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Performing the Party. National Holiday Events and Politics at a Public University Campus in Bangladesh

Mascha Schulz

No “Joyful August”

- 1 One morning in July 2017, a group of 30 to 40 students belonging to the SUST (Shahjalal University of Science and Technology) Chhatra League (BCL), the student wing of the currently ruling party, Awami League (AL), crowded in front of Assistant Professor Minhaz Sobhan’s office to confront him regarding his recent Facebook post that had gone viral the night before.¹ The post had been debated intensely among students on the university’s Facebook site. With emotions flaring, the number of reposts and comments quickly multiplied, spreading beyond the university circle. Several colleagues had called the professor advising him to avoid the university campus as he might be physically attacked. His office was locked in anticipation. The students started to vandalize the office from outside while shouting slogans against the teacher, calling for the university to take action against him. Chanting the common BCL slogan “*jay bāṃla, jay baṅgabandhu*” (Victory to Bengal, Victory to Bangabandhu [friend of Bengal i.e., Sheikh Mujibur Rahman]),² they tore down Minhaz Sobhan’s nameplate and used it to break his office’s small window. As a symbolic act they threw the wooden nameplate on the floor and stomped on it. Later that day, the BCL students proudly shared their Facebook posts with pictures of the nameplate amid pieces of broken glass, along with descriptions and pictures of the meeting with the university’s vice-chancellor concerning this incident and their demands.
- 2 Minhaz Sobhan’s Facebook post was also heatedly debated among the university’s faculty and the issue dominated conversations for a couple of days; even teachers not

directly involved in politics discussed this incident passionately, at times with deep emotional investment. Interestingly, many people argued that Minhaz Sobhan's post was an insult and a "real danger" to "secular Bangladesh."

- 3 Several pro-AL factions filed petitions to the vice-chancellor calling for Minhaz Sobhan's punishment. The SUST BCL continued to push their demands in more non-violent ways, such as by organizing meetings with the vice-chancellor, selected professors and AL politicians, and with non-violent protests demanding the termination of Minhaz Sobhan's university contract. Furthermore, the BCL leaders made sure their presence on campus was even more visible to both discourage Minhaz Sobhan from entering campus and to increase pressure on the university administration. The controversy about Minhaz's Facebook post was not limited to campus, it reached central and local AL and BCL leaders, and was discussed in local newspapers.
- 4 Less than a week later, the assistant professor's punishment was determined: he had to pay a fine of 50,000 Tk (about £425), take compulsory leave for six months and was demoted to the post of lecturer. The last punishment not only meant a reduction of his salary to about 40 % of the previous level, but—as many of my interlocutors pointed out—it was highly humiliating for Minhaz Sobhan to be considered junior to some of his recently hired colleagues after 14 years of regular service.
- 5 What kind of statement resulted in such a huge wave of protest and intensification of sentiments? As a first response to my enquiry, people usually explained that Minhaz Sobhan had written something against Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's father, who is also widely considered the "Father of the Nation" and is a highly symbolic AL party figure.³ Many immediately pointed out that it was not his first controversial post against Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and that Minhaz Sobhan's previous Facebook posts had been even more problematic. Minhaz Sobhan is an active writer, well known via his Facebook posts and political poems as a supporter of the opposition party, BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party), while many also allege that he has close links with Jamaat-e-Islami and its student organization Shibir. The actual status he posted on July 15, which went viral, had proclaimed: "I count the days...my joyful August is coming!"⁴ In contemporary Bangladesh, August is considered a "mourning month" as Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated on August 15, 1975. Therefore, posting about a "joyful August" was taken as a statement against the party in power. This, however, does not sufficiently explain the strong repercussions and consequences that followed the post, thus raising the questions: Why and how did such a Facebook post evoke such fierce reactions? What was it about "August" that provoked such strong sentiments and widespread protests? What does this tell us about political contestations, the complex role of "ideology," and, possibly, the configurations of the religious and the secular?
- 6 This incident can be interpreted in several ways, but it, in any case, illustrates the symbolic significance of "August" and the affective potential that is visible in these different groups' outraged reactions. While it is possible to view Minhaz Sobhan's harsh punishment primarily as a result of very unfortunate timing entangling him in personal and party-related politics on campus, I contend that beyond this, the incident illustrates the centrality of commemorative events for such politics.
- 7 Taking the incident as a starting point, this article focuses on the social and political life of national days at the SUST Campus to ask what such commemorative events and

associated repercussions reveal about the reproduction of party political structures and ruling party's hegemony. It complements work on student and party politics in Bangladesh that highlights so-called "seat-politics" internal factionalism, violence and the role of criminal entrepreneurs, or patronage networks (e.g., Kuttig 2019; Jahangir 1979; Suykens and Islam 2013; Ruud 2014; Andersen 2013) by highlighting the significance that ideological positioning and affective attachment to the major party founders play for campus politics.

- 8 Rather than contrasting "ideology" with "factional politics," this article argues that ideological positioning intersects with factionalist dynamics and strategic considerations in the politics around commemoration events. This intersection results in popular complaints about a lack of ideology (*ādarśa*, *cetanā*, *bhābādarśa*, *īdīolajī*)⁵, while at the same time ideological positioning—that is, the use of markers that indicate party belonging but are also associated with certain political ideas—appears to be highly present. Accordingly, "ideology" seems to be simultaneously highly relevant and irrelevant. Exploring ethnographic material on "August," I discuss the various ways through which "party ideology," that is, political ideas and affective attachment to them, becomes (ir)relevant; I begin with an interpretation of the Facebook incident through which the post's content and ideological commitment to party politics appear close to irrelevant. The subsequent section complicates the picture by exploring the social dynamics around commemoration events and national days at the university campus to demonstrate this apparently simultaneous (ir)relevance of ideological positioning.

The University Campus, Party Affiliation, and the Politics of August

- 9 If I asked my interlocutors for an explanation of the incident outlined above, most would firstly point to the relevance of "grouping" and party politics. The factional nature of (party) politics in Bangladesh is widely noted (cf. Islam 2013; Suykens 2017a; Ruud 2010). The hegemonic role political parties play in socio-economic life and, consequently, the polarization along party lines have been captured with terms such as "partyarchy" (Hasan 2006), "patron state" (Lewis 2011), and recently "party-state" (Suykens 2017b). As affiliation to major parties, particularly to the currently ruling AL or the main opposition parties BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami, structures access to various institutions and resources, party politics' significance reaches beyond formal politics, resulting in the continued perpetuation of a deeply politicized society.
- 10 The recently emerging literature on student politics and student party wings in Bangladesh also highlights the significant entanglement between party politics and public universities. These studies tend to focus on the (mostly male) main leaders of the student wings of the major political parties focusing on the Chhatra League, student wing of the AL; Chhatra Dal, student wing of the BNP; and Islami Chhatra Shibir,⁶ student organization of the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami. The remarkable power of the ruling party's student leaders has been attributed to their control over resources—particularly hall seats—their political backing, and their employment of force and violence (cf. Andersen 2013; Andersen 2016; Kuttig 2019; Suykens and Islam 2013; Suykens 2018; Ruud 2010; Ruud 2014; Christiansen 2012:200–202; Bleyder 2013; Rozario 2001). This description resonates with my research, although Shahjalal

University at the edge of Sylhet city is not a fully residential university and therefore only limited seats⁷ are available for student leaders to redistribute.⁸ It is often highlighted that the “confrontational divide” (Andersen 2016:418) and a so-called “winner-takes-all mentality” (for instance Suykens 2017a:1143) is reproduced by opposition student wing leaders’ deprivation. Indeed, well-known student politicians are often unable to enter campus once their party is in opposition.⁹ Thus, student politics at the university campus is a major contributor to the (re)production of party politics and confrontational factional structures. Previous research has further shown that the willingness of young men to participate in these often violent and risky politics is linked to potential benefits for their future careers, be it a presumed privileged access to the formal job sector via political links, their aspirations to become political leaders, or even possible future profits as a *māstān* (violent entrepreneur)¹⁰ (cf. Ruud 2010; Andersen 2016). Given BCL leaders’ power on their campus, it is not surprising that nobody seriously considered punishing them for the destruction of university property.

- 11 While student politics on the university campus is directly linked to the national level and major parties, faculty politics similarly perpetuates the (re)production of party divisions, despite the fact that SUST faculty are legally prohibited to actively engage in formal party politics.¹¹ Faculty politics are organized through faculty panels that, although they are not formally or officially affiliated to any party, are mostly referred to as the “Awami League panel” or the “BNP-Jamaat panel”¹² in everyday conversations. All major administrative positions tend to be replaced with the winning party’s loyalists after elections. SUST’s vice-chancellor is directly appointed by the government. Further, administrative posts such as proctor, student advisor, committee member, and hall provost are allocated by him and are thus considered “political posts.” However, even the members of the faculty association and members of the academic council, who are elected in regular and secret elections, tend to belong to the panel “in power.” Political affiliations, widely known to other faculty, provide a basis for social interaction and determine access to certain positions, privileged promotions, and access to certain services, favors, or routine paper work to a considerable degree (see for other contexts: Shahjamal 2007; Parvin 2012). Being a member of the panel “in opposition,” like Minhaz Sobhan was, results in disadvantages and this is a relevant part of this story. Indeed, it was widely assumed that his statements were an angry reaction to his experience where his wife failed to secure a job in public universities despite her outstanding qualifications due to his political affiliation.
- 12 These kinds of panel politics were also highly relevant in the determination of Minhaz Sobhan’s punishment. Nevertheless, many who had forthrightly criticized Minhaz’s actions commented that the punishment was “a bit too much.” Typical comments were, “See, from a political perspective, there needs to be a punishment, but from a personal perspective, I think it has become too much.” It was widely assumed that the main reasons for the harsh punishment were “political,” and that this case became so political due to its very unfortunate timing, which prompted many of the involved actors to demand an excessive punishment to show their loyalty to the government and what is assumed to be the AL “ideology.” The decision about Minhaz Sobhan’s case had been made at the very last syndicate meeting of the outgoing vice-chancellor, who at that time remained hopeful that the incumbent government would re-nominate him to the position. Furthermore, other senior members of the syndicate meeting hoped to be considered for the position and thereby had a vested interest in underscoring their

“ideological commitment” to AL leaders. Additionally, the SUST BCL committee was under considerable pressure to build a positive reputation at that time as their committee had been temporarily suspended. Current leaders may have been motivated to display their commitment to the party, thus the stronger reactions. It was accordingly difficult for anyone to speak up for Minhaz Sobhan as leaders of his faction and colleagues from his department had done during previous incidents.

- 13 However, such a perspective focusing on grouping and personal strategic considerations tends to reduce the statement on “August” to an ordinary demonstration of “creating an issue” and “showing off,” but it fails to account for why “August” became such a contentious issue in the first place catalyzing such strong affective reactions even beyond party-political divisions. Scholars concerned with the state, political leadership, and student politics in Bangladesh and South Asia have not attributed much significance to political ideologies. The recent focus on “muscular politics” highlights instead the significance of patronage, the pragmatic nature of politics, the role of violence, and access to resources (e.g., Atkinson-Sheppard 2017; Islam 2013; Jackman 2018; Jahangir 1979; Ruud 2010; Suykens 2017a). Scholars working on student politics in other areas in South Asia have often assumed that political ideology is of minor relevance, such as in the study of Jat students in Meerut who, according to Craig Jeffrey (2010), “viewed this quest in entirely pragmatic terms” (p. 140). Bert Suykens even suggests that ideology is not a relevant factor for politics in Bangladesh more generally; as he writes:

Both the AL and BNP have been built on weak ideological foundations. [...] These parties are, as such, often considered as vehicles for patronage, rather than centered on ideological differences [...] Commentators have thus found the ideological distinction between the two parties limited (Suykens 2017a: 1143).

Minhaz Sobhan’s case shows a more complicated relationship between party politics, significant symbols, and circulating political ideologies. While the factionalist struggle for resources and power might be a significant part of the story, commentators who interpreted this incident as a “real danger” for “secular Bangladesh” clearly see “August” not only as a symbol for party political struggles, but also as part of the political idea of “secularism,” which calls for more explicit analysis of the role of “ideology” in this context.

- 14 Ideology is of course a fuzzy and problematic term that can be used with very divergent connotations (cf. MacKenzie 2003; Lloyd 2003; Pelkmans 2017), and it is even more so if we consider the only partial congruence of the semantic fields to which the English term “ideology” is related in contemporary Bangladeshi Bengali,¹³ and say in contemporary British English. However, it is used here in a similar and similarly vague way as it is used by my interlocutors, or in the quote by Bert Suykens above, as referring to political ideas and ideals. The ambiguity is arguably inherent to the concept, as even the most standard examples of political ideologies, such as Marxism or Maoism, are never fully fixed or linearly linked to empirically observable coherent positions, but are umbrella terms that capture changing and often heterogeneous formations. Furthermore, political ideologies are rarely discussed as theoretical arguments in which dogmas and ideas ought to be precisely outlined in ordinary interactions. They are instead characterized by the usage of certain symbols and statements that refer rather implicitly to broad ideas and defuse political stances,

allowing people with diverse interests to unite under certain banners. Accordingly, I focus my discussion here mostly on “ideological positioning,” referring to markers associated with certain parties *as well as* political ideas that frame party political divisions but that, as I show below, at the same time resonate with large segments of the society beyond those at the core of party politics. I will explore the role of ideological positioning in the following by looking at what has often been perceived as privileged sites of ideological transmissions, such as nationalism or party narratives, namely, national days and commemoration events. Subsequently, the ethnographic perspective on social dynamics around these days allows us to explore the complex role of ideological positioning and its significance for party politics, existing power structures and a deeper understanding of the political and symbolic significance of “August.”

National Days and Political Time

- 15 National rituals and spectacles have been accorded a significant role in creating “imagined communities” by transmitting elite ideologies, creating affective attachments to the nation, and reiterating a supposedly shared “national” history (see Tsang and Woods 2014; Anderson 1983). While national days aim at commemorating *the* central historical events of the nation, the presumed traditions are often relatively recent inventions that tend to prescribe and sustain, rather than simply reflect, a shared national history and collective identity (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Kong and Yeoh 1997). Changes in the political climate or regime are therefore often reflected in shifts in commemoration practices and contestations around national days or monuments, as various studies have shown (Kook 2005; Stańczyk 2014; Chang and Holt 2011).
- 16 In Bangladesh, where competing historical narratives and imaginations of the nation have been propagated by the two main parties since at least 1990, this has implications. Different governments’ attempts to introduce, re-interpret, and shape commemoration practices in order to establish particular historical narratives in favor of their party’s hegemony have been described by several scholars (Uddin 2006; Kabir 1990; Ahmed 1990; Schulz 2012). Sufia Uddin (2006) discusses how shifting patterns of celebrating major holidays are linked to parties’ agendas and attempts to establish competing versions of nationalism, as well as to changing public perceptions on secularism and religion. Referring to the confrontational politics between the AL and the BNP, she writes: “Depending on who is in power, national holidays are celebrated differently—so differently that the festivities clearly indicate how competing nationalisms are articulated” (p. 139).
- 17 In the context of my research, many of my interlocutors highlighted the relation between party politics and commemoration practices, and some also referenced specific government policies. August 15, the National Mourning Day, is indeed an illustrative example in this regard. It was introduced as a national holiday when the AL came into power in 1996; it was reversed when the BNP was elected in late 2001 and declared November 7 a national holiday instead. The “National Revolution Day” commemorates the 1975 uprising when General Ziaur Rahman, a leading figure and founder of the BNP, came to power. Strong supporters of the AL continued to commemorate August 15, but had to do so without access to governmental resources or

recognition, mainly in closed circles and discreetly to avoid harassment. In August 2008, the caretaker government again reversed the decision and the *jātiya śakh dibas* (National Mourning Day) has been officially observed since. It is widely believed that the intensity with which the day is commemorated has increased considerably, as of 2018 not only the day itself is observed but the entire month of August is considered to be *śakher mās*, a “month of mourning” (cf. Mookherjee 2015:31–46).

- 18 The politicization of commemoration days along party lines is very apparent in the controversy about opposition leader Khaleda Zia’s claim that her birthday is August 15 and contestations around the subsequent annual celebration on that day by her followers.¹⁴ AL supporters allege that Khaleda Zia deliberately changed her birthday and interpreted this as provocation amid highly confrontational politics. In August 2016, Khaleda Zia announced that she will refrain from public “cake cutting” for her birthday, a decision she officially explained with reference to the national crisis, recent floods, forced disappearances, political murders, and the 2016 terrorist attack.¹⁵ Some interpreted this decision, however, as a change in strategy at a time of intense political repression. The fact that the (non-)celebration of Khaleda Zia’s birthday was extensively discussed on social media,¹⁶ on the streets and in other places of *āḍḍā* (chat) illustrates the highly symbolic and contested significance of August 15.
- 19 The Mourning Day is not the only day that was re- and de-introduced according to the “political time,” a concept coined by Jonathan Spencer (2007:125–126) to describe people’s tendency to divide time units according to political markers¹⁷ rather than referring to years. The politics around national holidays is further demonstrated in the government’s attempts to receive international support to increase recognition of historical events that highlight the party’s legacy. One example is the AL government’s successful lobbying in 2000 to have February 21 (Ekushe) recognized by the UN as the *International Mother Language Day*.¹⁸ It is well documented how, even for the British-Bengali community in East London, contestations around appropriate commemorations of Ekushe are “a primary site for a version of nationalist/cultural identity work and politics” (Alexander 2013:591), one that “draws the lines for the contestation of this identity, particularly around a broad religious/secular nationalist divide” (Alexander 2013:593) while at the same time intersecting with party-political lines even in the Bengali diaspora (Uddin 2006; cf. Mapril 2015 for a similar case in Lisbon).
- 20 In recent years, the government has implemented several policies concerning commemoration practices, making it obligatory for schools, universities, alia madrasas,¹⁹ and other public institutions to observe official national days. It has also allocated budgets for universities to organize programs or events on these days. These commemoration policies not only attempted to increase the number of days of commemoration, but also to incorporate larger segments of society into the observation of core national days.
- 21 The mere existence of these government policies and commemoration ceremonies, however, has not necessarily resulted in general acceptance of historical narratives and their related ideological messages. Indeed, some of my interlocutors reflected critically on government attempts to foster hegemony through commemoration practices and were rather cynical about the historical narratives. As one of my research interlocutors commented:

It was already bad when I was in school. We learned one kind of history and then, once the government changed, the answer that counted as correct in

the previous years, was suddenly marked as wrong. It's crazy. [...] But at least we did not have to attend all these days and seminars. My girls have to be in school today all day long although it's a holiday.

Attempts to establish hegemonic narratives are never fully successful, but are instead countered by alternative readings, acts of resistance, or outright ignorance. It appears to me that in the case of Bangladesh the deconstructive perspective that many of my research interlocutors shared was facilitated by the oscillating commemoration practices promoted by the different parties, next to other factors such as the diversity of school forms,²⁰ that promote different perspectives. Thus, it is important to pay close attention to how, why, and for whom commemoration events become significant and symbolically charged in ways that allow incidents like a Facebook post on August to create such strong reactions at the local level.

- 22 In his well-known ethnography of Shiv Sena in Bombay and Thane, Thomas Blom Hansen (2001) notes that many of the local party committees are not active all year around, but rather “before and during the festival season” (p. 56). This resonates with my observations in Sylhet, where commemoration days and events were a major activity for the various AL-affiliated committees and groups. Most committees not only observe the official holidays, but also several other days with historical relevance for the party.²¹ These ritualized national holidays result in “creating the actual occasions that visually enable the imagining of community” (Trivedi 2007:110). It is, however, not overly clear what kind of community is imagined in Bangladesh. It seems that rather than merely establishing “the nation,” these national and commemorative days result in competing “imagined communities” through the reproduction of party political divisions and an increased awareness of what Jonathan Spencer calls “political time.”
- 23 While I have outlined how party policies and the ruling party’s national decisions aim to transmit their ideological messages and affection for their party via national days, it is also important to understand why people accept the narratives and engage in such party-based, politically driven days of observance. Looking at the organizations responsible for national day celebrations in locations such as the university allows a more nuanced understanding of the reproduction of party political structures within larger segments of society and the role ideological positioning plays therein, creating commitment to certain ideas that reach beyond those actively engaged with party politics.

Performing the Party?

- 24 Commemoration activities are carried out in various forms, but in order to look at the role of ideological positioning in these commemoration events, I start with the discussion of one particular form that seems to be a major site of ideological transmission and the (re-)production of historical narratives: discussion assemblies or seminars (*ālocanā sabhā*) organized by the SUST university administration.
- 25 These seminars at university are held on all major national days and are organized by a vice-chancellor-nominated committee. It selects a main speaker, normally a faculty member charged with presenting the main paper about the day’s significance and history, which is published as a booklet and distributed among all participants. Lasting for about 30 to 50 minutes, this talk usually provides a narrative that traces the historical development from British colonialism or the language movement in 1952 to

what is perceived as a current and on-going post-1975 crisis and distortion of “the spirit” of the independence war. Afterwards, the main paper is commented on by several invited discussants, normally other faculty, student leaders, and sometimes special guests such as politicians of the ruling party, who tend to reiterate the historical narratives themselves, but sometimes also relate the history to contemporary political issues or comment on campus events. The seminar generally lasts for about three hours.

- 26 The seminars seemed to be a crucial site for the reproduction of historical narratives that substantially add to the legitimacy of the ruling AL. References to secularism, but even more to non-communalism and “the spirit of 1971,” figure prominently in the historical narratives, and are often highlighted in the paper titles and comments. The seminar discussants often link “secularism” rather directly to the AL, particularly to Mujibur Rahman, and accordingly mark the secular “Other” as the (party) political Other. This can be seen for instance in the first comments by one professor after the main speaker at the SUST seminar on August 15, 2016:

[...] But just after the British rule was cut off, the first attack of Pakistan’s arbitrary, discriminatory and oppressive rule was on our mother tongue. Another chapter of life struggle for Bengalis started. [...] With this hold [non-communalism] Sheikh Mujib continued politics throughout his life. In 1955, “Awami Muslim League” was transformed into the “Awami League.” This party created an *osāmpradāyik cetanā* (non-communal spirit) against the misuse of religion. Sheikh Mujib has built this party by his own hand.

Recalling the history up to the war of independence with references to historical events in 1954, 1955, 1956, 1958, 1966, 1970, and 1971 and to the four principles (nationalism, socialism, democracy and *dharmanirapekṣatā* (secularism)) of the 1972 constitution, the speaker continued:

But [...] he was killed with many family members due to the local and foreign conspiracy on the 15 of August, 1975. At the same time, a graveyard was created for *osāmpradāyikatā* (the politics of non-communalism) and *muktiyuddhar cetanā* (the spirit of the independence war). One of the four principles of the state, that is, *dharmanirapekṣatā* (secularism), was rejected. Consequently, politics in the name of religion started. [...] The good news is that in the national elections of 2008 and 2014, the leading party of liberation war, the Awami League, has come to power. [...]²²

As outlined above, National Day celebrations have been analyzed as ritual performances and public spectacles that provide occasions for the dissemination of elite ideologies to wider audiences, the creation of emotional and symbolic attachments to the nation through what Durkheim referred to as “collective effervescence,” and operate as a means to “manipulate collective memory in the promotion of political legitimacy” (Kook 2005:166; cf. Tsang and Woods 2014). Due to repeated reiteration of history, lengthy discussions of “the spirit of independence” and emphasis on the role of the iconic party figure Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the AL’s contribution, it seems that these seminars are a prime site for the transmission and renegotiation of (party) ideologies, most notably non-communalism and secularism.

- 27 Speakers are, nonetheless, not always convinced of the ideological significance of these events. While many emphasized the need to build historical awareness and transmit the “spirit of the independence war” to the younger generation, others were more disillusioned about the effectiveness of these seminars. Given the considerable effort

that goes into preparing for the events, it is quite surprising that there was usually neither notable publicity nor effort to attract wider audiences; these events are often not even announced publicly. Faculty members who attend these events often belong to the faculty panel that supports the current government, and, more specifically, to the faculty faction that supports the university administration, while the majority of students who attend the seminars are BCL students. Their participation in these long seminars was not entirely voluntary, but rather expected by their leaders. Some viewed this obligation to participate in AL-related commemoration programs as an obligation not dissimilar to their other BCL activities, such as occasional participation in physical fights and so-called “showdowns,” walks or motorbike rides as a display of group power.

- 28 Asking one of the invited speakers, a politically ambitious professor, a few days after one of the seminars what he personally thought about it, he replied:

Well, honestly speaking I think this is useless. The problem is that this is all political. I think it would be more relevant that we actually change the thinking, that we actually do something more for secularism. But some of the people who talk about this at the seminar, they are communal themselves. You know, some of them are not really AL-minded themselves.

Thus, while he clearly held personal convictions relating to political ideas that are reiterated in these events, he also shared a de-constructive and skeptical position towards the event itself due to its political nature. His statement not only shows a disillusionment with the event however; it also makes a strong association between the AL and secularism and non-communalism apparent, a linkage that was also reinforced by the narratives reiterated at the event itself. Therefore, it was not the content of the event nor annoyance with such ideological-political education (or propaganda), but the alleged insincerity of those who “are not really AL-minded” and the “political” nature of the event that resulted in his complaint about the uselessness. His statement is, therefore, quite revealing in terms of which ideological positioning seems to be simultaneously highly relevant and irrelevant. I propose that this simultaneity is the result of the *ālocanā sabhā* (discussion meeting), being two very different, but intersecting kinds of performances.

- 29 While I have illustrated the role of these seminars in the reiteration of historical narratives that strongly work in the ruling party’s favor and results in its association with certain values and political ideas, the event can also be analyzed as a “complex political performance,” similar to what Suykens and Islam (2013) have done for *hartāls* (general strikes)²³. In this view, the performative aspects go beyond nationalism and historical narratives. In their analysis, Suykens and Islam have pointed out that some aspects of these political performances are oriented towards internal audiences and thus underscore the need to pay attention to the performances’ multiple audiences. According to them, the organization of *hartāls* provides “opportunities for local party organizers to show, maintain and improve their position in the local power structure” (p. 61). Similarly, I argue that organizers and participants in these Bangladeshi national commemoration events are not primarily concerned with the ideological message, but rather with the event’s organization, such as the order of speakers, their positions on pictures, and names appearing on the banners. Generally, these events provide actual or aspiring leaders with an opportunity to display their relative strength, number of followers, and political affiliations. Observing attendance at the commemoration events

at the university, for instance, gave me a strong sense of the shifting loyalties and alliances to the administration, particularly the vice-chancellor. It is therefore not surprising that a considerable proportion of the speaking time during seminars tends to be used to name the various people present at the event.

- 30 While such dynamics in the organization of party events lead to popular complaints about a supposed lack of commitment to the imagined ideals associated with the party, from an analytical perspective it is important to pay attention to the intersections of such events' micro-politics and the resultant ambivalent significance of ideological positioning among my educated interlocutors. I will explore this argument in more detail in the next two sections by discussing the commemoration activities beyond the 2017 seminars.

Commemorating "August": The Micro-Politics of National Days

- 31 August 2017: Even before the beginning of the month, the streets of Sylhet become cluttered with black banners depicting Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and expressions of grief have been put up in the name of various local AL leaders. Throughout August, various events—large and small—are organized, mainly by the different AL branches and wings as well as by organizations loosely affiliated with the party. Activities include elements of the standard repertoire, such as wreath offerings at the Shaheed Minar, discussion seminars, mourning rallies, human chains, *milād māphils* (special prayer ceremonies), and publications. Commemoration practices tend to be based on pre-existing groups. Wreaths are, for instance, offered in the name of a particular organization and *milād māphils* (special prayer ceremonies) are organized on behalf of a specific group or leader. While the government and party stipulate these days' public commemorations, such events are not always public, as the university events underscore.
- 32 At the university campus, a few large banners referring to the *śakh dibas* (Mourning Day) were erected. However, the only leader who put up his own August posters on campus was the newly appointed acting president, Shafikul Islam. His posters depicted not only Sheikh Mujibur Rahman but also the general secretary of the BCL's central committee. The "postering" by Shafikul was seen as a way to become known to a wider audience and to acknowledge and strengthen his bond with the leader in Dhaka.
- 33 The BCL on campus held their annual *śakh dibas* (Mourning Day) program as usual. They placed wreaths at the Sheikh Mujibur Rahman mural at midnight and the commemorative event was announced to start at 1:30 pm on August 15. Although BCL programs often start late, sometimes with delays of 2–3 hours, the event started promptly. Each of the main leaders said a few words on Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's significance while holding the banner. After the commemoration, the leaders and their main followers returned to the "food court," the common assembling space used by BCL's 100–300 followers who normally attend these events. Each leader's different groups are easily distinguishable, forming separate circles, while the main leaders sat on a bench; it was only then that Shafikul Islam arrived. Later, when I asked Razon Chowdhury, one of the other main leaders, for the reasons behind the late arrival, he

replied somewhat ironically: “See, I told Shafikul that the program will start at 1:30. If the president cannot be there in time, is that my fault?”

- 34 After *āsarer nāmāj*²⁴ (the daily afternoon prayer), a *milād māphil* (special prayer ceremony) was held at the university mosque and all BCL followers, Hindus and Muslims, were urged to attend while I, the female anthropologist, waited in the entrance hall of the mosque. As the final part of the day’s program, the whole group jointly went to the high school attached to the university where free snacks were distributed to children from indigent backgrounds. The number of food packages and children on that day was relatively small, but the event nevertheless took a long time as the banner had to be rearranged a number of times. As is the case for most programs, each of the main leaders had instructed one of their juniors to take photos and upload them to Facebook. A lot of importance is given to the order of the different leaders in relation to the banner, the food packages, and their visibility on the pictures.
- 35 A few days later, shortly after the appointment of the new vice-chancellor, a banner at the central roundabout appeared announcing an *ālocanā sabhā* (discussion meeting) on August 24th in commemoration of the *śakh dibas* (Mourning Day) at the university’s philosophy department.²⁵ This was highly unusual, not only because departments normally do not hold separate national day seminars, but also because the head of the department was a known Jamaat-e-Islami supporter. The newly appointed acting BCL president, Shafikul, a student of that department, was named as one of the main speakers. The lecturer in charge of organizing the event was slightly nervous; as a former BCL activist he easily grasped its politics. Shafikul had not talked to the other leaders before announcing this event publicly. His attempt to improve his reputation and display his newly gained power by organizing a separate event was, however, hampered by the interference of other BCL leaders. Threatening to prevent the event from happening by using force, they were able to change the event’s character. After long, late-night negotiations, the list of speakers was altered to allow other factions’ junior leaders to be included as discussants along with, remarkably, a number of so-called “general” (non-political) students, including several female students who are normally not even seen in these seminars’ audiences. The banner announcing the event with the BCL leader’s name was removed from campus a few hours after it had been put up, replaced by another banner that mentioned no names.
- 36 This short description gives some impressions about political commemoration practices in Sylhet, in particular the micro power-dynamics of the organization of these days. The commemoration events themselves seem to function as occasions for leaders to improve their position and show relative strength. The aspiring leaders’ main concern during the event was not what they would say in a speech, but how many people had attended on their behalf. While hardly any efforts were made to involve a general audience in these commemoration events, the leaders paid a great deal of attention to the event’s representation and documentation on social media.
- 37 This also highlights that the commemoration events’ organizers are not necessarily concerned with a particular event’s ideological-symbolic content. Student leaders often follow their own agendas when engaging in the organization of and participation in these events. National days in Sylhet seem to be a privileged site for the renegotiation of power relations and factional affiliations. In his ironic comment, Razon Chowdhury made it very clear that it was no coincidence that he made Shafikul Islam miss the August 15 program, while at other times programs might start two hours late because a

senior leader is delayed. Conversely, leaders or factions' intentional late appearances are often strategic acts to indirectly, albeit publicly and highly effectively, communicate any discontent or problems in the relationship. The micro-politics behind the organization of these events become clearly visible in Shafikul Islam's attempt to organize a separate August program. The ethnographic material thus suggests an intricate entanglement of ideological projects launched through national commemoration policies and factional logics at the local level.

Commemoration and Shifting Sentiments: August beyond Factionalism?

- 38 The analysis of the micro-politics among politically active students and faculty should nevertheless not lead us to be too quick in dismissing ideological positioning as being merely "instrumental." Instead, it should push us to question why commemoration days are a prime site for such intra-party politics at the university. I suggest that the commemoration of persons and days, and the concomitant evocation of the political ideas associated with them, become such a privileged site for micro-politics because of their symbolic significance as markers for party belonging and because the imagined party political divisions reinforced by such events are indeed linked to broader narratives and affective attachments to certain symbols and ideas.
- 39 This also becomes apparent in various BCL members' reasons for their political engagement. In my experience, when asked, the replies mostly evoked historical narratives and alignment to secularism or non-communalism, which are sometimes repetitions of standardized narratives and sometimes highly personal statements with references to the person's own biography and convictions. Many of them claimed in the very same interview that they doubt other politicians' "ideological commitments." Such doubts are also mirrored in the politically ambitious faculty member's quote above, which contended that some speakers engaging in this narrative are not really "AL-minded." However, it thereby simultaneously reveals the normative assumption of this teacher that doing politics for a party shall be linked to a certain state of mind or ideological orientation. Despite the deconstructive complaints about the politics behind the organization of commemoration events, "grouping" and power politics, and, crucially, despite an at times strong disillusionment with politics, people apparently keep up the idea that party politics is supposed to be about "ideological commitment."
- 40 Similarly, it should not be underestimated that such significant "ground work" for the national days contributes considerably to establishing strong repercussions among certain segments of society, despite the striking "absence" of the "general" (non-party affiliated) public at commemoration events in August. This is true not only for the National Mourning Day, but also for February 21, Independence Day, and Victory Day, which resonate far beyond the specific days and result in patterns of "seasonal commemoration." At the beginning of each month—for example, in the December "victory month"—many people update their Facebook profiles with comments about or symbols of the relevant day, or post historic photographs. Most newspapers also cover these days extensively, publishing editorials on them providing historical analysis, as well as featuring politicians and influential intellectuals' letters or articles. The time from December to April encourages emphasis on Bengali nationalism and it is no

coincidence that most of the cultural events and theatre performances in Sylhet take place in December, February, or March (cf. Uddin 2006; Mookherjee 2015).

- 41 Despite its relatively recent establishment as a national commemoration date, *śakh dibas* (Mourning Day) has also been generalized as a “*śakher mās*” (month of mourning) and has achieved a remarkable influence within wider sectors of society. For instance, students at the university campus had a strong awareness that some events, such as modern music concerts, cannot be held during August. Like during Ramadan, people avoid holding music events as well as cultural programs in August if they do not relate to the historical events of 1975. More generally, public depictions of happiness are discouraged during this “month of mourning.” Although there is a certain division along party lines regarding the extent to which this is followed, it is clear that the government–encouraged commemoration practices have also reached into the private domain.
- 42 It is against this background that we need to view Minhaz Sobhan’s Facebook post and the outraged reactions and moral criticism it provoked from a wide range of persons, not only party workers, but also left-leaning people, and even some moderate BNP supporters. After the angry responses to his Facebook post, Minhaz Sobhan tried to defend himself saying that his post was never intended as a political statement. Rather, he argued, he had personal reasons to look forward to the start of the month, as his own and his wife’s birthdays are in August, and he was about to submit two articles on which he had worked for a long time. However, this explanation was widely viewed as a defense strategy rather than a legitimate reason. People pointed out that neither his birth certificate nor his graduation certificates state that August is his month of birth. It is true though that the biographical note in his literary publications mentions that month of birth, but this was probably not particularly helpful for his defense because it stated *August 15*, which was seen by many as a political statement in itself.
- 43 What I found striking during my research was the strong condemnation of Sobhan’s post that also came from people not directly affiliated with party politics. For instance, this case was discussed widely among the cultural activists in the city; many were outraged and were emotionally invested in condemning his post. For example, the left-leaning activist, Sujon Anindyo, explained his enthusiastic support for the punishment: “We know this guy. This is the kind of person that we fight against in our activism. This is the kind of persons that we tried to fight with the Gonojagoron Moncho movement.²⁶ This is the kind of person who endangers a secular Bangladesh.” That Sujon Anindyo considered a post on August to be against “secular Bangladesh” and rejected it with strong emotional investment, while he is otherwise highly critical of party politics and some of the ruling parties’ actions, can be taken as an indicator of the complex entanglement of ideas of party political divisions, commemorations, and wider contestations about ideologies such as secularism. Furthermore, some politically unambitious university faculty strongly condemned the post, and many who are considered “culturally minded” saw it as a “danger to secularism” but in further explanations pointed to his presumed party affiliation rather than any particular behavior.
- 44 These affective reactions observable among different groups are not merely spontaneous and individual responses but are related to underlying power structures, political regulation, and normative orders (cf. Blom and Jaoul 2008)—not the least of which are those political processes outlined above with regard to national holidays.

Interestingly, the emotionality and moral condemnation provoked by a post that was perceived as political, and as a statement against the central AL leader, is in some regards comparable to other forms of “outraged communities,” such as those that emerge after what has been perceived as “hurting religious sentiments” or blasphemy (see, e.g., Blom 2008; Riaz 2008; Mahmood 2009) or in times of symbolic injury in the context of sectarian or inter-caste conflicts (e.g. Jaoul 2008). This could then be indicative of the symbolic significance of August and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman beyond direct party politics as well as the pervasiveness of party political divisions in society.

Writing on “Sensitive Issues”: Factional Politics and Party Commitment

- 45 While the symbolical leverage of “August” and commitment to certain ideas is the reason why the Facebook post became such a contentious issue on campus, it is also arguably the effects of factional structures themselves that lead to strong commitments and affective attachment to certain groups and symbols that are embedded in, and simultaneously reproducing, these party political divisions.
- 46 Many comments on Minhaz Sobhan suggested that he is “strongly BNP” and “very committed to party politics.” However, when he joined the university in mid-2004, he was not really interested in engaging in politics and claimed that he never participated in student politics. Having joined the university during the BNP-Jamaat Alliance, he was loosely affiliated with the respective faculty panel. As he explained to me: “At university we should do politics in the interest of the teachers and student, but instead we do central politics. So I thought that I should focus on my career and teaching.” He became more known for his “political identity” in late 2007, when he started to write against another influential professor and leader of a pro-AL panel. Some of the faculty on his panel had encouraged him to do so, and he received further encouragement from them after the newspaper article was published. By contrast, faculty who supported the AL started to speak up against him and he increasingly felt the need to get the support or “shelter” of faculty from his own panel, who also encouraged him to continue writing. Consequently, through his writing he was increasingly drawn into panel politics, and thus party politics at the campus level. After the AL came into power in 2009, he saw his wife suffering from his political affiliation, having difficulty securing a job despite her qualifications and own strong family background and their affiliation to the Awami League. Seeing this hurt him, he explained, and he thus started to write even more strongly against that government. His writing in the form of Facebook posts, comments in newspapers, and (political) poems has accelerated further amid an increasing public silencing of positions such as his and in reaction to a number of national developments. This includes the political polarization and contestations in 2013 around the Shahbag and Hefajat-e-Islam Movement, the 2014 national election—won by the AL allowing the party to stay in power but seen by many as not being democratically legitimized since more than half of the seats remained uncontested due to the opposition alliances’ boycott—and the increasingly repressive political environment in Bangladesh since then.
- 47 After the university administration decided his punishment, many people advised Minhaz Sobhan to change his attitude, to refrain from any kind of political writing, and

some suggested that he might consider changing faculty panels to mitigate the punishment. His wife also told me:

See, my uncle called me. He is a very influential AL politician. He knows our difficult situation. He told us that he can help out, that he could talk to some central leaders to sort things out when my husband joins the party [AL]. I was very polite, but I know that he will never do this. He is just not such a person. He just cannot do this. Now we never talk about politics at home anymore.

Some people on campus suggested to me that Minhaz Sobhan's actions were motivated by hopes that he would gain advantages once the BNP comes into power. However, even if this was the case, I suggest that such a narrow instrumentalist perspective, which interprets party political affiliations and actions mostly as rational choices in a game around resources and power, underestimates the complexities in which such informal party affiliations are embedded and the far-reaching implications that such entanglements have.

- 48 Minhaz Sobhan and his wife did hope the punishment would be changed when the new vice-chancellor joined the university more than a month later, but they soon realized that this would not be easy. Being very much aware that a recently installed vice-chancellor also needs to display his party loyalty, Minhaz Sobhan's wife commented: "Well, in the end I can understand that he can't do anything. These are all *very sensitive issues* (my emphasis). There is nothing that we can do but be patient and wait."

Party Politics, the University Campus and the (Ir)Relevance of "Ideology" in Public Performances

- 49 In this paper I have looked at the complex role that ideological positioning plays in campus politics in Bangladesh. Previous research has highlighted factional divisions and the pragmatics of party politics assuming issues of "ideology" to be of minor relevance. That position is also echoed in popular complaints about a lack of ideals, morality, and ideological convictions in the politics of the major parties in Bangladesh. This paper, in contrast, has highlighted the complex ways in which "ideology" and factional party structures intersect. This leads to the paradoxical effect whereby "ideology" might be simultaneously highly relevant and irrelevant. As it is seen as a significant marker of belonging, party ideological positioning provides a fertile ground for micro-politics among persons with political ambitions, which in turn results in continuous doubts about the motivation for such ideological positioning. Due to this intersection, student and faculty activists' eager participation in commemoration events at the university or their strong stance on specific ideological statements and positions might not be seen by others, or indeed themselves, as a sign of personal ideological commitment. Conversely, widespread participation in the dispersion of ideological messages and historical narratives reflects and produces strong sentiments about various issues and what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behavior at certain times of the year, like August, among Sylhet's educated middle class. The ethnographic material discussed and the case of the conflict around "August" thus provides insights into the complexities of ideological positions formed and shaped in specific political structures and enhances our understanding of how and why ideological positioning matters (or does not) for party politics in Bangladesh.

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NOTES

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2. This slogan is mostly, although not exclusively, used by AL supporters.
3. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1920–1975) is also called “Bangabandhu” (friend of Bengal). In a number of previous cases, people have been prosecuted under the section 500 and 506 of the Criminal Penal Code for the defamation of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.
4. Original in Bengali “*dīn gunchi—āsche āmār ānandar āgāst.*”
5. These are only some of the terms that have been used by my interlocutors, at times exchangeable to *īdiolaji* (*ideology*) and at times with slightly different connotations. A detailed discussion of the semantic field goes unfortunately beyond this article. Please see the last paragraph of the next section and footnote 12 for a more detailed discussion of my usage of “ideology.” Related to the main theme of this paper, it might be noted that the term *cetanā*, which can also be translated as consciousness, sensibility, cognition or spirit depending on the context, was at the time of the research at least loosely discursively linked to Awami League rhetoric.
6. This is the name of the male student organization. Student politics in Bangladesh is highly male-dominated. While a few female students might be included in BCL or Chhatra Dal committees, the Jamaat-e-Islami explicitly mobilises a substantial number of female students, who are organized in a separate organization called Islami Chhatri Sangshta.
7. While the university has slightly more than 10,000 students, there are only an estimated 1,500 seats for students in the three halls for male and the two halls for female students.
8. While halls are officially managed by the hall provosts, de facto BCL leaders divide the seats in the male halls among them and re-distribute them according to their wishes and often in exchange for political loyalty. However, some rooms are reserved for other groups including journalists, members of the Chhatra Union, Khelafat Majlish, and Tabligh Jamaat.
9. This was true during my time of research: The exclusionary politics even prevented several former leaders from entering the campus in fear of violent attacks. However, there is no linear relationship between national power and campus politics; local power dynamics are also significant. Shibir students continued to control parts of the halls at SUST long after the AL came into power after the 2008 elections and were only evicted from the halls in 2012. This contrasts with Ruud’s observation at Dhaka University: “Hall capture’ was a routine practice at the university, where after each national election the winning party’s student wing evicted all prominent losing party activists from halls of residence. Politics in Bangladesh is effectively a two-party system and every national election until 2014 has led to a change of government, which in turn led to ‘a change of guard’ in the university student halls” (2014:306).
10. *Māstān*, often used as synonymous with the term *gunḍā*, refers to local strongmen and has been translated as “criminal entrepreneur.” For an overview on the debate on “*māstān*” in Bangladesh, see: Atkinson-Sheppard 2017; Jackman 2018; Ruud 2014.
11. As stated in section 51.3 of *The Shahjalal University of Science and Technology Ordinance, 1986* “[t]he service conditions shall be determined without any prejudice to the freedom of the teacher or officer to hold any political views, but he shall not propagate such views nor shall he associate himself with any political organization.” This prohibition is not inscribed in all University Acts and does not apply to Jahangirnagar University or Dhaka University, for instance.
12. More precisely there are three different panels: the pro-AL-leftish faculty panel “*Mahānmuktiyuddher cetanāy udbuddha śikṣakbrnda*” (Teacher Panel Inspired by the Great Independence War), the pro-AL-centrist faculty panel “*Mahān muktiyuddher cetanā o mukticitay aikyabadyā śikṣakbrnda*” (Teacher Panel United in the Spirit of the Independence War) and Pro-BNP-Jamaat panel “*Mahān muktiyuddho, bāmladeśī jātiyabād o dharmīya mūlyabodh śraddhāsīl phorām*” (Teachers Forum in Respect to the Great Independence War, Bangladeshi Nationalism and Religious Values).

13. Notably, this is not a mere problem of translation. As it is the case for many other English terms in Bengali, “ideology” is used within spoken Bengali but often with different connotations than such a concept might have for a British English speaker.
14. The date of birth on official certificates can easily be changed in Bangladesh. This is widely acknowledged, e.g., in the recently issued policy that names, place of birth and birthdays in passports might not be changed without substantial reasons.
15. Referring specifically to the incident at the Holy Artisan Bakery in Gulshan in July 2016.
16. This was hotly debated during my fieldwork in 2016, when various pictures of scans and allegedly fake scans of her passport were circulated on Facebook to substantiate claims about whether or not her birthday was on that day; see also: The Daily Star, August 13, 2015 “Khaleda’s passport scans are fake!”
17. People in my research context often referred to “the time of the BNP” or “at the time of the AL” when recalling events in the past even when they were not related to politics.
18. According to media reports in 2017, Sheikh Hasina further attempted, though without success, to change the date of International Genocide Day to March 25. The recognition of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s March 7 speech as documented heritage in the Memory of the World Register by the UNESCO in 2017 was celebrated throughout the country.
19. Alia madrasas are administrated by the Alia Madrasah Education Board, follow mostly the Calcutta Alia traditions and their degrees are considered as equivalent to public or private schools, while Qawmi madrasas are not subject to the same regulation and are mostly run by charitable organizations using donations following mostly the Deobandi model.
20. Due to the diversity of school forms—including NGO-run schools, English medium schools following international curricula, public schools, private schools, madrasa education—and a considerable proportion of the population without formal education, the curriculum at the level of schooling is much more diverse than in countries with universal governmental schooling.
21. Including January 10 (Day of Homecoming of Mujibur Rahman), January 24 (Mass Upsurge Day, commemorating Mujibur Rahman and others’ presentation of the six demands in 1966), March 7, March 25 (Genocide Day/Black Night), April 17 (Mujibnagar Day on which the government-in-exile was formed), May 17 (Homecoming Day, commemorating when Sheikh Hasina returned in 1981), August 21 (commemorating the grenade attack on Sheikh Hasina and party members in 2004), November 3 (Jail Killing Day, referring to the killing of four freedom fighters in a Dhaka jail in 1975), and December 14 (Killing of the Intellectuals Day) to name just some of the most prominent days. While some of these days, such as December 14 or March 26, are observed by a wider audience, including commemoration by non-party organisations such as freedom fighter associations or cultural groups, many of them are observed primarily by AL subcommittees without much public notice, including national days such as March 7 and 17, April 17 and December 14.
22. Translated transcript of the SUST Seminar on August 15, 2016. Originally in Bengali, translated by the author.
23. *Hartāls* (strikes) are a widely established protest forms throughout South Asia. Many of the commemoration practices overlap strongly with established South Asia protest forms, such as *mānabbandhan* (human chains), *michil* (procession) and rallies (protest marches).
24. Also “*asr.*”
25. The identity of the department has been altered for the sake of anonymity of my research interlocutors. No Philosophy Department exists at SUST.
26. The Gonojagoron Moncho (“People’s Awakening Platform”) movement formed in February 2013—in the context of the “International War Crimes Tribunal” after the announcement of the verdict of Quader Mollah sentencing him to life imprisonment—to demand death penalties for the 1971 war criminals. In Bangladesh it was widely seen as an anti-Jamaat-e-Islami and “secular”

movement. Mobilization was strongest in Dhaka, where people protested for weeks at the Shabhag junction close to Dhaka University and became known as the “Shabhag movement.”

ABSTRACTS

Based on 15 months of ethnographic research between 2016 and 2019, this article explores the campus as a core site for the (re-)production of Bangladesh’s ruling party’s hegemony and domination. While previous research emphasizes the pragmatic and violent nature of student politics, this article explores the role of ideological positioning in campus politics, focusing on commemoration events and the significance of certain symbolic national days. Commemoration practices contribute to the reproduction of party narratives and ideologies at the levels of both student politics and the university administration. However, far from just reflecting the official party discourse, individuals organizing or attending these events often have pragmatic perspectives using them strategically for their own micro-political endeavors on campus. The ethnographic exploration of these dynamics elucidates when and how ideological positioning and commitment becomes relevant, as well as how personal convictions intersect with other reasons for engaging in party politics.

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Keywords: student politics, ideological commitment, commemoration, National day, Bangladesh, university campus, party politics, August

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