Bangladesh's Paradoxical Youth: Unfolding University Students' Contradictory Perspectives on Secularism

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Secularism, *dharmanirapekkhta* in Bangla, is enshrined in the constitution of Bangladesh as one of the state principles in 1972. It stresses that all religious groups are independent in observing their faiths without fear or restriction. However, in Bangladesh, the concept of secularism has become an issue of contention between secularists and religious groups, particularly among university students. This paper is aimed at investigating the contradictory perspectives of university students on secularism in Bangladesh, as well as understanding the issue from socio-political, cultural, and religious perspectives. This study employed a qualitative research design, including convenience surveys and secondary content analysis, to address the research gap and test a hypothesis regarding the youths' perception of secularism. The study found a paradoxical view of secularism. The study findings indicate that more than half of the students prefer secularism as one of Bangladesh's state principles. In contrast, they view secularism negatively from Bangladesh's socio-economic and political perspectives. According to the respondents, secularism is more violent than religion and somehow equal to atheism. The significance of this study is to draw the attention of researchers and policymakers to conduct further research on the topic and make policies to minimize the distance between secularists and religious groups, especially among university students, regarding secularism in Bangladesh.

Introduction

Discontent with secularism is one of the most pertinent issues worldwide (Sen, 1994). Many states have adopted and abandoned secularism as a state principle due to socio-political and cultural causes (Fox, 2011). In addition, many theorists developed counterarguments against secularism based on their own social, cultural, religious, and political dynamics. Due to social and political changes, the perception of secularism has been redefined and altered in many ways (Kuru, 2009). All of these reasons made secularism a political 'hot cake' in many developed and developing nations, particularly in Muslim-majority countries. Consequently, many states adopted the idea of active and passive secularism based on their historical socio-political conditions and ideological struggle, which were the baseline of independence, if not all (Kuru, 2007, 2013).

Bangladesh is an example of one of the traumatic world events that gave birth to a new nation in 1971 from the disintegration of Pakistan (Jahan, 2015). When the country became independent, the population was approximately seven crore (70 million). Today, Bangladesh is one of the most

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populous nations in the world. Interestingly, the lion's share of the population is the working population, comprising 65 percent of the total population, traditionally known as the 'population dividend' for Bangladesh (BBS, 2023; Zaman, 2024). Among them, 31.9 percent are Generation Z, aged between 10 and 25 (Shuvo, 2024). There are more than 4.7 million students in both public and private universities in Bangladesh, a significant portion of the working force in Bangladesh. As population structure has changed, society, social structure, and norms have also changed. Several studies suggest that in the last two and half decades, the influence of religion in the social sphere of Bangladesh has increased. Consequently, the perception of secularism in Bangladesh has been debated and discussed (Sandip, 2024; Schulz, 2020).

From the perspective of Bangladesh's politics, no other political issue has been discussed at both the public and private levels other than secularism (Bhuiya, 2017). It has become an issue of contention between secularists and religious groups in Bangladesh (Riaz, 2018a; Islam, 2018; Islam & Islam, 2018; 2020). One of the reasons for discontent with secularism in Bangladesh is the people's different perceptions of secularism. How people think about it, particularly university students, is a matter of debate and discussion. Additionally, secularism is incorporated in the first constitution of Bangladesh as one of the state principles. However, it was completely absent during the war of the liberation of Bangladesh, which sparked debate and criticism from several perspectives (Hossain, 2016).

Since then, secularism has become a pressing issue of contention from the ideological, political, and cultural backgrounds of various political and social groups (Hasan, 2017; Firstpost, 2024). In short, it is not a settled political and social issue in Bangladesh (Bhuiyan, 2022). Undoubtedly, what goes on in the minds of university students regarding secularism is an appealing and substantial question for scholars with a keen interest on the topic. Consequently, two questions come to the point: How do university students in Bangladesh perceive the concept of secularism, and what factors influence their attitudes toward it? How do university students in Bangladesh reconcile the concept of secularism with their personal religious beliefs? However, unraveling students' opinions and thoughts on secularism is not a simple and easy method to provide answers. This paper used primary and secondary data sources to reveal university students' beliefs and thoughts about secularism in Bangladesh's politics. Against this backdrop, this study examined how university students perceive secularism within Bangladesh's socio-political context. The research addressed two key questions: (1) How do university students perceive secularism, and what factors influence their attitudes? (2) How do they reconcile secularism with personal religious beliefs? This analysis explored the potential role of educational institutions in fostering understanding and tolerance, contributing to a more inclusive society.

This research is significant for several reasons. First, university students are thought to be an essential part of learning and developing new knowledge. Second, no study of university students' attitudes toward secularism has been conducted, making this research particularly urgent. Third, this research is vital because it will assist policymakers, university administrators, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in providing training and facilities and encouraging students to practice tolerance, mutual respect, and social peace. The potential impact of this research on policy and practice is significant, as it can inform strategies to bridge the gap between secularists and religious groups and promote an inclusive society.

This paper is divided into five distinct parts. The first part of the paper confers the study's purpose, objectives, research questions, and significance. The paper's second portion describes the research methodologies used in the study. The paper's third section outlines the existing literature concerning the nexus between secularism and religion in Bangladesh. Section four, the central part of the paper, provides the study findings obtained from a survey questionnaire conducted among university students nationwide. The concluding section concludes the study with a brief discussion on the future of secularism in Bangladesh.

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research design, focusing on testing a hypothesis through an in-depth exploration of students' perceptions of secularism in Bangladesh. A systematic literature review was carried out to establish a theoretical foundation, identifying research gaps and framing the study's objectives (Halperin & Heath, 2020). The methodology consists of three main stages: a literature review, a survey, and data analysis. Subsequently, a systematic literature review was conducted to analyze existing perceptions and frameworks surrounding secularism in Bangladesh to establish a theoretical foundation and identify research gaps (Halperin & Heath, 2020).

A structured survey was developed based on established guidelines to capture empirical data (Liz & Mathews, 2010). The survey was distributed among 85 students from seven universities across Bangladesh. Using stratified random sampling, participants were selected to ensure representation across various disciplines, educational levels, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Respondents were pursuing undergraduate (1st–4th year) and postgraduate studies across the faculties of arts, science, social sciences, business, and engineering (see Table 1). The survey included closed-ended questions to capture quantitative data and open-ended questions to explore qualitative insights. This dual approach ensured a nuanced understanding of participants' perceptions of secularism.

Table 1.

Distribution of Survey Participants

Faculty/Department	Percent	Academic Year	Percent	Guardian Income (Tk/month)	Percent
Arts	26.7	First Year	30.0	Less than 10,000	26.7
Science	33.3	Second Year	10.0	10,000–15,000	23.3
Business Studies (FBS)	20.0	Third Year	26.7	16,000–20,000	20.0
Social Sciences (FSS)	13.3	Fourth Year	13.3	Greater than 20,000	30.0
Engineering	6.7	Masters	20.0	-	-
Total	100	Total	100	Total	100

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns in participants' perceptions. Integrating quantitative and qualitative data allowed for triangulation, enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings. The study adhered to ethical research practices, ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of respondents.

Understanding Secularism

Although this study does not focus on the details of secularism, it is necessary to give an overview of the concept, which will be discussed later from the aspect of the Indian-sub continent to understand the context of secularism in Bangladesh. It has been noted that the definition of secularism varies in the literature. Scholars from various social sciences and religious studies have defined the term from various disciplinary approaches. Consequently, secularism has many faces based on scholars' background profiles and ideological histories. Political secularism, for instance, is entirely different from the philosophical and sociological perceptions of secularism. Therefore, this would discuss secularism as a dynamic ideological phenomenon with political, social, and religious impacts on university-going students (Rahman, 2017).

As secularism is a contested term with numerous aspects, no single definition can include all the features of secularism. Even though differences of opinion remain, there appears to be a consensus that secularism is something that needs to be discussed. Rajeev Bhargava, an Indian

secularist theorist, understood secularism as being in 'opposition to religious hegemony, religious tyranny and religious and religion-based exclusion'. He also showed two arguments for defining secularism: firstly, all human beings exist on the "secular plane"; secondly, it presupposes that any human institution in this world can turn oppressive or inegalitarian (Bhargava, 2008). Such definition is, however, somewhat imprecise. It denies the functionalist approaches to religion. Religions are not violence-prone, Bhargava argued. George Jacob Holyoake, credited with coining the phrase, provided one of the early definitions of secularism. Holyoake described secularism as follows in his book The Principles of Secularism, published in 1851:

> *Secularism is the study of promoting human welfare by material means, measuring human welfare by the utilitarian rule, and making the service of others a duty of life. Secularism relates to the present existence of man and to action, the issues of which can be tested by the experience of this life – having for its objects the development of the physical, moral and intellectual nature of man to the highest perceivable point, as the immediate duty of society; inculcating the practical sufficiency of natural morality apart from Atheism, Theism, or Christianity (*Rectenwald, 2016).

Although the definition has changed over time, it would be incorrect to suggest that it is without ambiguity. 'It is not fully apparent what is meant by secularism,' Charles Taylor found, despite the term's widespread use. In his study (2009: 185-186), Daniel Philpott identified several approaches to secularism such as 'world outside the monastic sphere,' 'differentiation between religion and other spheres of society,' 'decline in religious practice,' 'marginalization of religion,' in which the term "secular" is used in the social science literature, and all of them refer to something other than religion.

Secularism arose in response to a perceived shortcoming or weakness imposed by an idea or institution, and political philosophy is immune to societal power dynamics. Secularism is a political doctrine when combined with religious and political theories (Bhargava, 2008). Turkish Constitutional Court's juridical-legal understanding of secularism illustrates its vast nature. Secularism is the separation of religion from social life, education, family, economy, law, manners, dress rules, and other aspects of life. In her new book, Saba Mahmood argues that secular liberalism cannot be handled just as a political philosophy or a collection of legal conventions: in its vast consequences, it defines, in effect, something like a way of life (Mahmud, 2006).

Charles Taylor found that "it is not apparent what secularism means despite its widespread use" (Taylor, 1998). Because the notion of secularism has been treated by three different disciplines, i.e., philosophy, sociology, and political science, three alternative interpretations are typically associated with it. Philosophically, it might be regarded as a rejection of transcendental and metaphysical values in favor of existential and empirical values; sociologically, the word refers to how religion's impact on public life and social institutions has waned over time; and politically, the separation of private and public spheres, as well as the separation of state and religion, are the most common explanations for the phenomena known as political secularism.

They are commonly called the French, British, American, and Indian models of secularism. Even though some academics have separated these ideas into two broad threads – assertive secularism and passive secularism – the contrasts between them necessitate that we keep this fourfold division for our examination (Kuru, 2007, 2013).

The French model of Lacité is a political and social model that bans religion from the public arena. This is the state's neutrality toward religious beliefs and the complete separation of religious and public domains. The idea is that the state protects individuals from religion while exercising public control over religion. *In the United States*, the notion of secularism is codified in the Constitution through the First Amendment. Under this interpretation of separation, society remains highly religious, yet the state maintains a distance from religion. This can be viewed as separating church and state to protect each other. *The British model* is based on a highly secular culture in which the state is nonetheless related to religion, even if only symbolically. In the

Church of England, the queen is the supreme governor, while the upper house of administration comprises 26 bishops. However, society's secularization at least in the sense of distinction, is well established. Sarva dharma *sambhav* (literally, all religions are real and equal) is an *Indian secularism* model emphasizing that "all religions are significant and should have a good position in the nation's life (Kuru, 2009).

The Secularism Question in Bangladesh

The term secularism is a widely debated concept in the Indian Sub-Continent. The reason might be the social and cultural differences between India and the West, including Europe, which is generally considered the home of secularism. Due to the social and cultural structural differences, many theorists, including Karl Marx, viewed Asia from different angles, such as 'oriental despotism' (Timasheff & Wittfogel, 1958), 'Asian mode of production,' 'Asian development,' the 'absence of feudalism,' and so forth (Marx, 1996; Mohammad, 1999). According to them, three distinct features made the sub-continent special from Western culture and society. Firstly, societal ownership of the property; secondly, sudden but regular social and political change; and finally, do not disturb the fundamental system of production in the Asiatic Village Communities (Omvedt & Krader, 1977). These social and cultural differences create a separate perception of secularism in the sub-continent from the West and Europe. Consequently, India did not incorporate the Western idea of secularism after its independence; instead, it adopted a soft form of secularism, ensuring religious freedom for all religions (Nandi, 2007; Sen, 1993, 2005; Bhargava, 2008).

As Bangladesh is part of South Asia, secularism has been influenced by the region's social, political, cultural, and religious thoughts (Ahmed, 2020; Ahmed, 2011). In the 1960s and 1970s, two dominant political ideologies, liberalism and socialism, influenced the then-political leaders and activists. Influential student leaders and political activists were the members of the left camps. Many scholars considered secularism as one of the 'driving forces' that inspired the freedom fighters to continue the struggle for a new land. The reason was to ensure justice, fraternity, and human dignity, which were not ensured in Pakistan for twenty-four years (Bhuiyan, 2017; 2021). Furthermore, secularism is inherently present in Bengali nationalism as it was formed based on a secular idea: the Bengali language (Van Schendel, 2020). However, critics argue that secularism was not the guiding principle of the war of liberation. They challenge this dominant narrative as it is not based on facts and evidence. Islam and Islam (2018), for example, refuse one of the dominant narratives of secularism along with democracy, nationalism, and socialism, the foundational ideology of Bangladesh's war of liberation. They argued that throughout the Bengali nationalist movement, the concept of secularism was never mentioned. The primary goal of this movement was to achieve autonomy as well as political and economic equality, or "democracy," which culminated in the liberation war and the establishment of Bangladesh. Before the formation of Bangladesh, no mention of secularism existed. Secularism was imposed from above, they argued, that it was not founded by popular consent (Islam & Islam, 2018).

The Awami League administration passed Bangladesh's first constitution on November 4, 1972, and it went into effect on December 16, 1972. Secularism was integrated into the Constitution, which outlawed the use of religion for political purposes. The first Constitution of Bangladesh, which was adopted in 1972, included the following provisions in the Second Preamble:

> *Pledging that the high ideals of nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism, which inspired our heroic people to dedicate themselves to, and our brave martyrs to sacrifice their lives in, the national liberation struggle, shall be the fundamental principles of the Constitution.*

Article 8 of the original Constitution of Bangladesh stated:
a. The principles of nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism, together with the principles derived from those set out in this Part, shall constitute the fundamental

        principles of state policy.

b. The principles set out in this Part shall be fundamental to the governance of Bangladesh, shall be applied by the State in the making of laws, shall be a guide to the interpretation of the Constitution and the other laws of Bangladesh, and shall form the basis of the work of the State and its citizens, but shall not be judicially enforceable

Article 12 of the original Constitution dealt with secularism and freedom of religion. It read as follows: The principle of secularism shall be realised by the elimination of

1. communalism in all its forms;
2. the granting by the State of political status in favour of any religion;
3. the abuse of religion for political purposes;
4. any discrimination against, or persecution of, persons practising a particular religion.

The original Constitution stated in Article 38, "Every citizen shall have the right to form associations or unions, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interests of morality or public order". It "provided that no person shall have the right to form, or be a member or otherwise take part in the activities of, any communal or other association or union which in the name or based on any religion has for its object, or pursues, a political purpose". The use of religion for political purposes is prohibited by Section 20 of the Special Powers Act of 1974. Bangladesh's government outlawed all religious-based political parties after the country gained independence. This represents religious political parties' repressive secularism model.

Article 41 of the Constitution of Bangladesh states:

1. Subject to law, public order and morality, (a) every citizen has the right to profess, practice, or propagate any religion; (b) every religious community or denomination has the right to establish, maintain, and manage its religious institutions.
2. No person attending any educational institution shall be required to receive religious instruction or to take in or attend any religious ceremony or worship if that instruction, ceremony, or worship relates to a religion other than his own.

Secularism and Anti-Secularism in Bangladesh

After a 24-year battle culminating in the nine-month-long War of Independence, Bangladesh became independent in December 1971, breaking relations with Pakistan. In December 1972, the constitution of the world's third-largest Muslim-majority country declared secularism as one of the state principles (Ahmed, 2024; Alam, 2022; Jahan, 2021). At the formal level, the secularism effort was short-lived. In mid-1975, the first civil regime (1971–1975) was deposed by a military coup. The military dictatorship that followed (1975–1981) abolished secularism from the constitution, and the second military regime did the same, declaring Islam to be the national religion. From the beginning, anti-secular state-level measures by military dictators and anti-secular civil governments had the support of anti-secular political, intellectual, and social forces (Ahmed, 2018). The most fatal blow to the quest for a true liberal democracy was the state's continued support for anti-secular groups. The state's reintroduction of secularism in 2011 did not alleviate pro- and anti-secularist tension (Majumder, 2016; Basu, 2021).

Bangladesh, it is widely believed, has become the next battleground between secularism and Islam (Mostofa, 2021). The international media repeats this depiction of the country, which is accentuated in public discourse. The resurgence of a conservative Islamist alliance demanding anti-blasphemy laws, the spectacular attacks of transnational terrorist groups such as Da'esh, The Islamic State in Iraq, and the Levant (ISIL) and AQIS (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic State), the rise of a popular movement in 2013 demanding capital punishment for those who committed war crimes in 1971, a series of killings of liberal activists, foreigners, and bloggers, the resurgence of a conservative Islamist alliance demanding anti. The common thread running across this image

is that the country is searching for its "secular essence," that "secularism" has dissolved and is deteriorating, and that Islam is on the rise (Riaz, 2018).

Awami League and Secularism Since the 1990s

Following the fall of military ruler Ershad, 1990 became a watershed year for democracy and free political parties in Bangladesh. Under the caretaker administration, the first impartial national parliamentary elections were held in 1991. After fifteen years of military rule, the Awami League became the first civilian administration and demonstrated its secular mindset against the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). However, in the first competitive election after the fall of the military dictatorship, the Awami League was beaten by the BNP and won 140 out of 300 seats, resulting in forming a coalition government in 1991. In 1996, it maintained its religious and nationalistic political stance. After losing in the 1991 elections, the leaders of AL and its supporters believed that the BNP's victory was due to religious exploitation. Bangladeshis are religiously aware but not religiously blind. In their political campaigns, the AL emphasized secularism and silenced the issue of religion in politics, which contributed to its collapse in the election (Chaudhury, 2020; Mostofa, 2024; Nair, 2024). Since then, AL has strategically avoided the road of secularism, preferring to use the term "non-communal" and emphasizing religion more (Bhuiya, 2022).

AL frequently fears losing its base of support if it goes against religion. To prevent this unwelcome anxiety, it established positive relationships with religious figures and institutions (Islam & Islam (2018). In 2018, the AL government announced that a mosque would be built in each Upazila (KSA) with financial assistance from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Both political parties use religion in politics to gain and maintain power (Hossain, 2024). Both parties, for example, traditionally begin their election campaigns by visiting Islamic sites such as Shahjalal Dargah. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina addressed prophet Noah's boat during an election campaign in Rajshahi in 2018. He claimed that, like Noah saved his country, AL would save Bangladesh if the country re-empowers them (Risingbd, 2023).

Sheikh Hasina, a former prime minister unseated through the July uprising in 2024 by the student movement, frequently claims that she regularly prays and recites the Quran to present an Islam-friendly image (The Daily Sun, 2020;). She further promises that Bangladesh will be governed according to the Medina Charter and the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) last sermon and directives and that no laws antithetical to the Holy Quran and Sunnah will ever be enacted (Devine & White, 2013). AL even blames non-secularists for political violence in politics in the name of Islam, which is not fact-based (Hassan, 2023). The future will reveal what AL will do to maintain its philosophy in a representative democracy where the vote bank is crucial.

Students' Perception of Secularism

The research indicates varied and conflicting views on secularism among university students in Bangladesh. Some students perceive secularism as lacking any religious affiliation, whereas others highlight the importance of respecting diverse religions. Many students do not equate secularism with atheism, although a connection is often perceived. Religiosity is significant, with individuals predominantly identifying as moderately or highly religious, influencing their skepticism regarding the role of secularism in personal life. Most students perceive secularism and religion as separate entities; however, approximately fifty percent of the participants consider it incompatible with Islam. The prevailing view is that secularism is perceived as more violent than religion, indicating apprehensions regarding its societal implications. Despite these reservations, fifty percent of respondents endorse secularism as a state principle, illustrating a "Bangladeshi paradox" (Respinti, 2023) in which secularism is supported in governance but less so on a personal level. The findings indicate that the limited appeal of secularism among

university students is a result of religious revivalism and sociopolitical dynamics, highlighting its complex role in the evolving identity of Bangladesh.

Secularism has already been discussed in depth in the preceding section of this work. Secularism has been interpreted differently depending on social, cultural, and religious distinctions. In the current study, I found that university students in Bangladesh have contrasting views on secularism. According to 11 students out of 30 (36.7%), secularism has no religious attachment (See Table 2).

Table 2.
Students' Understanding of Secularism

Indicators	Percentage
No religious affiliation	36.7
Do not believe in transcendental life	3.3
Separation of mosque and politics	16.7
Respect other religions	30.0
All of the above	13.4
Total	100

According to the second 30 percent of students, secularism is respecting different beliefs and cultures. A tiny portion considers secularism as a policy of separation between the state and religious institutions such as mosques and churches. Students were asked to respond to the topic of whether secularism is equivalent to atheism. The remark that secularism is essentially equal to atheism was disapproved by around half of the participants (See table-03).

Table 3.
Perceptions of secularism among university students

Questions	Opinion (%)					
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
Secularism is equal to atheism.	16.7	33.3	16.7	23.3	10.0	100
A religious believer should never be a secularist	10.0	26.7	23.3	33.3	6.7	100

It demonstrates that secularism and atheism in Bangladesh are fundamentally different issues, particularly among university students. However, an average percentage of students (33.3%) believe secularism and atheism are similar. In short, university students in Bangladesh are unlikely to hold distinct views on secularism and atheism.

Religiosity: Religious Devotion

Another way to grasp the significance of secularism is to look at the religiosity of university students. The more religious students are, the less secular they are, and vice versa. According to the respondents' perspectives, almost every university student believes themselves to be religious. The moderate viewpoint is held by 53 percent of participants, the highest percentage, while 30 percent of students claim to be highly religious (See Table 4). In short, most students studying in various disciplines at universities believe in religion to varying degrees. Only a small percentage did not reveal their religiosity—how religious they are.

Table 4.

Students' religious beliefs

Indicators	Percent
Slightly religious	10.0
Moderately religious	53.3
Very religious	30.0
Do not know	6.7
Total	100

The survey shows that religion is highly significant in the lives of university students in Bangladesh. The most plausible reason for this is that secularism has failed to appeal to students despite being taught modern educational tools and materials at the university level. The participants, in a sense, did not place a high value on modernization or secularization theory. But why? The rise of religious revivalism has nevertheless served a variety of political purposes. Three of these have been particularly prominent (Heywood, 2011, 2021):

- The first is that religion has become essential to social conservatism, promising to strengthen society's moral fabric by returning to religious ideals and practices.

- Second, religion has become a more prominent component, if not the defining aspect, of ethnic nationalism. The appeal of religion as a primary source of political identity, rather than the nation, is that it provides a presumably primordial and seemingly unchangeable foundation for forming a group membership.

- Third, religion has gained the most political clout by serving as the foundation for militant politico-cultural renewal, based on the notion that, in the words of Khomeini, "politics is religion." Religious fundamentalism is the term used to describe the idea of religion as a theo-political endeavor.

Secularism, Violence, and its Future in Bangladesh

University students who participated in the survey viewed secularism, religion, violence, and its future from different dimensions and the results are somewhat contradictory and do not match each other. It is a puzzle that the respondents express an unparallel attitude about secularism and the state principles of Bangladesh. It has happened, the author believes, due to the socioeconomic and religious patterns of students' background and their pre-higher education system.

Table 5.

Secularism, Religion, Violence and its Future

Questions/Variables	Opinion (%)			Total
	Yes	No	Do not know	
Being religious and secularist is different	56.7	26.7	16.6	100
Secularism is not compatible with religion, particularly Islam	43.3	36.7	20	100
Secularism is less violent than religions	23.3	63.3	13.4	100
Secularism should be a state principle in Bangladesh	56.3	33.3	13	100
Secularism is a threat to wearing religious clothes like the Niqab and Burka	23.3	63.3	13.4	100
About better future of secularism in Bangladesh politics	20	46.7	23.3	100

Secularism is Incompatible with Religion

The link between religion and secularism is constantly a point of contention among academics, who hold opposing viewpoints. Many academics believed that secularism and religion were incompatible. On the other hand, many theorists maintained that religion and secularism are compatible. According to Fox, religion will likely coexist with secularism, and they will compete for the same roles in society, such as being a source of legitimacy, in the near future (Fox, 2011).

Most participants agreed that secularism is not compatible with religion (See Table 5 and Figure 1), particularly Islam. However, some students disagreed with the majority of respondents. They believe that religion and secularism can coexist. If secularism and religion are incompatible, their coexistence may result in conflict.
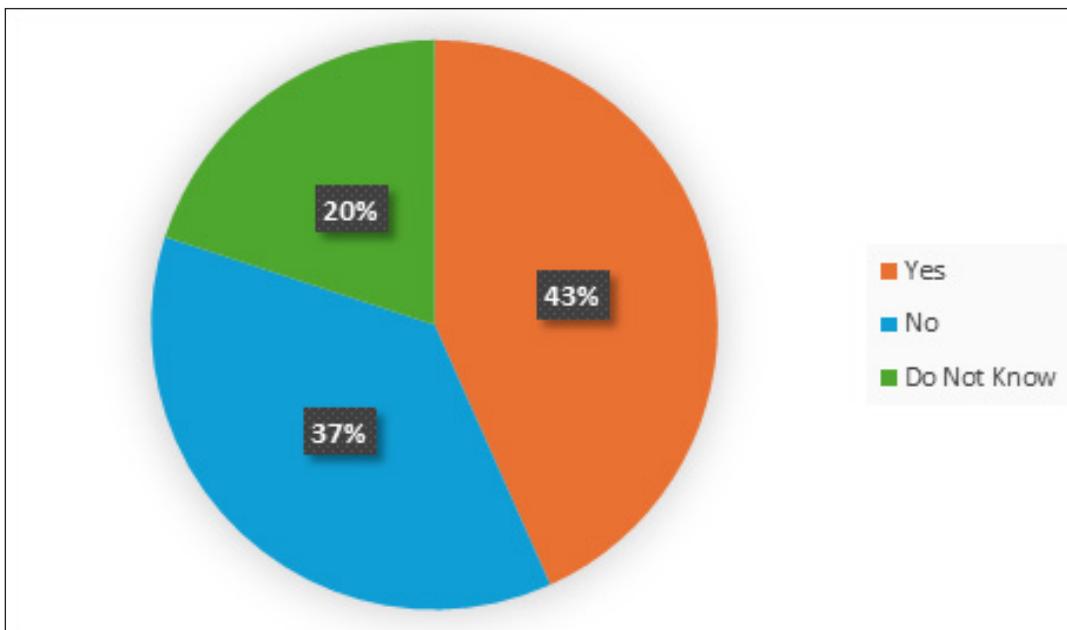

Figure 1.

Is secularism compatible with religion?

Secularism is More Violent Than Religion

A hot topic among academics is the relationship between violence and religion and the relationship between secularism and violence. The survey I conducted depicts 63.3 percent of respondents disagreeing with the statement that secularism is less violent than religion. Secularism, in other words, is considered more violent than religion (See Table 5 and Figure 2). Only around a quarter of survey respondents believe religion is more violent than religion. The conclusion reflects the viewpoint of a few experts who believe secularism leads to violence. American political scientist Robert Pape has compiled evidence to suggest that suicide terrorism is a secular tactic rather than a religious one and forms part of a broader campaign to remove an occupying force from the area perceived by the perpetrators as their homeland.
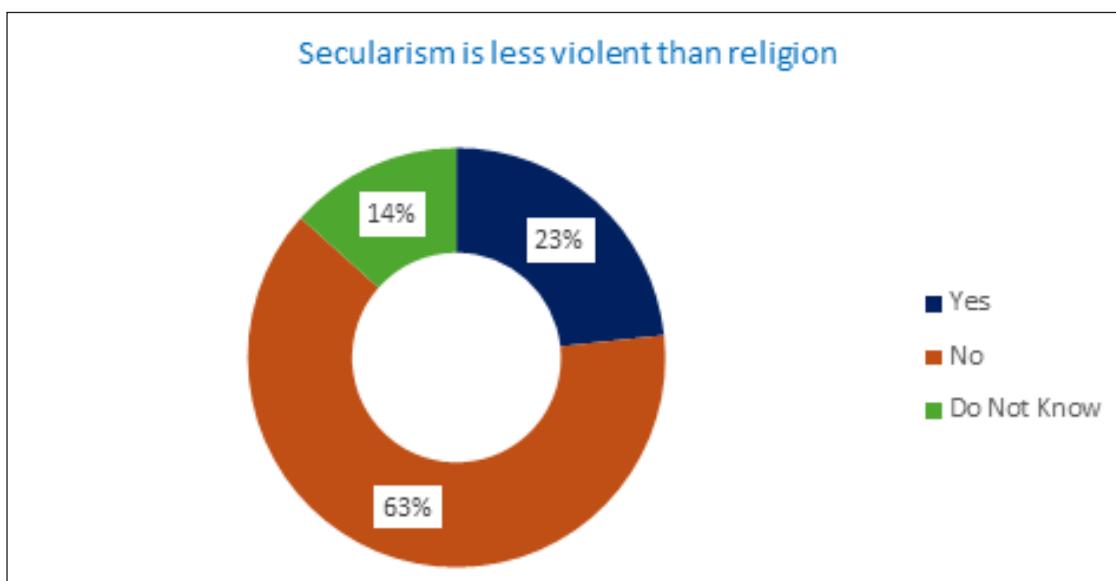
Figure 2.

Secularism is more violent than religion.

In his 2005 book Dying to Win, Pape examines all known cases of suicide terrorism from 1980 to 2003, a total of 315 incidents. He discovered that individual motives and beliefs did not explain the attacks and that there was a minimal link between religion and suicide terrorism. He concluded that 'there is little connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, or any one of the world's religions' (Pape, 2005, 2009). Adopting a similar position, Cavanaugh (2009) and Jakobsen (2004) argue that secularism incites violence. Jakobsen states:

> *Is secularism less violent than religion? In my research on this topic, I began with a typically academic answer of "yes and no." However, the more research and reading that I have done on the topic, the less accurate this answer has seemed, and finally, I came to the conclusion that the answer must simply be "no." The secular is not less violent than the religious; in fact, it is more so. It is a source of greater, more intense, and more intractable violence than are religious practices, communities, or worldviews and commitments.*

Hassan's study (2023) shows that secular groups are more violent than religious parties in Bangladesh. However, respondents disagree with the notion that secularists are threatening religious symbols such as the headscarf and the Niqab. They believe that secularism poses no harm in the private domain, such as when people dress in religious garb or say religious prayers. Overall, respondents viewed secularism positively and negatively based on its sphere of domination.

Secularism and the Question of State Principle

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's first civilian government included secularism as one of the state principles in Bangladesh's constitution, enacted in 1972. For political reasons, the secularism policy was amended, withdrawn, and replaced from time to time by both military and civil governments. This policy has already been thoroughly examined in the preceding section of this article. Now that Bangladesh has been independent for fifty years, it is undergoing social, political, and cultural transformations in the age of neoliberalism and globalization.
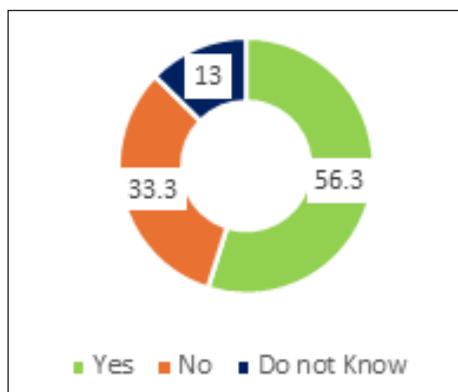
Figure 3.

Relevancy of secularism and state principle in Bangladesh

Secularism has become a new bugbear in Bangladesh politics, not only among academics but also among the public. Although respondents may not appreciate secularism in their personal lives, they are pleased to see it as one of the country's state principles (See table 5); according to more than half of the respondents, secularism should be a state principle in Bangladesh. The author believes this is a "Bangladeshi contradiction or paradox" in which they interpret secularism differently in their personal and public lives.

Conclusion

This paper has explained the university students' perception of secularism in Bangladesh. The study found a paradoxical youths' view about secularism. While the university students support secularism as one of the state principles, they also view it negatively, perceiving secularism as not necessarily a less violent political ideology. For instance, approximately fifty percent of survey respondents agreed that secularism has no better future in Bangladesh. However, despite these perceptions, religion-based political parties have historically failed to secure significant representation in national parliamentary elections, obtaining only about 10 percent of the total vote. This Islamist paradox highlights the complex relationship between political Islam and secularism in Bangladesh.

The findings of this study reveal that political Islam dominates the private sphere but is notably absent in the public sphere. In their private lives, most students and youth groups prioritize religion over secularism and other ideologies like democracy and socialism. Conversely, these groups hold diverse views on the role of secularism and other secular political ideologies at the state level. These contradictory perceptions create challenges for political inclusivity and peaceful coexistence. Policymakers and educators must acknowledge these findings to address the tensions and foster a more comprehensive understanding of secularism that resonates with the youth's socio-political context. Future research should focus on examining the socio-economic factors influencing these perceptions and the role of education in shaping views on secularism.

This study has significant implications for the future of secularism in Bangladesh. The contradictory perspectives of university students highlight the need for policy interventions to bridge the gap between secularists and religious groups. Educational institutions should be pivotal in fostering critical dialogue and mutual understanding about secularism and its practical implications in a diverse society. Policymakers should also design initiatives to promote a nuanced understanding of secularism that aligns with Bangladesh's unique cultural and political landscape. By doing so, it may be possible to reconcile these opposing views and strengthen the foundation for a more inclusive and peaceful society.

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