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**Contested Secularism in Bangladesh**  
**MPIL Agora**

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There are different ways in which scholars comprehend secularism. According to some, secularism means that religion is fully separated from the state and plays no part in the public domain. Others are of the view that, while secularism denotes in principle the separation between religion and state, there should be some involvement of religion in the public domain, because it is a vital part of the lives of individuals.

This article aims to present the various interpretations of secularism, create a classification of secularism models and examine how secularism is considered in Bangladesh. For this purpose, it analyses statements given by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (known as the Father of the Nation and the leader of Bangladesh Awami League) in support of the secularist model. Sheikh Mujib and his political party did not explicitly use the word "secularism" until the War of Independence in 1971.

However, secularist ideals were emphasised by the party and secularism was included in the Constitution of Bangladesh of 1972. In Bangladesh, secularism is understood as the antithesis of communalism. Anti-communalism does not refer to anti-religion; rather, it eliminates the conflict between the various sub-national communities and describes politics by giving equal status to individuals in a unified national community. President Ziaur Rahman removed the secularism principle from the Constitution in 1977 (5th Amendment). Islam was then declared as the state religion in 1988 during the rule of President Hussain Muhammad Ershad (8th Amendment). In 2011, the 15th Amendment to the Constitution was adopted during the tenure of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League, as she saw the necessity for following an established religion model, while making sure that sufficient rights were also awarded to religious minorities.

Adopting Islam as the state religion is considered by the Awami League as a means of satisfying Muslim majority and peacefully coexisting with religions groups such as Hefazat-e-Islam. This article argues that the Awami League's stance implies the practice of *modus vivendi*, which signifies a means for living together, despite the differences in opinions, interests, religions, ethnicities or beliefs. Through the practice of *modus vivendi*, these differences are recognised and facilitated. The meaning of secularism (and the issue of whether the state should be committed to secularism) is deeply contested in Bangladesh, making the country an interesting case study.



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