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the Aftermath of a Secularist Social Movement**

Anupam D. Roy
Howard University

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Bangladesh Development Research Center (BDRC)

2508 Fowler Street
Falls Church, VA 22046-2012, U.S.A.

Tel. +1 571 641 3005

E-Mail: contact@bangladeshstudies.org

<http://www.bangladeshstudies.org>



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Stealing Shahbag: A Re-legitimization of Islamism in the Aftermath of a Secularist Social Movement

Anupam D. Roy*

Abstract

The Shahbag movement emerged in early February of 2013 as a sit-in protest in the Shahbag square of Dhaka city on the demands of capital punishment of war criminals of the 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh. This paper evaluates the movement as case study for the framing tasks theory of social movements and explores how faulty framing of the movement grievances led to counterproductive consequences for the movement constituents. The theoretical analysis is supported by the empirical findings of an original public opinion survey of up to 300 movement participants. Key movement leaders and movement critics were also interviewed through open-ended questions to further inform the survey data. The paper provides a genealogy of the secularist civil society framing tasks and shows how Shahbag, after originating from that frame, eventually shifted away from it under the a politically coopted leadership. As a consequence, the Islamist civil society mobilized a countermovement under the banner of Hefazat-e-Islam, which lead to the re-legitimation of Islamism as a political ideology and reestablished Islamists as an influential interest group.

* Anupam D. Roy is a Junior, majoring in International Affairs and Economics at Howard University, in Washington, DC. Comments are welcome to be sent directly to the author via E-mail: writeranupam1101@gmail.com.

I. Introduction

This paper argues that the Shahbag movement faced cooptation from the ruling political party of Bangladesh in 2013 (the Awami League) and consequently shifted its ideological frame that opened it for attacks from the Islamist civil society. This finding is supported by the empirical findings of a public opinion survey designed for the purposes of this paper, in addition to drawing on news reports published in Bangladeshi and international media outlets as well as papers and blogposts by scholars and movement leaders.

The theoretical analysis of this paper presents Shahbag as a case study for the framing tasks theory. First, it tracks the framing tasks of the ideological predecessor of the Shahbag movement, the secularist civil society, and shows its success in frame bridging, frame extension and frame transformation that created a strong coalition of secularist organizations which had strong lobbying powers with the post 2008-Awami League government. Then it shows the frame bridging between the Shahbag Movement and the Awami League and shows how a transformation of that frame created a space for the Islamist civil society, the ideological opposition of the secularist civil society, to launch its own countermovement through Hefazat-e-Islam.

II. Background on the Shahbag Movement

The Shahbag Movement started on February 5, 2013, as a protest against the life imprisonment sentence of the Jamaat-i-Islam (JI) leader Abdul Quader Molla by the International Crimes Tribunal (which in effect was a domestic war crimes tribunal) to investigate and prosecute suspects of war crimes committed during the 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh. As documented by Zaman (2016), the verdict was viewed as too soft by many activists, who then initiated a protest at Shahbag, a busy intersection of the capital city of Bangladesh, demanding the death sentence for the war criminal. By the end of the first week, that protest had turned into the largest mass demonstration the country had seen in 20 years.¹

Responding to the demand of the Shahbag activists, the Bangladeshi Parliament passed a bill on February 17, 2013, amending the International Crimes (Tribunals) Act of 1973, which allowed the government, complainant, or informant to appeal an order of acquittal or order of sentencing. After that, prosecutors appealed to the Supreme Court of Bangladesh and asked for it to upgrade Mollah's sentence from life in prison to death.² Quader Mollah was hung on December 12, 2013, after the Supreme Court revised the previous sentence on September 17, 2013.³ The death sentence of Mollah and the amendment to the International Crimes Tribunal Act were seen as direct results of the overwhelming successes of the Shahbag movement by many of the activists and the media.⁴

However, by the end of its first month, Shahbag did not remain an issue-specific movement focused upon the death sentence of war criminals. Partly due to its own framing tasks and partly due to the actions by its ideological opposition, Shahbag came to be seen as the renewed

¹ Zaman (2016).

² The Bangladesh Trial Observer (2013).

³ Zaman (2016).

⁴ Anam (2013).

representation of the secularist civil society, which has been at loggerheads with Bangladesh's Islamist civil society for decades. Some faulty framing tasks and weak mobilization strategies led to an erosion of the popular support for Shahbag. It started to be labeled as an anti-Islamic movement by the end of the first month of its existence.⁵

The Islamist civil society capitalized on these weaknesses. An ultraconservative Islamist group based on Qawmi Madrasas in Bangladesh named Hefazat-e-Islam ("Protectors of Islam") was able to mobilize thousands of activists to gather in Dhaka to demand hanging the leaders of the Shahbag movement, who were portrayed as atheists.⁶ As detailed in Habib (2013), Hefazat-e-Islam also adopted the so-called "13-point demands", which included demands like arresting atheist bloggers,⁷ removing sculptures from public squares, making the education policy more 'pro-Islam'. As the Hefazat-e-Islam countermovement gained ground, the Shahbag movement protesters started to leave Shahbag square, which many supporters of the Hefazat movement see as proof of the success of the countermovement.

By the end of 2013, the Shahbag movement was all but completely demobilized, while the Hefazat movement became a major interest group with massive lobbying powers over the Awami League (AL), Bangladesh's ruling party at that time. Many Shahbag movement participants were being jailed based on blasphemy charges and the Hefazat leaders became major influencers of public policy. The transition of the Shahbag movement from the largest gathering in recent history to a small group of activists is astonishing. This paper will track this transition, evaluate the movement as a whole, and analyze the limitations of Shahbag's framing tasks that caused the movement to reach its end.

III. Methodology, Limitations, and Framework

III.1. Methodology

An overall analysis of the movement is constructed based on a survey and open-ended responses collected from participants of the Shahbag movement. The survey data was collected through an online platform. Four research assistants based in Bangladesh were hired with the author's personal funds to collect the data through SurveyMonkey. The initial participants were chosen based upon media mentions (like interviews, speeches, statements, talk show appearance etc.). These initial participants were also invited to an open-ended interview and excerpts from those interviews are used in this paper's analysis. The interviewed leaders were Maruf Rosul, Lucky Akhter, Omi Rahman Pial, and Faruk Wasif. Irfanur Rahman Rafin was interviewed as a general participant of the movement. The participants were then asked to refer to three more participants, who they knew personally to have been present at the protests. A total of 300 responses were collected through this snowballing method. Not all questions were

⁵ Yuan (2013).

⁶ Yuan (2013).

⁷ The attack on agnostic, atheist and anti-Islam writers had been common in Bangladesh since the early 2000s. The first attacks came from radical Islamists, who threatened the writers with violence and then started turning those threats into reality. Professor Humayun Azad was the first victim in 2004 and hundreds have been murdered or attacked since then. The more mainstream Islamist groups like Hefazat-e-Islam later started demanding legislative action against such writers, with one leader suggesting 14 years in prison for writing anything that offends religious sentiments. For more details see Hammer (2015).

asked to all 300 participants due to limitations of the survey platform. The number of participants that answered each question is indicated in the caption of each figure below.

The reasons for the successes and the failures of the movements and the real-world effects of those results are presented in the last section of the paper. Participant observations from the movement leaders and critics are also used to track the transition of the framing tasks of the movement. Survey data collected from the movement participants has then been used to assess the public opinion regarding the outcome and the limitations of the movement. An analysis of the overall movement is presented in the conclusion.

III.2. Limitations of the Study

Although this study chronicles the shift in the frames of the Shahbag movement leadership and describes its consequences, it has several limitations. First, the survey responses that were collected for the quantitative research were taken through close-ended questionnaires for convenience of analysis. Responses were only collected from persons who chose to respond, exposing the data to a potential response bias. The survey sample was limited to 300 respondents and is not meant to be dealt with advanced quantitative analysis. It only retains real significance as a substitute for interviewing. However, the close-ended survey style interview has been supplemented by open-ended interviews from a few movement leaders, who were widely cited in the media as the representatives of the movement. Given that these respondents were not democratically elected by the movement, their representativeness could be challenged. To tackle this problem, primary documents released by the movement leadership (like speeches, memoranda and statements) have been analyzed.

It is also noteworthy that the use of the term Shahbag movement to represent what was officially called Ganajagaran Mancha may seem problematic to some. The initial participants of the Shahbag protests in early February had discontents among themselves and throughout the entire course of the movement. Splinter groups like Shaheed Rumi Squad emerged as a result.⁸ This study overlooks these divisions in order to analyze the phenomenon as a whole and measure its consequences as a whole. It takes Ganajagaran Mancha as being the representative of the movement on the basis of its prominence as the mouthpiece of the movement by the government, the media and the ideological counterpart (Hefazat-e-Islam). When this study speaks of a political cooptation, it is safe to assume that it is speaking of the Ganajagaran Mancha as it institutionally represented itself until its confrontations with Hefazat.

III.3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this paper will be drawn from the resource mobilization school of social movement theory. A deciding metric for measuring the success of a social movement will be drawn from William Gamson's work. Gamson (1990) addresses measurement of movement success by specifying two dimensions, i.) winning acceptance from elites and recognition as a legitimate representative of a given constituency and ii.) winning new advantages for a movement constituency. This creates four possible outcomes: a.) full

⁸ The Daily Star (2013).

response: both acceptance and new advantages; b.) collapse: neither acceptance nor advantage; c.) preemption: new advantages without acceptance; and d.) cooptation: acceptance without new advantages.⁹

The paradigm of resource mobilization is then further strengthened by the analysis of the framing tasks theory. What this suggests is that the framing of grievances is more important than the mere existence of grievances in terms of social movement mobilization. The first method of achieving this end is frame bridging, which connects two or more preexisting grievance frames that are ideologically connected but structurally unconnected. The second method is frame amplification that essentially explains the current frame of the movement in a broad fashion to include other frames. The third method is frame extension that basically connects the frame of the movements with unconnected frames and urges their support for the broad ideological banner that they interpret the other groups to be sympathetic to. The last method is frame transformation that implants a new and broad grievance frame to fit the existing grievances.¹⁰

IV. Literature Review and Contribution

Since the Shahbagh movement emerged in 2013, a number of papers and articles have appeared that analyzed its success, failures, and difficulties. Sanyal and Murshid (2013) argue that the Shahbagh movement was up against the long history of political Islam in Bangladesh (which they consider to be “either radical or nothing”). Zaman (2016) seconds this claim and argues that Shahbagh was not only under attack from the Hefazat-e-Islam’s grand narrative; Hefazat was also under attack from Shahbagh’s grand narrative. Zaman argues that this clash of narratives led to a portrayal of the movements as enemies of each other as they quested to save what they believe should be the basis of Bangladesh’s collective identity and ideology. Zaman (2016) also underlines the importance of framing tasks of each of the binary (which she names the “pro-Shahbagh movement” and “pro-Islamist”) in producing polarization regarding the issues of identity of the country. However, Zaman refrains from investigating the cause of the emergence (and demise) of this movement and focuses on the framing strategies leading to the ideological polarization instead.

In an account of the framing tasks that caused the emergence and demise of the movements, Sajjad and Härdig (2017) observe that the secular Shahbagh mobilization was derailed by the massive Islamist countermobilization of the Hefazat-e-Islam. They explore the framing tasks of Hefazat through which they succeeded in anchoring their ideology in pre-existing religio-cultural imagery and casting themselves as authentic defenders of Islam and their secular opponents as atheists. Sajjad and Härdig (2017) also provide particular attention to the processes of “framing” but limit its attention to the framing tasks of the Shahbagh movement. They attributed the movement’s inability to sustain itself to a lack of effective resource management, internal divisions, disagreements about the death penalty, and repeated attempts of political co-optation. After making these observations, Sajjad and Härdig (2017) conclude that the counter-mobilization by Hefazat-e-Islam was the most devastating for Shahbagh. They argue that the Islamist counter-mobilization exposed a fundamentally altered discursive

⁹ Gamson (1990), p. 115.

¹⁰ Gamson (1990).

opportunity structure, and effectively limited the already unsteady ability of the Shahbag mobilization to evolve into a sustained movement.

While these observations about the effects of Hefazat-e-Islam on further weakening of the Shahbag's frame may be true, the empirical evidence presented in this paper suggests that the counter-movement was not the most devastating factor for Shahbag. This paper explores the framing tasks of the Shahbag movement (in a very similar manner to Sajjad and Härdig's exploration of Hefazat's framing) to discover the caveats that led to an opportunity Hefazat later capitalized upon. While Hefazat continued to weaken the Shahbag movement, this paper argues that the main and initial weakening of the movement's ideological appeal came from its misdirected framing as well as the mobilization limitations that Sajjad and Härdig mention. In order to explore the faults in the framing of the Shahbag movement, the following discussion will start with an analysis of the framing of Shahbag's ideological predecessor and contrast it with the framing tasks of Shahbag. This will enable us to clearly see where Shahbag faltered and gave Hefazat an opportunity to come in and attack its frame.

V. The Roots of Shahbag: The Secularist Civil Society as an Ideological Predecessor

The discourse on the prosecution of war criminals started right after the end of the Liberation war of 1971. The Mujib government started prosecuting the perpetrators of crimes against humanity or war criminals immediately after independence. Sheikh Mujib promulgated the Special Tribunal Order on January 24, 1972, fourteen days after his return from Pakistan. Under this order, he had 37,000 alleged collaborators arrested.¹¹

But these efforts came to an abrupt halt when Mujib was assassinated, along with his family, in August 1975. The subsequent government (after a brief period of coups and counter-coups) led by General Ziaur Rahman, soon released jailed collaborators and created an official indemnity act for Sheikh Mujib's assassins and other political criminals. He also amended the constitution to allow Jamaat to become one of Bangladesh's political parties. Over the next two decades, Jamaat-e-Islami teamed up with Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP, which is the more right-wing political party that Ziaur Rahman started) and provided funding and muscle for their political alliance.¹² Jamaat came to power when the BNP obtained a pledge of support from it after the 1991 parliamentary election.¹³

It was under this government that the first organized movements started. In 1992, the Ekatturer Ghatak-Dalal Nirmul Committee (EGDNC), which roughly translates as the committee for uprooting collaborators, was formed under the leadership of Jahanara Imam, who was the mother of a martyred freedom fighter. At a symbolic tribunal arranged in a public park, the EGDNC produced a verdict of the death penalty for the chief of Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), a major Islamist political party, on ten specific allegations of war crimes.¹⁴ The movement carried into the new decade with the EGDNC gaining more followers and more traction in the civil society.

¹¹ Momen (2008).

¹² Khan (2014).

¹³ Inter-Parliamentary Union (1991).

¹⁴ Ghosh (1997).

EGDNC became even more prominent during the 2001-2006 period, when Jamaat came to power for the second time (again in alliance with the BNP).

What the secularist civil society achieved in this time period was remarkable. They achieved frame transformation by using the 1992 event of Jamaat selecting Ghulam Azam, an identified war criminal, as their party leader, to argue that what previously was unfortunate but tolerable (the existence of Jamaat as a legal political party) had now become inexcusable. Then they went through frame bridging and brought other organizations from the civil society to support their cause. They formed an alliance with the Sammilita Sangskritik Jote (Combined Cultural Alliance-CCA), the Sammilita Samajik Andolon (Combined Social Movement-CSM), the Citizens Voice, Security and Human Rights, The Hindu, Buddhist and Christian Unity Alliance (HBCUA) and other groups to fight for broader causes than prosecuting war criminals, like protesting communal violence.¹⁵

Their frame gradually extended and the non-institutional band of civil society leaders emerged, which we can call the secularist civil society. It is not implied that the agents consciously used the framing tasks to meet their organizational goal, but what took place can be explained if the events are seen through the lens of framing tasks theory. The secularist civil society achieved the organizational structure of a federated union by bringing multiple secularist organizations under its umbrella. After the formation, the community again transformed its frame to include countering communalism and advancing secularism.

Through these seemingly apolitical tasks, the secularist civil society actually protested against the political regime of the BNP-Jamaat Alliance and formed a strong ideological framework that defined itself as the ‘Spirit of the Liberation War’. The Awami League, being the major political opposition to the BNP-Jamaat Alliance, and also having been the major political party behind the liberation war, bridged their own political frame with the ideological frame created of the secularist civil society. The 2008 election manifesto of the Bangladesh Awami League supports this claim.¹⁶

This bid against Islamist politics (under the veil of the narrative of religious fanaticism) and appeal to the secular civil society helped the AL-led coalition achieve a landslide victory in the 2008 parliamentary elections.¹⁷ After winning, the AL government started to arrange the prosecution of war criminals in order to fulfill its promise made in the 2008 Election Manifesto. The government established the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) in 2009 to prosecute alleged war criminals. So the demands of the secularist social movement were finally being fulfilled by the ruling political party.

The legacy of the secularist civil society was of paramount importance for the Shahbag movement. The Shahbag movement cannot be understood without a short introduction to the history of the secularist civil society. Though the Shahbag movement started with the demands

¹⁵ Sen (2011), p. 125.

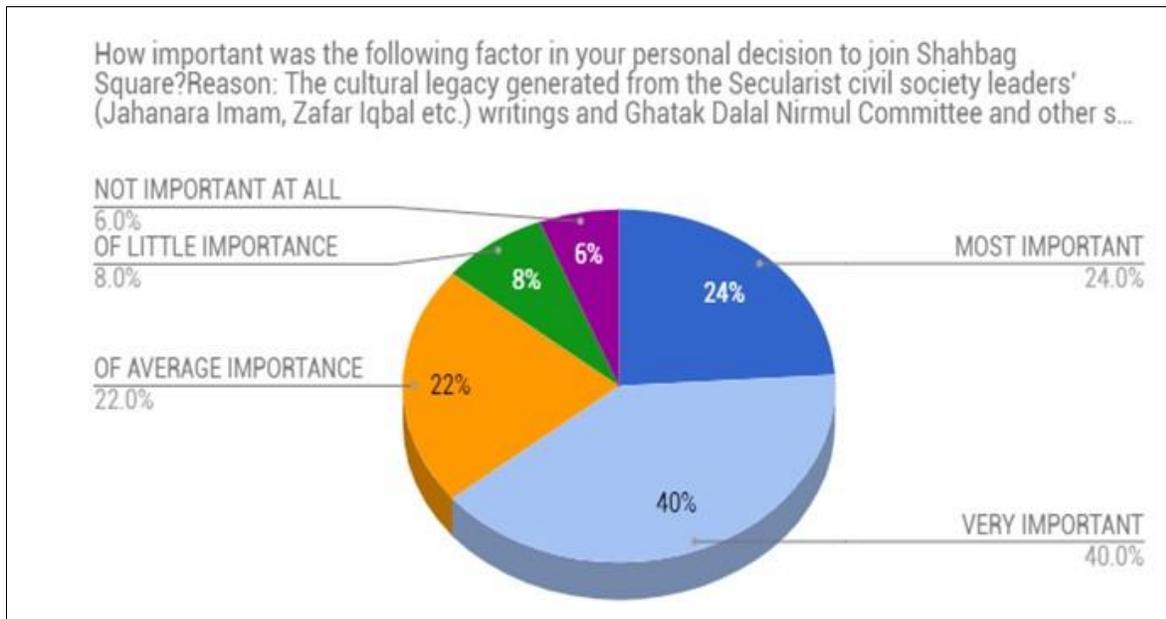
¹⁶ Shushasoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujan) (2009). The Manifesto reads: The rape of the democratic constitution, rehabilitation of war criminals and religious fanatics, criminalization of politics and promotion of militancy, the institutionalization of corruption, and the sway of black money and muscle power overtook the post-Bangabandhu governments (...). Establishment of Good Governance: Terrorism and religious extremism will be controlled with iron hand. Trial of war criminals will be arranged.

¹⁷ Inter-Parliamentary Union (2008).

related to the ICT, especially the capital punishment of the indicted war criminals, it did not limit itself to those demands. It portrayed itself as the secular “soul of the nation”.¹⁸

This assessment is supported by the response given by movement participants being asked about the importance of the influence of the legacy of the secularist civil society in determining their decision to join the movement. As shown in Figure1, 40 percent of 100 Shahbag movement participants said that the legacy of the secularist civil society was a very important factor in their decision to join the movement and 24 percent even said that it was the most important factor in their decision to join the movement.

Figure 1: Importance of the Legacy of the Secularist Civil Society (based on 100 Shahbag movement participants)



Source: Based on author's survey.

VI. The Birth of Shahbag: Who They Were and What They Wanted

The Shahbag movement arose as a spontaneous outburst that was sparked from a group of protesters, who sensed some sort of hidden agreement between Jamaat and AL, when the Quader Mollah verdict came out.¹⁹ In Bangladesh, people have little trust in the legal system and believe that people with a political connection would be pardoned as soon as their party comes into power.²⁰ The public disappointment with the life imprisonment verdict was so high because they saw the verdict as a denial of justice.²¹ As a response, student-protesters started

¹⁸ Zaman (2016).

¹⁹ Sajjad and Härdig (2017).

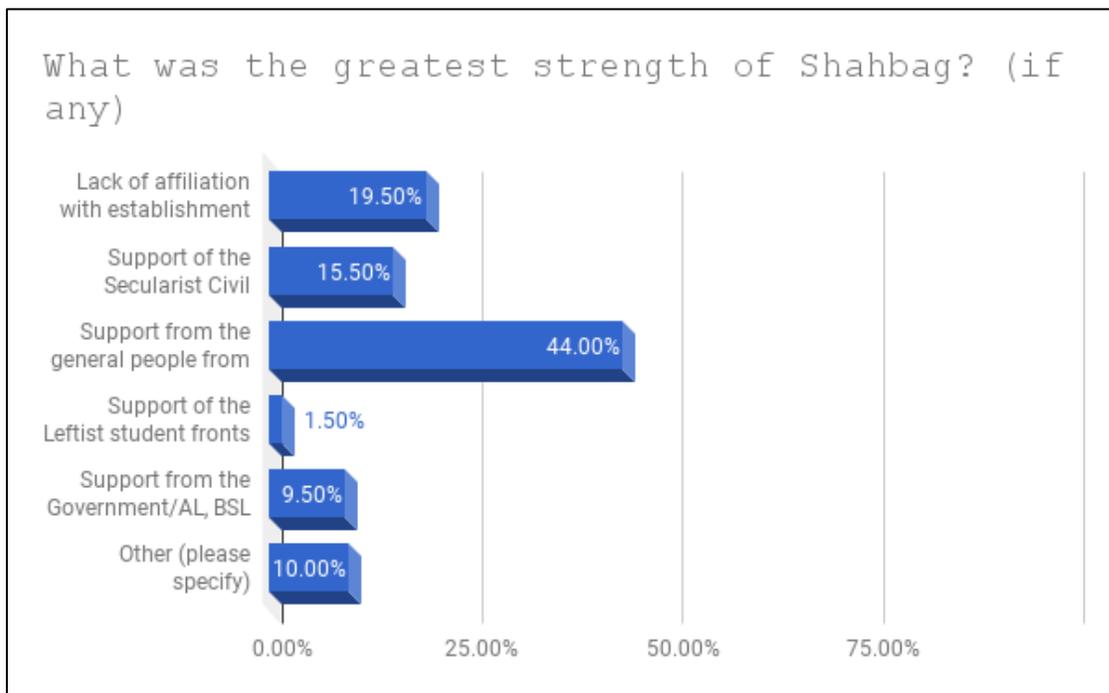
²⁰ Ashrafuzzaman, Sufian and Khan (2015).

²¹ The Economist (2013).

a movement in the Shahbag square as a rejection of mainstream politics.²² In an act of startling courage, they denied the requests from prominent government representatives and ministers to speak at the stage of the movement.²³

A lot of participants were attracted to the movement specifically because of this anti-establishment viewpoint. As shown in Figure 2, based on our survey of 200 Shahbag participants, nearly half (44 percent) indicated that the movement's support from the general people from all parts of society has been the movement's greatest strength, followed by the movement's lack of political affiliation, which 19.5 percent of the participants indicated as the greatest strength. Furthermore, as shown in Figure 3, in a random sample of 300 Shahbag movement participants, 55.33 percent self-identified as having no political affiliation.

**Figure 2: The Greatest Strength of Shahbag
(based on 200 Shahbag movement participants)**

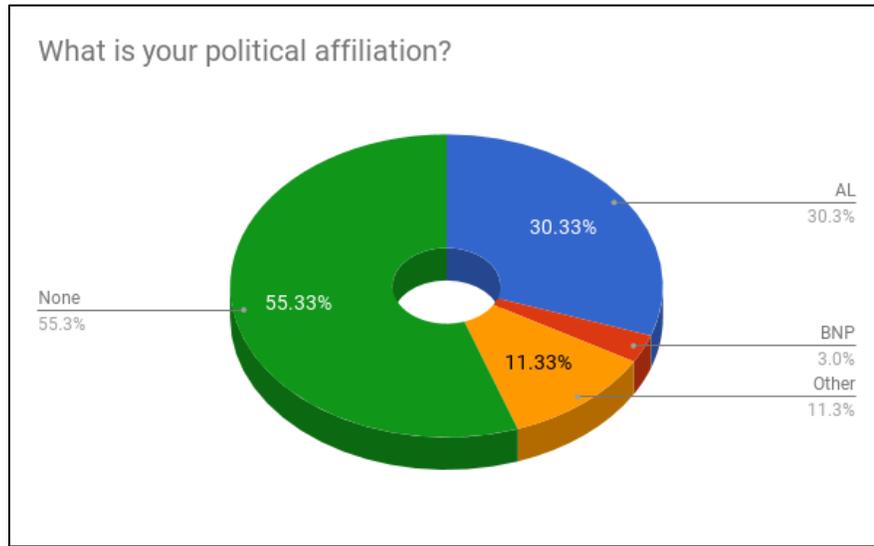


Source: Based on author's survey.

²² Mohsin (2013).

²³ The Economist (2013).

Figure 3: Political Affiliation of the 300 Shahbag Participants Surveyed



Source: Based on author's survey.

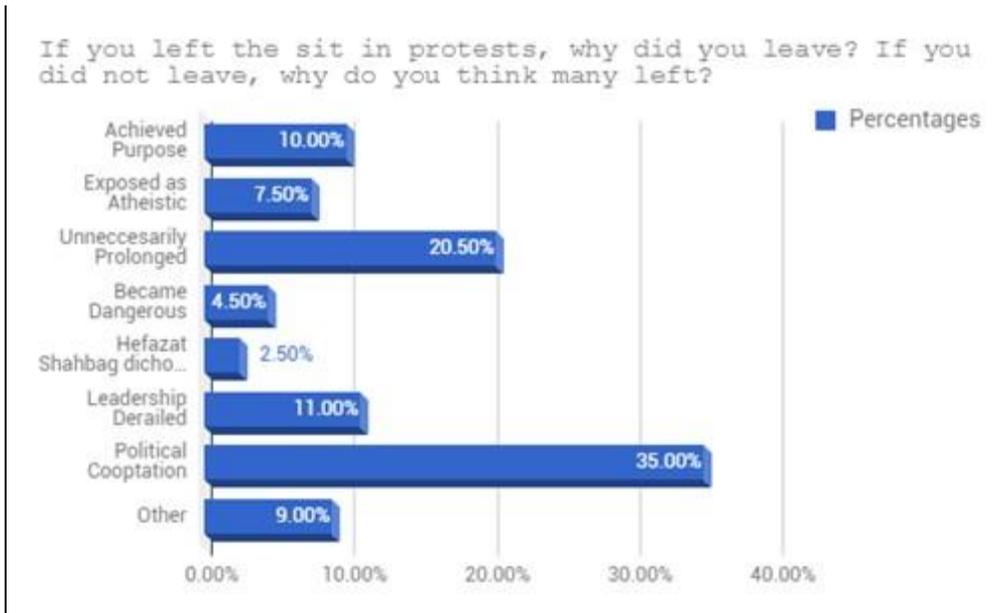
The Shahbag movement was initiated and led by the youth. In a random sample of 100 Shahbag participants, 66 percent said that they were under the age of 29 as of 2017, which means that they were at most 25 years of age during the movement. This implies that the generation that led the Shahbag movement was significantly different than the generation that led the secularist civil society in the 1990s and 2000s, who were mainly reputed academics, writers, and cultural figures. Shahbag's spontaneous character also meant it was disorganized and without a long-term strategy. While claiming to be a non-political movement, it came under the influence of vested political actors.²⁴ Individuals joined the movement with their competing agendas and eventually co-opted its leadership.

VII. The Rot in the Spirit: The Leadership Gets Co-opted

The young student leaders of the Shahbag movement were solely brought to prominence by the existence of the movement. Many of these students were online bloggers, who had very limited contact with mainstream politics. This young and inexperienced leadership soon became a burden for the movement. As shown in Figure 4, in a sample of 200 participants, 11 percent said that the most important reason for their departure from Shahbag was faulty or derailed leadership. Figure 5 shows that 19.5 percent said that lack of an independent leadership was the greatest weakness of Shahbag.

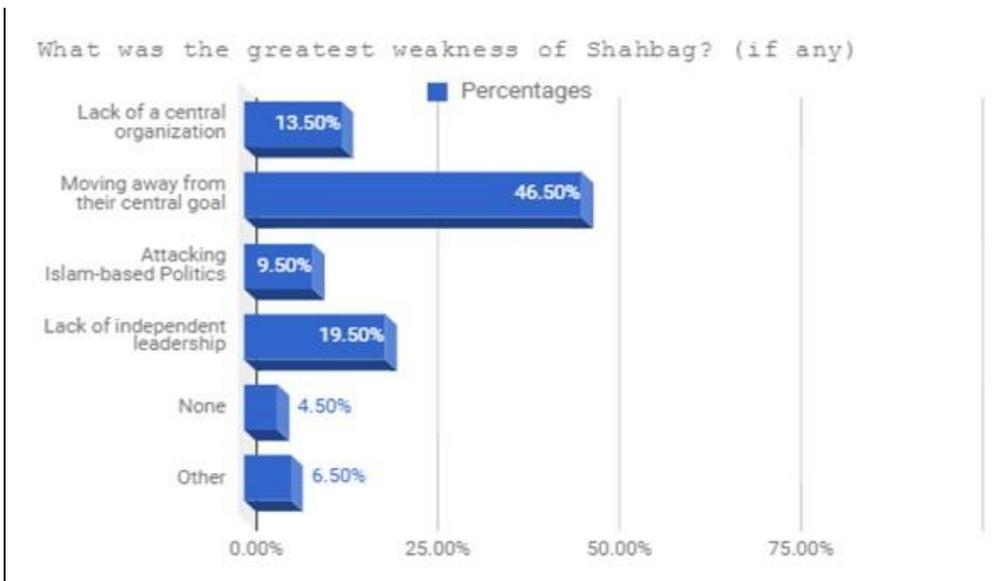
²⁴ Sajjad and Härdig (2017).

**Fig. 4. Main Reason Participants Left the Movement
(according to 200 survey respondents)**



Source: Based on author's survey.

**Figure 5: The Greatest Weakness of the Shahbag Movement
(according to 200 survey respondents)**



Source: Based on author's survey.

Maruf Rosul, a participant from the first day of the movement who eventually became a leader, makes the following remark about the contrast in leadership between the EGDNC and the Shahbag movement:

EGDNC was a pre-organized movement. Some known figures of the society organized the movement of EGDNC. They had committees consisting of various social, political and cultural activists. But the Shahbag movement sparked from an instantaneous reaction. (...) It was initiated by some bloggers who were completely unknown to the people.²⁵

As such, it was easy for experienced politicians to infiltrate the ranks of these novice leaders and co-opt the movement. As shown in Figure 5, 35 percent of 200 movement participants said that the movement was politically co-opted and that was the main reason for their departure from the Shahbag square sit-ins. The cooptation of the Shahbag movement leadership was visible to the most passionate Shahbag leaders, who view the movement as a total success. Omi Rahman Pial, a frequent representative of the Shahbag movement in the media and a strong believer in Shahbag's success, makes the following remark:

Many wanted us to take on a political role and even start a new political party. (...) It is true that a lot of different people wanted to gain political advantage from the group. There were people who printed business cards with the name of the movement on it.²⁶

Under the new leadership, the movement soon drifted away from the frame of prosecution of the war criminals. Soon, the demand for capital punishment expanded into a demand to ban Jamaat as a political party which then was transformed again into a call for a ban on all kinds of political use of religion.²⁷ The frame transformation was visible to both the participants and the detractors of the movements. Irfanur Rahman Rafin, a regular participant of the Shahbag movement, makes the following observation:

Banning Jamaat was a central issue from the very beginning of the movement. However, the demand of banning all religion-based politics came later. It is my personal opinion that Leftist Parties like Communist Party of Bangladesh brought this issue at the center stage as there is a philosophical contradiction between religion-based politics and Left political theory which is tough to be resolved peacefully.²⁸

His observation is supported by Lucky Akhter, who became a major figure of the movement at its peak and later become the president of the Bangladesh Student Union, a leading leftist student organization of Bangladesh. She said:

Banning religion-based political parties has long been a leftist issue that a lot of organizations such as the Student Union had been working on. (...) As such, we used to shout the slogans for banning religious politics from the very beginning of the protests. It became more mainstream at the later days, when other groups also started adopting our slogans against religion-based politics.²⁹

Thus, the secondary frame of secularism and anti-Islamism (defined as an ideological opposition to the political use of Islam), which the secularist civil society had gradually

²⁵ Interview with Maruf Rosul by the author in 2017.

²⁶ Interview with Omi Rahman Pial by the author in 2017.

²⁷ Sajjad and Hårdig (2017).

²⁸ Interview with Irfanur Rahman Rafin by the author in 2017.

²⁹ Interview with Lucky Akhter by the author in 2017.

incorporated with their primary frame of war criminal prosecution, was brought into the forefront as a primary frame of the Shahbag movement. However, most of the general participants of the movement were not very happy about this shift of framing. Most of them could sense that a shift in the central goal was going on and did not like where the shifted frame was heading. As shown in Figure 5 above, an overwhelming 46.5 percent of the 200 respondents said that moving away from their central goal was the biggest weakness of the movement.

The frame of the Shahbag movement changed gradually and radically. The new frame of the Shahbag movement was a lot more confrontational with the Islamist civil society than was the pre-Shahbag secularist civil society frame. This angered the Islamist groups that had been feeling a loss of power in comparison with the secularists. The broad vilification of all Islamist groups gave the Islamist civil society an avenue to retaliate with the characterization of all Shahbag movement participants as being anti-Islamic (rather than anti-Islamist).

Most leaders directly involved with the Shahbag movement remarked that the movement had no fault for being characterized as anti-Islamic. Most Shahbag leaders blamed a right-wing propaganda for the erosion in their public image. Not only did Lucky Akhter, Omi Rahman Pial and Maruf Rosul, all refer to the viciousness of the right-wing propaganda machine in their interviews with the author, the Shahbag movement also produced a memorandum calling for the ban of a prominent right-wing newspaper. However, intellectuals and activists who observed the movement from a distance found Shahbag at fault to a great extent. Faruk Wasif, a senior journalist with Prothom-Alo and a participant of Shahbag on the first day of gathering, makes the following observation:

(Shahbag's) version of secularism had an Islamophobic war-on-terror based rhetoric. The group (...) had been talking about a different sort of secularism, feminism and liberation than the regular Bangladeshi masses. This Islamophobic undertone left the regular religious Bangladeshis out of the Shahbag discourse, which in turn created an ideological vacuum that was simply filled-in by Hefazat.³⁰

The anti-Islam characterization soon became so prominent that even the participants of the Shahbag movement started to get swayed away by it. As shown in Figure 4 above, 7.5 percent of the 300 participant-sample said that Shahbag was exposed as an atheistic movement. This perceived anti-Islamic characterization of the Shahbag movement got the attention of the Jamaat and Hefazat-e-Islam, which marched to the capital and occupied another major city square in Motijheel on April 6, 2013.³¹ The gathering in Shahbag square started to grow thinner as the Hefazat supporters continued with protests, gatherings and demonstrations, culminating in various violent protests between Hefazat-e-Islam supporters and Awami League activists on May 5-6, 2013.³²

VIII. Measuring the Outcomes of Shahbag

The huge crowds that the Shahbag movement drew initially were not due to the success of Shahbag movement alone but were a continuation of the ideological frame developed by the

³⁰ Interview with Faruk Wasif by the author in 2017.

³¹ The Daily Ittefaq (2013).

³² See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hefazat-e-Islam_Bangladesh.

secularist civil society. Maruf Rosul, who was one of the central leaders of Shahbag movement and composed most of the speeches, memoranda and press notes for the movement, makes the following observation regarding the effect of EGDNC and the secularist civil society on the initial organization of Shahbag movement:

Shahbag always identifies itself as the spin-off of EGDNC. The mental foundation of Shahbag movement is based on Jahanara Imam's movement. (...) We were inspired by the writings of Jahanara Imam, especially "Ekattorer Dinguli" and the spirit of the EGDNC movement. The issues of war criminals and their trial were highly vivid in the blogging community. (...) The EGDNC movement worked as a catalyst to form our views. It is to be noted that most of the participant of the Shahbag movement is from the early 1990s generation. During the EGDNC movement, most of us were in school going stage. We can remember their posters of them, some pictures of Shaheed Janani, etc.³³

The independent aftermath of the movement that followed the initial massive gatherings can be measured as an outcome following the metrics of William Gamson (1990). Gamson (1990, p. 29) characterizes success as a set of outcomes, which fall into two clusters: acceptance and new advantages. Acceptance means being recognized as a valid spokesman for a legitimate set of interests and new advantages means attaining the goals that the movement seeks. If these two metrics are combined, there can be four possible outcomes from a movement: full response, preemption, co-optation and collapse. To determine the appropriate category for the outcomes of Shahbag, four questions must be considered:

1. To what extent was Shahbag movement extended formal recognition by the government as a spokesman for the secularist civil society?
2. To what extent did policy changes occur which met explicit grievances of the movement participants?
3. To what extent were new policies introduced that decreased benefits to the secularist civil society?
4. Did the secularist civil society's lobbying power or influence with the government increase or decrease as a result of the Shahbag movement?

To answer the first question, we will look at instances of parliament addresses, political speeches, and public meetings, where the government recognized the Shahbag movement as a spokesman for the secularist civil society. Barely before the first week of Shahbag was over, (on 10 February 2013) the speaker of the parliament (a member of the Awami League) met with the leaders of the Shahbag movement to accept a memorandum of their demands. On the same day, the speaker promised that the memorandum would be forwarded to the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the leader of the opposition Khaleda Zia.³⁴ On the very next day, the Prime Minister addressed the Shahbag movement in the parliament and said that it was the 'perfect leadership to direct Bangladesh in the spirit of the liberation war.' Referring to the spirit of the liberation war is a frequently used euphemism for the secularist civil society's framework. As reported in the Jajaidin (2013), Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also said that

³³ Interview with Maruf Rosul by the author in 2017.

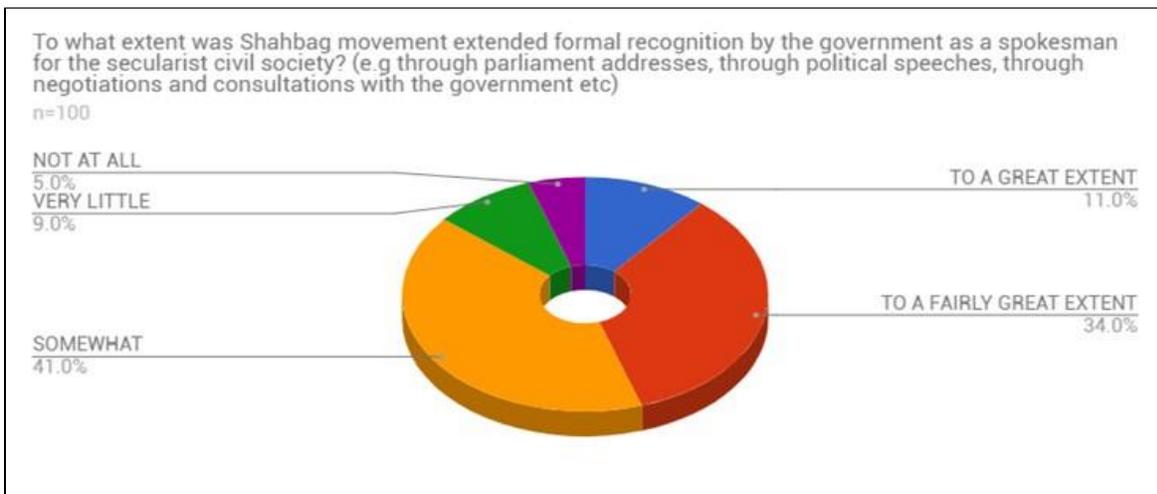
³⁴ bdnews24.com (2013a).

her government would do everything to fulfill the demands of the Shahbag protestors. The opposition party (the BNP) came out with a statement on February 12, 2013, where they generally supported the movement but warned against a political cooptation of the movement.³⁵

This level of expeditiousness is truly remarkable in Bangladesh's political culture. Even after the parliament address, the government's representatives entered into negotiations with the Shahbag leaders throughout the course of the movement.³⁶ This evidence suggests that Shahbag movement participants and leaders acted as spokespeople for secular civil society. The participants of the movements also agree with this conclusion. As shown in Figure 6, in a survey of 100 participants, 41 percent of the respondents said that the Shahbag Movement was somewhat formally recognized as a spokesman for the secularist civil society, while 34 percent and 11 percent said that they were recognized, respectively, to a great extent and a fairly great extent. Only 14 percent of the respondents said that the movement received very little recognition or no recognition at all.

We will now try to answer the second and third questions by exploring the policy changes that took place after the Shahbag movement and analyzing their effect on the movement constituents. The recognition of the Shahbag movement did not necessarily translate into gains for its constituents. Although it is true that explicit grievances of the movement were met by the government initially, the trend did not hold in the longer run. Shahbag was not successful in achieving its most central original goal, banning Jamaat-e-Islami as a political party and taking legal action against their funding sources.

**Fig. 6. Acceptance of Shahbag movement
(according to 100 respondents)**



Source: Based on author's survey.

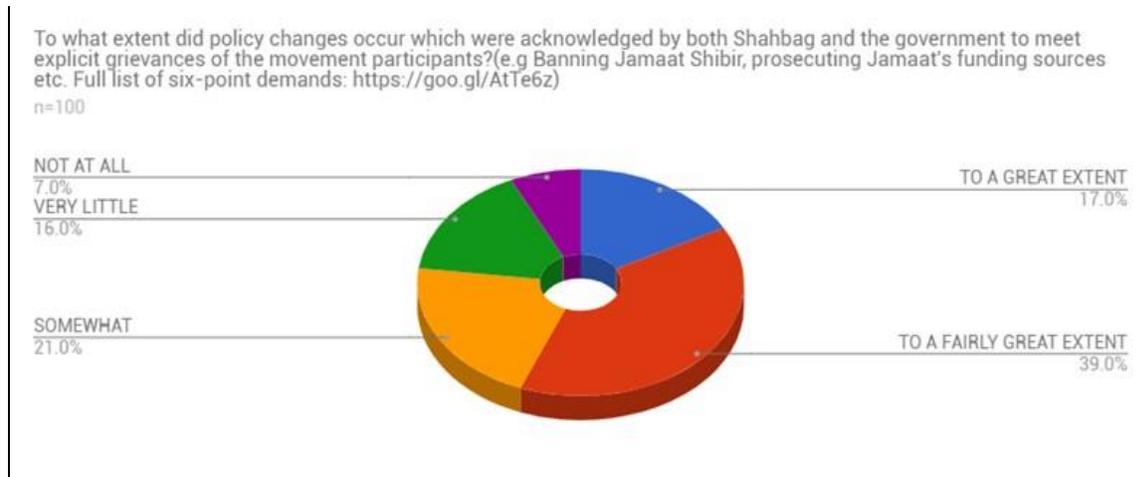
³⁵ The Bangladesh Chronicle (2013).

³⁶ Prothom Alo (2013a).

However, the movement did seem very successful in attaining other smaller goals in the beginning. In the first month of the movement, the leaders demanded the arrest of Mahmudur Rahman, a vocal critic of the movement and the editor of a pro-Islamist newspaper ‘Amar Desh’, accusing him of inciting violence against the pro-liberation forces.³⁷ Even though Mahmudur Rahman was not arrested within the 24 hour ultimatum set forth by the Shahbag leaders, he was ultimately arrested on charges of treason within two months of the accusations from Shahbag.³⁸ On July 20, 2013, the movement demanded the state to appeal the verdict against Ghulam Azam.³⁹

The state appealed the verdict on August 12, 2013.⁴⁰ Shahbag movement leaders also demanded the arrest and prosecution of the attackers of the movement participants throughout the movement and submitted a memorandum to the State Ministry on the same demands.⁴¹ The State Ministry was somewhat responsive to this demand. The murderers of Rajib Haider (an atheist blogger and a Shahbag activist who was hacked to death during the first month of the movement) were arrested and two were sentenced to death.⁴² However, the biggest achievement of the Shahbag movement, which a lot of participants view as a success, is the passage of the amendment in the law that allowed the state to appeal any verdicts in the war crimes trial.⁴³ Directly because of this amendment, the state was able to appeal the life imprisonment verdict against Quader Mollah, which then resulted in a death sentence by the Supreme Court revision.⁴⁴

**Figure 7: New Advantages Gained by Shahbag Movement
(according to 100 respondents)**



Source: Based on author's survey.

³⁷ Prothom Alo (2013b).

³⁸ BBC News (2013).

³⁹ Rosul (2015), p. 192.

⁴⁰ Prothom Alo (2013c).

⁴¹ Rosul (2015), p. 202.

⁴² The Daily Ittefaq (2017).

⁴³ Ahmed (2013).

⁴⁴ bdnews24.com (2013b).

Due to all these achievements, most of the Shahbag participants (66 percent of the respondents) view the movement as a success. As Figure 7 shows, following the same trend, 56 percent of the respondents believed that the Shahbag movement was able to achieve policy changes that meet its grievances to a great or a fairly great extent.

However, such an evaluation of the Shahbag movement seems myopic in hindsight. Because as the movement lost its traction, the government started to become less and less responsive to the pleas of the Shahbag movement leaders and representatives of the secularist civil society in general.

Many violent attacks on Shahbag activists were not prosecuted, including the murder of Jafar Munshi (on February 14, 2013), and the more recent (26 February 26, 2015) high profile murder of a blogger, writer, and atheist intellectual, named Avijit Roy.⁴⁵ Numerous attacks on secularist activists and bloggers took place after Avijit Roy's murder, including the murders of Washiqur Rahman, Ananta Bijoy Das, Niloy Chatterjee, and Nazimuddin Samad.⁴⁶

One week after the murder of Nazimuddin Samad (on April 6, 2016), the Prime Minister remarked that writing against a religion or hurting someone's religious sentiment was perverted (her words) and that the government will not take responsibility for any consequences of such indecency.⁴⁷ This statement essentially gave legitimacy to murdering secularists and atheists in Bangladesh according to some online activists.⁴⁸ Most of these murdered bloggers were leaders or participants of the Shahbag movement, which meant that legitimizing their murder was the same as legitimizing the murder of Shahbag movement leaders.

Even aside from the personal danger that the Shahbag movement created for secularist civil society and Shahbag movement leaders, the movement also created a great lobbying disadvantage for the secularist civil society (answering the fourth question of our discussion). Before the Shahbag movement, the lobbying power of the secularist civil society with the ruling party was very strong, which was visible from the willingness of the government to follow through the demands of the community to prosecute war criminals.

However, the weaknesses of the Shahbag movement diminished this lobbying power and handed over a great amount of influence to the Islamist civil society. As shown in Figure 8, only 33.7 percent of the surveyed Shahbag movement participants agree that the lobbying power of the secularist civil society was increased as a result of the Shahbag movement; the rest (76.3 percent) believe that the lobbying power decreased or remained the same.

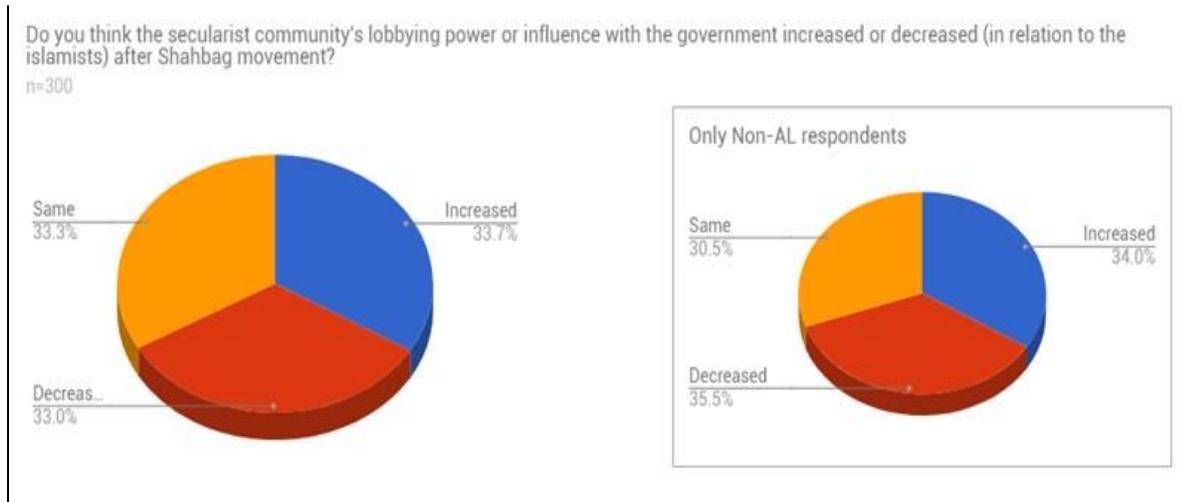
⁴⁵ Samakal (2017).

⁴⁶ Tharoor (2016).

⁴⁷ Prothom Alo (2016).

⁴⁸ Deutsche Welle (2016).

**Figure 8: Secularist Civil Society’s Lobbying Power after Shahbag Movement
(according to 300 participants)**



Source: Based on author’s survey.

As the right pie chart of Figure 8 shows, the detrimental effects of Shahbag are more visible to the non-Awami League community as they rank the decrease in lobbying power as the top outcome of the Shahbag movement. This implies that overall, the Shahbag movement did not achieve any new advantages for the secularist civil society and might have instead created some disadvantages for it.

As the secularist civil society and the Shahbag movement lost much of its popular support, the Islamist civil society gained ground both in the popular mind and the government. They built connections with AL leaders and started to push their own agenda. Soon, their lobbying efforts started to bear fruits. A massive change in public school textbooks was carried out in 2017 that took out the writings of authors deemed as anti-Islam by Hefazat, according to the demands that the group made during their counter-protests.⁴⁹ The government recognized Qawmi madrasas certificate the Dawah-e-Hadith as a postgraduate degree as per Hefazat-e-Islam’s demands and the Prime Minister greeted Hefazat leaders in her residence, the Ganabhaban.⁵⁰ A statue of Lady Justice was removed from the Supreme Court premises because Hefazat-e-Islam activists deemed it to be anti-Islamic.⁵¹

When Shahbag movement leaders took a stand against this move, four of the leaders were jailed and one hundred and forty student leaders were sued.⁵² When a prominent secularist civil society intellectual, spoke out against this move, Hefazat-e-Islam leaders openly threatened to physically attack her in the streets and the government did not condemn the threats.⁵³

⁴⁹ Barry and Manik (2017a).

⁵⁰ Mamun (2017).

⁵¹ Barry and Manik (2017b).

⁵² Bangladesh Pratidin (2017).

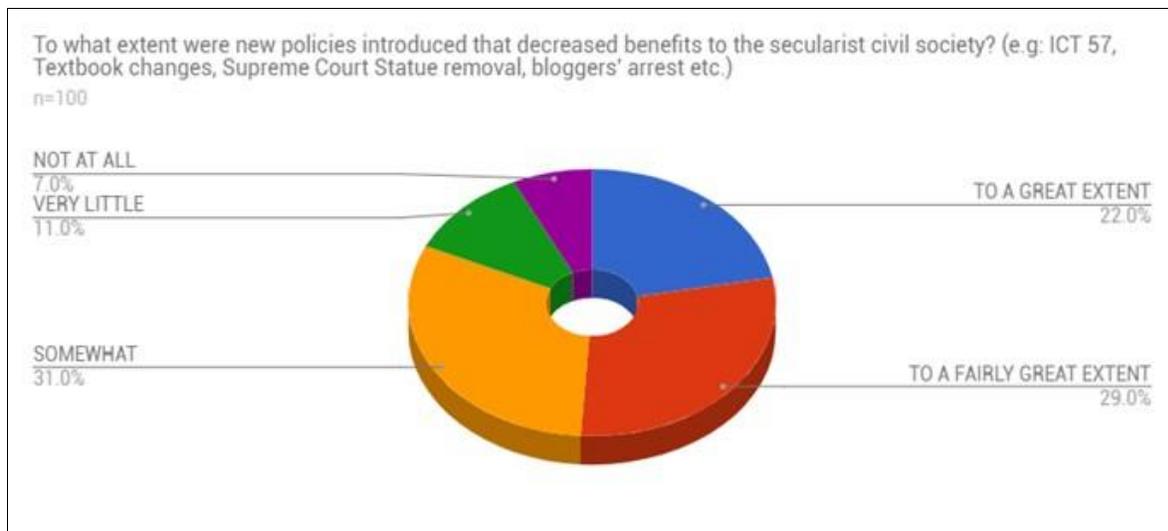
⁵³ Safi (2017).

Furthermore, the official spokesman for the Shahbag movement, Imran H. Sarkar, was summoned to court for speaking out against the statue removal and was attacked with rotten eggs by AL activists.⁵⁴

These incidents points to the fact that the Shahbag movement has diminished the popular support, influence and lobbying power of the secularist civil society and has empowered the Islamist civil society in the process. While the Shahbag movement received some favorable policy changes in the beginning (which constitutes the answer to the second question), it later incurred a number of unfavorable policy changes (which constitutes the answer to the third question), and finally, it lost much of its lobbying power with the government (which constitutes the answer to the fourth question).

While the movement participants celebrate the initial advantages won by the movement, they also acknowledge the disadvantages that it incurred later on. The majority of the movement participants observe that the recent policy changes directly decreased the benefits for the secularist civil society.

Figure 9: Effect of Shahbag in Decreasing the Advantages of the Secularist Civil Society



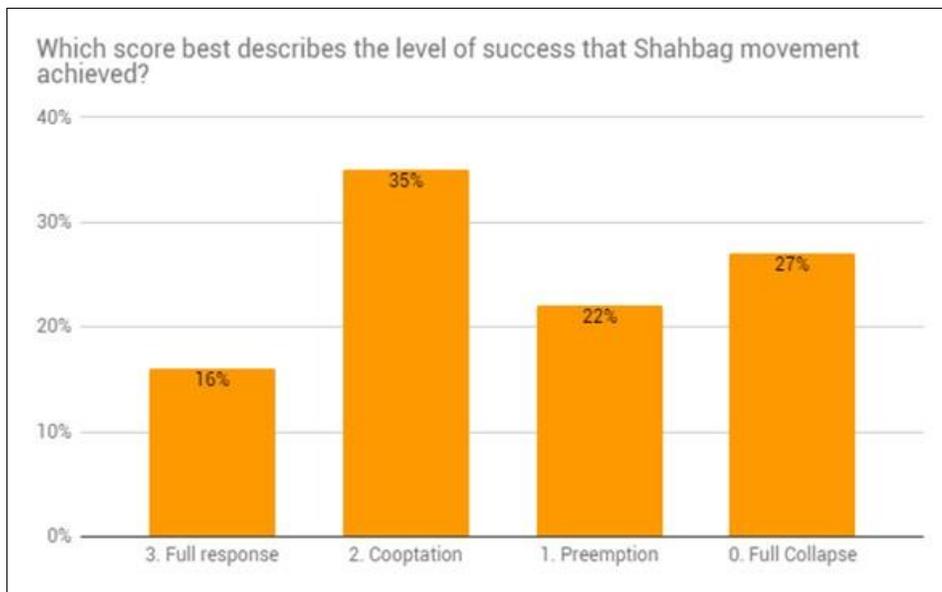
Source: Based on author's survey.

As shown in Figure 9, in a 100-participant survey, 51 percent said that new policies that decrease benefits for the secularist civil society were introduced to a great extent or a fairly great extent, while 31 percent said that it was somewhat so. Only 18 percent of the survey respondents expressed that very little or no detrimental policy changes happened. Overall, these replies imply that the Shahbag movement failed to achieve new advantages for the secularist civil society and created some disadvantages instead.

⁵⁴ bdnews24.com (2016).

Following Gamson’s metric, the Shahbag movement achieved the acceptance but failed to receive new advantages. Therefore, the Shahbag movement can be characterized as a movement that was co-opted. As shown in Figure 10, Shahbag movement participants point towards this diagnosis as well. A majority of 35 percent of the respondents said that the movement was co-opted, 22 percent said that the success of the movement was preempted, 27 percent said that the level of success was a full collapse, while only 16 percent said that the Shahbag movement achieved a full response. Taking these responses into consideration along with the policy changes that have occurred in the aftermath of the Shahbag movement, it can be claimed that the movement was overall disadvantageous to the secularist civil society as it diminished its lobbying power with the government and led to the re-legitimization of the Islamist civil society.

Figure 10: The Level of Success of Shahbag (according to 100 Shahbag participants)



Source: Based on author’s survey.

IX. Conclusion

The resource mobilization school informs that the Shahbag movement reached an end of political cooptation because of its faulty framing tasks. The survey results show that a majority of movement participants were politically unaffiliated and felt betrayed when the movement was coopted by the ruling party. In such circumstances, moralists left the movement and political beneficiaries and attention seekers took over the movement’s leadership. This new leadership transformed the frame of the movement and made the Shahbag movement a force against political Islam. Such a reframing of the Shahbag movement opened it up to being criticized as an anti-Islamic movement.

The Islamist civil society took this opportunity and mobilized a countermovement under the banner of Hefazat-e-Islam. The countermovement was able to reclaim the popularity and acceptance of Islamism with the masses and the political elite. This is evident through the change in the government's policy agenda that now favors Islamism and de-facto criminalizes the secularists. Overall, the Shahbag movement failed to achieve further advantages for the secularist civil society and it foiled the lobbying power garnered by its ideological predecessors through tactful frame bridging between secularist organizations. It also provided means for the Islamists to hit back and gain an upper hand in the ongoing ideological conflict, which resulted in the re-legitimization of the Islamist civil society as a legitimate and influential interest group within mainstream politics.

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