

## **Uniform Family Code and Its Discontents: Reading Islamic Resistance in Bangladesh**

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### **Abstract**

Since gaining independence in 1971 from Pakistan, following a prolonged struggle that challenged the notion of religion-based national identity rooted in the politics of 1947, Bangladesh has emerged as a significant site of negotiation between progressive, gender-just reforms and the persistence of conservative socio-religious traditions. Secular feminist movements in Bangladesh—often sustained through transnational donor networks yet deeply embedded in local struggles—have played a decisive role in shaping gender-just reforms by the state and non-state actors, contributing to notable advances in women’s education, employment, and legal protections, specially against early marriage and gender-based violence. These developments position Bangladesh as a dynamic arena where gender just reform agendas coexist with deeply rooted cultural and religious frameworks of Muslim majority country. Despite these gains, one of the crucial demands of women groups remains persistently contested: the repeal of the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961 and the establishment of a Uniform Family Code grounded in liberal principles of equality across gender and religion. Whenever such reforms were proposed or initiated, they were met with large-scale protests, particularly from Islamic fundamentalist groups. This resistance often convinced governments that introducing a uniform family code could threaten their political stability, making the implementation of such laws both risky and difficult to justify. This paper conceptualizes this resistance as an organized backlash which comes to surface level at specific political conjuncture when existing political system intensify hegemonic masculine anxieties around religious identity. Moving beyond the dominant binary of feminism versus patriarchy, I contend that these conjunctural eruptions of resistance are best understood as organized expressions of postcolonial masculine anxiety. This anxiety is rooted in the historical experience of colonialism and manifests in the perceived need to defend religious and cultural identity from external influence. At these critical junctures, women’s bodies and family structures become central symbolic sites through which such anxieties are articulated and mobilized. Focusing on the most recent backlash against uniform civil code in 2025 against proposals by a government-appointed Women Reform Commission, this paper examines how and why this moment became a site of intensified resistance. This argues that this episode represents the convergence of long-standing anxieties and immediate political triggers, demonstrating how backlash intensifies at historically contingent moments. By foregrounding conjuncture as the key analytical lens, this study not only offers a more precise and context-sensitive framework for understanding resistance to the Uniform Family Code, but also highlights Bangladesh’s distinctive political landscape—where reform, resistance, and negotiation continuously reshape the boundaries of gender, law, and national identity in ways that resist simplistic categorization.

**Keywords:** Bangladesh, Feminism, Secularism, Islamization, Uniform Family Code.