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Identity, Conflict, and Social Movement Activism in Bangladesh's Nation-Building Politics

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Abstract

In the last half a century, the search for a Bangladeshi national identity has been driven and contested by different forces and political imageries. This paper looks at the interrelations between nation-building policies and social-movement activism. Since its independence in 1971, the country has been caught up in debates surrounding Bengali, Bangladeshi, and Muslim identities and activism in its nation-building process, leading to multiple exclusions along ethnic, religious, gender, and class lines. Identity formation in postcolonial society has mainly relied on constructing majority populations with shared commonalities, such as religion, language, heritage, or social traditions. We show how state initiatives in crafting a so-called natural identity and homogeneity in the name of nation-building have turned into counterproductive and politically profit-oriented projects, masking inequalities and persecution. We propose that achieving a sophisticated understanding of the nation-building process requires paying attention to the causes, outcomes, and influences of social and political movements. We also posit that nation-building is a protracted process of political integration that often remains unfinished, even decades after a nation has gained its independence.

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Introduction

"Nation-building" may be defined as the process through which the boundaries of the modern state and those of the national community become congruent (Mylonas 2012). It is often thought that nation-building constitutes a challenge wherever modernity has brought previously smaller, self-contained social units into closer contact with one another. In this context, political integration and national identification form two sides of the same coin: nation-building (Talentino 2004). To achieve political integration and national identity, states forge ties between citizens and the state that serve to integrate ethnic both minorities and majorities into an inclusive power arrangement. As part of this process, cultural pluralities are viewed anew in numerical terms and, as such, perceived as "minorities" and "majorities." Consequently, they are required to be pacified, contained, held, subjugated, or "transformed" through the symbolism of the majoritarian culture, which the state itself often articulates through its social and cultural policies (Sheth 1992). Yet nation" and "national identity" remain contentious topics and unattainable visions in many postcolonial countries, mainly ones where society is deeply divided along sociocultural lines.

Bangladesh has a long history of contestation related to national belonging, and the subject of nationhood continues to be part of struggles and negotiations in the postcolonial nation-state. Since independence in 1971, the advancement of Bengali, Bangladeshi, and Muslim nationalisms has led to various exclusions along ethnic, religious, gender, and class lines. While the dominant nationalist model promoted by the more secular faction with East Bengal's political leadership reinforced the unity of Bengalis based on language, culture, and heritage, those protagonists embracing more religious ideals have sought to highlight a national unity based on Islamism. Rather more invisible, however, have been forms of activism denouncing intersectional inequalities, such as the exclusion of religious and indigenous [1] minorities or of diverse gendere identities.

Against this background, this paper investigates the intersection between nation-building policies and social-movement activism.[2] It shows, first, how the crafting of a threat to national security has been employed as a political strategy to mask the exclusions enshrined in nation-building. Second, nation-building seen as a continuous process can be strongly linked to both violent and nonviolent social movements, ones that relate to the state as the primary but not the only force behind particular nation-building projects (Sheth 1992). Political and social movements also seek to contribute to nation-building by pursuing processes of social transformation.

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1 The term "indigenous" refers to the population covered by the definition "indigenous people" coined by the United Nations.

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Methodologically, this article is based on extensive empirical research undertaken in various phases in Dhaka and the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The first author conducted ethnographic research, including participant observation in multiple protests and political meetings, group discussions, and interviews over six months in Dhaka between 2018 and 2020. Interviews were conducted with four key figures of the Shahbag movement, persons who were particularly visible in the movement's slogans, statements, speeches, media interviews, or talk shows, plus with 31 movement participants as well as 13 "supporters."[3] She also conducted three group discussions (six to a group) and four in-depth interviews with indigenous activists in Dhaka who participated in the Shahbag movement. Although access to leaders or activists from Hefazat-e-Islam (HEI) proved difficult, interviews were conducted with two leaders of HEI, six Long-March participants, as well as 13 supporters. Beyond the movement's participation circle, five group discussions (six to a group) were further conducted with current university students on the topics of national identity and social movements.

The second author has conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the CHT since the late 1990s in various phases, with a focus on ethnicity and nationalism, indigeneity, social-movement activism, and development. She has also worked with activists from indigenous communities both in academia and more practical fields. This has occurred in various on-site fieldwork missions and collaborative projects with local organizations, as well as part of engagement in transnational activism for human and particularly indigenous people's rights.

The paper is structured as follows. We begin by exploring academic discourses on nation-building and their connection to social movements, then examine nation-building agendas and strategies in Bangladesh. We focus thereafter on the indigenous movement in rural southeastern CHT and its connectivities to activist spaces in urban areas. We subsequently draw on our findings concerning the different positionalities of national identity and their connections to Shahbag and its countermovement led by HEI. Next, we establish parallels between the indigenous and the Shahbag movements by showing how intersecting social categories structure the multiple inequalities enshrined in opposing ideas of national belonging and exclusion. The final section sums up the paper's findings and briefly discusses its broader implications.

Nation-building and social movement activism

How have scholars engaged with the concept of nation-building? How are social-movement activism and nation-building processes interlinked? We address these questions on the basis of two key arguments: first, that nation-building is a

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3   These are individuals who support the cause but did not directly participate in related activities, or did so but only on one or two occasions.

continuous process and, second, that nation-building and social movements are mutually constitutive.

Nation-building combines two objectives: state-building, which involves creating and developing formal political institutions, and identity-building, which refers to creating an overarching communal identity (Talentino 2004; Fukuyama 2007; Allen 2010; Barr 2012). National-identity formation or contestation are considered central to a nation-state's ability to realize these objectives. National identity, however, is constituted from particularistic ethnic cores, myths, memories, religious beliefs, language(s), territorial connections, and political values (Smith 1991). Thus, an essential feature of nation-building lies in its attempts to create loyalty to that communal identity. And it is considered one of the key sources for solidarity (Moran 2011) as well as for achieving the goals of resolution and rehabilitation, particularly in post-conflict contexts (Talentino 2004; Pfaff-Czarnecka 2005). In this way, the nation-building process is a form of integration that involves shifting sovereignties from kinship or ethnic allegiances to fealty to the nation-state (Sutherland 2009). Importantly, national identity is not about individuals per se but refers to a personal identity arising from membership in a national political community, and an identity vis-à-vis said political community that renders it distinct from those of other nations (Parekh 2008, 56). At the same time, structure and political process are the core elements of nation-building. Thus, state-building and identity formation are not separate spheres; instead, they influence each other (as demonstrated later empirically).

Existing theories do not specify who pursues nation-building policies and in what fashion (Mylonas 2016). There is a need to examine policy outputs, the process of selecting policies, as well as specific ones regarding assimilation, accommodation, or exclusion (Mylonas 2016). Nation-building is the interaction between various groups within a state, wherein foreign policy and international actors/interests are also involved. Quite often, nation-building is the contingent outcome of a strategic response by politicians to the modern conditions of geopolitical competition or of power plays within the state. The formation of national identity in the postcolonial era has primarily relied on the construction of majority populations sharing commonalities such as religion, language, heritage, or social traditions. These common denominators encompass decisive factors for the perceived unity and solidarity needed to construct a national community. How these majorities are established is what tends to exclude those perceived as minorities (Talentino 2002; Mylonas 2012;). For nationalists, populations threatening the purity of the national community constitute a potential danger. This fuels tensions in heterogeneous societies where high degrees of ethnic, linguistic, or other forms of diversity are present. Scholars often tend to analyze nation-building discrepancies through an inclusion/exclusion binary (Wimmer 2010). In contrast, we adhere to Mylonas's (2012) argument that nation-building policies must be viewed as more than dichotomous conceptualizations such as "inclusion/exclusion" or "violent/non-violent."

For nation builders, the acceptance of state-building processes is essential for the creation of the desired overarching identity. This acceptance includes a belief in the state's legitimacy and an internal sense of ownership of its policies. Legitimacy, thus, is linked to identity — as the process of identity-building aims to bind citizens to the state through the nation (Talentino 2004). Struggles over participation in decision-making procedures, equal access to social institutions, or the recognition of cultural differences can perpetuate social movement activism. As will be seen in the subsequent analysis, social movements representing the claims of minorities challenge the hegemony of the state by positioning themselves in opposition to it.

While understanding nation-building according to the above framework is practical, it also offers only a fragmented picture of the nation-building process. We propose that to obtain a sophisticated temporal understanding of the assimilation, accommodation, and exclusion enshrined in nation-building requires close attention being paid to the causes, outcomes, and influences of social and political movements in that nation-building process. Assimilation, accommodation, and exclusion are not static but rather require an awareness of how various groups react to and shape that process, and how they interact and negotiate with other state- and non-state actors — both nationally as well as internationally.

The existing scholarship on nation-building and social movements has largely been carried out in isolation, although many overlapping notions do exist. As discussed above, nation-building engages in a variety of different processes to unite people and ensure (social) justice through a consensual state apparatus. On the other hand, social movements strongly influence states in manifold ways: they might contribute to overthrowing dictatorships and monarchies, to establishing democracies, to triggering local policy transformations, or to instigating changes in people's views on particular social and political realms (Shewly and Gerharz 2023). Although a popular uprising may not always successfully overthrow a regime, it can still alter media discourses, public opinion, or scientific and intellectual communities, thereby creating a pathway for future achievements in this regard (Jenkins and Form 2013). The so-called Arab Spring, the revolutionary movement in Sudan, or contemporary anti-monarchy or anti-military-rule movements in Southeast Asia constitute cases of social-movement activism par excellence that later shook or shaped particular forms of nation-building. In South Asia, social movements have broader both political and social implications. As Amenta (2006) rightfully argues, political contexts matter, as they shape social movements' scope for action.

Social movements typically prefer to promote a unified and homogenous collective identity to minimize internal division and avoid related factions (Lichterman 1999; Armstrong 2002; Pulido 2006; Ward 2008). In doing so, social movements often fail to respond to the fact that their participants possess individual identities that might structure the types of challenges or opportunities they encounter in their lives. Moreover, identity-based movements tend to devote limited attention to the interests of subgroups marginalized in multiple ways (Cohen 1999; Strolovitch 2007).

Individual activists, however, are sometimes quite conscious of how their own identities affect their experiences and may draw on more than one identity to spur their activism (Greenwood 2008; Blackwell 2011; Clay 2012; Milkman and Terriquez 2012). They may also attempt to build bridges between the various communities they are a part of (Mische 2008). Looking specifically at what they call "movement intersectionality," Roberts and Jesudason conclude that "attention to intersecting identities has the potential to create solidarity and cohesion [across identity categories]" (2013, 313). Thus, intersectionality can foster alliances and act as a means for movements to embrace diversity (Crenshaw 1991). Such understanding can encourage the development of connections within social movements and thus make them more inclusive (Terriquez, Brenes, and Lopez 2018).

We argue that adopting an intersectional lens can help us to better grasp a social movement's construction of exclusionary social and cultural policies in nation-building, as they operate within the social spaces available to them. This does not imply that we claim to perform a systematic intersectional analysis of the field. Our aim is more humble, intimating the need to look beyond dominant identity categories and therefore reveal how coalitions are being formed and identity politics configured. Social movements and the state often do not work together. On the contrary, through the political and social mobilization of certain sections of the population, often on rights-related issues, movements seek to compel the state to adopt policies and enact legislation that it would otherwise not be inclined to pursue (Sheth 1992). However, we also posit that social-movement activists' influence on state-making is no less problematic or hegemonic.

A general limitation of the nation-building literature is that it emphasizes more the struggles that have constituted a nation rather than looking at changes in nation-building from a temporal perspective. Here, rather, we take the view that nation-building is a protracted and ongoing process of political integration that requires continuous negotiation between state and society. Consequently, the evolvement of a political consciousness that helps contain internal conflicts does not result from a unilineal process but is rather a disjointed series of reverses and delays, and ultimately remains elusive. In the following, we illustrate this with the case of the Bangladeshi nation.

Nation-building in Bangladesh: Changes, contestations, and exclusions

Bangladesh is relatively homogeneous in cultural, linguistic, and ethnic terms. It has a small (slightly over 10 percent) but declining and politically weak Hindu minority, as well as a modest indigenous population. Together with a form of economically

driven colonialism from West Pakistan, Bengali ethnonationalism[4] was at the core of East Pakistan's independence movement and the subsequent birth of "Bangladesh" (Jahan 1973; Riaz 2020).

The newly crafted Bangladeshi Constitution adopted nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism as its fundamental nation-building principles. Secularism[5] in Bangladesh was largely conceived of as an instrument to prevent communal forces from capitalizing on Islam for political benefit. Scholars consider this a result of the experiences of rancorous religious nationalism during the Pakistan era (O'Connell 1976; Guhathakurta 2012). As part of its secularism, the Constitution declared religion a personal choice, banned religious-based political parties, chose a national anthem composed by Rabindranath Tagore, and designed a national flag devoid of Islamic symbolism (Kabeer 1991). This echoes Talentino's (2004) reflection on the aftermath of war being a time to reinforce the fledgling spirit of community and commitment to a shared vision of unity. In subsequent years, however, the practice of secularism remained vague, with an array of religious activities taking place in public spaces — including religious broadcasts on state-controlled media or allowing the madrasahs (Islamic seminaries), particularly those of a Deobandi persuasion, to impart Islamic instruction despite the nationalization of the education system (Riaz 2020).

To establish unity on the basis of language and culture, the Constitution declared Bangladeshi citizens "Bengalis." This, however, eventually led to ethnolinguistic fragmentation by alienating the non-Bengali populations, the largest of which lives in the CHT located on Bangladesh's southeastern border.[6] In response, the local

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4   Although formed on the basis of religious commonality, Muslim identity did not unite the two demographic segments of Pakistan for long. The connection between religion and politics in the region has a long history. Although the partition of Bengal in 1947 was not the result of a long political mobilization or of a shared national ideology regarding the creation of a homeland for the Muslims of Bengal, Punjab, and other areas (Khan 2010, 5), the idea of a Muslim nation was indeed present at the time — as was Muslim religious nationalism. Three major historical movements — the Faraizi Movement, the Tariqah-i-Muhammadiya Movement, and the pan-Islamic Khilafat Movement — were indicative of the rise of political Islam in colonial Bengal. However, there was no one particular movement that campaigned for an Islamic territorial nationalism in colonial India. In 1933, Rahmat Ali, a University of Cambridge student, coined the name "Pakistan" and first proposed a Muslim state separate from India. The notion of Pakistan appeared in the Muslim League's political agenda in 1937. According to the 3rd June Plan, the Bengal Legislative Assembly divided itself into two parts, where representatives of both the Hindu and the Muslim majority districts conducted separate votes to determine whether a majority wished to divide the province. The representatives of the Hindu majority districts voted in favor of religious segregation, while representatives of the Muslim majority districts voted against it. For more details, (see: Moore 1983; Chatterji 1999; Shewly 2008, 2013).

5   It is important to mention here that the context, meaning, and appeal of secularism in Bangladesh are different than in its Western manifestation. In Bengali, the term *dharmanirapekṣatābād* is used for "secularism." It translates as "neutrality in religion," or, to use O'Connell's (1976) term, "tolerance."

6   Historically, the CHT was a distinct geopolitical entity with its own social and political system and remained outside the sphere of colonial administration. In the 1935 Government of India Act, the CHT was declared a "totally excluded area." When the postcolonial states of Pakistan and

political leadership, seeking to represent the interests of the Pahari population,[7] took a strong stand against the assimilationist politics pursued by the first Bangladeshi government. This led to the formation of the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati (PCJSS) in 1972, a political organization that advocates for the recognition of cultural differences and strongly opposes exclusion and discrimination. The situation in the CHT worsened from 1975, as the Bangladeshi military seized power in a bloody coup and reversed the nation's trajectory in its attempt to define national identity anew. The PCJSS's demands for the recognition of cultural differences and regional autonomy were suppressed by increasingly violent means. Heavy militarization resulted in an open and violent conflict between the Bangladeshi army and the PCJSS's armed wing.

The military-dominated governments of General Ziaur (Zia) Rahman (1975–1981) and General Hossain Muhammad Ershad (1982–1990) not only shaped political developments in the CHT but had far-reaching consequences for Bangladesh in general. Both promoted Islamization as part of seeking to earn a veneer of legitimacy (Hakim 1998). Secularism was replaced with the phrase "Absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah," while a new clause was included in the Constitution: "The state shall endeavor to consolidate, preserve, and strengthen friendly relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity" (Kabeer 1991; Jahan 2003; Riaz 2013).[8]

President Zia legitimized the return of religiously-based political parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami (JEI), and declared the slogan "Joy Bangla" (Bengali: *jaẏ bāṃlā*; i.e. "Victory to Bengal") as un-Islamic, to be replaced with "Bangladesh zindabad" (Bengali: *bāṃlālādeś jindābād*; i.e. "Long live Bangladesh!"). Attempts to blur the lines between state and religion continued unabashed during the regime of President Ershad: Islam became the state religion in 1988, and un-Islamic practices and expressions were discouraged. What could be remembered in public spaces was strictly regulated by the then government (D'Costa 2013). Although a signatory to the World Plan of Action for the UN Decade for Women, the Bangladesh government refused to ratify a number of clauses (related to inheritance, marriage,

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subsequently Bangladesh attempted military, bureaucratic, political, and economic encroachment into the CHT's indigenous territories strong counterreactions ensued.

7 "Pahari" (Bengali: *pāhāṙi*) literally means "hill people." The term is commonly used to denote the CHT's indigenous population.

8 In the area of foreign policy, Bangladesh initially opted for nonalignment, negotiating mainly with India and socialist countries on aid and assistance, which negatively affected the building of relations with the United States. After the 1975 coup, President Zia set the country firmly on its still-present pro-Islamic and pro-US course, where aid from the developed capitalist countries became much more important, as did that from OPEC states — particularly Saudi Arabia. For example, during the devastating famine of 1974, the US decided to withhold food shipments (due to Bangladesh's trade relations with Cuba) at a time when the population was suffering from one of the country's worst disasters to date. It should also be noted that Saudi Arabia refused to recognize the new state of Bangladesh until the assassination of Prime Minister Sheikh Mujib and the subsequent appointment of President Zia. For detail see (Sobhan 1982).

child custody, and divorce) listed in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, on the grounds that they conflicted with Sharia law (Kabeer 1991). Despite the strict control of information and banning of any commemorative rituals other than those sanctioned by the authoritarian state, public resentment grew (Hossain 2015). In January 1983, President Ershad reneged on his plan to turn Bangladesh into an Islamic state after massive protests.[9] Such ongoing resistance has helped moderate the extent to which official Islamization has a direct effect on women's rights in Bangladesh. Military rule ended with a popular democratic uprising in 1990.

The period of parliamentary democracy from 1991 to 2013 was marked by the fierce rivalry between the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). This resulted in a polarized political landscape vis-à-vis national identity and nation-building: the AL continues to embrace Bengali nationalism, the BNP supports a Bangladeshi-Muslim form thereof, while JEI promotes an overtly political Islam. In the preceding years, Islamist groups in general and JEI in particular had not only gained recognition as legitimate political actors but also emerged as kingmakers, both electorally as well as ideologically, having formed a coalition with the BNP (Riaz 2004, 7).

This notwithstanding, during the new era of democracy the victims of the 1971 war organized and led the Gono Adalot movement, which, on January 19, 1992, formed the 101-member Ekattorer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee (EGDNC) ("Committee for Eradicating the Killers and Collaborators of [19]71"). This nonviolent movement, as well as the leadership of JEI, appealed to all segments of society (De 2015; Mookherjee 2009). The Committee's demands developed into a slogan taken up by urban youth. The AL enjoyed a landslide election victory in 2008 with the mandate of establishing an "International Crime Tribunal" to punish the war criminals. In 2011, it also passed a National Women's Development Policy that was fiercely opposed by Islamists in reinstating secularism to the Constitution. During this period, the AL overtly supported the Shahbag movement and instructed the state security apparatus to be extremely heavy-handed in its response to the countermovement organized by HEI.

After 2014, however, the AL would reverse its position on secularism. It has since pursued an increasing Islamization of Bangladesh's political culture in official speeches,[10] has passed blasphemy laws, and has overseen the revision of school

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9   Twenty-three opposition leaders also issued a statement warning that the declaration of an Islamic state would lead to civil war and communal strife. Various women's groups led this opposition, with a popular newspaper headline reading: "This time the women have taken the lead" (Kabeer 1991, 55).

10 On March 23, 2014, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina declared that the country would be governed as per the Medina Charter, a 622 CE document that lays out the principles of Islamic governance — representing a significant shift as part of Bangladesh's journey from its promise to banish religion from the public sphere to bringing religion into the heart of state ideology (Riaz 2020).

texts.[11] An increasingly authoritarian style of rule has seen the AL make greater concessions to HEI. Lorch (2019) interprets these developments as part of a top-down process of state-led Islamization and a strategy to contain the rise of Islamic social movements, fierce political competition, and to legitimize semi-authoritarian rule.

"Cultural engineering" — that is, the attempt to create a sense of national identity in cultural terms — occurs particularly in the areas of education and communication (Breuilly 1985). Since independence, there have been vast changes in Bangladesh's political culture, social practices, and most importantly in its national identity and integration. Public culture in Bangladesh has seen a transition in terms of the acceptance of Islam, due to state patronization. This reflects Gellner's (1983) argument that national identity is supported by national institutions and reinforced through the education system in line with the narratives promoted by state elites. Nation-building policies in Bangladesh — whether upheld via language criteria, the promotion of national history, or school textbooks — are all devoted to implementing elites' preferred nation-state project. While Bengali identity advocates excluded ethnic minorities, the promoters of a Bangladeshi-Muslim identity have additionally excluded not only ethnic but also religious minorities. In the years since independence, national-identity formation and nation-building measures have seen periods of secularism and religiosity, with associated resistance emerging through various forms of activism. As a result, in Bangladesh today two ideologically divided camps exist, while politics, culture, and grassroots activism continue to shape constitutional, institutional, and educational perspectives in the country (as well as their various contestations).

Forced assimilation, conflict, and indigenous movements

In the 1970s, as the country's military rulers discontinued negotiations and instead violently repressed demands for regional autonomy, insurgents in the CHT began to fight back for their right to self-determination. The military attacked local villages, taking part in massacres, acts of torture, and disappearances — which contributed to massive internal and international displacement (to India) during the 1980s and 1990s (Chakma and D'Costa 2013). Quite often, the vacated lands were taken over by Bengalis, who were relocated under a scheme named the "Settlement of landless non-tribal families in the CHT" between 1979 and 1985 (Adnan and Dastidar 2011, 42).[12]

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11 The government launched new editions of schoolbooks in 2017, which featured more references to religious symbols and from which 17 poems that Islamic conservatives had condemned as "atheist" were removed (Lorch 2019).

12 Officially, approximately 400,000 Bengalis (mostly Muslims) took part in this program, but it is estimated that the number settled in the hills is actually much higher. Before agreeing to settle in the CHT, each migrant family was promised 5 acres of hilly land, 4 acres of "mixed" land, and 2.5 acres of paddy land in addition to access to bank loans. The government organized the logistics of their

This scheme also involved the forcible eviction of indigenous people from their homes and their regrouping in "cluster villages." Because of the traditional system of collective land ownership in the CHT, where oftentimes no officially accepted land titles exist, allegedly ownerless land was distributed to Bengali settlers — thus depriving the previous occupants access to the lands they had recently lived on and farmed. The scheme was ultimately designed to suppress the armed resistance of the PCJSS rebels (Dewan 1990, 243; Adnan and Dastidar 2011, 42). It has also been argued that the government's real motive behind the relocation program was to "colonize" the CHT by bringing about a demographic shift (Mohsin 2003). The initiatives, taken in the name of development, ultimately marginalized Paharis and alienated them from their lands – a process that Levene (1999) defines as a case of "creeping genocide." Since independence, all regimes and governments have denied the demands for self-determination or regional autonomy by the CHT and legitimized the exclusion of minorities there and violence toward them. This was achieved by labeling them a serious threat to the security and territorial integrity of Bangladesh (Mohsin 1997, 2003; Guhathakurta 2002; Gardner and Gerharz 2016; Bal and Siraj 2017; Gerharz and Pfaff-Czarnecka 2017). As various scholars have pointed out, defining the minority as a danger to the greater community constitutes an essential strategy in the building of national unity — one rooted in colonial, administrative, and political measures (Appadurai 2006; Riaz 2020).

In 1997 a Peace Accord was signed in the CHT, following negotiations between the AL government and the PCJSS's leadership. From the point of view of activism, the peace process implied a transition from a militant to a civil social movement. The peace process was accompanied by the institutionalization of an indigenous-rights regime — a comprehensive transition that fostered the reinterpretation of questions of identity and brought to the fore indigeneity as a new unifying category of identification (Gerharz 2015). In the realm of social-movement activism in the CHT, the post-Accord period has seen a split into various factions amid party politics, military interference, diverse economic interests, and intragroup animosities.

Beyond these internal divisions, contemporary activism in the CHT occurs on two fronts: namely regarding indigenous issues and participation in general movements respectively. An ongoing clampdown by state forces starting around 2017 has forced many indigenous political activists to flee, with many of them still on the run (Chakma and Chakma 2021). Research participants mentioned in interviews that activists located in the CHT need to be extremely cautious, and that there is always the risk they will be deemed insurgents by the security forces. In response to these increasingly repressive government strategies, the members of respective social

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transportation to the CHT with different reception points along the way. The state also provided incentives like cash allowances, military protection in their new locations, and food rations. The transmigration program officially ended in 1985, but research shows that settlement continued "albeit in disguise" into the second decade of the twenty-first century (Chakma 2010, 42).

movements have been forced to either quit, go underground, or take refuge in other countries; those who choose to stay and remain active are subject to extensive surveillance.

Thus, regional activism can be classified as extremely risky and relatively unsuccessful vis-à-vis attracting media attention to its cause. Interlocutors shared their frustrations over mainstream media: "Our news only appears (though partially) in the newspaper if an incident goes viral on social media." All research participants unanimously argued that the CHT sees a much higher prevalence of human rights violations because it is de facto ruled by the military. Although the Peace Accord included a clause on demilitarization and specifically the withdrawal of all army camps from the region, currently there still exist over 400 military or paramilitary camps (*Hill Voice* 2021) in major strategic locations. The government employs a variety of means to conceal the deteriorating human rights situation: denying access to human rights observers, restricting the movement of foreigners, or openly threatening human rights activists. Despite a number of attempts to make human rights violations in the CHT public, the military has never been held accountable for the violence perpetrated there, and such news is seldom heard in the mainstream media.

One of the few opportunities for activists to reach a wider audience is coordinated activism via social media. Indigenous youth activism in this space lobbies against military oppression, land grabs in the name of development, tensions with Bengali settlers, and gender-based violence. Tourism, commercial plantations, resource extraction, and external — as well as, to a limited extent, internal — corporate actors have caused further loss of lands, of livelihoods, not to mention forced displacements (Adnan and Dastidar 2011; Ahmed 2017). Commercially driven land grabs have become the central issue afflicting the CHT. Alongside a commitment to upholding human rights, devolving power to regional bodies, and demilitarizing the region, the Peace Accord also includes provisions for speeding up "development," the settlement of land disputes, and for the rehabilitation of indigenous refugees and internally displaced persons. However, the non-implementation of most of the Accord's provisions continues to be a source of stark disappointment and contention. Due to the massive ongoing migration of Bengalis from the country's plains to the CHT, the indigenous population has become a minority in demographic terms. Moreover, the domination of Bengalis in virtually every social, political, and economic space in the region, observed by scholars during the early post-Accord years (e.g. Gerharz 2002; Adnan 2008), continues to the present day. Despite the Accord, the years of terror imposed on the local population (Uddin and Gerharz 2017) have instilled acute feelings of alienation from successive ruling Bengali regimes (Mohsin 2003).

In addition to online activism, CHT youth have strengthened their networks and participation vis-à-vis various nationwide social movements to bring the injustices experienced locally onto other organizations' agendas. One example is the women's

movement, which has actively supported activist initiatives against gender-based violence in the CHT (D'Costa 2014; Gerharz 2014). To change the enduring stigmas resulting from racist prejudices against the indigenous population in the national mainstream media, activists often visualize that which might help break social and political stereotypes.

Such initiatives reveal that contrary to established forms of nationalist exclusion, ethnicity is being juxtaposed with other categories such as age and gender. Such activism, located in as well as strategically addressing intersecting categories of identification, can inspire commitment in multiple subordinate groups (Frederick 2010), and serves the call for a more holistic form of social justice and social change (Pastrana 2006, 2010). In October 2020, for example, Bengali and indigenous activists formed a coalition in which they marched and occupied city spaces together in a week-long protest against rape and the culture of impunity around it in Bangladesh. Their slogan "In hills and plains, the battle will persist uniformly" is an essential step toward the bringing together of diverse voices speaking out against violence against women (Shewly and Gerharz 2021). Such intersectional activism reflects the importance of overlapping memberships in social-movement spillover (Meyer and Whittier 1994) and demonstrates the ultimate permeability of the nationalist imaginary.

Besides being represented as a security threat, indigenous people are also constructed — particularly by the media but also in some textbooks — as an "exotic" other (CHT Commission 1991, 91; Gerharz 2015). The popularity of such images of the backward, primitive, yet beautiful and interesting "tribals" is embedded in colonial and postcolonial notions of civilization and development (Schendel 1992, 103). Since independence, Bangladesh's indigenous peoples have challenged the degrading imagination of "tribals" as "backward" and "primitive" and sought recognition as equal citizens. Reflecting on such representations, our research participants highlighted how different dimensions of discrimination and power relations impacted their lives. In line with such viewpoints, indigenous activists across the country use social media to publicly counter the twin stigma associated with their intersectional marginalities and identities (Zimmerman et al. 2012) through visual art and storytelling — both individually and collectively.

State-making policies and practices in the CHT are, therefore, not only discriminatory but also instruments of internal colonization. While local activists try to resist acts of land grabbing and forced displacement, their concerns rarely occupy a place in policy discourses or make headlines in popular or state media. However, their involvement in national collectives such as the women's movement demonstrates progress is being made regarding the interconnection of identity processes on multiple levels.

Shahbag and its counter-movement: A redux of competing identities

The Shahbag movement emerging in 2013 was first sparked by the verdict delivered in one of Bangladesh's war-criminal trials.[13] Research participants consistently stressed that the movement was galvanized not merely because of Kader Mullah's V sign after being sentenced to life imprisonment for being a collaborator during the war of independence, but also because of increasing suspicions and frustrations over the decades-old political culture of "hidden negotiations" between the government and opposition politicians (see also, *The Daily Star* 2013). Initially it was young people and students who engaged in online activism, so-called bloggers who helped drive the ultimate engagement of the masses (De 2015). As articulated by one of its leading organizers during the field research: "We called the event and thought only a few would turn up […] but people were making it bigger every minute."

This unprecedented participation of ordinary people is a sign both of popular support and public acceptance, essential aspects of a social movement's potential for genuinely transforming state and society. Shahbag activists and supporters shared how in its early days the movement reflected the desire to undo three decades of nation-building policies wherein war criminals had played a significant role. The new collective reinvigorated the latent emotions and memories of the independence movement and 1971 war through their various symbolic and peaceful performative acts.

Which exact issues motivated people to participate in Shahbag events (Tarrow 1998)? Several key aspects appeared in their answers to our related questions, such as reforming the justice system to prevent corruption in politics, emotions and memories surrounding the war, participating in a peaceful movement beyond otherwise contentious political-party mandates, or bringing closure to the sad chapter of the "collaboration" by some locals in Pakistan's repressive actions pre-independence. Like in many other countries, particularly those in the Global South, a large number of younger Bangladeshis distrust political parties completely (Shewly and Gerharz 2021).

Indigenous research participants recalled their motivations in joining the movement: namely inclusivity, and the hope that the fulfillment of the promises made during the declaration of independence[14] might bring some changes to their less-than-citizen status. Jointly, they amended one of the 1971 slogans '*tumi ke? āmi ke? bāṅāli,*

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13   Individual online activists used blogging platforms to showcase their particular agendas and ideological motivations. Young, urban bloggers had been active since around 2005, demanding that war criminals face trial, bringing to the fore various historical facts, and offering narratives of genocide and JEI's involvement with Pakistan that had either been forgotten or buried by those in power.

14   The elected political leadership formed a provisional government and issued the proclamation of the independence of Bangladesh on April 10, 1971. The government pledged to establish "equality, human dignity, and social justice" as fundamental guiding principles.

bāṅāli', by changing it to '*tumi ke? āmi ke? bāṅāli, pāhāṛī*' ("Who are you? Who am I? Bengali, Pahari"). In questions of identity, thus, the slogan reflects a recognition of ethnocultural plurality.

Shahbag leaders initially followed a strategy of not aligning themselves with any politicians. Although this helped it become a people's movement, this impression was not sustained (Roy 2018). Many research participants, both those who actively took part in the protests as well as supporters, noted that they lost interest in Shahbag once "the people's movement had been hijacked by the ruling party." One of the participants shared that the "AL is not only capable of organizing successful movements, but [also] of negating a popular movement." The movement suffered its biggest blow when a self-proclaimed atheist blogger and Shahbag activist, Rajib, was stabbed to death for his antireligious writings in Bengali. On top of this, his blogposts were published in a right-wing newspaper, which branded Shahbag a *nāstik* ("atheist") movement (Chowdhury 2019). Worth mentioning here is that the print media was also highly polarized and active in discursive "Othering" (Parvez 2022). Secularist positions were subsequently denounced by the countermovement as atheist, the government distanced itself from Shahbag, and the participation of ordinary people fell markedly (Sajjad and Härdig 2016). More importantly, however, the accusation of promoting atheism provoked a discussion at a general level about the role of Islam in Bangladesh and raised questions of how far the faith belonged to "national culture."

A few weeks after the instigation of the Shahbag movement, a strongly religious orthodox group, HEI,[15] emerged in campaigning against these activists (Chowdhury 2019). The organization served notice to the governing AL by gathering over half a million supporters in Dhaka on April 6, 2013, for a protest where the main slogan was: "Hang the atheist bloggers" (Mustafa 2013). HEI put forward a total of 13 demands, criticizing the government for not taking action against what it called "atheist bloggers." Among these was the call for a new blasphemy law, with the death penalty for those who insulted Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. On May 5, HEI arranged another rally ("long march") in Dhaka to again demand the acceptance of their 13 conditions. During a violent encounter between HEI supporters and police, 27 people (including two policemen) were killed and many more injured and arrested (BBC 2013).[16]

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15 HEI has traditionally not sought power through electoral processes, but instead has looked to use its "street muscle" to change Bangladesh's secular culture and politics through the enforcement of what it believes are proper Islamic ways. The organizations belonging to the HEI coalition are based in more than 25,000 madrasahs across Bangladesh.

16 HEI supporters reportedly vandalized and torched 50 vehicles, a number of buildings and political offices, as well as assaulted journalists during their rally. In the early hours of May 6, security forces — drawn from the police, the elite Rapid Action Battalion, and from the paramilitary Border Guard Bangladesh — jointly launched an operation and used stun grenades and rubber bullets to disperse protesters and end their sit-in. The government has filed charges against 12 of HEI's top leaders for murder, vandalism, arson, the destruction of property, and other crimes (BBC 2013).

While the polarization between two movements exemplifies the contestation over the significance of religion versus secularism in the Bangladeshi nationalist imaginary, it also reveals other significant facets in play here such as class dynamics, the switching of public support from one movement to another, the influence of the education system, and similar. The Shahbag movement, for example, is generally considered to be spearheaded by predominantly secularist middle-class urban youth, and the HEI countermovement by a younger generation of an opposing mold: namely rural, lower class, predominantly male madrasah students. Some research participants expressed similar frustrations with the perceived divisions along class rather than ideological lines. One interviewee complained that: "Rich people's sons (Shahbag activists) were allowed to stay on the street for weeks, but the government was brutal with our sons (HEI supporters) when they occupied the streets only for a day."

Our own field research reveals a more complex picture beyond mere differences of class, however. Although it could be said that Qawmi madrasah students come from a middle-class background, and many participated in both movements, religious identity nevertheless played a big role in people's alignment choices. As one activist shared: "I joined Shahbag because I wanted punishment for the war criminals, but I care about my religion too." Another felt that: "It was a question of your belief part of my education in the madrasah — later I joined the long march to Dhaka. Ordinary people on the way to Shapla Square offered us food, water, and showed solidarity! It was not Qawmi madrasah – only movement." Some participants expressed their disappointment over HEI's political strategy to try and remove the government: "We all marched on their call to save Islam, but it was shocking to find out their political wishes — they were discussing who will take over the president's and the prime minister's positions." Internal divisions within the network of Qawmi madrasahs also deterred many members of other madrasahs from joining the long march.

A decade on from the original Shahbag protests, the topic of Bengali and Muslim identity continues to consume Bangladesh's social and political spheres to such an extent that many of the ongoing injustices and structural inequalities in the country are not strongly contested for fear of taking sides. University students involved in our research, irrespective of their religious or ethnic identities, expressed their frustrations over the fugitive politics surrounding national identity. In group discussions, they shared that they do not have the luxury of thinking about a national identity in the current situation where their employment prospects are bleak, daily living expenses rising, student accommodation is politically explosive and unsafe, and the streets are dangerous for girls and women. Others remarked that they do not belong to either of these groups. As a student in a public university noted: "I want to solve my everyday problems, for example, corruption or oppression by the ruling party's student wing but there is no way to form a crowd. The coalition breaks apart mostly on identity lines." People coming together *en masse* is vital to popular politics because doing so provides a highly visible, physically present, and embodied form of contestation (Chowdhury 2019).

A diverse paradoxical assortment of factions currently paralyzes Bangladeshi politics, with competing nationalisms, grievances, and movements all falling into the trap of binary politics. These movements — parallel, contentious, and continuous — have not only instrumentalized many of the institutional and public policy changes seen in recent decades but also revealed deep-seated divisions within Bangladeshi society. One example is the split among the younger generation and people in general over national identity, the result of contested nation-building strategies since independence. Significantly, however, a rising trend among students of placing more importance on everyday practicalities than on visions of an overarching national identity might suggest a new driving force being at work in the near future.

Conclusion

The paper showed how political discourses and ruling elites' nation-building policies have taken capricious paths since Bangladesh's birth in 1971. We were also able to draw on our research findings in illuminating the different positionalities as well as the significant role that religion and language play in Bangladeshi political culture. Despite cultural and linguistic diversity, there has been a "systematic reluctance" to recognize the "plural and heterogeneous nature" of the country's ethnic minorities within the legal framework of modern Bangladesh's Constitution (Adnan 2008, 27). Similarly, the analysis revealed that the construction of a Bengali versus Bangladeshi nationalism is so powerful that it supersedes (visions of) everyday reality. Meanwhile, the increased visibility of religion in political and public life does not mean the death of secularization; instead, it highlights that secularization is a complex, multifaceted process that encompasses a number of different dimensions of individual and collective life (Riaz 2020, 10). Bangladesh's social movements are at a crossroads in terms of their coordinated responses to state hegemony because of these divisions along identity lines. While social-movement actors struggle to overcome these binary nationalisms, many ordinary students are striving to find new ways to position themselves beyond such divides in Bangladesh. These contested identity politics and subsequent movements overshadow the general aspiration of nation-building: namely community formation.

We made three important theoretical contributions to the discussion of nation-building policies and politics in the Bangladeshi context. First, nation-building is a contentious, complex, and continuous process that necessitates a temporal approach being taken to fully fathom its multifaceted nature. Second, the goal of developing a so-called natural homogeneity under the guise of nation-building is a political project, one that masks intersectional inequalities, enforces majoritarianism, and, ultimately, thus remains ineffective. The goal of nation-building should not be to develop a single nation in the sense of shared ethos but to build a common commitment to a single state (Talentino 2004). It is about consultation, negotiation, and compromise.

Third and finally, nation-building is not linear, but an occurrence regarding which we need to take into account the complex interaction of various resistances (social movements) that alter, pause, complicate, or shape that (top-down) process. At the same time, social movements are in perpetual motion, they have their ups and downs, they exist as mobilizations and uprisings but also in latent states — at once shaping and at the same time being shaped by political culture. We, thus, brought together two literature strands that normally work in isolation, therewith calling also for more empirically informed work on the intersection between social movements and nation-building policies as well as practices.

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