

12-1-2018

## Alam, S.M. Shamsul. Governmentality and Counter-Hegemony in Bangladesh. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Tarique Niazi Ph.D.

University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire, niazit@uwec.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Niazi, Tarique Ph.D. (2018) "Alam, S.M. Shamsul. Governmentality and Counter-Hegemony in Bangladesh. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 10 : No. 1 , Article 23.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol10/iss1/23>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact [phuffman@lindenwood.edu](mailto:phuffman@lindenwood.edu).

**Alam, S.M. Shamsul. *Governmentality and Counter-Hegemony in Bangladesh*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.**

What does Michel Foucault have to say on being a ‘Bengali’ or ‘Bangladeshi’? Lining up behind center-left Hasina Wajid, Bangladesh’s incumbent Prime Minister, or her rival former Prime Minister Khalida Zia? Rooting for Gen. Ziaur Rahman, the country’s first military leader or his successor Gen. Hussein M Ershad? Not a lot, until you have opened *Governmentality and Counter-Hegemony in Bangladesh*, and read it half way through. In this theoretically dense but captivatingly learned account of Bangladesh’s colonial past and postcolonial present, Foucault has a great deal to say on every twist and turn that has marked the life of this nation since its founding. In Alam’s telling, the country’s past echoes in its present. Although Alam does not lay claim to it, he has made quite a few dives into the history of pre-colonial Bangladesh as well, to chronicle the emergence of ‘Muslim Bengal.’ In this quest, he touches on highly evocative issues of whether Bengalis are ‘low-caste Hindus’ who converted to Islam for its egalitarian ethos, or their choice of faith was the result of the arrival of Arab merchants on to the subcontinent. Even on these dicey disputations, Alam readily turns to Foucault for his ideas on historical ‘origin,’ ‘genealogy,’ and all the warts that they bring.

More importantly, Alam hears these contentions reverberate in postcolonial Bangladesh. His documentation of the plight of three young women, Nurjahan (pp. 108-109), Rahima Akhtar (p. 112) and Hena Begum (p.112), reveals how village Mullahs (prayer leaders) abuse Islamic jurisprudence with abandon to wrongfully punish the innocent. Nurjahan lost her life to a Mullah’s vengeful fatwa<sup>1</sup>, for spurning his unwanted advances, who judged her ‘adulterous.’ The scorned man further ruled that Nurjahan was unworthy of a Muslim burial. As a result, her remains were left uninterred for several days until a few fellow villagers took pity on her (in death), and shoveled her body into an unmarked grave. Rahima was whipped in public at the behest of another village Mullah who ruled her alleged act of giving birth to a child before she was wed a ‘transgression of Sharia.’<sup>2</sup> In the third case, a fatwa led to the murder of teenaged Hena Begum for dating her married cousin, while the cousin walked free. Drawing on Foucault, Alam observes in these patterns of lethal and sublethal use of fatwas the repeated abuse of religious authority exercised against the innocent (women). He terms this deployment of power, purportedly in behalf of faith, ‘Islamic governmentality.’

The classic case of abuse of religious authority or ‘Islamic governmentality’ is that of Tasleema Nasreen’s. Since the 1990s, Nasreen has become Bangladesh’s global face of a feminist struggle against religiously sanctioned patriarchy. Nasreen’s acerbic critique of male chauvinism, ill-informed faith, and xenophobic nationalism turned her into a nemesis of Bangladesh’s religious, cultural and national establishment. The indignant clergy chased her out of country in the belief that they would thus turn her off for good. Instead, Alam records, Nasreen produced her prodigious work in exile, and in profusion. When she returned to neighboring West Bengal in India to lessen the agony of exile in the warm vicinity of her native land (of Bangladesh) that she loves so much, she again found Muslim clergy up in arms against her. Her detractors did not rest until the Indian government was forced to re-exile her to Delhi, India’s capital city, apparently for her safety. As Alam recounts, Mullahs falsely accused Nasreen of giving a call for revisiting Quran and Hadith<sup>3</sup>. Such calls are considered blasphemy, which Mullahs are eager to see punished by death. Nasreen has since lived under death threats by religious fanatics who trail her wherever she goes; yet she refuses to submit to their subliterate and erroneous interpretation of faith. Alam calls fatwa politics ‘biopoliticization of Islam’ (p.

107) that is aimed at regulating social life. In this regard, Foucault's concept of 'biopower' expresses power relations in which the biological features (such as marriage, births, sex) of people are bent into political stratagem to govern them. Alam has ingeniously employed this concept to describe fatwa-mongering in Bangladesh, which is meant to terrorize the female gender into total subjection.

In general, Alam's deft choice of Foucault's concept of governmentality has been driven by its liberatory potential, i.e., the ultimately least governed citizens, unencumbered by religious edicts, government legislation and authoritarian statecraft. Reviewing the major upheavals that Bangladesh endured since its founding, Alam folds them into three kinds of governmentalities: nationalist, authoritarian and neo-liberal. All three, by default, line up chronologically. While looking at colonial Bangladesh (which was part of united Bengal until 1905), Alam sees nationalist governmentality take shape. Pre-Bangladesh Bengal first severed its ties with West Bengal (of Hindu majority) to become East Bengal (of Muslim majority) in 1905. Yet it remained under the British colonial rule until 1947, when it liberated itself to become East Pakistan. In 1971, it again broke off with the mother country (of Pakistan) to become the independent nation of Bangladesh, which was envisioned to be *Sonar Bangla* (i.e., Golden Bengal).

Alam sums up 'postcolonial governmentality as Mujibbad' (p. 62) that he regards as the high noon of nationalist governmentality. In 1972, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of Bangladesh, explained Mujibbad in four foundational governing principles: *democracy, socialism, secularism and nationalism* (p. 65). He first dreamt this vision for a united Pakistan, which widely resonated with his fellow oppressed Pakistanis. It is no wonder that the country's largest province of Balochistan and its third most populous province of Pakhtunkhwa (then Northwest Frontier Province) resoundingly voted in 1970 for leaders and parties that were Mujib's allies. In the Punjab and Sindh (the two most populous provinces of then West Pakistan) the working and lower-middle classes voted for Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which mimicked Mujib's new social contract by declaring socialism and democracy its governing ideology.

Yet Pakistan's ruling classes (bureaucrats, large landholders, industrialists, big businesses and political dynasties), who were beneficiaries of a rentier state, were unwilling to see the status quo replaced with the birth of a social secular democracy that would strengthen Pakistan and keep it united. Failed in his ambition to govern united Pakistan, Mujib hoisted his vision (of democracy, socialism, secularism and nationalism) onto a new-born nation that he founded. Alam, however, is skeptical of Mujib's nationalism and secularism that he argues will not sit well with an ethnically and religiously plural Bangladesh. He then analyzes the 'authoritarian governmentality' that succeeded Mujib's 'nationalist governmentality.' The icons of authoritarian governmentality were two military leaders and two political dynasts: Gen. Ziaur Rahman, Gen. Hussain M. Ershad, Khalida Zia (widow of Gen. Ziaur Rahman) and Hasina Wajid (one of Mujib's two daughters who survived the massacre of their family in 1975).

Gen. Ziaur Rahman seized the reins of power after a bloody coup that killed Mujib and all but two of his family members. He too was assassinated in a coup, and succeeded by Gen. Hussain M. Ershad. Since the 1990s, Dhaka has been changing hands between Khalida Zia and Hasina Wajid. They have been each other's sworn enemies that partly explains their authoritarian bent. When one is in power, the other is either in jail or in exile. True to this pattern, Khalida Zia is now serving a five-year jail term on what her supporters see trumped up charges of corruption.

These leaders and their governments did a lot of good for the country, but their Foucauldian ‘conduct’ was driven by their biopolitics: to extend control over the entire population. Here, Alam specifically mentions the military governments’ development programs such as *Gram Sarkar* (village government) and *Village Defense Party*, which were duly meant to ameliorate the rural masses. But this ‘governmentality’ was a means to extend the government control over Bangladesh which Alam claims still continues to be a ‘village-based society’ (p. 82).

Alam’s major contribution lies in his reconceptualization of governmentality in a colonial context to describe nationalist, authoritarian and neoliberal governmentalities in his native Bangladesh, and violent uprisings that arose in reaction. Alam furthered this idea by introducing ‘counter-conduct’ or what he describes ‘counter-hegemony’ to capture resistance as an inevitable part of power relations. Here he heavily draws upon Antonin Gramsci and his idea of hegemony to dovetail them with Foucault’s idea of ‘counter-conduct.’ Nationalist uprisings in colonial and post-colonial Bangladesh, in Alam’s account, are expression of counter-hegemony. Despite his innovative integration of Gramscian and Foucauldian ideas to develop an original theory of resistance in a colonial context, Alam generously credits Foucault for his attentiveness to a blind spot in his thought that he later cleared with a new concept of ‘counter-conduct’ or resistance.

Alam’s treatment of neoliberal or global governmentality gives rise to a solution to governmentality: a liberated civil society (the least governed citizen). This solution is nevertheless problematic. Civil society pushes back on political society to thwart the latter’s attempts at power grab. Yet civil society can be ‘uncivil’ too. The right-wing extremist groups in Europe and North America, which want to see the beast of government starved to death in order to redeem ultimate freedom, are also part of civil society. Their nativist, racist, sexist and xenophobic views are life-threatening for minorities of all stripes, which are held back by the force of governments. So are the Islamist extremist groups, such as Al Qaeda, Boko Haram, ISIS, Al-Shabab, and Taliban, which want to see government disappear, and replace it with faith-based tyrannies. The ‘least governed citizen’ as such is not an ideal worth pursuing. What is worth pursuing, however, is a government that is accountable, just, fair and transparent, regardless of whether it administers citizens, children, laity, or the sick as Foucault would have put it.

Yet *Governmentality and Counter-Hegemony in Bangladesh* indeed is a memorable contribution to the theorization of nationalist struggles in colonial Bangladesh and religious extremism in post-colonial Bangladesh. Those who are interested in political theory and empirical politics would find S.M. Shamsul Alam’s work a must-read, especially on Bangladesh’s national and social evolution, colonial contextualization of governmentality, and theory of resistance (counter-conduct or counter-hegemony). The volume, indeed, deserves an honored place among graduate collections on Asian Studies, Political Theory, Political Sociology, and Foucault.

Tarique Niazi PhD  
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire  
[NIAZIT@uwec.edu](mailto:NIAZIT@uwec.edu)

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fatwa is religious opinion on observance or breach of faith.

<sup>2</sup> Sharia is commonly understood to mean Islamic jurisprudence.

<sup>3</sup> Hadith is an account of all that Prophet of Islam said and did in his life.