



IDENTITY, FAITH, AND SOCIAL COHESION: HOW BANGLADESHI POLITICAL PARTIES APPROACH THE CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Social cohesion is the glue that keeps a society together and ensures the well-being of the citizens. Three actors play pivotal roles in enhancing or damaging the quality of social cohesion: the state, civil society, and political forces. This report examines the commitments of Bangladeshi political parties regarding various dimensions of social cohesion, including identity, pluralism, and cohesive values. Reviewing 32 election manifestos of six political parties since 1991, the report argues that identity—national and individual—remains the most contentious issue and divides the parties into two rather distinct camps. Despite variations in underscoring different elements of identity such as ethnicity and religion, parties subscribe to variations of majoritarianism. Different stances on the role of religion are noted, but pathways for harnessing religion towards a more harmonious society are missing. All parties reviewed acknowledge the country’s religious and cultural diversity, but a robust commitment to bridge the communities, a key factor of building a cohesive society, is absent. Cohesive values such as a sense of social justice, respect for human rights, and underscoring equality among citizens (including minorities) are recognized in various degrees, which provides grounds for some optimism. The report calls for further exploration of the parties’ commitment to social cohesion and examination of whether these commitments are adhered to in actions—both within the party generally and while it is in power.

INTRODUCTION

The Asia Social Cohesion Radar (Asia-SCR), a multidimensional and internationally accepted measuring instrument, identified Bangladesh as one of the countries with low social cohesion (BTI 2018). The Asia-SCR defined social cohesion as “the quality of social cooperation and togetherness in a territorially delimited community” (Vopel 2020, xiv). The concept is broken down into three domains: social relations, connectedness, and focus on the common good. Each of these domains comprises three measurable dimensions: extent of social relations (social networks, trust in people, and acceptance of diversity); levels of connectedness (identification with community, trust in public institutions, and perception of fairness); strengths of people’s focus on the common good (solidarity and helpfulness, respect for social rules, and civic participation) (Delhey and Boehnke 2018, 33–34; Vopel 2020, xiv; for details see Appendix 1). Two waves of surveys were conducted in 22 countries in South and Southeast Asia under the project between 2004 and 2015. The report based on these surveys shows that among the three domains of social cohesion, Bangladesh is the second least cohesive society among 22 Asian countries according to this dimension of social relations. The country appears to demonstrate weak orientations towards the common good; it is only in the second dimension (connectedness) that Bangladesh’s society exhibits a medium degree of identification with the community, trust in institutions, and perceptions of fairness (Dragolov, Koch, and Larsen 2018: 76). The dimensions of the Asia-SCR do not include religion as an element, but the social networks dimension implicitly addresses the religions’ role. Three other dimensions—acceptance of diversity, perception of fairness, and solidarity and helpfulness—are integral to identity and socially cohesive values. Analyses of the surveys and eight in-depth country studies (Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Singapore, South Korea, and Sri Lanka) show that three actors play pivotal roles in enhancing or decreasing the quality of social cohesion in a society: the state, civic society, and political forces (Croissant and Walkenhorst, 2020.)

This report examines political party approaches towards social cohesion in Bangladesh against the backdrop of the empirical findings of the Asia-SCR and understandings of commitments of political parties. The report also explores how the political parties view the role of religion: as an integral part of diversity and pluralism, in society in general, and particularly in terms of social cohesion. Bangladesh offers a compelling context for a critical examination of how social cohesion and religion are and are not related. An estimated 99.5% of its population identifies with a religious affiliation (Ireland 2020), and 80% consider religion to be of significance in their daily lives (Pew Research Center 2018). Despite this strong religious foundation, the country fares poorly in terms of social cohesion metrics. This unique juxtaposition offers an excellent opportunity to conduct a thorough analysis of the political parties’ commitment to upholding or undermining the values of social cohesion within their political agendas as reflected in the parties’ election manifestos.

There is no single well-articulated and analyzed theory on what roles religion and religiosity play in social cohesion, and empirical experience is rather ambiguous. There is, however, a growing body of literature making compelling arguments about possible relations. There are two contesting positions among scholars: some advance the *prosociality* hypothesis, while others advance the *religious intolerance* hypothesis. According to the religious prosociality argument, believers are expected to show stronger prosocial behavior such as solidarity, charity, responsibility, etc. (Galen 2012, 876). The religious intolerance hypothesis considers strong faith to be accompanied by intolerance and the devaluation of members of other religions and non-believers (Batson 2013, 88–100). A strong argument can nonetheless be made that “religion by nature, is designed to foster a socially cohesive society characterized by members guided by moral principles that promote the common good of society” (DDP 2022). The role of religion, often portrayed as a divisive force within society, has the enormous potential to serve as a source of unity.

“Religion gives people the opportunity to share common values, create a sense of unity and foster a sense of community” (Sharaf 2018). Studies on the role of religion in social cohesion have demonstrated that faith can play a critical role in shaping a common identity and unified work towards common goals, which are essential to a cohesive society (Pennington 2020).

This report begins with a background section that provides a brief description of religion in the public sphere, the political landscape of the country, and the role of religion in the political sphere. The second section clarifies the conceptual framework of social cohesion. The third section describes the methodology employed and components examined in this study. In the fourth section, the findings of the study are presented in tabular format. The fifth section discusses the findings. The seventh and the final section offers some concluding remarks.

BACKGROUND

Religion in the Public Sphere in Bangladesh

It is well recognized that “religion is a central element of the social fabric in Bangladesh” (Adams 2014). It has consistently been an integral part of the social milieu and plays pivotal roles, with impact “in the daily lives of many Bangladeshis” as well as “in the broader social dynamics” (Adams 2015). Religion’s roles, particularly Islam, in the social and political milieu of Bangladesh has been complex. On the one hand, it has served as a source of moral and ethical guidance to many, while on the other hand, religion has been instrumentalized to achieve political objectives. There is a large body of knowledge which has portrayed the growing significance of religion in the political sphere as a contestation between two identities: ethnicity based secular identity as a Bengali and religion-based territorially defined identity as Bangladeshis (Adams 2015, Bhardwaj 2011). This portrayal has served as a source of schism and contributed to the weakening of social cohesion.

This division has been created and reproduced by political parties in their daily discourses and political documents, including election manifestos. Presentations of the role of religion depict their position as to what role the party expects religion to play and how the party will facilitate the process, if it is elected to state power. It is worth recalling here that instrumentalization of religion has not been an exclusive preserve of the political parties; state institutions have been used to foreground religion in social lives. In a similar vein, social organizations, especially some faith-based organizations, have also thrust religion into the forefront of public discourses.

Political Landscape and Party System in Bangladesh

In the past 50 years Bangladesh has witnessed several systems of governance, ranging from multiparty electoral democracy to a one-party presidential system to military rule. Despite the variations, authoritarianism was the defining feature of governance until 1991. The democratic journey of the country since then, however, has not produced a stable and resilient participatory system of governance, despite four relatively fair elections and alteration of power between 1991 and 2008. Instead, acrimonious relations between two major parties, the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), have engendered political crises and paved the way for the military’s intervention in politics under a civilian guise (2007-2008). Researchers and international organizations argue that

over the past 14 years the country has descended into a hegemonic electoral authoritarian system (Savoia and Asadullah 2019; Blair 2020; Hossain 2020, Mostofa and Subedia 2021, Riaz, 2022, BTI 2022. International IDEA 2022).

The changes in the political landscape have shaped the contours of the party system. While a *de facto* two-party system has emerged, reflected in the popular votes secured by the BAL and the BNP in four elections held between 1991 and 2008, the number of political parties has proliferated. Bangladesh has two kinds of political parties: those which have grassroots organizations with reasonable public support, and those which are name-only with very limited presence in the political sphere. The Election Commission (EC) requires registration with the commission to be eligible to participate in the election. As of September 2023, 44 parties were registered with the commission (BEC 2023). However, scores of political parties have not been granted registration but have presence and support among the populace and have the capacity to mobilize their supporters on various issues. As for the ideological orientations, parties of various shades of left and right exist.

Religion in the Political Sphere

Bangladesh's political landscape has witnessed significant changes in terms of the ideological orientations of the parties and gradual ascendance of the question of religion in the political sphere. The rise of religion as a social phenomenon had been intertwined with the identity question on the one hand, and acknowledgment and acceptance of pluralism and diversity on the other. There are two defining characteristics of these changes. The first is the emergence and proliferation of religion-based political parties, and the second is the acknowledgment of religion's role as a key sociopolitical element by major, ostensibly secular parties.

In the early years of independence, the constitution barred founding religion-based political parties, but since 1978 religion-based parties have been allowed. Consequently, religion-based political parties, that is parties whose objectives include implementing an Islamic system of governance in some measure, began to emerge. Two religion-based parties participated in the 1979 election: the Islamic Democratic League and the Bangladesh Nezam-i-Islami. In the 1986 election, which was boycotted by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and five leftist parties, at least nine Islamist parties participated, including the Jamaat-e-Islami. In 1988, all major political parties boycotted the election. An alliance of smaller parties emerged as the main challenger of the ruling Jatiya Party (JP). Among the few other parties which participated was an Islamist party. Between 1979 and 1990, several old Islamist parties which became moribund at independence began to reorganize themselves (for example, Jamaat-i Ulema-i-Islami, originally established in 1909), and a few other new parties began to emerge (for examples, Bangladesh Khilafat Andolon, est. 1981; Bangladeshi Islami Andolon, est. 1981). The trend continued after Bangladesh embarked on its democratic journey in 1991.

While the total number of Islamist parties is difficult to determine as many are only on paper (a characteristic shared with non-faith-based parties), participation in elections and the number of registered parties with the Election Commission since 2008 provides some idea. The number of Islamist parties participating in various elections are the following: 1991-17; 1996-18; 2001-11; 2008-10; and 2018-12. As of December 2023 there are 11 Islamist parties registered with the Election Commission, and seven of them have filed candidates for the 2024 election.

Islamist parties are not the only strand of faith-based political parties. In 1986, a party named Bangladesh Hindu Oikkyo Front contested and secured only 1,338 votes. In the 1991, 1996, and 2001 elections, Bangladesh Hindu League participated. Bangladesh National Hindu Party field candidates in 1991.

Bangladesh Tafsil Jati Federation (Mondol) and Bangladesh Tafsili Federation (Sudir) participated in 1996. Although Bangladesh Hindu Mohajot, established in 2006, claimed itself a social organization, it has professed a specific political agenda to protect the interests of the Hindu community. In 2017 the Bangladesh Janata Party (BJP) was launched, claiming to protect the interests of the Hindu community, and was followed by and the Bangladesh Sonaton Party (BSP) in 2022. The former announced that it will compete in elections, but it neither registered with the EC nor remained active since.

Acknowledgment of the role of religion in society, adoption of religious rhetoric, and instrumentalization of religion as a part of the political ideology by apparently secular parties are largely a post-1990 phenomenon. Except for left parties, all parties recognize the role of religion in social and political life and often use religious symbols and icons in their party documents and public pronouncements. Since its inception in 1979 the BNP has underscored the role of religion in the sociopolitical lives in Bangladesh. The constitutional changes under Ziaur Rahman's rule (November 1975-May 1980) included the deletion of secularism as a state principle, insertion of "absolute trust and faith in almighty Allah" and incorporation of *Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim* ("In the name of Allah, The Most Merciful and The Most Compassionate") in the constitution, and repeated reference to the Islamic values clearly indicated that the party views religion as a key element of national identity. In similar vein, from its founding the Jatiya Party (JP) headed by General H M Ershad insisted that it reflects the Islamic ethos. Throughout the years it was in power (1982-1990) Ershad not only incorporated Islam as a state religion in the constitution, but he had also evoked religion on various occasions and befriended Islamists, especially conservative Islamists. He went on to say on January 15, 1983, that making Bangladesh an Islamic country was the goal of his struggle. After his downfall, in the 1991 election the JP founded an alliance with five parties, including two Islamist parties, and named it *Islami Jatiyo Oikyo Front (IJO)*. Both the BNP and the JP have adopted religious objectives and rhetoric as an ideological position instead of a political strategy.

The Bangladesh Awami League (BAL), often described as a secular party, began to adopt religious rhetoric, use Islamic slogans, and befriend Islamist parties beginning in 1991. During the 1991 election campaign Sheikh Hasina Wazed declared that she had "no quarrel with Bismillah," meaning that if her party was voted to power it won't remove *Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim* from the preamble (Hashmi 1998). Between 1991 and 1994, the BAL allied with the *Jamaat-e-Islami (JI)*, the country's largest Islamist party, inside and outside the parliament to oust the BNP government headed by Khaleda Zia; resigned from the parliament together with the JI; and launched street agitation to include caretaker government provision in the constitution (Riaz 2016; Hashmi 2023). In the 1996 election the party adopted the slogan "*la ilaha illah, nauker malik tui Allah*" ("There is no God but Allah, and Allah is the Owner of boat," Yasmin 2013). On December 26, 2006, ahead of the 2007 election (which was cancelled after military intervened on January 11, 2007), the BAL signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Bangladesh Khilafat Majlish (BKM) that stipulated that if the BAL-led Grand Alliance comes to power it would introduce a blasphemy law and create a system to certify ulama who can issue fatwa (religious edicts). On March 23, 2014, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina declared that the country would be governed as per Medina Charter, a 622 CE document which lays out the Islamic principles of governance. In 2017, the government decided to make changes in school textbooks to satisfy demands of the ultraconservative Islamist group *Hefazat-i-Islam (HI)*. Hasina's cajoling of Islamists and the use of religion was described by the *Economist* as "use of piety to mask her misrule" (Economist 2017). In 2018, the government recognized the degrees awarded by the privately owned *Qawmi* madrasas (Islamic seminaries) as equivalent to master's degree. The policies and actions of the BAL have been described as Islamization of society and polity (Lorch 2029; Hasan 2020).

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF SOCIAL COHESION

Social cohesion at a conceptual level is widely discussed yet highly ambiguous. The term's origins can be traced to the works of Emile Durkheim, especially his insistence on a “cohesive society,” and social scientists, policymakers, and national and international agencies have used the term from different perspectives and explained it differently, with different constitutive elements. According to Durkheim, a cohesive society is one that is marked by the abundance of “mutual moral support, which instead of throwing the individual on his own resources, leads him to share in the collective energy and supports his own when exhausted” (Durkheim, 1893).

Two broad approaches to the concept are helpful to analyzing the underlying patterns. Some consider the concept as being synonymous with trust, solidarity, and peace; while others incorporate inclusiveness, poverty, and social capital as essential elements. With the growing use of the concept, a definition put forward by Judith Maxwell has gained traction: “Social cohesion involves building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community” (Maxwell 1996). This definition highlights the procedural aspect of social cohesion, which many analysts consider as deficient as it does not capture sociocultural aspects (Rob et. al. 2020). Similar criticisms are raised against the definition provided by Chan et al (2006). They have noted some integral elements of the concept: “Social cohesion is a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that include trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioral manifestations” (Chan et al 2006, 290).

The vertical and horizontal aspects underscored by Chan et al contributed to the conceptualization of social cohesion in the Asia-SCR. According to the Asia-SCR, three dimensions of social cohesion incorporate both horizontal and vertical relationships and involve intersection of these factors. Social relation refers to the strength of social networks, the level of interpersonal trust, and acceptance of diversity; connectedness refers to identification with social entity, level of institutional trust, and perception of fairness in society; and the common good incorporates attitudes and behaviors related to solidarity and responsibility for others, respect of social rules, and engagement for the community (Delhey and Boehnke 2018, 35). These variations clearly point to the multidimensionality of the concept.

Existing literature on conceptualization faces an additional two challenges: first, whether the concept should adopt a universalist or a particularistic approach (Delhey et al 2018; Janmaat 2011); secondly, whether a distinction should be made between ideational and relational dimensions of social cohesion (Janmaat 2011). As for the universalistic approach, a large body of academic literature and those which have been advanced by organizations such the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2012) and the Council of Europe (2004) speak of social cohesion and insist on some universal values. To a degree this line of argument has developed along the line of modernization theory, which posits development as a linear process that all societies follow from agricultural, rural, and traditional societies to postindustrial, urban, and modern forms, and as such these societies must adhere to particular values and norms. While such arguments were contested and were discarded in the 1990s as a development paradigm, a variant has emerged in Europe in the context of debates about immigration and integration of the migrant community, especially after the rise of transnational terrorism post-2001. One of the key weaknesses of the argument is that it implies homogenization of society based on cultural traits, norms and values of dominant culture and religion in a country.

On the other hand, those who argue in favor of a particularistic approach contend that different countries, regions, and cultures tread different pathways and adhere to different norms. Although Green et al's study on social cohesion in Europe is considered seminal in this regard (Green et al 2009), the approach has gained salience in recent years. One of the key aspects of the particularistic approach is its insistence on the cultural element of society. "Scholars associated with this school of thought tend to understand culture as an enduring phenomenon shaping rather than being shaped by political and socio-economic processes" (Janmaat 2011). As for the second challenge, Janmaat (2011) has argued that it is necessary to make a distinction between ideational and relational aspects of social cohesion: "The ideational dimension refers to shared norms, values and identities as the affective side of social cohesion. The relational dimension refers to the observed relationships between members within a collectivity" (Janmaat 2011, 63).

METHODOLOGY

This report uses a qualitative content analysis method to examine the positions of six major political parties in Bangladesh on identity, religious diversity, and socially cohesive values, as presented in their election manifestos since 1991. Election manifestos were selected as they represent the commitment of the political party and serve ideally as the contract with the electorate. The review does not assess the performance of the respective parties vis-à-vis their promises while they were in government. These manifestos were gathered from several sources. A few of these were gathered over the past years as a part of this report author's efforts to build an archive. Those missing from this archive have been collected from the party offices. In large measures, Bengali versions of the manifestos were used for the analysis. However, English versions of three manifestos were available and used for analysis and quotations. They are of the 2018 election manifestos of BNP and BAL and the 2008 election manifesto of the Jamaat-e-Islami. The contents of each manifesto were summarized by three conceptual issues or domains and listed in Microsoft Excel sheets by party. The author and the research assistant summarized the manifestos separately and compared the coding to synchronize. Sometimes a party's statements remained the same throughout various years, while in others new additions were made. In listing the position of each party's commitment in each dimension, these common and reiterated positions are used as the position. In identifying changes and additional positions this report have used the manifesto of the last elections the party contested. For example, in the case of the JI, the 2008 election manifesto was used as the party didn't participate in the 2014 and 2018 elections.

Six political parties were selected covering the range from a religion-based party to an ostensibly secularist party on the left. The selection was based on the positions of the parties in the ideological spectrum and their participation in most of the past six elections. The aim was to include at least one party from each persuasion in the sample.

Seven elections have been held since 1991; the analysis excluded the February 1996 election as it was boycotted by all the parties except the then-incumbent BNP. The 2014 election was boycotted by the opposition parties, only the ruling Bangladesh Awami League and its allies' manifestos were there to examine. Below is the list of political parties and the years of manifestos selected as samples for the study (Table 1) and their electoral performance in the elections in which they participated (Table 2).

TABLE 01**Selected Parties and Manifestos by Year**

Party	Orientation	1991	1996	2001	2008	2014	2018
AL	Centrist	X	X	X	X	X	X
BNP	Right of Center	X	X	X	X	Boycotted	X
Jamaat-e-Islami (JI)	Islamist	X	X	X	X	*	**
Jatiya Party (JP)***	Centrist	X	X	X	X	X	X
Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB)	Leftist	X	X	X	X	Boycotted	X
Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD)****	Left of Center	X	X	X	X	X	X

Note: * JI was deregistered in 2013 after a court found its party charter inconsistent with the country's constitution, making it ineligible to participate. JI appealed against the verdict, but the Supreme Court rejected the appeal in November 2023. ** Although JI could not file its candidates under its party name, about 25 nominees participated under the symbol of the BNP. *** The JP has several factions; the analysis includes the faction led by the founder of the party, General H M Ershad. **** JSD has several factions under the same name; the analysis includes the faction led by Hasanul Huq Inu.

TABLE 02**Electoral Performance of Selected Parties, 1991-2018**

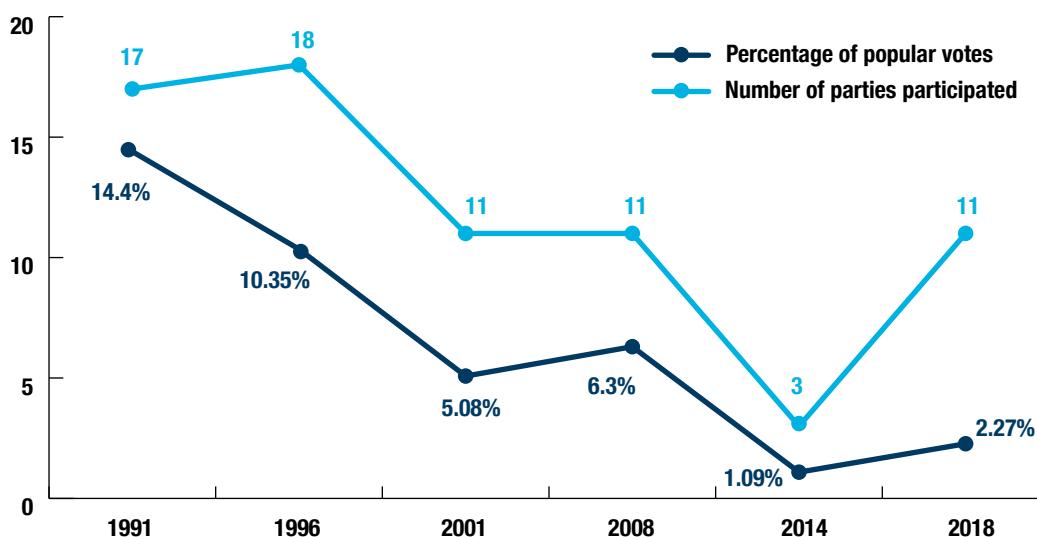
Party	Election year/Percentage of Total Vote Received					
	1991	1996	2001	2008	2014	2018
Bangladesh Awami League	30.08	37.44	40.13	48.04	72.14	74.44
Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)	30.81	33.60	40.97	32.50	N/A	12.07
Jatiya Party (JP)	11.92	16.40	7.25	7.04	7.00	5.38
Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami	12.13	8.61	4.28	4.70	N/A	N/A
Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB)	1.19	0.11	0.10	0.06	N/A	0.07
Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD)	0.50	0.12	0.21	0.72	1.19	0.72

Note: BNP boycotted the election in 2014. The BJI has been ineligible to participate since the 2014 election.

It should be noted that although there are many religion-based political parties, most of them are either not registered with the Election Commission and/or have not participated in elections as a separate political party but contested as a member of an alliance. As of December 2023, 11 Islamist parties are registered with the Election Commission. No other religion-based parties are registered. Some of the small religion-based political parties have regularly participated in elections, but their popular support has remained below 1% of popular votes. In the past six elections between 1991 and 2018 (except the election held in February 1996), Islamist parties' share of the popular vote has declined. The absence of the JI in the 2014 and 2018 elections as a party directly participating under its own symbol, along with the boycott of the 2014 elections by a large number of parties (including Islamists), had decreased the number significantly (Figure 1).

FIGURE 01

Islamist Parties in Elections and Their Share of Total Votes, 1991-2018



Jl is the only party earning more than 1% of the popular vote in all the elections it participated. The only exception to this was Bangladesh Tarikat Federation in 1984, when it secured 1.04% votes (Table 3).

TABLE 03

Electoral Performance of Islamist Parties, 1991-2018

Party	1991	1996	2001	2008	2014	2018
Bangladesh Tarikat Federation				0.03	1.04	0.51
Bangladesh Inquilab Party	0.00					
Bangladesh islami Biplobi Parishad	0.00	0.00				
Bangladesh Islami Front	0.07	0.06	0.06	0.05	0.02	0.07
Bangladesh Islami Party		0.00				
Bangladesh Islami Republican Party	0.00					
Bangladesh Khelafat Andolon	0.27	0.04	0.02	0.02		0.01
Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish					0.03	0.00
Bangladesh Khelafat Party	0.00					
Bangladesh Krishak Raj Islami Party		0.00				
Bangladesh Muslim League				0.00		0.02
Bangladesh Muslim League (Ayan Uddin)	0.20					
Bangladesh Muslim League (Jamir Ali)		0.01	0.00			
Bangladesh Muslim League (Kader)	0.10					
Bangladesh Muslim League (Motin)	0.03					
Bangladesh Muslim League (Yusuf)	0.01					

Bangladesh Nezame Islam Party	0.00					
Bangladesh Tanjumul Muslimin		0.00				
Islami Al Zihad Dal		0.00				
Islami Jatiya Oikya Front						
Islami Oikya Jote	0.79	1.09	0.68	0.15		0.01
Islami Shasantantra Andolon (Islami Andolon Bangladesh 2008)		0.03	0.01	0.94		1.47
Islamic Dal Bangladesh (Saifur)						
Islamic Front Bangladesh				0.00		0.04
Islamic Samajtantrik Dal, Bangladesh	0.00					
Jaker Party	1.22	0.40	0.00	0.19		0.13
Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh	12.13	8.61	4.28	4.70		
Jamate Olamaye Islami Front	0.04					
Jamiate Ulamae Islam Bangladesh		0.11	0.03	0.25		0.00
Khelafat Majlish				0.04		0.01
Muslim Peoples Party	0.00					
People's Muslim League		0.00				
Quran and Sunnah Bastabayan Party		0.00	0.00			
Quran Darshan Sagstha Bangladesh		0.00	0.00			
Saat DOilio Jote (Mirpur)		0.00				
Tharikey Olama-e-Bangladesh		0.00				
Total percentages	14.87	10.35	5.08	6.37	1.09	2.27

Source: Bangladesh Election Commission. 1. Islamist parties which participated at least in one election between 1991 and 2018, even if their percentage of the popular vote was 0%, are included. 2. In the 2001 election, an alliance of five parties contested under the name Islamic Jatiyo Oikya Front. Two of these alliance members were Islamists: Islamic Shashontotro Andolon and Muslim League. The alliance was led by the JP (Ershad faction). The alliance candidates bagged a total of 7.25% of the popular vote. They won 14 seats; all belonged to the JP. The alliance collapsed soon after the election as the alliance members in the parliament identified themselves as JP members rather than alliance members. Despite being named as an Islamist alliance, and having two Islamist members, the analysis excluded their votes from the total Islamist votes.

Thematic Categories and Analytical Framework

This report focuses on three aspects of social cohesion, following Rob et al (2020): identity, diversity and pluralism, and socially cohesive values.

Identity is a fundamental element of social cohesion not only in terms of understanding one's position within society but also in shaping the sense of belonging and determining the person's role vis-à-vis other members of society and with formal and informal institutions, including the state. It not only reflects the ties that bind people to groups, but also it affects those ties and how the person decides to see members of other groups. It is in this vein that the identity thesis posits that sharing an identity tends to promote social cohesion. It is commonly argued, drawing on the social identity approach, that "an individual is likely to join a group based on an intrinsic self-evaluation at a cognitive or perceptual level. In other words, group members typically share an awareness of a common category membership" (Purohit et al 2012).

The importance of identity has long been underscored by social scientists. Hroch (1996, 69) argues that cohesive groups are “integrated not by one but by a combination of several kinds of objective relationships (economic, political, linguistic, cultural, religious, geographical, historical) and their subjective reflection in collective consciousness.” These “people who share the same collective identity think of themselves as having a common interest and common fate” (Kriesberg, 2003).

Individual identity is not singular; everyone in society belongs to several groups and has multiple identities, yet often one identity gets primacy over the others. While there are primordial identities which remain present in a society, those as well as other identities are often constructed. Identity construction not only creates a notion of inclusivity but also construction of “other” identities is part of the process; the process contributes to creation of social divisions and inequalities that are subsequently reinforced. Which identity will get primacy largely depends on the driving force in a society. Those who argue for construction of a national identity through social and juridico-legal forces suggest that the sharing of a national identity tends to facilitate social cohesion, including trust and solidarity. They insist that a national identity will create homogeneity and thus create a stronger social bond. Among the driving forces in constructing identities in a society are political parties.

In the sociopolitical context of Bangladesh, four sub-elements of identity—individual, group, national, and global—are pertinent. The identity question has remained contested and unresolved since the nineteenth century, but it has gained salience as a tool of political mobilization since the mid-1970s and contributed to “pernicious polarization” in the recent decade (Rahman 2019). How political parties of various persuasions portray the identity of citizens is thus relevant.

The relationship between **diversity**, particularly ethnic diversity, and social cohesion has been widely studied in the North American, European, and Australian contexts since Robert Putnam argued that ethnic diversity has negative impacts on social cohesion (Putnam 2000; 2007). The thesis has gained traction in the context of immigration to Western countries. However, the thesis has also been challenged with empirical data (van der Meer and Tolsma 2014; McKenna et al 2018). The debate notwithstanding, it can be argued that discussions on social cohesion cannot ignore diversity as an important factor. As such, it is imperative to examine how political parties address diversity. Acknowledgment of diversity—cultural, religious, ethnic, gender, and attitudes towards diversity—are essential factors for a cohesive society, especially in a diverse society.

Despite the apparent homogeneity of Bangladesh—89% of the population is Muslim and almost 99% belongs to the ethnic Bengali community—the country is diverse. According to the International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs, “Bangladesh is home to more than 54 Indigenous Peoples who speak at least 35 languages” (IWGIA, nd.). The country has not adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The constitution, since its adoption, has not officially recognized the existence of the indigenous population. However, since the amendment of the 2011 Constitution, people with ethnic identities different from the Bengali population are mentioned in the constitution, but there is no guarantee to the economic and political rights of indigenous communities. This reflects the majoritarian mindset of the political elites. Similarly, considering the small number of religious minorities, Muslim majoritarianism has become ingrained as the social norm.

Although Bangladesh has made significant progress in some indicators of gender parity (USAID, 2023), women face barriers due to social norms and the legal system. According to World Vision, “Bangladeshi women have been struggling to establish their rights in family, society and in the state. Practically in the society and the implementation of law, women are still facing discrimination, exclusion and injustice and have negligible influence in decision making processes. Discriminatory laws and policies hinder formal equality and sociopolitical conditions prevent women from exercising their rights” (World Vision, nd).

This report examines if and how the political parties address the issues related to the existing diversity and discrimination.

Values, defined as “stable meaning-producing superordinate cognitive structures” (Rohan, 2000, 257), are an essential part of understanding and measuring social cohesion. It is widely agreed by scholars that “shared values are necessary as a solid foundation for social cohesion” (Nowack and Schoderer 2020, vi). Although values vary by various sociocultural contexts, there are core values which are supportive of social cohesion, and these can be transmitted through generations. These include interdependence of cultural and religious groups; sense of social justice; respect for human rights; support for equality, especially for minorities; and opposition to discrimination. These are described as **socially cohesive values**, and this paper explores how the Bangladeshi political parties address these in their election manifestos.

Drawing on these three components, the following analytical framework with specific questions to examine is used in the review (Table 4).

TABLE 04
Analytical Framework for Assessing Social Cohesion

Thematic Category	Elements	Items to identify
Identity	Individual Group National Global	How are personal, social, national, and global identities defined and presented as an ideal by the political parties? What role does religion play in the construction of these identities?
Diversity and Pluralism	Cultural Religious Ethnic Gender Attitude towards diversity and pluralism	Does the party acknowledge the cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity of the country? Does the party approve and encourage tolerance for other religions and cultures? How does the party address gender equality? What, if any, role does religion play?
Socially Cohesive Values	Interdependence among cultural and religious groups Sense of social justice Respect for human rights Equality Minority Discrimination	Does the party recognize and offer actions towards building a cohesive society? Does the party recognize and offer actions for assuring human rights? Does the party recognize and offer actions for integrating minority groups into larger society? Is the party aware of and offering remedies to existing discrimination? Is the party imbued with social justice? Does religion play any role in identifying and addressing these issues?

FINDINGS

This section presents, in tabular format, the main findings of the review of the 32 manifestos from six political parties issued for six elections between 1991 and 2018. The findings are based on all the available manifestos of the respective party, while the quotations extracted to illustrate some of the commitments are drawn from the respective party’s last election manifesto.

TABLE 05**Bangladesh Awami League (BAL)**

Thematic Category	Elements	Findings	Summary Statements from the Manifestos
Identity	Individual identity Group identity National identity Global identity	<p>The BAL insists that individual identity is based on ethnicity and underscores that Bengali ethnic identity is the basis for citizenship in Bangladesh.</p> <p>The party emphasizes the distinct identity of ethnic and religious minority groups.</p> <p>National identity is defined as all citizens of Bangladesh, but BAL insists that this identity is shaped by the values of Bengali nationalism and secularism.</p> <p>Global identity of the country and its citizens is defined as citizens of the country in order to promote Bangladesh's interests on the international stage.</p>	<p>The policies and programmes followed by Awami League Government for protection and development of secular and democratic traditions of Bangalee culture will continue.</p>
Pluralism and Diversity	Cultural Religious Ethnic Gender Attitude towards diversity	<p>The BAL professes secularism as its ideal and is committed to ensuring constitutionally stipulated equal rights and honor for all citizens, including religious minorities, small ethnic communities, and “backward” communities. However, the election manifesto also promises that “Laws repugnant to Quran and Sunnah shall not be made.”</p> <p>The party emphasizes the need to foster a culture of tolerance, respect, and understanding for all viewpoints and beliefs.</p> <p>The party is committed to protecting the rights of all individuals, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or sexual orientation.</p> <p>The BAL is committed to protecting freedom of expression, association, and religion, ensuring that all citizens have the right to practice their faith and express their opinions freely.</p> <p>The party pledges to promote the inclusion of all groups in society, ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate in the country's social, economic, and political life.</p> <p>The BAL has committed to preserving and celebrating the cultural heritage of all groups, fostering a sense of shared identity and belonging.</p> <p>The BAL has also committed to promoting cultural diversity and understanding between different groups. Women will enjoy equal rights and opportunities.</p>	<p>With the adoption of the 15th Amendment in 2011, Awami League has restored the four basic principles of the state stipulated in the Constitution of 1972. As a result of ensuring the equal rights for religious minorities and the people of the small ethnic communities, the constitutional obligations to end the discriminatory behavior against small ethnic groups and protect their lives, properties, religious institutions and lifestyle and cultural individuality have been further reinforced. The slogan ‘To each his own religion, but festivals are for all’—reflects this motto.</p> <p>We are strongly against politics of division, violence, arson, blockade and anarchy. For the sake of uninterrupted continuation of the process of growth and development, we have to endeavour for national unity on the basis of four national principles embedded in the spirit of the liberation war.</p> <p>As per Articles 10 and 28 of the Constitution, Awami League is fully committed to establishing ‘women's participation in national life’ and women's equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and of public life. The introduction of 6-month maternity leave for would-be mothers and the mandatory rule of writing mother's name along with father's name—all are the contributions of Awami League.</p> <p>Bangladesh Awami League will carry on its initiative by women's empowerment through ensuring women's participation in all ranges of work with a view to eliminating discriminations against women.</p>

<p>Pluralism and Diversity continued</p>			<p>Equal wages for both men and women will be ensured, employment opportunities will be created for rural women, and work environment for the women will be improved in all sectors. Women's capabilities will be scaled up through imparting proper education and adequate training.</p> <p>The Awami League government is devoting its activities to resolve all discriminations based on religion, group, caste, gender or the place of birth. Efforts are going on to stop the misuse of religion in politics, elimination of hatred, involving all the marginalized people including the third gender in the process of development, and making the civil liberties and benefits available to the people.</p> <p>No law contrary to Quran and Sunnah will be enacted. Instructions and values of all religions will be honoured.</p> <p>Freedom of expression as per the Constitution, independent Human Rights Commission, independent Anti-Corruption Commission, independent media, independent and strong judiciary and the National Integrity Strategy are making important contributions to the protection of the basic rights of the people.</p>
<p>Socially Cohesive Values</p>	<p>Interdependence among cultural groups Sense of social justice Respect for human rights Equality Minority Discrimination</p>	<p>The party's manifestos have pledged to address the root causes of social divisions, such as poverty, inequality, and discrimination, while promoting tolerance, respect, and understanding among different groups.</p> <p>BAL has also committed to strengthening social safety nets, providing equal opportunities for all, and promoting social justice.</p> <p>The BAL insists on gender equality and women's empowerment as an essential part of promoting social cohesion, and it highlights policies related to women's rights, safety, and economic empowerment.</p> <p>As a marker of its commitment to protect the interests of the religious and ethnic minorities, it highlights the measures taken to protect the land, forests, water bodies, and other resources belonging to religious and ethnic minorities.</p>	<p>A 'National Social Protection Strategy' has been prepared with a view to accelerating poverty mitigation through making social safety programmes more goal-oriented and implementing them more successfully.</p> <p>Necessary measures have been taken to protect the lands, forests, water bodies and other resources belonging to the religious and ethnic minorities.</p> <p>'National Minority Commission' will be formed and Special law will be enacted for effective protection of the rights of the minority.</p> <p>All the discriminatory laws will be rescinded and unlawful practices against the minorities and small ethnic communities will be abolished.</p> <p>Let us put hand in hand and build up a Bangladesh where all basic needs of the people will be met, a domestic system will thrive with space for everyone, and social justice will be ensured. Let us join our hands to build up a Bangladesh where all will have equal rights and freedom to observe respective religions; where women will enjoy equal rights and opportunities; and where the youth will get an appropriate environment for creative development of their innate faculties.</p>

TABLE 06**Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)**

Thematic Category	Elements	Findings	Summary Statements from the Manifestos
Identity	Individual identity Group Identity National Identity Global Identity	<p>The BNP insists that individual identity is shaped by the individual’s religion.</p> <p>It underscores that being a Bangladeshi is a group identity, and solidarity within the community is emphasized.</p> <p>It insists on Bangladeshi as a national identity and emphasizes Bangladeshi culture.</p> <p>The Muslim-majority aspect of the country is highlighted, providing an impression of Islamic elements as the basis of global identity.</p>	<p>In the light of Bangladeshi nationalism and social and religious values, our culture will be developed naturally and fairly.</p>
Pluralism and Diversity	Cultural Religious Ethnic Gender Attitude towards diversity	<p>The BNP commits to protect religious, social, and cultural beliefs and identity of people of all other ethnicities and religions. However, it says that laws which contravene the Quran and Sunnah will not be enacted.</p> <p>The BNP commits to protect the rights of all Bangladeshi citizens, regardless of their background or beliefs.</p> <p>Recognizing the existing gender inequality, the party promises to ensure women’s representation in all government institutions.</p> <p>BNP promises to promote, encourage, and patronize “native” culture and prevent “all forms of counterculture.”</p> <p>Regardless of party, creed, caste, or religion, all ethnic groups, small and large, will be guaranteed full rights to constitutional social, political, economic, and cultural rights and resources.</p> <p>The BNP commits to provide additional attention to protect the lives and property of “backward” groups.</p>	<p>The participation of women in all affairs would be guaranteed. All obstacles to reaching this objective would be eradicated.</p> <p>Women would receive the rightful entitlement to family inheritance and all conflicting laws, if any, would be addressed in this matter.</p> <p>Laws would be enforced strictly in order to stop harassment of women, rape, throwing of acid, demanding of dowry, sexual harassment and exploitation of women and children.</p> <p>The right to life, property and social dignity of the minority and ethnic nationalities living in the hills and the plains would be fully protected.</p> <p>A separate Ministry for Religious Minority Affairs would be created.</p> <p>A National Commission would be formed to reach a new social contract with a view to establishing a forward-looking new stream of political culture as against politics of retribution and alienation.</p>

<p>Socially Cohesive Values</p>	<p>Interdependence among cultural groups Sense of social justice Respect for human rights Equality Minority Discrimination</p>	<p>The party commits to protect the rights of all citizens, including freedom of expression, association, and practice of religion, irrespective of religion and caste, and to strengthen national unity and solidarity.</p> <p>The party's manifestos have outlined measures to address gender inequality, social discrimination, and economic disparities.</p> <p>BNP continues to insist that it will uphold the four principles enshrined in the country's constitution, which include economic and social justice.</p> <p>The BNP affirms its support to the National Human Rights Act, and the National Minority Commission as its commitment to upholding the human rights of all citizens.</p> <p>The party promises that there will be no discrimination against religious or ethnic minorities in appointment to important government positions.</p> <p>Alleviation of poverty and promotion of economic empowerment, particularly among marginalized groups, are underscored to reduce economic disparities which contributes to social tensions.</p>	<p>Freedom of Expression would be ensured. There would be no censorship in criticizing the government. Citizens would be allowed to speak and communicate without fear or re-pression.</p> <p>Digital Security Act and Official Secrets Act and all other black laws would be scrapped. Under the Rights to Information Act there would be no impediments to obtaining any information. The Special Powers Act 1974 would be scrapped.</p> <p>The four principles enshrined in the country's constitution - full trust and faith in Almighty Allah, nationalism, democracy and economic and social justice - will be upheld and the parliamentary democratic system will be strengthened.</p> <p>Culture of tolerance would be encouraged to prevent objectionable criticism of the national leaders.</p> <p>Rationing would be introduced for the individuals living below the poverty line.</p> <p>The financial safety benefits for destitute women, widows and elderly would be increased in accordance to the prevailing inflation rates.</p> <p>An Ombudsman would be appointed as per the provisions of the Constitution.</p> <p>A National Commission would be formed to reach a new social contract with a view to establishing a forward-looking new stream of political culture as against politics of retribution and alienation.</p> <p>The functioning of the state administrative machinery, police and institutions would be ensured on the basis of honesty, merit, skill, efficiency, patriotism and sense of judgment. There would be no room for personal bias or nepotism.</p>
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TABLE 07
Jatiya Party (JP)

Thematic Category	Elements	Findings	Summary Statements from the Manifestos
Identity	Individual identity Group Identity National Identity Global Identity	<p>Underscores personal religion as the basis of individual identity, with emphasis on Bangladeshi identity.</p> <p>Emphasizes Muslim identity and solidarity as the dominant group identity.</p> <p>National identity is described as Bangladeshi with reference to being Muslim and ascribes the construction of the identity to the Liberation War of 1971.</p> <p>Global identity is constructed through reference to the country as a Muslim-majority country and Islamic culture.</p>	<p>Jatiya Party promises to establish the spirit of independence, sovereignty, liberation war, religious values, Bangladeshi nationalism, good governance, and true democratic system of governance.</p>
Pluralism and Diversity	Cultural Religious Ethnic Gender Attitude towards diversity	<p>Emphasizes a homogenous national culture described as Bangladeshi culture.</p> <p>Muslim religious cultural traits are highlighted.</p> <p>JP manifestos stressed the importance of maintaining peace and harmony among different religious communities in Bangladesh.</p> <p>The party on the one hand is underscoring Islamic values and Islamic precepts, and promises to give religious values a priority, while on the other hand it promises to ensure representations of religious minorities.</p> <p>Recognition of gender diversity and a promise of gender equality is spotty in the manifestos over the period under review; however, in the 2018 manifesto, the party promises to ensure women's education to they can obtain better jobs.</p>	<p>Right of the followers of all religion shall be safeguarded.</p> <p>Thirty seats will be reserved through constitutional amendment for religious minorities increasing the total number of seats in the parliament to 380.</p> <p>Employment and higher education opportunities will be ensured to the minorities proportionate to their adherents. The Ministry of Religious Minorities will be established, and a Minorities Commission will be appointed.</p> <p>Existing laws would be brought in line with the principles of the Qur'an and Sunnah.</p> <p>Laws contrary Qur'an and Sunnah shall be amended. Shariah laws would be followed as far as possible.</p> <p>Special laws would be made for punishing those making derogatory remarks against the Prophet (sm) and the Shariah.</p> <p>Religious values will be given top priority.</p>
Socially Cohesive Values	Interdependence among cultural groups Sense of social justice Respect for human rights Equality Minority Discrimination	<p>Jatiya Party manifestos have mentioned, except in 2008, the importance of maintaining peace and harmony among different religious communities in Bangladesh.</p> <p>Expressed commitment to upholding the rights of religious minorities and ensuring their equal treatment under the law. However, it promises to amend the laws contrary to Quran and Sunnah and enact an anti-blasphemy law (law to punish those who makes derogatory comments about Islam and Prophet Muhammad).</p>	<p>Rural rationing will be introduced in rural areas to ensure minimum food resources for people in rural areas. Within a year, arrangements will be made to provide rice-dal (lintels) -oil-sugar to the people of the village through the rural rationing system. Arrangements will be made so that the people of the village can regularly get essential products at low cost.</p>

Socially Cohesive Values continued	Voiced support for good governance and transparent, accountable administration as vital for the social well-being of the country.	Promoted values of religious tolerance and inclusivity, encouraging all religious groups to peacefully participate in social, economic, and political life.
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TABLE 08

Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD)

Thematic Category	Elements	Findings	Summary Statements from the Manifestos
Identity	Individual identity Group identity National identity Global identity	Party defines individual identity by ethnicity as a Bengali, although it does not explicitly address the national identity issue. Party underscores secular identity as the key element in defining the national identity.	[The JSD will] pursue the spirit of the Liberation War in all aspects of governance, and will as well as following the four main state principles - democracy, socialism, secularism, and nationalism enshrined in the 1972 Constitution,
Pluralism and Diversity	Cultural Religious Ethnic Gender Attitude towards diversity	JSD values and promotes the cultural and religious diversity of Bangladesh. The party emphasizes the protection and rights of minority and indigenous people. It advocates measures that ensure the inclusion and welfare of minority and indigenous communities. Based on its commitment to secularist principles, it advocates separation of religion and politics and values diversity. It promises to protect the rights of all minorities in Bangladesh, including religious and ethnic minorities, and minorities in terms of their sexual orientations. The party promises to promote tolerance and understanding between different ethnic and religious groups. The party advocates for equal rights for women in all spheres of life, including education, employment, and politics. It calls for an end to gender discrimination in hiring and promotion and supports initiatives to increase women's representation in the workforce.	Ensuring the right of all citizens to practice religion in peace without fear. Ensuring the sanctity and peace of religious places by banning political activities in all religious places including mosques-temples-churches-pagodas, stopping the use of religion as a political tool, maintaining harmony and peaceful coexistence among people of all religions. Banning religion-based politics, communalism, fatwabaazi (issuing religious edicts). Abolition of all discriminatory laws against women, implementation of women's development policies, reservation of 33% of seats in the National Parliament and holding direct elections, 33% of representation in local government bodies, reservation of 33% in all representative bodies including political parties, trade unions Share representation reservation for women, paid 6 months maternity leave for working women, equal pay for men and women for equal work. To ensure the right of all citizens to practice their religion without fear.

Socially Cohesive Values	Interdependence among cultural groups	It emphasizes the importance of constructing a national identity that promotes social cohesion.	[[JSD promises to] end all forms of discrimination between citizens on the basis of religion and caste, abolish the Enemy Property Act, fully implement the Chittagong Hill Tracts Agreement, set up a Land Commission to ensure the traditional rights of the tribals and ethnic minorities of the plains over land, provide constitutional recognition to ethnic minorities. Formulation of land use policy for villages and towns to ensure land reform and maximum utilization of land, establishment of land commissions, bringing khas land, land holdings beyond the stipulated ceiling, dispossessed land under state control, reform of land administration, special courts to solve legal problems related to land will play a role. Establish trust for workers-employees-farmers-women within the government, reflect public aspirations in determining government policies, especially workers-employees-farmers-agricultural workers-laborers-workers-professionals-hardworking people-domestic entrepreneurs in agriculture and industry. Investors will be encouraged to make efforts to protect the interests of the exploited, deprived and backward groups of the society, including the tribals, religious and ethnic minorities. Registration of slum dwellers, no eviction of hawker-slums without rehabilitation, launch of housing schemes to ensure basic services for slum dwellers, resettlement of rural landless and squatters on special land, compulsory investment of 5 percent of the total deposits of all banks for the poor in poverty alleviation programs, emergency fund.
	Sense of social justice	Based on their professed socialist principles, the party underscores social justice, political inclusivity, and secular governance.	
	Respect for human rights.	The party emphasizes the importance of interfaith harmony and dialogue to foster understanding and cooperation among people of different religious backgrounds.	
	Equality	It advocates policies aiming to reduce income inequality and provide economic opportunities to marginalized and disadvantaged communities.	
	Minority	It insists that secularism is essential for ensuring equal treatment and religious freedom for all citizens, regardless of their faith, which contributes to social cohesion.	
	Discrimination	The JSD promises to strengthen the rule of law by upholding the independence of the judiciary and ensuring that all citizens are equal before the law. The party expresses commitment to upholding human rights as a part of a just and equitable society.	

TABLE 09
Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB)

Thematic Category	Elements	Findings	Summary Statements from the Manifestos
Identity	Individual identity	Individual identity emphasizes attributes of Bengali culture and traits.	Re-establish the principles of the 1972 Constitution including democracy, secularism, nationalism and socialism as state principles. Consolidate the spirit of progressive Bengali nationalism in the self-development of Bengalis and other nationalities living in Bangladesh and protect the constitutional recognition of the existence and rights of other nationalities and their right to development.
	Group Identity	National identity is based on the ideals of the 1971 Liberation War, emphasizing Bengali nationalism.	
	National Identity	Global identity is based on national identity but with commitment to be a part of the international socialist movement, which transcends religious and national identities.	
	Global Identity		

Pluralism and Diversity	<p>Cultural Religious Ethnic Gender Attitude towards diversity</p>	<p>CPB advocates a secular political system that separates religion from the state, thus recognizes the plurality of religion.</p> <p>It staunchly supports religious freedom and the right of individuals to practice their faith without interference.</p> <p>CPB values and promotes the cultural and religious diversity of Bangladesh. It advocates equal rights and equal opportunities for all citizens irrespective of religion, caste, ethnic identity, gender, and social status.</p> <p>It promises to raise social awareness to prevent sectarianism, bigotry, and prejudice against religious minorities.</p> <p>Promoting gender equality and women's empowerment is a core element of the CPB's agenda. It advocates policies that address gender-based violence, economic disparities as a result of gender, and representation of women in decision-making roles.</p> <p>It promises to ensure the life and wealth of religious and ethnic minorities and indigenous people.</p> <p>The party believes that indigenous communities have a right to self-determination and that their land and culture should be protected. Its position on indigenous communities is in line with its overall ideology of socialism and communism.</p>	<p>Ensuring equal rights of all citizens irrespective of religion, caste, women, men and abolishing all discriminatory laws.</p> <p>Ensuring equal status and security for religious minorities in all spheres of state and society. To stop torture, persecution, discrimination, harassment of people belonging to religious minorities. Formation of the Commission for Religious Minorities (Protection of Rights).</p> <p>To give full constitutional recognition to the identity of ethnic minorities. Signing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and taking concrete measures accordingly.</p> <p>Ensuring social security of women. Protecting women from the violence of bigoted preachers and influencers. Implementation of the historic 2001 High Court ruling outlawing fatwas.</p> <p>Formulating and implementing gender sensitive policies for all media to ensure proper role of mass media against negative, restrictive, derogatory, traditional attitudes towards women.</p> <p>Introduction of Uniform Family Code and updating the laws relating to Torture against Women.</p>
Socially Cohesive Values	<p>Interdependence among cultural groups Sense of social justice Respect for human rights Equality Minority Discrimination</p>	<p>It emphasizes the importance of interfaith harmony and dialogue to foster understanding and cooperation among people of different religious backgrounds to strengthen social cohesion.</p> <p>CPB insists that gender equality is a fundamental component of social cohesion.</p> <p>Promotes social cohesion by opposing religious discrimination and special treatment for any particular religion or group.</p> <p>It seeks to protect workers' rights, fair wages, safe working conditions, and collective bargaining as conditions for ensuring social justice. It believes that strong workers' rights contribute to social cohesion by reducing exploitation and inequality.</p> <p>Emphasizes the importance of social justice, advocates policies that address issues such as land reform, empowerment of marginalized communities, and the protection of minority rights.</p> <p>It believes that all people, regardless of their ethnicity or social status, should have equal rights and opportunities.</p>	<p>Eradiation of all forms of communalism from all sectors of society.</p> <p>Ensuring the right to practice one's religion, ensuring equality of religious minorities. Ensuring the dignity and full security of minorities, and repealing the 'Enemy/Vested Property Act.'</p> <p>Establishing a 'Land Commission' to ensure the land rights of the minority communities and giving priority to them in the allocation of special land in the respective areas. To form a commission to improve the socio-economic status of Dalit community.</p> <p>Ensuring freedom of individual, freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom of thought and expression, freedom of conscience, freedom of association, freedom of strike, assembly, and demonstration.</p> <p>Building a strong and robust public distribution system across the country, forming 'Producer Co-operatives' and 'Meta Co-operatives' and introducing direct 'marketing' between them.</p>

TABLE 10**Bangladesh Jamaat-Islami (BJI)**

Thematic Category	Elements	Findings	Summary Statements from the Manifestos
Identity	Individual identity Group identity National identity Global identity	Individual identity emphasizes attributes of Islam. Group identity insists that every Muslim citizen shall adhere to the fundamentals of Islamic faith. National identity is framed as a part of religious faith, invoking Allah and Prophet Muhammad’s teaching and referencing a Muslim nation. Global identity is expressed as a citizen of democratic Islamic welfare state.	Bangladesh shall be declared an Islamic Republic on the basis of Sovereignty of Almighty Allah. The Holy Quran and Sunnah will be the only source of all laws in the Republic. (1991, 1996, 2001)
Pluralism and Diversity	Cultural Religious Ethnic Gender Attitude towards diversity	<p>Ji underscores Islamic culture as a defining element of society and that tenets of Islamic faith and law will be dominant.</p> <p>It states, “Islamic laws and principles shall be accorded recognition as state laws.”</p> <p>Women shall be provided with employment in accordance with their talent, qualifications, and needs to establish the highest dignity and right of women given by Islam.</p> <p>Promised to promulgate “blasphemy law to prevent and prosecute anti-religious propaganda.”</p> <p>The Ji mentions that measures shall be taken to ensure that people of other religious denominators can perform their religious practices freely. It further states, “Security of life, property and honor of people of all religions shall be guaranteed.”</p> <p>Gender diversity is not featured in the manifestos. The 2008 manifesto (the last election that the Ji participated) stated that “rape and all other forms of violence against women shall be prevented.”</p> <p>It also presented women’s rights and entitlement to opportunities as stipulated in the Islamic religious laws and tradition.</p> <p>Emphasizes building new institutions to spread Islamic education.</p> <p>Each and every Muslim citizen shall be oriented in unquestioned faith in Islamic fundamentals, injunctions, and moral values so that Muslim men and women could acquire knowledge about the fundamental teachings of Islam easily.</p> <p>Laws shall be enacted to stop anti-religious propaganda and punish those who make indecent remarks to religion.</p>	<p>As an initial step to establish an Islamic welfare state, the existing laws of the country will be improved in order to make them well-timed, and eventually a modern welfare state will be established through comprehensive administrative reforms.</p> <p>The main objective of Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh is to establish a complete equitable and well-rounded social order in the world on the basis of the Quran and Sunnah uprooting all sorts of man’s oppression over man including the oppressed from the world through introducing the law of Allah on His earth.</p> <p>All possible steps shall be taken to establish ‘Salat’ (prayers). Laws shall be enacted to stop anti-religious propaganda and punish those who make indecent remarks to religion. Believers in other religions shall enjoy full freedom to practice their respective religions.</p> <p>Women shall be provided with employment in accordance with their talent, qualifications and needs in order to establish the highest dignity and right of women given by Islam. Oppression on women everywhere shall be curbed with an iron hand.</p> <p>All people irrespective of caste, creed, religion shall enjoy equal civic amenities in respect of citizen’s right. Life, property, and honour of non-Muslim population, their religious freedom as well as their civic and legal rights shall be protected.</p> <p>The rule of law shall be established to ensure an equal application of law to all citizens.</p> <p>Blasphemy law shall be promulgated to prevent and prosecute anti-religious propaganda and to ban blasphemous remarks in books and in print and electronic media.</p>

<p>Pluralism and Diversity continued</p>			<p>Security of life, property, and honour of people of all religions shall be guaranteed. Religious freedom and civil and legal rights of people of all religions shall be protected.</p> <p>Full wellbeing and development of the scheduled caste shall be ensured, and the distinctiveness of the non-Muslims and indigenous communities shall be maintained. All shall be given equal opportunities in education and employment.</p>
<p>Socially Cohesive Values</p>	<p>Interdependence among cultural groups Sense of social justice Respect for human rights Equality Minority Discrimination</p>	<p>A sense of social justice derived from Islamic precepts is underscored and promises to ensure a system to deliver social justice. The existence of social inequality is recognized, and zakat (alms) is prescribed as the remedial measure. It promises to establish equal religious rights for people of all religions. All people irrespective of caste, creed, or religion shall enjoy equal civic amenities in respect of citizens' rights. Life, property, and honor of non-Muslim population; their religious freedom; and their civic and legal rights shall be protected. The JI states, "In terms of civil rights, equal opportunities for people of all religions and ethnicities shall be guaranteed." The JI commits to repeal all repressive laws, like the Special Powers Act and Public Safety Act, to guarantee the people's fundamental rights.</p>	<p>All repressive black laws like the Special Powers Act and Public Safety Act shall be repealed in order to guarantee the people's fundamental rights. The judiciary shall be separated from the Executive in toto. Civil and criminal Procedure codes shall be suitably amended for ensuing easy and quick disposal of cases and in the interest of justice</p> <p>Muslim men and women shall be educated in the basic teachings of the Islamic belief system, Islamic rules and regulations and moral teachings. Appropriate measures shall be taken to establish ritual prayers among the Muslims. Blasphemy law shall be promulgated to prevent and prosecute anti-religious propaganda and to ban blasphemous remarks in books and in print and electronic media.</p> <p>Equal religious rights shall be established for people of all religions.</p> <p>Security of life, property and dignity and the cultural distinctiveness of all the inhabitants of the region – indigenous people, Bengali, non-Bengali, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians and people of all religions, colours and ethnicities –shall be protected.</p> <p>All sorts of fundamental rights of people of all aboriginal tribes and ethnic minorities living in Chittagong Hill Tracts and in other parts of the country shall be protected</p> <p>Measures shall be taken to ensure that people of other religious denominations can perform their religious practices freely.</p> <p>Appropriate measures shall be taken to alleviate poverty through expanding industrial business and agriculture and through providing bank credits. Zakat shall be used as an effective method of maintaining social security and development.</p> <p>The Jakat System which is symbol of social security and prosperity shall be established as compulsory. 'Baitul Maal' (State Treasury) shall be built up by collecting Jakat and Usahr from the rich and well-to-do people of the society.</p>

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The review of election manifestos of six political parties over a period of 17 years across six elections provides a picture of the commitments of political parties of various persuasions regarding identity, diversity, and socially cohesive values. A few features warrant attention.

Identity as a Wedge Issue

The identity question has been the most divisive issue, with political parties falling into two distinct camps. In these binary constructs, one camp underscores the ethnic Bengali identity while the other camp's insistence on "Bangladeshi" is laced with a latent religious undertone. The ethnicity-based identity is exclusionary as it precludes or at least marginalizes the indigenous nationalities and also excludes non-Bengalis, commonly referred to as Biharis. Many Urdu-speaking people were left behind after the 1971 war of independence, and the Pakistani government deliberately failed to repatriate them, but several generations of them have been born in Bangladesh since independence (Macdonald 2021). Yet there is no reference to them in the election manifestos in any of the political parties. The notion of "Bangladeshi" had the potential of being an inclusive composite identity, but the way it is presented and practiced by its adherents has an exclusionary element in it, since it tends to conflate national identity with Muslim identity and thus excludes non-Muslims. These two camps are represented by the BAL and the BNP, but these positions are not exclusively theirs; for example, the Jatiya Party (JP) adheres to Bangladeshi nationalism.

It is worth noting that political parties which can be located as left-leaning are not free from ethnic majoritarianism. Despite the Communist Party of Bangladesh's avowed promotion of global identity of citizens as members of oppressed masses, its national and individual identity description is shaped by Bengali ethnic nationalism. The JSD's position on identity, in a similar vein, has a majoritarian tone rooted in Bengali ethnic identity. Despite its pronounced support for pluralism and diversity, it has remained steadfast on its position on national identity. These two different identity constructs have one common element—their proclivity towards majoritarianism. Both, willingly or unwittingly, adopt a majoritarian tone, making them inimical to social cohesion as they lack recognition of the pluralist composition of society. As noted before, this has weakened harmony and tolerance and contributed to a pernicious polarization.

Inclusivity and Pluralism

Election manifestos of all political parties have made promises of inclusivity, especially of minority and marginalized communities. While these reflect recognition of diversity and pluralism, there are sources of concern because of the repeated assertion of parties to uphold Islamic culture. Upholding the inclusive elements of various religions, creating a space for interfaith dialogue, and exploring common ground can contribute to better understanding and social cohesion. However, the approaches of the political parties have not been along this line, with one exception. The JSD manifesto of 2018 referred to the importance of interfaith harmony and dialogue to foster understanding among people of different religious backgrounds. On the other hand, the Bangladesh Awami League promised that there will be no law inconsistent with Quran and Sunnah. The party has held the position that family and property issues should be dealt with within the religious laws of the concerned individuals. It is not surprising that as an Islamist party, the BJI stated in its 1991, 1996, and 2001 manifestos that "all the existing anti-Islamic laws shall be amended in the light of the Quran and Sunnah" and mentioned in the 2008 election manifesto

that “Islamic laws and principles shall be accorded recognition as state laws.” In the 1991, 1996, and 2001 manifestos the BJI identified Muslim culture as the key feature of society but stated that “believers in other religions shall enjoy full freedom to practice their respective religions.”

The Jatiya Party’s manifestos of 1991, 1996, and 2001 state that the rights of believers of all religions will be guaranteed, while these manifestos also highlighted Muslim culture as the dominant feature of society. Since 2008, references to rights of believers of all religions and reference to other cultures have been omitted. Since its inception the BNP has highlighted the Muslim identity of the citizens and underscored the role of faith, particularly Islam. In the 1991, 1996, and 2001 manifestos, the party stated, “Islamic values, faith and belief will be protected and promoted based on the faith of the larger population of the country.” In a similar vein, during these periods the party stated that it would work to build a harmonious culture in light of “Bangladeshi nationalism and social and religious values.” The party, however, shifted its position in the 2018 manifesto, where it made explicit commitment to the diversity and equality of all without prioritizing any religion. It is a significant departure from the BNP’s earlier position on religious diversity.

The Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamist party, predictably insisted on making Islam the compass for its policies and approach to sociopolitical issues. Until 2008, the BJI used to insist on establishing an Islamic Republic of Bangladesh and portrayed this as the global identity of the country. However, after the Election Commission insisted on removing such statements from the party constitution during the registration process, saying that the goal of establishing an Islamic Republic contradicts the country’s Constitution, the JI changed its position. It is at this time that the party changed from Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh to Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami. The former implied that the organization is a chapter of a global Islamic movement, while the latter presents it as a national political party. Prior to 2008 JI insisted that, “The entire social fabric shall be reshaped wherein the people shall become Allah fearing, and adherent to Allah’s ordains.” BJI’s promise to introduce a blasphemy law is not restricted to protecting only Islam but “to prevent and prosecute anti-religious propaganda,” but it has the potential to curb the freedom of those who do not believe in established religions. It is equally true that the JP promises to enact a blasphemy law with special reference to punish those who make derogatory comments about Islam and Prophet Muhammad.

The ethnic diversity of the country is increasingly being recognized by major political parties such as the BAL and the BNP. For example, before 2008 the BAL highlighted Bengali secular identity as a defining feature, but since then, manifestos have asserted that it is committed to treat ethnic communities’ rights in equal measure. In this regard the party’s promise to establish a Minority Commission is worthy of note, although it has not come to fruition. The BNP has made a commitment to protect the religious, social, and cultural beliefs and identity of people of all ethnicities. The CPB, in its 2008 election manifesto, stressed the necessity to act on the “security of religious and ethnic minorities and indigenous people’s lives and wealth.” On the other hand, the JP’s manifestos on ethnic diversity fall short, with a palpable absence of any recognition of ethnic and cultural pluralism.

Illusive Gender Equality

Despite significant improvements in alleviating gender discrimination since its independence, Bangladesh has a long way to go in establishing gender equality. Social norms, ingrained patriarchy, and laws are seen as inimical to ensuring equality to women. Except for two parties—the BJI and the JP—all parties reviewed have unequivocally expressed their commitment to gender equality. The BNP 2018 manifesto states that steps will be taken to ensure equitable rights of women in property. Gender equality and women’s empowerment have been prioritized in the CPB’s manifestos; the JSD takes a similar position.

As for the JP, there was no reference to gender diversity and equality in the 1991, 1996, and 2001 manifestos; in 2001 the party promised to protect women from discrimination. However, the 2008 manifesto omitted the promise. The BJI insists that the rights of the women will be accorded within Islamic laws and tradition. Prior to 2008, three statements delineated the BJI's position regarding gender. In 2001, it stated that "effective steps shall be taken to provide due honor upon the women and protection of their rights. Women's seats in the parliament shall be increased." In 1991 and 1996, the manifestos stated that "oppression on women in and outside the family shall be curbed with an iron hand." Three manifestos—1991, 1996 and 2001—stated that "women shall be provided with full opportunity to earn a living and participate themselves with the bounds of shariah."

Weak Commitment to Social Cohesion

There are few direct references to social cohesion in the manifestos of the political parties under review, though there are references to issues which promote socially cohesive values, such as the sense of social justice, the recognition of the existence of social inequality, and respect for human rights. The BAL and the BNP have noted inequality and proposed various programs to address it. Social justice remains the fundamental tenet of CPB policies. The JSD underscores the importance of ensuring human rights for all. Cohesive values, obliquely underscored in the manifestos of the JP, are based on Islamic values, with some reference to other religious communities, but specific commitments to their roles and contributions are not articulated. The BJI makes special reference to social inequality and social justice and offers solutions within Islamic precepts. There is a notable absence of any mention of human rights issues in the manifestos of the JP.

The BNP's 2018 election manifesto reflects several shifts regarding its goals pertaining to social and political values, and in the manifesto, it commits to establishing a more just, democratic, and people-centric administration. A few of these changes are notable and have relevance to social justice issues: establishment of a national commission to formulate "a new social contract" focused on creating a "future-oriented political culture" devoid of the "politics of vengeance and revenge." It promises to establish a judicial council to reform the judiciary for ensuring "fair justice" and to appoint an ombudsman to ensure transparency and accountability in governance.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This review describes the avowed positions of six parties on the deeply interconnected issues of identity, faith, and social cohesion. The goal of the report was to explore how the selected political parties, of different political persuasions, have addressed these issues and what promises they have made to the citizens of Bangladesh. Apart from divides on identity issues, the parties have different stances on the religion question; none seems to offer a pathway as to how religion can be harnessed towards creating a more harmonious society. Commitments to socially cohesive values, although not viewed in this frame, are discernable in the manifestos.

While the party manifestos paint an optimistic picture, Bangladesh is nonetheless a low cohesion society (as the SCR noted in its survey). This suggests that political parties make very little effort to create awareness among the citizens of Bangladesh as to how to create a more tolerant and resilient society. Their promises either fall by the wayside when they are in power (either as a dominant party in a governing coalition or as a junior partner) or pay lip service at best. If social cohesion is considered an essential part

of the pathway to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 16 calls countries to “Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.”), active and wider debate is essential.

Limitations

The review was done as a succinct collation of the positions of the selected political parties, rather than a critical examination of their stated positions versus their actions in reality. Although the sample is representative of various political persuasions, the author acknowledges that it was a small sample; the analysis would benefit from a larger sample. Some of the faith-based parties, for example Bangladesh Islami Andolon, were left out. Many manifestos were already at hand when this project began, but gathering the missing ones was challenging as there is no database or archive of political party manifestos, constitutions, and election manifestos. When contacted, some of the political parties were unable to provide old manifestos. The research period, September 2023 through mid-November 2023, was not conducive for gathering the information as the political situation in the country was volatile and a significant number of opposition parties, including the BNP, were engaged in street mobilizations to demand a free and fair election in early 2024.

Recommendations

TO THE BANGLADESH ELECTION COMMISSION

The Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC) should develop a digital archive of party manifestos and election manifestos of all parties that is available to the citizens.

TO RESEARCH ORGANIZATIONS

A comprehensive analysis of the party manifestos and election manifestos of major parties since the independence of Bangladesh should be conducted to track the commitments and the changes over time, focusing on various elements of social cohesion.

Explore practices of political parties both internally and in making policies when in power using this report as a baseline of existing promises and approaches of various political parties.

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APPENDIX 1: ASIAN SOCIAL COHESION RADAR (ASIA-SCR)

TABLE A-1

Domains and Dimensions of Social Cohesion	
Domains	Dimensions
Extent of social relations	Social networks Trust in people Acceptance of diversity
Levels of connectedness	Identification with the community Trust in (public) institutions Perception of fairness
Strength of people's focus on the common good	Solidarity and helpfulness Respect for social rules Civic participation

The Asian Social Cohesion Radar (Asia-SCR) examined social cohesion in 22 countries located in South and South-east Asia (SSEA) for two periods: 2004 to 2008 (“Wave 1”) and 2009 to 2015 (“Wave 2”). These countries were divided into three clusters: South Asia cluster, Malay-Buddhist cluster, and Sinic cluster. Bangladesh’s scores were following:

TABLE A-2

Bangladesh’s Scores in the Asian Social Cohesion Radar								
	Social Cohesion Overall Index		Social Relations Index		Connectedness Index		Common Good Index	
	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 1	Wave 2
Bangladesh	-0.41	-0.46	-1.24	-1.15	0.31	0.18	0.3	-0.4

Source: Aurel Croissant and Peter Walkenhorst, 2020. “Social cohesion in Asia: an introduction” in Aurel Croissant and Peter Walkenhorst (eds.), *Social Cohesion in Asia: Historical Origins, Contemporary Shapes and Future Dynamics*. London: Routledge. p. 11.

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