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Travel Grant Abstract

“Interactions of “Social” and “Political” Islam in Bangladesh”

The primary objective of the paper is to examine the interplay of the growing strand of political Islam and the syncretistic tradition of local Islam in Bangladesh. Islam has long been a part of the daily lives of the people inhabiting the region now called Bangladesh, but it is undergoing significant changes in recent years as Islamist movements of various shades have gained strength. I argue that two broad Islamic realms exist in Bangladesh: “social” and “political Islam”. I describe the traditional one which is inclusive of various opinions, practiced without any rigidity and underscores the individual piety as the social Islam, while the scripturalist interpretation of Islam, guided by the political objectives of the hierarchically organized organizations with definite socio-political goals is described as the “political” Islam. These two trends interact, adapt, accommodate and contest with each other. The paper looks into the traditional practices of Islam and how these practices are being reshaped by the contemporary religio-political movements. The paper will particularly examine the changes in the contents of Waz mahfil (i.e., public commentary of scriptures). I will demonstrate that the proponents of political Islam are successfully employing this traditional practice to disseminate their message of a standardized Islam as opposed to the presence of diverse interpretations of Islam.

This paper will contribute the growing body of literature on the role of political Islam in Bangladesh. Often the discussions on Political Islam exclusively focus on the political organizations and their strategies within the body politic. These studies pay little attention to the role of extant social institutions in shaping the contour of political Islam and vice versa. Developing on my earlier works on Islamist politics (*God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh*, and *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: A Complex Web*), I show here that Islamists are shaping the popular culture through the use of traditional social institutions.