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Navigating Transformation: The Challenges and the Future Trajectories of Hefazat-e-Islam in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This study critically examines Hefazat-e-Islam's (HI) role and challenges within Bangladesh's evolving sociopolitical context. Drawing on in-depth interviews and secondary sources, it explores how HI navigates tensions among religious authority, political activism, and contested public opinion. As a prominent representative of conservative Islamic constituencies, HI occupies a significant yet contested position in the public sphere. Yet it faces multiple challenges, including internal fragmentation, leadership crises, and external pressures such as state regulation, negative media coverage, and global Islamophobic discourses. Situating the analysis within broader debates on political Islam, the study demonstrates how HI responds to shifting government policies, international counterterrorism frameworks, and local dynamics of religious mobilization. It also assesses the organization's potential future trajectories, including institutional political participation, coalition-building, continued reliance on street-based activism, and the risk of increased polarization. The findings highlight the complex relationship between religious authority and political power, showing how HI adapts to uncertainty while seeking to

expand its influence. The study contributes to discussions on democracy, religious pluralism, and social cohesion in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Hefazate Islam, Islamophobia, Political Marginalization, Leadership Crisis, Ideological Contestation, Future Trajectories

Introduction

Rapid urban growth, globalization, new forms of government, and shifting cultural and ideological trends have significantly reshaped Bangladesh's sociopolitical landscape in recent decades. Religious organizations like Hefazat-e-Islam (HI) have become important in this changing environment, influencing political discourse, social identities, and government policy. HI is a conservative Sunni Islamist group from the Deobandi Qawmi madrasa system. It has become a significant presence in Bangladesh's religious, social, and political life. Hefazat-e-Islam began in 2010 as a coalition of religious and educational organizations. It has since evolved from a predominantly faith-based organization into a significant political competitor, as evidenced by its 2013 protests, which demonstrated its ability to mobilize national religious sentiment (Khan, 2018; Raqib, 2020). Researchers have noted that Hefazat's central ideas include *amr bil ma'ruf* and a view of secularism and moral decline as major threats (Raqib, 2020; Wolf, 2022), placing the organization at the center of broader discussions about political Islam in Bangladesh.

However, the challenges facing HI have increased alongside its growing role in Bangladesh's changing sociopolitical context. It operates within a conflicting political system that is difficult to make sense of, as both Islam and constitutional secularism are seen as the state religion. This situation creates a challenging and complicated atmosphere for politicians to reach ideological agreements (Bhuiyan, 2022; Riaz, 2024). On the other hand, HI is politically marginalized because the government is trying to control Islamist groups, and there are still ideological fights with secular and progressive groups. Islamophobic and security-focused media portrayals also affect its public image. These portrayals often use negative and violent stereotypes, which provide the "us versus them" narratives (Shaheen, 2001; Parvez, 2021; Munmun, 2024). Along with its stance against the

government's proposed reforms, particularly regarding women's rights and education, these images and Hefazat's opposition to the government undermine its legitimacy and complicate its integration into formal politics (Raqib, 2020; Wolf, 2022). Although the organization advocates traditional gender roles, a few individuals are willing to change, at least in women's education. This demonstrates that the organization's place is not absolutely determined (Raqib, 2020).

Despite the growing body of research on Hefazat-e-Islam, we have not yet fully understood how local politics and global forces shape its views and perceptions. Although other researchers focus on gender issues, state relations, and the media, they often neglect the role of local religious groups and grassroots organizations in Bangladesh's changing political environment. This study seeks to fill those gaps by employing a qualitative methodology, using in-depth interviews and secondary sources to provide a deeper understanding of the challenges that Hefazat-e-Islam faces; it also contributes to broader conversations about democracy, religious diversity, and national cohesion in Bangladesh and South Asia. The paper also analyzes the organization's future paths, including a shift toward institutionalized forms of political involvement and strategic coalition-building, the persistence of street-based mobilization as a main form of engagement, and the possible escalation of sociopolitical polarization.

Literature Review

The relationship between state and religion in Bangladesh is deeply contradictory. Secularism was a crucial element of the country's identity and was codified in the 1972 Constitution (Bhuiyan, 2022). Nonetheless, Islam has served as a political instrument for various regimes seeking legitimacy, particularly the military governments of Hussain Muhammad Ershad and Ziaur Rahman (Riaz, 2024; Hossen, 2022). Constitutional secularism and Islam as the official state religion have produced a paradoxical ideological system, with political actors alternating between secular governance and religious accommodation (Islam & Islam, 2020; Shahabuddin, 2025). To preserve political stability, the AL also engages in this balancing act despite its secularist origins (Bhuiyan, 2022; Sarwar, 2023).

These shifts in thought have affected public spaces and institutions, often marginalizing minority groups and religious diversity (Siddika et al., 2025; Wohab, 2023). Hefazat-e-Islam (HI) and other non-state religious actors are crucial in this context because they complicate the secular-Islamist dichotomy by positioning themselves as defenders of Islamic values and by participating in political negotiations (Islam & Islam, 2020; Mostofa, 2024).

In 2013, the Deobandi Qawmi madrasa-based group Hefazat-e-Islam became an essential player in Bangladesh's national politics, especially after its "Siege of Dhaka" movement, which demonstrated its ability to mobilize religious sentiment on a large scale (Khan, 2018; Raqib, 2020). Researchers examined HI's ideological foundations in *amr bil ma'ruf* (commanding good) and its framing of moral decline and secularism as existential dangers (Raqib, 2020). Madrasas form the foundation of the organization's religious infrastructure, which provides a base for mobilization and education (Wolf, 2022).

HI generally stays outside the formal political process, even though it is popular at the grassroots level. It resisted integration but sometimes worked with state institutions when politically advantageous (Khan, 2021; Riaz, 2016). This lack of clarity is typical of Bangladeshi political Islam, in which religious figures sometimes serve as cultural critics, moral guardians, and political allies (Hajjaj, 2023; Mostafa, 2024).

An evident example of Hefazat's opposition to state-led reforms is its stance on education and legal reforms. Raquib (2020) states that HI ulama perceived nonreligious topics in Qawmi madrasas as a threat to religious identity. Likewise, leaders of Hefazat criticized the proposed legal amendments, especially those related to women's rights, because they contradicted Islamic jurisprudence, which they depicted as Western incursions (Raqib, 2020; Wolf, 2022).

In Bangladesh, the question of gender remains widely discussed. HI primarily advocates conventional gender roles, yet internal conflicts, particularly regarding women in education, are becoming evident (Raqib, 2020). These developments lead to a less one-sided, though still evolving, discourse, indicating that HI's ideological system is not very firm.

The strength of HI lies in social protests. Khan (2018) and Wolf (2022) demonstrate that mass mobilizations may be both strategic and symbolic, as the organization may assert religious authority and challenge government policies. People from various social classes tend to support these movements, which supports HI's argument that it embodies absolute Islamic values.

Media representation plays a significant role in shaping the organization's social image. Drawing on Edward Said's (1978) concept of Orientalism, researchers such as Shaheen (2001), Parvez (2021), and Munmun (2024) show that mainstream media often presents HI through a securitized, gendered lens. These depictions portray HI as violent or retrogressive, aligning with Islamophobic discourse worldwide and reinforcing the us-versus-them dynamic (Zaman, 2016; Langah, 2019).

These identity representations are not restricted. Zaman (2016) notes that counter-framing HI by labeling secular movements such as Shahbagh as anti-Islamic contributes to ideological polarization. This mutual delegitimization further divides society and leaves less room for democracy.

Hefazat has demonstrated the ability to mobilize large numbers of people, yet it lacks long-term strategic coherence due to internal issues. The lack of a strong and consistent political force undermines its effectiveness due to leadership crises, factionalism, and uneven policy engagement (Wolf, 2022; Khan, 2018). Although it is quite popular among certain groups, these structural limitations constrain its ability to transition from protest to policy influence.

Hefazat-e-Islam's ideological background and approaches to reaching people have been thoroughly researched, although certain gaps remain. To begin with, there is no analysis that situates HI within the broader context of political pragmatism, state accommodation, and Islamophobia. Second, the literature is limited in its examination of the extent to which local and external narratives (especially those concerning security in the post-9/11 world) influence the group's credibility, flexibility, and strategic choices. Also, although scholars have covered specific themes such as protest, gender, education, and media representation, they seldom connect these

themes to examine how HI addresses them simultaneously. There is little literature on how HI views its changing role in the social and political life of Bangladesh, based on field data or in-depth interviews. This study seeks to address these gaps by analyzing Hefazat-e-Islam's issues through a multi-thematic, qualitative approach.

Methodology

The research design adopted in this study is qualitative, aimed at exploring the evolving role and issues of Hefazat-e-Islam within Bangladesh's sociopolitical climate. The complexity of this organization and its issues are reflected in two complementary data sources: primary and secondary.

Primary Data Collection

To gather primary data, ten participants were carefully selected to take part in semi-structured, in-depth interviews: five representatives from diverse backgrounds connected with HI and five representatives from various professional groups.

Table 1:

Profile of Respondents

Respondent	Category	Occupation/Role	Educational Background	Age	Socioeconomic Status	Location
Respondent I	Hefazat Leader/Activist	Mohaddith (Hadith Lecturer), Local Leader	Dawra Hadith	47	Middle Class	Urban, Chittagong
Respondent II	Hefazat Activist	Madrasa Student, Local Activist	Qawmi Madrasa (Ongoing)	20	Lower Class	Rural, Chittagong
Respondent III	Hefazat Leader	Central Leader, Muhtamim (Principal)	MA	50	Upper Class	Urban, Dhaka
Respondent IV	Hefazat Activist	Businessman, Community Leader	MA	45	Middle Class	Rural, Feni
Respondent V	Hefazat Activist	Freelance Journalist, City Activist	Dawra Hadith	35	Upper Class	Urban, Chittagong

Respondent	Category	Occupation/Role	Educational Background	Age	Socioeconomic Status	Location
Respondent VI	Expert	Journalist & Political Analyst	MA	45	Middle Class	Chittagong
Respondent VII	Expert	Professor of Islamic Studies	PhD (Usul al-Din)	51	Upper Class	Chittagong
Respondent VIII	Expert	Government Official	MA	50	Upper Class	Chittagong
Respondent IX	Expert	Professor of Political Science	PhD	50	Upper Class	Chittagong
Respondent X	Expert	Social Worker	MA	40	Middle Class	Chittagong

Source: obtained from primary data

This research developed an interview guide by reviewing the literature and consulting with experts from IIUC and Chittagong University. It covered the developments of Hefazat-e-Islam over the years, its ideological orientation, and internal and external organizational issues. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, during which participants were free to discuss their ideas, experiences, and understanding of HI.

Secondary Data Collection

A systematic review of scholarly articles, books, policy reports, newspaper articles, and reliable online sources on Hefazat-e-Islam, Islamist movements in Bangladesh, and social and political changes in the country will be used to collect secondary data. This review will situate the main findings within broader academic debates and social and political changes, helping triangulate the study and strengthen its rigor.

Data Analysis

An inductive method was used to analyze both primary and secondary data thematically. To understand how Hefazat-e-Islam is changing and the challenges in Bangladesh's sociopolitical environment, emerging themes, including political marginalization, ideological contestation, and Islamophobia, were inferred from interview narratives and corroborated with secondary sources.

Findings and Discussion

1. The Emergence, Expansion, and Ideological Foundations of Hefazat-e-Islam

In Bangladesh, Hefazat-e-Islam is a powerful Islamist movement that emerged in 2010 amid paradoxical religious and sociopolitical conditions. The group was organized by scholars, students, and teachers of Qawmi madrasas who sought to spread conservative Sunni values and Islamic orthodoxy in the Deobandi tradition (Raqib, 2020; Zaman, 2016). Historically, Arab merchants, Sufi missionaries, and Muslim kings contributed significantly to the spread of Islam in Bengal, facilitating the expansion of quintessential Islamic institutions such as Hefazat (Islam & Islam, 2020; Zaman, 2024).

The outlawing of Jamaat-e-Islami and the growing secularization initiatives of the ruling AL government were further incentives for the rise of Hefazat. Hefazat could appeal to marginalized, religiously conservative voters by positioning itself as a religious opposition to secular state discourses (Lutful, 2023; Islam, 2018).

Hefazat-e-Islam viewed the secularist protests of the Shahbagh Movement (2013) as a severe attack on Islamic values. In response, Hefazat mobilized nationwide, culminating in the Dhaka siege, and issued a 13-point charter calling for blasphemy laws, gender segregation, and the protection of madrasa autonomy (Zaman, 2016; Wolf, 2022).

Since its release in 2013, the 13-point agenda has been the subject of heated debate and condemnation. International observers and civil society have raised concerns about its potential to threaten women's rights, encourage religious fundamentalism, and jeopardize Bangladesh's secular constitutional order (Al Jazeera Staff, 2013). Critics, including Abrar (2021), argue that Hefazat's activities are more indicative of intra-Muslim disputes over religious interpretation than of attempts to unite the Muslim ummah. They also draw comparisons between Hefazat and other sectarian Islamist movements, such as the Taliban and ISIS. According to Akhter (2013), the agenda seeks to reverse advances in gender equality by forcing women into less progressive roles.

Hefazat-e-Islam held a press conference to address criticism and misunderstandings regarding the 13-point agenda first proposed at the National Ulama Mashayekh Conference, which called for the reinstatement of Islamic values in Bangladesh's legal, educational, and cultural systems. To counter secular control, they want to restore "Complete Trust and Faith in Almighty Allah" in the Constitution. They also demand a blasphemy law to prevent illegal defamation of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). They further call for an end to anti-Islamic propaganda, such as Ganajagaran Mancha. They support modesty, the hijab, the niqab, and gender segregation where possible. They also want changes to women's and education policy to incorporate Islamic teachings, arguing that women's policy is inspired by secularism and anti-religious elements, and that textbooks contain much anti-religious content. Cultural demands include banning statues in public places and foreign customs like lighting candles, as well as asking the media not to make fun of Islamic clothing and symbols. They are also concerned about government interference in religious practices, pointing to limited access to mosques and the cancellation of Islamic events. They want religious freedoms protected. They also want action taken against NGOs and missionaries, especially in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, for allegedly forcing people to convert, and they want the Ahmadiyya (Qadiani) community to be officially declared non-Muslim. Hefazat opposes the government's use of force against peaceful protesters and ulama (scholars). They seek to release the detained ulama and compensate victims. Lastly, they ask the government to take decisive action against communal violence to protect minority rights and promote unity and harmony in the community. Hefazat says these demands are necessary to protect Islam and Bangladesh's independence, and that their clarification is intended to clear up any confusion or misrepresentation. (Hefazat-e-Islam explains the 13-point demands, 2013) (Hefazat-e-Islam, 2013)

The Awami League's plan to co-opt Hefazat as opposition to Jamaat deliberately gave Hefazat's radical agenda greater legitimacy and contributed to its growth (Lutful, 2023). Hefazat has developed socioreligious legitimacy despite its extreme views. This is especially true among conservative Muslims who see secularism as a threat to their identity and values. The Shahbagh Movement and other ideological polarizations have helped Hefazat gain support and expand its influence in both the religious and political spheres (Zaman, 2018; Iqbal, n.d.).

Hefazat's rise is also part of a global trend in which Islamist organizations resist secularization by advocating an orthodox Islamic identity. This process seeks to balance tradition with contemporary issues, and the definition of Muslim identity is dynamically reinterpreted and reshaped in response to evolving sociopolitical contexts, as in Muslim communities in the West (Widyaningsih & Mujahid, 2025).

2. Hefazat-e-Islam's Role in the July 2024 Revolution

All respondents noted that HI played an essential role in the July 2024 revolution in Bangladesh, which was initiated by the student-led anti-discrimination and quota reform movement.

According to the respondents' notice, the AL government has been severely criticized for its harsh response to the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement, including attacks on activists, women, and even people who were injured in hospitals. During these crackdowns, HI immediately condemned the deaths of six students. On July 17, 2024, HI publicly spoke out against the government's actions, calling them un-Islamic, inhumane, and a violation of international human rights standards. Accordingly, HI issued a formal statement at Hathazari Madrasa on behalf of all students, condemning the violence and calling for justice. Earlier that day, hundreds of madrasa students and HI activists gathered to protest the attacks and show support for the victims. On July 18, 2024, HI held a rally against the 56% recruitment quota, arguing that it hurt merit, weakened public institutions, and stifled intellectual growth. HI said that mobilization would continue if student complaints were not addressed, and it also criticized the closing of schools as a way to silence dissent. (Chowdury & Rashed, 2024; "Andolan niye Hefazat-er bibriti, 2024")

In early August, the movement's tone grew more intense, and the AL government killed, injured, and arrested students and others en masse. The Hefazat Ameer called for Friday prayers across the country on August 2, 2024, to condemn the government's violent crackdown and to seek protection and justice. The HI offered condolences to the victims' families, demanded compensation and medical care for the injured, and appealed for broad societal support. The following day, HI organized nationwide prayer gatherings for the movement's martyrs. Babungari said in his

speech that the movement had shifted its focus from opposing recruitment quotas to seeking justice for the deaths of students. He also cited the deaths of Hefazat members during the 2013 Shapla Chattar incident to show how long state violence has persisted. On August 4, HI intensified its call for resistance through the one-point “Dhaka Cholo” movement. The Ameer described the current struggle as a renewed fight for justice and sovereignty, condemning what he termed “fascist rule” and urging national unity. He emphasized that street mobilization alongside students was the only viable path toward meaningful political change. (Chowdury & Rashed, 2024)

All respondents observed a shift in Hefazat-e-Islam’s role in the July 2024 revolution from passive religious and political commentary to active street participation and mobilization across the country. They also noted that thousands of Hefazat-e-Islam activists and Qawmi madrasa students took part in mass protests and marches in support of the July movement against the repressive and fascist regime. These events were marked by significant violence, allegedly resulting in the deaths of hundreds of madrasa students, injuries to thousands, and the arrest of many. In this way, HI positioned itself as an ethical force and a political participant during a significant period in Bangladesh's history by aligning with protesting students, intertwining religious rhetoric with political discourse, and demanding systemic change.

3. Challenges: Organizational Limitations, Internal Conflict and External Constraints

3.1. Education, Gender, and Identity Politics

The interaction of Hefazat-e-Islam with education, gender, and identity politics is indicative of a multifaceted nexus between religion and power in Bangladesh. This group has been protecting conservative Islamic values in response to post-independence secular reforms (Raqib, 2020; Riaz, 2010), which have led to a bifurcated system of religious and secular education. Respondents VI and X noted that it has failed to define an integrated educational model that combines Islamic learning and modern scientific knowledge, thereby limiting its applicability to younger and urban constituencies.

It promotes gender segregation and veiling as Islamic identifiers and opposes Western liberal ideals (Hussain, 2010). Nevertheless, critics, such as human rights and secular groups, label such stands as patriarchal and retrogressive and tend to point to transnational Islamist influences (Schippers, 2020; Islam & Islam, 2020). Another observation by the respondents was the lack of a coherent structure for women's safety and education. Despite its mobilization capacity, the group is ineffective at overcoming plural identities and engaging constructively with rights-based critiques (Khan, 2018; Bhuiyan, 2022; Najjaj, 2017; Baldi, 2017).

3.2. Expression of Prejudice and Assertive Religious Piety

Respondents VI and IX stated that Hefazat-e-Islam speakers often use strong rhetoric and aggressive gestures, especially regarding women's rights, secularism, atheism, and education. This rhetoric intensifies polarization, instills fear among minorities and secular groups, and frames contemporary practices, including co-education and women's participation in public life, as threats to Islamic values. These narratives further contribute to social polarization and negativity toward pluralism and coexistence in Bangladesh's pluralistic society, thereby undermining the organization's overall social legitimacy. The respondents also noted that imposing strict markers, such as the niqab and beard, as mandatory subjects and social pressure oppresses diverse forms of Islam and limits individual religious freedom.

Respondents VI, VIII, and X reported that Hefazat leaders recently used rude and abusive language at a conference for women leaders of the Women Affairs Reform Commission. As a result, Hefazat leaders received a legal notice. The notice stated that Hefazat verbally abused the women leaders instead of engaging in a productive conversation with them. The notice was issued under sections 499 and 500 of the Penal Code for abusive and offensive language (Staff Writer, 2025).

3.3. Internal Divisions and the Struggle for Leadership Authority

Respondents I, IV, IX, and X argued that Mufti Shafi's careful, non-political leadership helped maintain Hefazat-e-Islam's unity within religious conservatism and facilitated negotiations with the government.

According to them, his successor, Junaid Babunagari, was more confrontational and political, especially during the 2021 protests against Modi. They also noted that after Babunagari died unexpectedly, the organization faced a leadership crisis. There were heated debates over whether to remain politically active or return to strict religious beliefs. Accordingly, the group split into factions that competed with each other. The dominant Babunagari faction wants the madrasa to be independent, with the state negotiating. Others, particularly younger people who shifted toward greater revivalism and conservatism, wish to protest in the streets and resist. Still, a pro-government bloc supports the AL, citing Mufti Shafi's legacy.

Respondents I, IV, VI, IX, and X argued that Hefazat-e-Islam's breakdown stems from several internal and external factors. Significant ideological and strategic differences within the organization have complicated relationships with other Islamist groups, such as Tablighi Jamaat (Saad Kandlawi) and Islami Andolon Bangladesh (Charmonai Peer). Although all seek to create an Islamic state, divergent plans and methods have worsened internal tensions (Nelson & Hasan, 2022; Mostofa, 2024). Additionally, the group's religious education, grounded in specific doctrinal interpretations, has fostered an exclusionary and extremist outlook, further deepening divisions (Daud, 2010). Historical patterns of Islamic fragmentation, as noted in early Islamic history, also influence Hefazat's struggle to maintain doctrinal coherence amid diverse religious currents (Асадуллин, 2020).

Participants I, IV, VI, IX, and X outlined the impact of the absence of cohesive leadership and an overarching strategy as the reason Hefazat-e-Islam has greatly lost its influence in the country, making it more susceptible to government manipulation, popular disbelief, and internal disunity.

3.4. Political Marginalization and State Repression

All respondents agreed that Hefazat-e-Islam's marginalization stems from state crackdowns, legal restrictions, surveillance, and extrajudicial actions, especially during periods of heightened activism, such as the 2013 Shapla rally and the 2021 anti-Modi protests.

Respondents I, II, III, IV, and V reported that the Hefazat-e-Islam rallied at Shapla Chattar on May 5, 2013, and turned violent, with police, RAB, and BGB fighting. They believed that hundreds of people were killed, bodies were hidden, and that more than 4,000 to 5,000 people were arrested and that enforced disappearances were carried out by police, RAB, and BGB. It is terrible to think how harshly the event was covered up and how it is still debated in Bangladesh's political and human rights discussions.

Later, the HI provided a list of 93 people killed during the 2013 operation, and on November 27, 2024, Hefazat filed a formal allegation with the prosecution wing of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT). They accused former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and 49 others of responsibility for that violent suppression (Dhaka Tribune, 2025).

According to Human Rights Watch (2013), at least 58 people were killed on May 5 and 6, based on hospital records, eyewitness accounts, and news reports. Odhikar, a human rights organization, reported that 61 people were killed in Shapla Square. Following this report, the AL government charged and arrested Odhikar's Secretary, Adilur Rahman Khan, and Director, ASM Nasiruddin Elan, under Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act, 2006 (amended in 2009) (Dhaka Tribune, 2024).

All respondents claimed that after the Shapla Chattar crackdown, there was a systemic campaign of political and media repression. They said the government violently controlled the mainstream media to suppress discussion of the crackdown. Diganta TV and Islamic TV were forced to shut down for broadcasting footage of brutality. Human Rights Watch (2013) reported and condemned the government's shutdown of both TV stations on the night of May 5–6 as an attempt to suppress coverage of the protests.

The repression also affected people who defend human rights. The pro-government media have been spying on, harassing, and spreading lies about Odhikar and its leaders since 2013 (Dhaka Tribune, 2024). The AL government arrested key leaders, banned rallies, and made it harder for Qawmi madrasas linked to the HI to operate (Nelson & Hasan, 2022;

Khan, 2018). The state's use of anti-terrorism and public order laws made Hefazat's political activism illegal by framing it as a threat to national security, which made it harder for it to run smoothly, split its leadership, and scare its supporters (Siveria, 2022; Gabbay, 2023).

The government has also used digital surveillance and intelligence monitoring, making it even harder for Hefazat to organize and mobilize nationally. As a result, the group has been forced to go on the defensive and respond, significantly reducing its ability to act as an independent political group (Shams, 2024).

Enforced disappearances, torture, and extrajudicial killings in the name of counterterrorism, mostly carried out by law enforcement agencies in Bangladesh, have been widely alleged to support a wider culture of repression (Gabbay, 2023; Mollah, 2019). The politicization of counterterrorism also allows the government to legitimize its power over opposition parties by labeling them as supporters of terrorism, to centralize its authority domestically, and to strengthen its global legitimacy (Silveria, 2022; Islam, 2011). At the same time, the Awami League has sought strategic compromises to buy off moderate elements of Hefazat-e-Islam, such as the officialization of Qawmi madrasa degrees. This is a way of appeasing conservative forces while excluding more radical groups, thereby undermining internal unity (Nelson & Hasan, 2022; Lutful, 2023). Altogether, this game of repression, manipulation of the law, and selective co-optation is indicative of a growing authoritarian line of operation to control dissent and religious discourse (Khan, 2017; Islam, 2011).

3.5. Ideological Contestation with Other Islamic Forces

Respondents IV, VI, VII, IX, and X argued that Hefazat-e-Islam operates within a competitive and ideologically divided Islamic landscape in Bangladesh. The situation is constantly changing because of differing theological views, institutional rivalries, and competing visions of Islam in public life. Hefazat-e-Islam, originating primarily in the Deobandi tradition and among ulama and students of Qawmi madrasahs, has a grassroots clerical character (Mostofa, 2024).

Hefazat is distinct from Jamaat-e-Islami, a structured Islamist political party founded in 1941 that seeks to implement Sharia through elections. Instead, Hefazat is non-political and focuses on religious education and moral conservatism (Mostofa, 2024; Kumar, 2017; Datta, 2003). Hefazat opposes Jamaat's modernist political activism because it seeks to change society's morals outside of politics. Respondents VI, IX, and X reported that Qawmi madrasa authorities acted quickly to punish or terminate individuals connected to Jamaat or Shibir from their institutions and organizations. According to their observations, in some cases, Qawmi authorities may even insult them publicly or harass them physically. Teachers or students who express ideological support for Jamaat in class discussions are also at risk of facing the same consequences. Hefazat's internal policy of ideological surveillance and enforcement appears aimed at preserving doctrinal purity and preventing rival Islamist narratives from spreading. According to their observations, this environment severely limits political discussion and academic freedom in Qawmi madrasah spaces.

The difference between HI and Tablighi Jamaat (led by Saad Kandalawi) also causes internal factionalism within HI, despite Tablighi Jamaat being another Deobandi-influenced organization that rejects politics and focuses solely on personal piety and the spread of Islam (Mostofa, 2024). Respondents IV, VI, VII, IX, and X reported ongoing ideological conflicts with other Islamic groups in Bangladesh. They also discussed problems between HI and Ahle Hadith, which follow Salafi teachings and disagree with Deobandi practices, including Hanafi law and Sufism. Respondents also noted that HI has problems with Islami Andolon Bangladesh (Charmonai Peer), a Sufi-influenced Sunni activism engaged in electoral politics, in contrast to Hefazat's conservative, non-electoral clericalism.

Respondents VII, IX, and X also discussed Hefazat's conflicts with Bareilvi-influenced groups such as the Gawthiyah Committee and the Islamic Front, particularly over practices like Mawlid celebrations and shrine visits, which Hefazat calls religious innovations (*bid'ah*). These organizations then accuse Hefazat of being sectarian and doctrinally rigid, arguing that its Deobandi exclusivism undermines religious harmony among groups.

Respondents VII, IX, and X also noted that radical pan-Islamist groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and Hizb ut-Tawhid make Hefazat's position difficult to defend, as they view HI as ideologically weak and too passive, criticizing its rejection of militancy and its negotiating approach with the state. Conversely, Hefazat has been largely criticized by Sunni groups for being too extreme and sectarian, arguing that it harms religious pluralism. Unfortunately, these Sunnis support the state's actions against HI.

The majority of respondents confirmed that these ideological conflicts have had a significant effect on Hefazat's strategic course and institutional identity in several respects. It is constantly competing to become legitimate in the Islamic realm in Bangladesh. It is difficult to see how Hefazat can hold its members together and maintain control over the movement in the face of doctrinal and political rivalry.

3.6. Internal Challenges within Qawmi Madrasahs

Respondents I, IV, VI, IX, and X noted that Hefazat-e-Islam also faces internal issues, as the Qawmi madrasa system is decentralized, with various education boards and institutions operating independently. Competition and rivalry, particularly among major madrasahs such as Patia and Hathazari, center on a struggle for leadership and influence. Despite shared objectives and ideologies, personal interests and institutional pride make collaboration difficult, which makes Hefazat less effective as an Islamist movement. They also said that although Hefazat-e-Islam strongly believes in religious education through the Qawmi madrasa system, the organization faces many challenges because of misconduct and governance problems in these schools. Some Qawmi madrasahs have been accused of serious wrongdoing, including instances of homosexuality and sexual abuse of boys, which raise serious moral and social issues (Chandan, 2023; Corraya, 2019).

Respondents III and V denied the existence of homosexuality and male sexual abuse among the Hefazati ulama. However, respondents VI, VIII, and X acknowledged these problems in Qawmi madrasahs, while the others were unaware of them. Respondents VI, VIII, and X contended that structural, social, and psychological factors are the root causes of male sexual abuse and homosexuality in Qawmi madrasahs. They also contended

that, because these institutions are residential, there is little interaction with women, and teachers and students live in close, often isolated quarters. Psychological strain may result from teachers' extended separation from their families. They also observed that misbehavior could continue without official oversight or child protection procedures. Sexual expression is also redirected by cultural silence regarding sexual health, unfavorable views of women, and rigid gender segregation. Abuse and the normalization of deviance are further enabled by the lack of moral instruction and training in proper conduct.

These abuses not only make these schools less moral but also make Hefazat vulnerable to criticism from both Muslims and people outside the community. Because many madrasas are closed off from the outside world, it is often difficult to investigate and hold people accountable, allowing these problems to continue (Ramdani & Izadi, 2024; Razak et al., 2024).

Respondents II, V, VI, VIII, and X discussed problems with how money is handled and decisions are made in Qawmi madrasahs. The Muhtamim (head) is often the sole person responsible for finances. The lack of audits and modern financial practices worsens the problem, underscoring the need for better financial training and infrastructure (Akhyar, 2024). They also noted that the Muhtamim of Qawmi madrasas in Bangladesh are often authoritarian and do not allow dissent or change. Hefazat-e-Islam has a more challenging time adapting and staying organized because of this authoritarian setting, where politics and fear of punishment make it difficult for people to study freely ("Academic Freedom in Bangladesh," 2022).

3.7. Islamophobic Narratives and Media Representation

Most participants claimed that Hefazat has to contend with Islamophobic narratives in secular civil society and the mainstream media in Bangladesh, especially Prothom Alo and The Daily Star. These outlets intentionally framed Hefazat as a violent and backward group, which undermines its credibility as a religious and educational organization. Participants also claimed that this framing mirrors global Islamophobic trends that depict Islamic movements as conservative and violent. They further said that

Indian news outlets and government officials often terrorize and criminalize Hefazat. They claimed these unethical framings are part of a broader plan to stop Islamic activism and to justify increased surveillance and political repression toward Islamic movements.

National and international media portrayals of Hefazat-e-Islam often frame it as part of an anti-Islamic agenda, focusing on extremism while ignoring local political and social issues (Khan et al., 2024; Tama & Sulistyaningrum, 2023). Since 9/11, counterterrorism discourses have broadened suspicion worldwide, extending it from militant groups to traditional organizations such as Qawmi madrasas (Rahman, 2016). The global war on terror has created a securitized environment that overlooks the socio-political foundations of Islamist mobilization in favor of victimization and resistance narratives (Reifer, 2006; Askerov, 2024). Concerns about Western-driven Islamophobia are heightened by what Islamist organizations perceive as increased foreign intervention and antagonism toward Islamic scholarship (Rios, 2010).

In Bangladesh, secularist discourses often portray Hefazat as an extremist group that hinders the country's progress and modernization. Scholars view it as part of a broader ideological struggle over the role of Islam in Bangladeshi society (Riaz, 2018; Khan & Govindasamy, 2011). Public opinion and policy responses are significantly shaped by the media's portrayal of Islamic movements as synonymous with terrorism and extremism (Ishak & Solihin, 2012).

Islamist organizations like HI are subject to both repression and instrumentalization as a result of these developments, which have caused ideological division and mistrust among the general public. Respondents agreed that Bangladesh's long history of religious tolerance and pluralism had been a strong defense against Islamist extremism, even under considerable pressure.

4. Strategic Repositioning and Future Prospects of Hefazat-e-Islam

4.1. Need for Reform and Strategic Rethinking

The largest share of respondents argued that the strategic repositioning of Hefazat-e-Islam in Bangladesh requires a broad-based recalibration of its image in the face of an ever more modern, globalized, and normatively pluralistic socio-political context. There is a need to shift the narrative toward a more inclusive, development-focused one to increase both legitimacy and interest in the activities of state and civil society actors.

Experts among respondents indicate that this change reflects an underlying tension between preserving doctrinal purity and adopting adaptive pragmatism. Although strong adherence to conservative Deobandi orientations leads to internal legitimacy, it also risks political marginalization. The Islamic political participation literature emphasizes that engagement in accordance with ethical governance and the common good is not only acceptable but also ethically encouraged (Suganda et al., 2024). Nevertheless, extremism can hinder such engagement due to ideological rigidity (Majeed, Ahmad, and Zulfiqar, 2026). Islamic political ethics (focusing on justice, balance, and pluralism), concepts such as *wasatiyyah* (moderation), and similar ideas provide a promising framework for balancing doctrinal continuity with the realities of practical adjustments (Leniawati & Haq, 2024; Amanullah & Fanani, 2024).

Based on the responses of the majority of respondents in the system, reform must address institutional gaps in the Qawmi madrasa system, such as protecting students from abuse, enhancing financial accountability, updating curricula, and promoting intellectual openness. Reforms such as these are important for regaining moral authority and increasing the legitimacy of education.

4.2 Opportunities for Engagement with State Institutions

Most respondents believe that state recognition of Qawmi madrasa degrees is a breakthrough opportunity to institutionalize these degrees and achieve policy impact. They also indicated that such a development increases the bargaining power of Hefazat-e-Islam, enhances its ability to participate in

policymaking on religious issues, and entrenches its views in policy frameworks.

This type of involvement aligns with broader trends in Islamist engagement, in which religious actors participate in governance under ethical obligations. Empirical evidence shows that collaboration between states and faith-based organizations can improve policy outcomes and strengthen institutional legitimacy. As a result, influence, negotiation, and the normalization of democratic processes offer opportunities to lead through strategic involvement in state institutions (Bano, 2011; Raqib, 2020; Islam & Islam, 2020).

4.3 Collaboration with Islamic and Civil Society Actors

According to the majority of respondents, moderate Islamic actors are an essential approach to reducing polarization and increasing collective bargaining capacity by building alliances. Engagement with organizations such as Jamaat-e-Islami and other Islamic movements can also help bridge ideological gaps and enable joint advocacy on shared interests. These types of alliances are especially noteworthy in a polarized civil society context framed by secular-Islamist antagonism.

Intra-faith, intra-Aqidah, and broader interfaith dialogue, grounded in respect, joint activities, and equitable leadership, consistently has a positive impact on social integration and religious reconciliation, regardless of the context. The diversity of beliefs among Islamists and other Islamic groups is more likely to be a controlled difference than a source of conflict when these groups interact through structured dialogue and joint projects without compromising fundamental beliefs (Rizki, 2025; Chaudhari, 2016; Whyte & Yucel, 2023).

4.4 Reimagining Role in a Pluralistic Democracy

A shift in discourse toward nonviolence is urgently needed in a pluralistic democracy. Traditionally associated with confrontational mobilization, the organization needs to focus on dialogue and peaceful advocacy to reduce state repression and broaden societal acceptance (Khan, 2018). Nonviolent methods have successfully mobilized various constituencies, especially the urban masses (Haque, 2024).

Such a change is not only in harmony with socio-religious traditions in Bangladesh, which has a Sufi-based pluralism (Alam, 2015), but also complies with democratic principles of inclusivity and deliberation (Riaz, 2015). Long-term sustainability and policy impact require constructive engagement with institutional structures rather than radical opposition (Hasan, 2011; Riaz, 2018).

4.5 Navigating Global Trends and International Scrutiny

The largest share of respondents emphasized that global discourses on Islamophobia and counterterrorism shape domestic perceptions and foreign interactions. As a result, strategic rebranding is necessary to counter discourses that equate extremism with conservatism. A focus on nonviolence, social welfare, and education reform can increase international legitimacy.

The digital innovation and modernization of Qawmi madrasa education, including a critical reform of the curriculum, have been important parts of the process and are intended to increase the relevance of pedagogy, broaden the epistemic base, and bring traditional religious education into alignment with modern educational and technological requirements (Zainuddin et al., 2024; Momen, 2025). Direct communication and narrative control can be achieved through the exploitation of media platforms (Putra et al., 2024), and information sharing and ideological placement can be facilitated by using transnational Islamic networks (Muqit et al., 2024). These policies align with broader efforts to align the

practice of traditional Islamic education with modern socio-economic expectations (Sikand, 2009; Santosa, 2022).

Taken together, these paths indicate that the future sustainability of Hefazat-e-Islam depends on its ability to balance ideological stability with strategy in a changing national and global environment.

Conclusion

This study shows how Hefazat-e-Islam's rise reflects the paradoxical relationship among religion, politics, and identity in postcolonial Bangladesh. HI has used cultural grievances and religious authority to make its voice heard during times of crisis, when democracy is weakening, Islamophobia is rising, and Jamaat-e-Islami is banned. This study finds that Hefazat-e-Islam's growth has been complex and marked by conflict. It has become a strong voice for conservative Muslim groups, positioning itself as a defender of Islamic values. However, it faces challenges such as internal fragmentation, leadership crises, concerns about financial transparency, and criticism of its madrasa networks. Its strong moral stance and oppositional rhetoric have drawn both support and controversy, especially regarding gender roles and education policy. Hefazat-e-Islam is often seen as an outsider by the state and the media, which often frame it through Islamophobic lenses. Concurrently, the AL's selective co-optation and repression reveal the contradiction of using religious figures for political gain while limiting their freedom when they threaten state control.

The trajectory of Hefazat-e-Islam is theoretically consistent with postcolonial feminist critique, cultural backlash, sectarian politics, and social movement theory. In South Asia's contested democratic landscape, its ideological disputes reveal how Islamist actors navigate identity, legitimacy, and power amid conflicts between orthodoxy and pragmatism, elite negotiation and grassroots support, and resistance and accommodation.

Ultimately, the case of Hefazat-e-Islam illustrates the evolving role and constraints of religious activism in a rapidly transforming Bangladesh. Its future trajectory depends not only on institutional adaptation to shifting political realities but also on its capacity to reconcile doctrinal

commitments with the normative demands of democratic governance and a pluralistic social order. Sustained relevance requires balancing ideological continuity with strategic adaptation amid growing sociopolitical pluralization and global interconnectedness. This necessitates institutional reform, discursive moderation, and constructive engagement in policymaking. In particular, modernizing the Qawmi madrasa system, enhancing transparency, and transitioning toward nonviolent, dialogical participation in democratic life are essential.

Opportunities for state recognition, advisory inclusion, and civil society collaboration further offer avenues for legitimacy and influence. Ultimately, its long-term viability depends on repositioning itself as a constructive stakeholder in governance and development while maintaining its core religious identity in an increasingly pluralistic and globally scrutinized environment.

Limitations and Future Research

Qualitative approaches are especially appropriate for investigating the inner meanings, dynamics, and lived experiences of Hefazat-e-Islam. Nonetheless, the current research is limited by its exclusive use of qualitative methods, which restricts generalizability and precludes the detection of large-scale or statistically significant trends in larger groups. In future studies, a mixed-methods approach should be implemented, comprising both qualitative and quantitative methods to improve analytical rigor and empirical validity, including in-depth interviews and discourse analysis. Also, future research ought to address the strategic repositioning of Hefazat using analytical tools such as scenario planning or SWOT analysis, and, in particular, how Hefazat has integrated digital engagement into its approach to coping with state surveillance and misinformation.

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