for which it also has its own mechanisms. It arranges weekly meetings on campuses during which students are invited to discuss their ideology and objectives. Our respondents described ICS activists as always attempting to influence the more academically gifted students, and that they assign senior ICS activists to indoctrinate potential members. In addition, the ICS seeks to significantly influence the Aliya madrasa students’ political orientation through its monthly publications and an extensive online library. As a senior ICS activist explained:

I was fascinated when I first read *Esho Alor Pothe (Come Towards the Light)* and the four volumes of *Sahoshi Manuser Golpo (The Stories of the Brave)* provided to me by one of our senior members. These books opened my eyes, and I started realising that all [the] mishaps in Bangladesh and the Muslim world (that) occur today are because of Muslims’ deviation from the true path of Islam. It became clear to me that just preaching Islam will not [be enough to] benefit us; we have to actively participate in Islamist politics to establish an Islamic state. Gradually, I have been introduced to different interpretations of [the] Quran, Hadiths, Islamic economics and so on. I better understand Islam and the world politics today, and I am indebted to my organisation (ICS) for that.

Moreover, respondents claimed that in some Aliya madrasas, lectures and courses are organised in a way that supports BJI ideology. Their teachers’ interpretations of the Quran and the Hadiths encourage students towards Islamist politics. However, the activities of other Islamist parties are also visible in some madrasas, but they were less visible than those of the ICS. The students’ political orientation is also shaped by mainstream media such as newspapers, magazines and television news. Social media, particularly Facebook, have become a major vehicle for propagating politicised messages about Islam, with the Facebook group Basher Kella (Bamboo Port) and YouTube

channels carrying Waz Mahfil (public preaching) videos as cases in point. Easy accessibility to these provides content and shapes the world-view of the students.

Unlike Aliya madrasas, the presence of political parties was found to be negligible in Qaumi madrasas because the madrasa authorities do not allow explicit political engagement by their students. These madrasas are residential and so offer very limited access to mainstream newspapers, television and social media. Because of their nature, students cannot be associated with political activities outside their madrasas. Therefore, their political ideology is largely shaped by the senior students and teachers with whom they interact. One respondent commented that the educational system was a kind of *guru vittik shikha* (learning directly from the sage) in which students' political ideology is primarily influenced by the teachers. Another interviewee from the Court Mosjid Madrassa in Gopalganj commented that this was also the reason for the Qaumi students' ideological unity and why the madrasas had absolute control over them.

Not apolitical at all

It is common wisdom that Aliya madrasas are aligned with the BJI and that only a small number of the Qaumi-educated are associated with the mainstream political parties, especially with the IOJ. This has resulted in many authors characterising Qaumi madrasas as largely apolitical. Some researchers have gone even further and declared Qaumi madrasas to be completely apolitical, overlooking the Qaumi madrasa-based political parties.⁶⁹ Our study of the Qaumi and Aliya madrasas in Bangladesh finds that both strands of madrasas are engaged in political activism. In short, Qaumi madrasas are political too.

Researchers of madrasa education in Bangladesh largely believe that whether a group is political or not is determined by its explicit affiliation with a political party. This is a narrow definition that excludes the social and economic dimensions of politics. Moreover these researchers are evaluating politics on a liberal democratic model,⁷⁰ and are not considering other models such as military or Islamic regimes that put stability or religious norms before liberty and democracy.⁷¹ In Islamic regimes, a government must often depend on the clergy's interpretation of political issues, such as in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In Bangladesh, too, the government needs to comply with the religious interpretations of the Qaumi *ulema*, albeit informally, because the Qaumi *ulema* have absolute authority over the interpretation of Islam in the country. (The Qaumi *ulema* did not accept the reform curriculum prescribed by earlier governments, whereas the Aliya *ulema* did, but as a result, the latter lost their authority over interpretation.)⁷²

Zaman rightly commented that in the South Asian context, the *ulema*, through their activities, have both retained authority over the intellectual tradition they represent and reframed their own authority as the best-qualified arbitrator of that tradition for today's Muslims.⁷³ In Bangladesh, the *ulema* have established absolute authority over

69. Ahmad, 'Views from the Madrasa'; and Bano, 'Madrasa Reforms and Islamic Modernism in Bangladesh'.

70. Andrew Heywood, *Political Theory: An Introduction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

71. Robert Garner, Peter Ferdinand and Stephanie Lawson, *Introduction to Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

72. Bano, 'Madrasa Reforms and Islamic Modernism in Bangladesh'.

73. Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*.

not only their own traditions, but over Islam in general.⁷⁴ The government, the BJI and other parties are not in a position to interpret and determine issues relating to Islam; governments seldom challenge the authority of the Qaumi *ulema* because they fear that the *ulema* will launch mass demonstrations as they have done effectively on several recent occasions. Governments therefore either remain silent or compromise by accepting some of the *ulema*'s demands. The authority of Islam or the demand for a Sharia-based state is not a private religious issue but a public one, nor is it limited to any particular region of the country. Instead it is part of a political agenda that is contrary to the fundamental founding principles of Bangladesh. A group that, along with other Islamists, has significantly contributed to the inclusion of Islam as the state religion in the country's otherwise secular constitution, has brought about changes in secular textbooks, and has succeeded in the removal of a statue personifying justice from the Supreme Court as well as other Islamisation projects, cannot merely be described as an apolitical social force. Hefazat-e-Islam's rise suggests that Qaumi madrasas, so far considered by the political elite as the abode of the poor and the neglected, have now developed into a potent political force.⁷⁵

Riaz argues that Hefazat-e-Islam's emergence and the attainment of its specific demands cannot be defined as an apolitical venture. He further argues that the organisations associated with Hefazat have long been affiliated with Islamist politics, and that Hefazat, in the larger political equation, supports certain political parties. Therefore Riaz defines Hefazat as an Islamist political organisation because the organisation does not see Islam just as a religion, but rather instrumentalises it for political gains.⁷⁶ While Riaz argues that the rise of Hefazat should be seen as a part of the Qaumi madrasas' long association with party politics since the 1980s, Afsan Chowdhury describes the organisation's rise as meteoric. He states: 'We have seen the birth of a new political force in Bangladesh called Hefazat-e-Islam. It didn't exist a couple of months back but from nowhere [it] has become a force that no one can ignore now'.⁷⁷ Heywood is correct when he argues that politics is a social activity—it involves the expression of differing opinions, competition between rival goals, or a clash of irreconcilable interests.⁷⁸

In addition, our fieldwork demonstrates that, similar to other Islamist political parties, the objective of the Qaumi madrasas is to establish an Islamic state, although their ways of achieving this objective vary. At present they stress social Islamisation, insist on their goal of safeguarding Islam from 'misinterpretation', and portray themselves as the custodians of Islam. However, they do not eschew the possibility of direct political association, though this does not necessarily mean that they will be affiliated with the existing Islamist parties. The Qaumi madrasas' political choices do not depend only on religion, but are significantly influenced by the relative local strengths of political

74. *Ibid.*

75. Martin Griffiths and Mubashar Hasan, 'Playing with Fire: Islamism and Politics in Bangladesh', in *Asian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 23, no. 2 (2015), pp. 226–41.

76. Voice of America, 'Hefazat Cannot Be Called a Non-Political Organization: Ali Riaz', Voabangla.com, 10 May 2013 [<https://www.voabangla.com/a/hefazat-a-part-of-political-party-riaz-interview-8-may-2013/1657298.html>], accessed 10 Jan. 2018].

77. Chowdhury, 'Round One to Hefazot as Tabligh Steps Back'.

78. Heywood, *Political Theory*.

parties—the affiliation of the Gopalganj Aliya Madrassah with the Awami League illustrates this. Economic factors also influence their political options: because of the dependent economic position of people associated with the Qaumi madrasas, local political elites influence their political choices.

Conclusion

The relationship between madrasa education and politics in Bangladesh is complex. Madrasas are not apolitical but do in fact have political affiliations. Against the common assumption that Aliya madrasas are political while Qaumi madrasas are not, this paper argues that both strands of madrasas are political. Going beyond a narrow definition of politics in which existing studies claim that Qaumi madrasas are apolitical because of the absence of explicit associations with any particular political party, it argues that their authoritative monopoly over Islam and their activism in support of a Sharia-based Islamic state, as well as other social Islamisation movements, are political projects. Moreover, our fieldwork also found that Qaumi students and teachers have a strong interest in politics and that their political choices are diverse. Their political preferences are not completely determined by religious factors but depend on the strength of the dominant political party in the locality and on their own economic conditions. The political perceptions and views of Qaumi students are formed by their teachers and senior students of the institutions because of the students' limited access to other modes of political orientation.

On the other hand, this paper confirms that the students of Aliya madrasas have strong political inclinations towards the BJI's politics, although they have associations with other political parties too. The political orientation of Aliya students is dominated by the ICS' campus activism, its literature and other indoctrination processes. However, students have access to other modes of developing political orientation, particularly through social media. For both Aliya and Qaumi madrasas, the ultimate goal is to establish an Islamic state, but their means are different. While the former intend to attain it through active political participation in the democratic process, the latter intend to primarily use social Islamisation projects to establish their absolute authority over Islam.

The conclusions of this study are tentative because of certain limitations such as the small sample and the even smaller percentage of female respondents. Although respondents answered eloquently, the timing of the survey may have precluded them from being more forthright because during the period of the survey, the government's anti-militancy drive may have created some unease among the students and teachers of the madrasas. Yet these findings should serve as a first step towards conducting further empirical studies to encourage evidence-based dialogue on the nexus between madrasas and politics in Bangladesh.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).