

# Rock 'n' Roll, social change and democratisation in Bangladesh

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*Mubashar Hasan argues that in order to resist increasing radicalism in Bangladeshi society, the state needs to promote cultural alternatives which support values of inclusion and moderation such as Bangladeshi Rock 'n' Roll music.*



The birth of Bangladesh as an independent country in 1971 following a nine-month long bloody war against Pakistan was premised upon its struggle for democracy. When Awami League (AL) won a 160 seats out of 162 seats in East Pakistan during 1970's general election, the West Pakistani government refused to hand over power to AL. This escalated into a war of independence and Bangladesh was born in 1971. Democracy and secularism, alongside socialism and nationalism, constituted the four pillars of the new nation state.

Three million lives were sacrificed in the struggle to establish Bangladesh as an independent democratic state. However, Bangladesh's tragedy is that despite of its repeated constitutional commitments for secularism and democracy, in 2015, almost 44 years after the independence the country is neither democratic nor secular. In an [article](#) published in 2014 Dr Ali Riaz, Professor of Politics at Illinois State University, argues that Bangladesh remains stubbornly beset by democratic deficiencies as its performance in electoral competitiveness, democratic quality, press freedom, religious freedom, civil liberties and the rule of law is well below what is accepted in a democratic country. Riaz reached this bleak conclusion after consulting multiple indexes measuring the quality of democracy such as [Polity IV](#), [Freedom House](#), the [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) (EIU) democracy index, the [World Value Survey](#) (WVS), the [press freedom index](#) of Reporters Without Borders and U.S. State Department reports.

Simultaneously, the secular structure of Bangladeshi society is slowly shifting towards more conservative attitudes and religious radicalism according to several survey reports published by respected US-based polling organisations, Gallup and Pew Research. For example, a Pew [Survey](#) published in 2013 found that 82% of its sample Bangladeshi Muslims favor making *Sharia* the official law of the country and 71% said they wanted religious judges deciding family and property disputes. 50% of those Muslims who favored *Sharia* Law also supported corporal punishment. The fact that such a significant proportion of Bangladeshis favour the incorporation of *Sharia* in the state's legal framework first became apparent in a [2006 Gallup](#) poll, which found that 91% of its total sample Bangladeshis wanted the constitutional and legislative framework of the country to be infused by religious values.

It is worth noting that *Sharia* is understood in different ways in different parts of Bangladesh so those surveyed may not be full representative of the wider population. However, what these survey reports indicate is that many Bangladeshis perceive their state as a non-secular one and there is a desire to see the state apparatus adapted to more accurately reflect this. Understandably, we have seen mass-based political parties such as the AL and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) frame election manifestoes and many state policies in religious terms. The worrying scenario is that within this socio-political context support for radical and extreme outfits of Islamists are growing amid youths (as has been discussed in my previous article, co-authored with Martin Griffiths [here](#)). Bangladeshi youths are increasingly framing their identity and lifestyles in religious terms, whether liberal, radical or somewhere in between. It is questionable whether democracy is compatible with highly conservative or exclusive values, which can result in discriminatory policies.

The problem for Bangladesh is that its policy makers and social thinkers both have undermined and ignored cultural elements within Bangladesh which are promoting more secular values. In particular, there is a vibrant rock 'n' roll music scene, which since the independence is playing a key role to promote and uphold liberal values within the society. Bangladeshi bands like *Uccharon*, *RockStarta*, *Warfaze*, *Aurthohin*, *Feelings*, *LRB*, *Feedback*, *Artcell* and

artists like Maqsood, James, Sumon and so forth have supported religious tolerance, democracy and even Sufi Islam and explicitly criticised authoritarianism, rampant corruption, Wahhabism and extremism in their music. Without being anti-Islamic, these bands and musicians were at the forefront in changing values of Bangladeshi youths in the post-independence years. However, they have received no support from the state, for example no attention has been given to protecting the commercial rights of artists.



Photo Credit: [Aninda Kabir Avik](#)

There is a growing literature exploring the link between political identity and popular culture, as illustrated by the recent volume [Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods and Pedagogies](#), edited by Federica Caso and Caitlin Hamilton. Furthermore, there have been several studies indicating that rock 'n' roll is not merely a matter of entertainment, but a genre of music that is able to shape identity. In his book [All Shook Up: How Rock 'n' Roll Changed America](#) Dr. Glenn Altschuler documented how this particular genre challenged conservative attitudes in the 1950s. The discussion of rock 'n' roll in Muslim majority countries has received less attention, perhaps because it clashes with the orientalist paradigm of extremist Muslim youths. However, it was documented by the book [Heavy Metal Islam](#) by Professor Mark LeVine. Similarly, the specific case of Bangladesh has not been widely explored but in a [2011 Daily Star article](#) I highlight that in the wake of independence some citizens reacted against globalisation by turning to radical forms of Islam, while others adopted the 'rock aesthetic', creating a home-grown 'rock generation' of Bangladeshi artists, producers, sponsors and listeners who used music to question, challenge and explore political and societal issues.

The challenge now is that the state has fostered Islamism but failed to support the 'rock aesthetic' and the values inclusion and moderation it tends to promote. Governments invest much more in promoting religion because they are able to mobilise it for their own political legitimacy (both domestic and international) and as a source of national identity. However, in the absence of an authoritative interpretation of how religion can coexist with liberal freedoms and basic human rights, the use of religion by politicians in an ad hoc manner for opportunistic reasons creates the space for more radical (and violent) groups to emerge. If they are serious about sustaining democracy and secularism in Bangladesh, policy makers should seriously consider supporting rock 'n' roll and other cultural forms that promote liberal democratic values and offer alternatives to radical religious narratives within society.

In this regard, the government could increase its investment for supporting, promoting and studying modern music. Public universities which run musical departments could open special streams to teach various aspects of popular music including sound engineering, music marketing and composition.

The state have rightfully invested in promoting what they deem Bengali culture alongside of the promotion of

religion. Within this paradigm, the research and publication capacity of institutions such as Bangla Academy was strengthened and investment was increased to support cultural practices such as playwriting, traditional Bengali dance and Tagore dance. The problem however is that within this narrative of cultural practice, the existence of more modern cultural expressions like rock 'n' roll music is ignored. One needs to keep in mind that “radicalism and extremism” thrives on populism and Rock n Roll too is a popular cultural product but one which counters extremism. Therefore, the state should invest more on supporting popular music that attract youths. This approach has merit. Recently Italy has taken a similar approach where [it aims to invest](#) €1billion in culture as well as security to fight IS. Otherwise, Bangladesh’s continued institutional negligence about forming an institutional memory on this powerful form of culture is in the long run going to prove counterproductive for Bangladesh’s liberal identity.

### **About the Author**

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