

## 12 individuals have been slapped with a cyber-crime lawsuit

Before the inception of a fast-track tribunal in 2013, you would be hard pressed to find a person indicted because of committing a cyber-crime. Hardly a surprise as cyber-crime laws in Bangladesh were perhaps not as prevalent or widespread even today as it is on, let's say much more digitally advanced nations. It is after all a fairly new avenue, and it was not until April 9, 2018, Bangladesh listed its new Digital Security Bill in parliament, which was then sent to a parliamentary standing committee for review. The proposed law was in part intended to replace section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act (ICT Act) 2006.

Now when the occasion does arrive, especially if it is a high profile one it tends to catch the nation's attention, as was the case with Monirul Islam, a rubber plantation worker in Srimongol, southern Bangladesh, who was arrested on April 2017, over allegations of defaming the Bangladesh's Prime Minister and "harming the image of Bangladesh".

So, when news filters through that not one but a total of 12 individuals and organizations (listed below, starting with the primary defendant) have been slapped with a cyber-crime lawsuit, filed in accordance with the now freshly inducted Digital Security Act, it forces you to take notice.

Our court correspondent who is already fairly busy these days, hurried over to the Magistrate's court in Rajbari, where the lawsuit was filed by one Mr Akbar Ali, against the staff and contributors of an online based news Publication called 'PortalBangladesh.com'. Our correspondent was able to find out that defamatory article bearing abusive messages and comments against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her family were published by this news outlet. The lawsuit specifically names those involved in writing the article and of course those who published it subsequently, including the co-editor of PortalBangladesh.com. Nevertheless, the lawsuit was filed on 12 March and the names of those accused along with 'PortalBangladesh.com' are, Md. Rashed Alam, MD Anisuzzaman, Azir Uddin, Shah Mohammad Shahinur Rab, MD Hasnain, Mohammad Abu Zobayer Rabbani, MD Sabbir Hossain, Chinmoy Debnath, Nizamuddin Dodon, Moshiul Hossain Khan, Kamrul Islam, MD Tofail Hossain.

Now since the changes have been wrung, anyone found guilty under the new anti-cybercrime laws face serious repercussions including up to 14 years in jail, and a sizeable fine. Our correspondent is yet to determine any ulterior reasons behind the plaintiff's decision to launch a lawsuit of this stature against such a large group. It is unclear whether it was politically motivated as well. The case files meanwhile cite that the plaintiff is merely a devout patriot and an Awami League (current Bangladeshi regime) loyalist.

The defendants meanwhile (most of them as our correspondent found out) were currently plying their trade outside Bangladesh. Due to that very information it has been difficult to garner any information on them.

However we did manage to speak to the investigating office for this lawsuit one Mr Swapan Kumar Majumder, Officer-in-charge of the Rajbari Police station, who are overseeing the general investigations to be conducted regarding this lawsuit. He stated, "Any allegation brought against the honourable Prime Minister, be it small of a large magnitude, is treated with extreme importance here, and a with a level of caution as well. It is easy to just jump to conclusions here without first liaising with the accused individuals here and establishing whether or not the allegations brought have any truth to them." When asked if that has been possible so far he offered, "No because in this unique case, a large portion of the defendants happen to be out of the country and we have only managed to establish that for a few of them. We are yet to trace the whereabouts of all of them. But you shall be informed in due course, so

please no more questions.”

We contacted the Home Ministry for comments on this lawsuit and were rudely declined access to either a spokesperson or representative of the government, by the very irate official who received our call. Any attempts to contact ‘PortalBangladesh.com’ who are at the centre of this lawsuit have been unsuccessful as well.

We will bring you more news about this lawsuit so stay tuned.

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### Digital Security Act 2018 In Action: 12 Men Amongst the first on the receiving end of the new digital reforms

In what is certainly one of the more eye-grabbing events this week, on Tuesday a lawsuit was filed against a dozen people at the Senior Judicial Magistrate Court No.1, Rajbari. The accused allegedly contributed towards ‘abusive and derogatory content’ against current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her father, former Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. According to our court correspondent, said denigrating content was published in an online website called ‘Portal Bangladesh’.

Now the charges are fairly serious but at a first glance, someone who is unaware of Bangladesh current socio-political state might dismiss this lawsuit as a common occurrence. And to a certain extent, he would be right, for the courts of Bangladesh are inundated with lawsuits in general. What sets this one apart however is that this lawsuit has been filed under the freshly passed Digital Security Act 2018, under Penal Code 25/29/31/35 to be exact.

Now, this lawsuit here is uncommon in the sense that Bangladesh happens to be one of the many nations where digital laws, cybercrime (and laws against them) are not as prevalent as other more technologically developed countries. Indeed before the introduction of the now newly reformed Digital Security Act 2018, Bangladesh legal system was largely ignorant of monitoring digital activities e.g. internet traffic, social media portals visa-a-vis, where cybercrime usually tends to originate from. They largely operated under the rather meek ‘Bangladesh Information & Communication Law 2006” (As amended in 2009)’. Up until the aforementioned, Digital Security Act of course.

Fast forward into 2019 and the ‘Digital Security Act 2018’ is a topic of hot debate, with online activists, human rights activists, editors, writers, free press and media criticising the law, referring to it as the ‘Black Law’. They cite that this is yet another attempt at ‘stifling the freedom of speech’. Often critics also refer to it as a ‘bone-chilling doctrine’, despite the government maintaining that it is a law introduced for ‘those who indulge in dissent far too often and unnecessarily’. A vast majority of the people debating the law have criticised the government for introducing yet another tool in which to silence its critics. Indeed some of the words of caution, introduced within the Digital Security Act do leave room for debate and are quite concerning. For instance, there is a very specific ban mentioned in the Act which prohibits anyone from “spreading negative propaganda” about the country’s 1971 war of independence and its founding leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Anyone found guilty under this new act face an assortment of legal consequences including up to 14 years of jail time.

That is the predicament awaiting the 12 people who have been accused in this lawsuit. The plaintiff here one Mr Akbar Ali was gracious enough to participate in a very brief interview with our court correspondent. He states that the accused have, “deliberately and without

remorse, gone about besmirching the name of our founding father Bongobandhu and his daughter, our current revolutionary leader Prime Minister Hasina. We need to stand up to bullies who use the free press and online media outlet to spread false rumours and propoganda against the honourable men and women who have ruled and currently rule our country.” The plaintiff also had a few choice words for the accused but we have omitted them in the interest of keeping this space clean for our readers.

Now 12 men accused are as follows, starting with the primary accused Mohammad Rashed Alam, Md Anissuzaman, Azir Uddin, Shah Mohammad Shahinur Rob, Md Hasnain, Mohammad Abu Zobair, Md Sabbir Hossain, Chinmoy Debnath, Nizam Uddin Dodon, Moshiul Hossain Khan, Kamrul Islam, Md Tofayel Hossain. There are 3 witnesses in total listed in this lawsuit, our court correspondent understands.

As our readers can probably imagine, it was difficult to get a hold of the accused at all. Our correspondent managed to track down some of them, but it appears that they are currently residing abroad.

Our correspondent next approached the Home Ministry for comments on the case, but a spokesperson rudely refused to let us speak to any present official instead citing that the Home Ministry does not comment themselves with ‘individual incidents’.

Our court correspondent was also refused entry into the local Police Station handling the primary investigations for this lawsuit. But more information will be available as this incident is slowly filtered out for the media to evaluate and report on later. Thus we urge patience from our readers for now as there is potentially more to follow.

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### Minorities in Bangladesh: A matter of survival

At least 100 Hindu were killed and 31 were disappeared in 2017 as a result of communal attack in Bangladesh; according to a report of BJHM (Bangladesh Hindu Mohajot). Moreover, it has been confirmed by the report that 782 Hindu have been forced to leave country or have been threatened to leave the country, 23 Hindus have been forcibly converted to Islam, at least 25 Hindu women and children were raped and at least 235 Hindu temples were vandalized.

The report confirms that; the inglorious history of minority attacks which is often referred to the ethnic cleansing; has been continuing in Bangladesh. There is no official report yet in 2018 demonstrating the proper scenario; but it is thought that the number of attack is not less if not more than the previous year.

This Article aims at pointing out the reason of the resurgence in the minority attack in Bangladesh and the possible steps should be taken by minorities to prevent it by analysing the history of minority attacks in Bangladesh.

#### Historical Scenario:

During 1971 Liberation war, by which Bangladesh got independence,29% total population were Hindu. But, the percentage is only 8.96% now. This is mainly because of systematic land graving, killing, vandalizing religious establishment and force conversion of the minority

people in Bangladesh.

During 1971 Liberation war, minority in Bangladesh specially the Hindus were targeted to be killed and tortured alleging their connection with India. As a result, estimated 6 million Hindu Refugees from Bangladesh gathered in India to save their lives. After the Liberation war when Bangladesh became independent, most of them returned to Bangladesh hoping it would be a secular state ensuring equal rights for people from all race and religion. The constitution made by the then Awamileague Government ensured secularism principles in the constitution which resulted in much acceptance of Awamileague as a political party to the minorities of the country.

However, it did not take long to dream be faded for the minority communities of the country, following a dramatic change in Bangladeshi Politics in 1975 after demise of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. After 1975 the other political parties apart from Awamileague of the country started to do systematic oppression to the minority with a view to making their survival harder in the country. Though at present Awamileague is in the state power, the hostile environment for the minority in the country has not changed and the main reason behind is Awamileague's reluctance to stick on its secularism characteristics. As a result, in 21st century people in Bangladesh are being attacked only because of their religious identity! Advocate Direndra Ghosh, the chief of the Minority Watch, Bangladesh has recently revealed that, every day at least 500 Hindus are being forced to leave their motherland in Bangladesh.

Reason of the frequent attack in Bangladesh:

Bangladesh has lost its secularism characteristics practically and constitutionally at present. Recently, Bangladeshi Court has upheld the Islam as the state religion repealing Secularism in the constitution. Though, the amendment in the constitution was done by court, it was apparent that such a decision was biased by the government who was reluctant to re-establish secularism in Constitution as a result of their 'compromise' with Hefazat-e-Islam, the biggest Islamist group in Bangladesh. That constitutional change is not an isolated rather consequence of the constant pressure by the radical Muslims of the country. Over the last decade Socio-economically Bangladesh has turned into Islamic controlled system. Thousands of Madrasahs have been established across the country where minimum tolerance to the people of the other religion is taught. Intolerance for different opinions other than Islam is very visible now a day mainly because of wide spread use of Social Media. In Bangladesh you can't express your free thought now as you will be victim of racial attack by the radical Muslims. And the audacity of them is getting beyond control as there are no preventive measures to stop them. Most of the time the attackers on the minority go unpunished and there is no legal action at all against those atrocities in social media.

During the election minorities in Bangladesh generally support Awamileague which was thought to be better than others in term of securing Minority Rights in Bangladesh. But since after securing power in 2014, in an uncontested election Awamileague has been seemed to be reluctant to take strong actions against the Islamists. This is because, to continue in state power Awamileague has been controlling their political opposition and they do not want any opposition from the Islamist which could create uncomfortable situation in the power. Doing so, they have been implementing one after another demand of the Islamist like removing lady justice sculpture, compromising with Hefazat-E-Islam, and the biggest Islamist supported group of the country. Moreover, Awamileague leaders got involved in minority attack reportedly over the years for land grabbing. In 2017 Miscreants vandalised and looted at least 10 Hindu temples in Brahmanbaria's Nasirnagar this afternoon along with hundreds of houses of the Hindu community. Later it was appeared from public media investigation that none but Awamileague ally was

responsible for that attack. It is established now that being a Awamileague supporter is a double-edged sword for the minorities in Bangladesh as Awamileague opposition attacks the minorities for not supporting Awamileague while Awamileague supporters attack minorities for not casting enough votes during the election.

Road to survival:

The minority in Bangladesh is in such a critical situation where there is no other option than creating strong resistance by the minorities in Bangladesh for their survival. They will also have to decentralize their political support from Awamileague.

Rangpur, Nasirnagar & Ramu, three biggest rampages against the minorities in Bangladesh in recent history, indicates that such attacks were foreseeable. But, surprisingly there were no visible precautions to stop those attacks. It is understandable that any resistance by the minorities would not last long, but a strong message could be sent by such a resistance. During the Gujarat Riot in 2002 minorities in western India were attacked first. Being attacked, they did not sit down rather overcoming the initial loss minorities in Gujarat made strong resistance and turned the attack into riot. Though lots of minorities lost their lives because of the resistance, a strong message was established that eyes would be for eyes.

For the survival in Bangladesh, minorities of Bangladesh should make strong and firm resistance against any attack and turn those attacks in 'riot'!

On the other hand, minorities in Bangladesh should stop their unconditional support to Awamileague for their survival. In India, though minorities are more unlikely to cast their votes for BJP, they are not blind to Congress only. They are divided in their political opinions centrally and regionally. As a result, they are getting a good outcome.

In Andhra Pradesh 4% reservation are secured in employment and educational institutions only for Muslim. In Tamil Nadu the reservation is 3.5% for Muslim and Christian which is 7% in total. In Kerala reservation in Public Service Commission for Muslim is 12%, which is 9% in Tamil Nadu 26.56% of total population in Kerala is Muslim, 9% and 5.6% respectively in AP and Tamil Nadu.

On the other hand, though the percentage of the minorities comprising of Hindu, Buddhist and Christians in Bangladesh is very marginal of the total population, there is no reservation in any sector for them. Even Awamileague has been unconditionally supported by the minorities; it has done nothing notable for the minorities in their 10 continuous years in power. Rather during the Awamileague Regime; abolishment of secularism from the constitution by replacing Islam as state religion has been secured, Islamic group Hefazat-E-Islam has been in much more stronger position by the Awamileague patronization. The most alarming sign comes into light when the President of Bangladesh Awamileague declares that the country will run in accordance with Medina Charter (Islamic Regulations which was drawn up on behalf of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad shortly after his arrival at Medina in 622 CE, following the Hijra from Mecca).

In fine, instead of unconditionally supporting Awamileague, minorities in Bangladesh should politically be decentralized and make the political parties dependant on them for their valuable votes. Political decentralization and making strong resistance against any attack could only be the way of survival for the minorities in Bangladesh.

## 55 Accused of Blasphemy Now...Crackdown Continues with No Signs Of Ceasing



*Main Accused Zobair Hossain*

It will perhaps go down as one of the most astonishing lawsuits ever filed in a court of law of Bangladesh, but it has happened and this time 55 individuals have been accused of committing blasphemy, an act worthy of being punishable by death according to certain sections of the Bangladeshi society. The accused here certainly face some serious legal repercussions, and of course the wrath of the Bangladeshi society, even its administration as the case will surely be well-publicised.

In accordance with Bangladesh Penal Code 295, C. R. case number 719/18 was filed with the Senior Judicial Magistrate Court, Dhaka this past 17/10/2018. The plaintiff, one Mr Munshi Makidul Islam, has listed more than 4 dozen individuals whom he believes to have “hurt the religious sentimentality of a nation” and are culpable of “concocting various obscenities” about Islam and its Prophet (PBUH).

The 55 individuals, that is their exact number, have been named as follows,

Zobair Hossain (primary accused) (31), Arifur Rahman, Md. Tofayel Hossain, Hosni Mobarak, Secular Publishers Ltd, Arunangsho Chakrabarty, Chinmoy Debnath, Adnan Saqib, Abdur Rahman , Abu Hanif , Syed Mohammad Sajeeb Abed , Syed Sunvy Anick Hossain, Taushnuva Fardousi , Naymul Islam , M D Abdullah Al Hasan , H.M Atiqur Rahman , Asif Abrar Titu , Abul Hasnat , Hayat Hamid Ullah Robin , Shafi Nawaz Shipu , Miltan Kumar Dey , Sharmin Jannat Bhutto, Abu Taher Md. Mostafa, Saiful Islam, Arman Ahmed, Nazmul Hossain, Sujan Chandra Deb, Suranjoy Sarker, Syed Samun Ali , Faisal Hossain Anick, Abdul Ahad Shanto , Syed Ishtiak Hossain , Pinaki Deb Apu , Sohag Kazi , Enayetul Huda , Roosevelt Halder , Yeaz Kawsar , Maruf Hasan, Syed Ishtiak Hossain Shaon , Tahera Sultana , Farhana Yasmin , Abdul Ahad , Masud Khan , M.D Sabbir Hossain , Jawad

Nirjhor , Kishore Das , Hafizur Rahman , Abdul Kader , Shipon Ahmed , A.F.M Abdullah Masum , Tamzid Hossain , Rakibul Islam Pintu , Farzana Islam , Bani Mahmud Shuvo , Al Mamun Ahmed

The above-named individuals have been accused of writing and contributing blasphemous content to a magazine called "Atheist in Bangladesh". The magazine reportedly features crude and vociferous articles against religion in general, Islam in particular. More than anything the plaintiff Mr Makidul Islam appeared most perturbed at the lewd and disrespectful portrayal of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH). Mr Makidul Islam states the Prophet (PBUH) is his role model, whose lifestyle is his guiding principle.

Our court correspondent reports that the plaintiff Mr Makidul Islam came across the magazine shortly after it was published. Mr Makidul could gauge just by the title, as he states, that the magazine was abusive. However, once he delved deep, he was rocked to the core at the vile and baseless lies aimed at religion, pointedly at Islam and Muslims, the emissaries of peace.

However, we are not surprised to see 'Atheist in Bangladesh' in the midst of it all again. The organization, which sponsors these magazines, have gained a notorious reputation here in Bangladesh so far for their anti-religious stance, and have been subjected to multiple lawsuits over recent years, similar to the one we are focusing on now.

Nevertheless, our court correspondent decides to conduct a one-man brief investigation and his first move was to get in touch with the accused. That was easier said than done. He tried contacting 'Atheist in Bangladesh' proper but information available on their website (as unearthed from court sources) is scant, however, we did manage to find an email address. We are still waiting for a response from them. What was unsurprising again, was that none of the accused were available for comment. In fact, our correspondent was able to discover fairly quickly that most of them were already residing abroad.

Mr Makidul, of course, was available to spare us a few choice words. For the purpose of keeping this space clean, we will refrain from publishing the colourful language Mr Makidul employed at times. Speaking to us via Skype, Mr Makidul says, "I'm proud to have taken the initiative to do something about this unwanted epidemic which threatens to cripple our nation. No one is doing anything about it! Least of all the government who have seemingly given up after being overwhelmed by the sheer numbers these (colourful language) have. As a responsible citizen, pious Muslim, I felt compelled to have them tried for the obscenities they have concocted, none more so that the unwarranted criticism of our beloved Prophet Mohammed (PBUH)"

This lawsuit comes of course on the back what is currently rather a fragile environment in Bangladesh. From a social standpoint, the nation is divided into factions now, some embracing the growing trend of fundamentalism, some like the government and law enforcement authorities who are currently struggling to subjugate the random bouts of terrorism, militancy that has spread throughout the nation in current times. And there is another faction much like the accused, who chose to be liberal, perhaps too liberal in their thinking and their actions. The recently murdered bloggers, free-thinking souls, journalists, activists, writers can also be included in this group.

Reactions towards the lawsuit have been decidedly hostile. Social media platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit which were the ones we tracked for reaction) which have been rife ever since news of the lawsuit broke in, indicate that the public agrees with Mr. Makidul Islam's action.

In stark contrast though, several independent writers, bloggers, and online activists have firmly criticised Mr Makidul Islam, and accused the law of being "biased and medieval".

Meanwhile, our correspondent did pay a visit to The Police Bureau of Investigations (PBI), seeking to have a word with the person in charge of investigating the charges brought forth in this lawsuit. We were sadly unable to get a hold of him. Our correspondent, however, promises to bring our readers an update as soon as we know more.

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### Blasphemy lawsuit submitted against secular writers

On 17th October 2018 the perennially busy and overworked Dhaka Judicial Magistrate Court-1, Amoli Court, added a blasphemy lawsuit to its already burgeoning workload. The blasphemy lawsuit, which sent shockwaves across the court premises today according to our sources, has been filed against a total of 55. The defendants (whose names have been disclosed below) have been accused of being derogatory and abusive towards religion, particularly Islam. Unsurprisingly thus, the lawsuit has been filed in accordance with Bangladesh Penal Code 295.

For those of our readers who are unaware, the Bangladesh Penal Code 295 is a law which when breached can lead to serious legal consequences including fines, and long jail times. Naturally, it was introduced in a bid to discourage blasphemy indeed or indulge in it at all.

The plaintiff of this lawsuit has been identified as one Munshi Mokidul Islam his full identity is unknown to us at the moment, as are the explicit reasons as to why he has taken such an initiative. But our court sources cite that the plaintiff “felt compelled” from “his sense of duty as a Muslim” to punish those that seek to harm Islam. An attempt to contact the plaintiff ended in failure as his premises appeared to be vacant at the time we tried to establish contact. However our court correspondent is still working away diligently in order to obtain the plaintiff’s current whereabouts. More on that to follow in future reports.

Meanwhile we were able to extract a lot more information on the defendants of this lawsuit. The list comprises of rather well-known bloggers, online activists. It appears the plaintiff has named one Zobair Hossain, who the plaintiff along with his other (listed) colleagues accuses of producing ‘crude and perverted’ content on religion in general. It appears that the accused have had the alleged blasphemous content they produced, published properly on to a magazine called “Atheist in Bangladesh”. An attempt to contact the defendants was futile as well for our correspondent understands that most of these individuals are currently residing on foreign soil. The names of these bloggers and activists are now listed below,

Zobair Hossain, Arifur Rahman (Editor), Md. Tofail Hossain (Assistant Editor), Hosni Mubarak (Assistant Editor), Publisher (Secular Publishers Ltd), Arunangsho Chakrabarty, Chinmoy Debnath, Adnan Saqib, Abdur Rahman, Abu Hanif, Syed Mohammad Sajeeb Abed, Syed Sunvy Anick Hossain, Naymul Islam, M D Abdullah Al Hasan, H.M Atiqur Rahman, Asif Abrar Titu Abul Hasnat, Hayat Hamid Ullah Robin, Shafi Nawaz Shipu, Milton Kumar Dey, Sharmin Jannat Bhutto, Abu Taher Muhammad Mustafa, Md. Mostafa Saiful Islam, Arman Ahmed, Nazmul Hossain, Sujana Chandra Deb, Suranjoy Sarker, Syed Samun Ali, Faisal Hossain Anik, Abdul Ahad Shanto, Syed Ishtiaq Hossain, Pinaki Deb Apu, Enyetul Huda, Yeaz Kawsar, Syed Isteak Hossain Shawon, Farhana Yasmin, Masud Khan, M.D Sabbir Hossain, Jawad Nirjhor, Kisore Das, Hafizur Rahman, Abdul Kader, Shipon Ahmed, A.F.M Abdullah Masum, Farzana Islam, Bani Mahmud Shuvo and others

What was surprising, however, was that this magazine already has a rather chequered history in



terms of facing legal charges, with already quite a few other lawsuits to its name. We are trying to obtain more information on that as we write this.

Our correspondent next got in touch with the local police station in a bid to determine whether any formal investigations have been launched or not. However, a spokesperson for the station (the chief inspector refused to speak to us) cited that if a complaint has indeed been launched, it will take time for the place to receive official instructions to carry out an investigation. Before ushering our correspondent out the spokesperson stated that they take all matters of blasphemy very seriously.

Meanwhile, social media channels have been rife with a discussion once news of the lawsuit broke today. The popular opinion here appears to be that of general approval, several agreeing that the plaintiff has 'taken the right' measures in order to preserve the holiness of this 'Land of Allah'.

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### LGBT Communities in South Asia: When social values, religion or politics aren't enough to marginalise people

"Perhaps now fears over my life may have eased somewhat. But as a bisexual woman, I do not think I will ever escape being marginalised. Even though I reside within what you'd consider a tolerant society."

These are the words of one Ms Taushnuva Fardousi, a Bangladeshi Muslim woman, who is currently on a study leave in the UK. She happens to be one of many members of the LGBT community, scattered across the world, seeking refuge because of their unique sexual preferences. Her words meanwhile are more or less echoed by almost every single lesbian, bisexual, transgender or gay person we have had the benefit of speaking to.

It is no secret that a large number of LGBT men, women have actively sought asylum anywhere where they would not be fined, harassed or ostracized because of their sexuality. And most of these applications, alarmingly, tend to originate from South East Asia.

There are several reasons to slate South East Asia as a sub-par region of a continent which in truth has been on the ascendancy in the last few years, if latest audits of economic growth and standard of living ratios are anything to go by.

The likes of Pakistan still dabbles in honour killings (such as the high profile one of Qandeel Baloch, 26, a social media celebrity) in attempt to subdue anyone who struggles to come to terms with its conservative values. Bangladesh to be honest has found it quite difficult to shed its reputation as a hostile nation towards religious and ethnic minorities. According to latest country reports, it is now in the on its way to be (if it's not already in the throes of) overwhelmed by an epidemic of religious fundamentalism. Not to mention it legally condemns LGBT individuals as 'unnatural' offenders, reserving fines and generous jail times for them.

The Indian Supreme court meanwhile has decriminalised homosexuality and bisexuality in a landmark ruling (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-45429664>), and that in itself qualifies as a step forward in the right direction. But is it enough to convince us sceptics? Because to be honest India, just like Pakistan, still remains amongst those nations whereby the death penalty is the highest form of punishment dished out. And really, has that stopped anyone from committing murders in India, or Pakistan for that matter where regular honour killings are

still a legitimate concern? Thus, should we just believe that the Supreme court's abovementioned decision has completely abolished or will fully stem the incessant abuse LGBT communities in India continue to be subjected to till today?

We would whole-heartedly like to say yes but unfortunately we can't. For if the Indian sub-continent has proved something throughout its rather long, rich, and illustrious history is that it is not all that receptive to change. The continuing Hindu-Muslim conflicts across the continent, minority persecutions (such as the systematic extermination of Rohingya's in the Bangladesh-Myanmar border), and the existence of medieval, superficial social values are living proof of that.

Bangladesh it seems is worse off according to Mr Abdur Rahman, who is living in the United Kingdom.

"Back home people think I am carrying some of sort of virus which has made me like this. As if I woke up one day and I suddenly "felt" gay. My dad, may Allah bless him, I could never tell him. How can I? His only son, his pride and joy. Who he was going to find a lovely bride for? So my options back then were one suicide, two suicide, or three just run away and keep running", he finished.

While its immediate neighbour (India) seems to be at least attempting to redeem itself in front of the LGBT community, Bangladesh continues to be trigger happy when it comes to reprimanding members of its own LGBT communities. Often severely so.

As recently as 19/05/2017, Bangladesh Rapid Action Battalion (an elite paramilitary force with certain special executive powers) arrested as many as 27 young men on charges of engaging in 'homosexual activities'

(<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/bangladesh-authorities-arrest-27-men-gay-homosexuality-muslim-country-islam-police-charge-a7744366.html>)

"It is absolutely terrifying, and it goes to demonstrate the deplorable state of members of the LGBT community in South-East Asia, not just in Bangladesh" Taushnuva replied, when we asked her how she felt about the aforementioned crackdown on gay men in Bangladesh.

We also probed her further on whether she considered the implications of coming out as a bisexual Muslim woman in Bangladesh. "Of course I did and I had to. The internal struggle with myself (whether to come out or not) was unbearable. I had to account for my life, my career choices, what it meant for my education. I did not have an inkling that the consequences would be of such severe magnitudes, that I would have to hide myself like a rat from my own people. It is as if I am the by-product of some sort of sin. That I never should have been born" she said.

It truly is a brutal picture painted by the above mentioned individuals we spoke to. It begs the question whether there is an end to this acrimonious cycle. While India seems to be bucking the trend, we are sceptical of its effect. The immediate aftermath of course is that homosexuality or bisexuality will no longer be a crime. But we wonder just how long it will take to change the Indian society's perspective. Will it truly stop homosexual or bisexual people there from being bullied or ostracized? Meanwhile India's neighbours continue to be as rigid and as conservative towards such liberal sexual preferences in general. If anything it seems as if their efforts crackdown on the LGBT communities across the sub-continent have intensified.

What adds to fire to the fuel of course is the sub-continent's stiff religious values, here

strict adherence to them. We can write a book debating the pros and cons of religion, but perhaps that discussion is for another time. For the time being though, religion, especially Islam condemns homosexuality or bisexuality as a shameful sin worthy of being punished with death. Bangladesh and Pakistan of course are Muslim majority countries and India, although dwarfed in terms of numbers, still has a sizeable contingent of Muslims within their boundaries.

It feels sad to conclude on such a bleak note, but what can we do? After all even the slightest improvements often raise more questions than answers. We can sit here and talk about radical change, but is there even the slightest whiff of anything forthcoming? It is almost as if the sub-continent has settled into a lull, a stupor state where it finds itself to be very comfortable. How long before members of South-Asia's LGBT community continue to seek refuge elsewhere out of fear of persecution? How long before they can go back home? How long before they can say with pride and without fear that I am a gay man, a lesbian woman or a bisexual person?

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## Hefazat-e-Islam, a growing cancer in Bangladesh?

*By Kishor K. Das*

Introduction:

Compromise between Present governments with Hefazat-e-Islam Islam, the biggest Islamic group backed by radical Muslims of the country has reached into an ominous stage according to the non-communal people of Bangladesh. It is thought by the secular people of Bangladesh that the present government is intentionally patronising Islamic groups to ensure their continuing dominance in the political field and to survive in the power. Present ruling party, Bangladesh Awamileague formed a government in 2014 in a non-participated election by all political parties of Bangladesh where 154 parliament member were elected uncontested. Since then the present government has been continuously controlling the opposition parties by extrajudicial activities and has been succeeded to do so apart from those radical Islamic religious groups like Hefazat-e-Islam-e-Islam who are currently acting as policymaker of Bangladesh even not being part of the government. To understand their influence in Bangladesh and realise the power of Hefazat-e-Islam this article intends to go through the evolvment, recent activities, influence and impact of Hefazat-e-Islam in the secularism in Bangladesh.

Background and powerhouse of Hefazat-e-Islam:

Hefazat-e-Islam was formed in 2010, comprising of the teachers of several Madrasas (Islamic Schools) of Chittagong, opposing the proposed plan of giving men and women equal rights in inheritance. They conduct their activities based on Qawmi Madrasas of Bangladesh. According to a report of BANBEIS (Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and statistics there are 13902 Qawmi Madrasas where more than 1.4 million Quranic students are studying there in Bangladesh. Teaching Islam through Arabic medium is the sole goal of most of these madrasas. Most of the students there are orphans. In Bangladesh, the term orphan not only refers them whose parents died but also referred to them whose parents do not have the capability to feed them.

The Madrasa authorities house those orphans, feed them and most importantly teach them even to

sacrifice their lives to establish an 'Islamic Society' for the sake of here and hereafter. Being deprived of the minimum opportunities of the life, those young orphans think people who are giving them shelter and food are 'angel' ready to carry any order made by them.

Those orphans from the very early life are thought there is only one God who is Allah and the Islam is superior than any other religion, anyone apart from Muslim are deprived of 'God's blessing', worshipping the sculpture is 'Haram' and should not be allowed anybody to do so, women shouldn't be allowed alone outside and they should stay within veil, every Muslim of the world is their brother and they have to be accountable in the final judgement for what they have done for the fellow Muslims in the world. Apparently, they have also thought the West is the enemy of Islam and they even should sacrifice their lives to kill their enemy to ensure Jannat (heaven), a place of endless luxury with 70 Huris (beautiful women) for each man. By getting brain drained and in expectation of getting Jannat (heaven) most of those students there get ready to do anything for the sake of Islam and quite a significant number of them get ready to engage themselves in Zihad to kill the enemies of Islam.

These Quami Madrasas run by Hefazat-e-Islam-e-Islam are not at all financial dependant on Bangladeshi Government. These 13902 Madrasas comprising of 1.4 million students with food and accommodation totally depend on private donation which enables them to avoid state control. It is alleged that this huge amount of donation comes from some individuals from the Middle East who plan to make Bangladesh as a Sharia government state. Hefazat-e-Islam-e-Islam is the sole authority to run all these Madrasas and Hathazari Madrasa a resident of more than 14000 students is used as the headquarter of them. Shah Ahmed Shah Ahmed Shafi, who opined once "women are nothing but mouth-watering tamarind for men" is the supreme leader of the Islamic group.

#### Early Roar:

By getting backed by thousands of fearless radical young Muslims, who are ready to die for the 'sake' of Islam, Hefazat-e-Islam decided to inform their existence in 2010 for the first time. They declared to hold a rally and meeting in Laldighi, a significant political place of Chittagong City against the then government plan of banning Madrassa education, religious-based politics, and cancellation of the fifth amendment of the constitution and a proposed education policy that would have ended Madrasha education.

\*Present ruling party Awami league was the then government took a strong stand against the Hefazat-e-Islam-e-Islam's procession and did not give them permission to hold the rally. Despite not getting permission from thousands of desperate Hefazat-e-Islam activists, almost all of them were madrasa students, started to head towards Chittagong city with different regional weapons. A clash broke down with Police in the entrance of Chittagong city and many were injured including police. Realising the government's zero tolerance against them Hefazat-e-Islam confined themselves in the bottle. Since then until 2013 nothing was heard about that radical group.

#### Resurgence:

Hefazat-e-Islam became talk of the house and real threat of the secularism of Bangladesh in time of the movement of the young generation demanding capital punishment of the crime against the humanity by the Bangladeshi during the liberation war, 1971. Hefazat-e-Islam declared those young bloods demanding the capital punishment of the war criminal as atheist and insisted to protest them. It is worth mentioning that most of the suspect war criminals were a member of another similar radical Islamic religious group Jamat E Islam. Secular blogger and online

activists became the target of Hefazat-e-Islam-e-Islam and a few were killed though they never admit their involvement in any killing. However the non-communal community of Bangladesh started to be concerned of Hefazat-e-Islam-e-Islam since then.

### 13-point Demand Agitation & Muscle Display:

On 06 April 2013, hundreds of thousands people wearing 'Islamic Dress' gathered in a rally lead by Shah Ahmed Shafi the head of Hefazat-e-Islam to present their demand. This was the first national scale movement by the radical group. They declared 13 points charter heading with changing the constitution of Bangladesh by restoring the phrase 'Complete faith and trust in the name of almighty Allah'. Secularism was one of four principles adopted in the constitution of Bangladesh after the liberation war in 1972. Though Bangladesh is a pre-dominated Muslim country 'secularism' was rather than 'Islamic Republic' was adopted in the mother constitution to honour all the martyrs' regardless religion during the liberation war.

Other notable part of the whole 12 points charter is introducing new law with capital punishment for any defamation of Islam, stopping male and female free movement, making Islamic education mandatory from primary to higher level of education, removing all the sculptures and cancelling the women policy which intends to empower the women of Bangladesh.

It was declared by the Islamic radical group Hefazat-e-Islam-e-Islam in that rally that there is no way other than accepting their demands by the government. Shah Ahmed Shafi the supreme leader of the group worded outrageously "Regardless whoever in the state power or wish to form government in future, they must accept our 13 points charter." He also urged to his follower to get ready even to sacrifice their lives for their future programs.

His Fanatic orphan (most of them were teen-age) followers took his evocation as sacred order and did not take long to respond their 'sacred leader'. After series of separate attacks to the non-communal groups, hundreds of thousands young Islamic dressed Muslims flocked together in the centre of Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh on 05 May,2013 to establish their 12 points charter in an rally led by Shah Ahmed Shafi. Eyes were firing, Body language was like ready to die of those Madrasa students attended in that rally. It is estimated that more than 500,000 students and teachers from Madrasa clogged in that instigation and many were waiting in the nearby areas to back up if necessary.

Most of the people of the country thought they would leave the place after the rally until the late evening. Even after the whole day programs there was no sign of leaving them rather their arrogance was peaking with time. The whole country specially the non-communal people stood still in the late evening for something very ominous when Hefazat-e-Islam-e-Islam activists started violent fierce clash by burning 100s of shops in the nearby places.

After a whole day discussion with the Hefazat-e-Islam-e-Islam leader at last the government which was formed by Present ruling party Awamileague came into the realisation that the Islamic radical group is aiming at even change in the state power to establish their demands. The government decided to go in 'hard line' and Police Procession with tear gas and firing started at about 2 a.m. by cutting electricity power. Hundreds including police died though the actual number of death is never known. Hefazat-e-Islam-e-Islam was forced to leave the place. It has been alleged by Hefazat-e-Islam and many Human Rights organisation that thousands of madrasa students died by Police firing. The main reason of not knowing the actual number of death is that most of those died were orphans and they do not have anybody to claim for their death body.

Control or Compromise?

Since 05 January 2005, the leaders and activists of Hefazat started to avoid public appearances for a while. However the non-communal people of Bangladesh got relieved and appropriate step of the then government was appreciated from all the secular activists of the country. But, Alas! The trust and faith to the government of controlling any religious extremism lasted for very short time until it started to be appeared that government compromised with the Hefazat-e-Islam rather controlling them. Now a days it is believed by the non-communal people of Bangladesh that, Hefazat-e-Islam-e-Islam's inactivity was technical rather than incapability and more likely to be an intern negotiation with the government. Some decisions by the government in recent past back that doubt. Actually during the silence period of Hefazat-e-Islam-e-Islam in 2014-2016 before and after General Election of Bangladesh, they were getting more organised a stronger so that they can achieve their demands from the government.

#### First & Firm Strike:

Secularism principle was struck firmly for the first time in many years by a verdict of Supreme Court in March 2016. Though theoretically judicial department is independent than executive department practically it is, as biased as anytime of the history of the country.

In the very beginning of the Bangladeshi Constitution, 1972; secularism was adopted one of the four basic principles. This principle was repealed after 8th amendment of Constitution which was done in 1988 by lieutenant General Hussain Muhammed Ershad by declaring Islam as the state religion in a symbolic bid to win popular support. A petition was filed against the amendment by some of the elite secularists warning that naming Islam state religion would lead the country towards fundamentalism. Apparently their agitation was proved by the later occurrences of Bangladesh. However the petition was ignored for 28 years by the court surprisingly. After forming government by the Awamileague in 2009 with overwhelming majority they made a further amendment in the constitution reaffirming the Islam as religion state with additional term 'Secularism' and 'equal status' of other religion. The wording of the 2011 amendment shows itself how contradictory the wording is. Moreover, the 2011 amendment including Islam as state religion carries much more significance as it has been done by elected government rather than a military government. Actually 1988 an autocrat made decision was legalised in the 2011 amendment of the constitution by the government of a party which was believed to be more likely to uphold the dignity of secularity in Bangladesh. The secular class of the country got absolutely stunned by the decision of the government and a supplementary to its 1988 case was filed in the court. High court then passed an order asking the giver why reaffirming Islam as state religion should not be declared void.

After prolonged waiting, 28 March 2016 was set to hear the petition by High Court. By the time, Bangladeshi politics has changed immensely. In 2014 Awamileague formed government in a non participated election and led them rely on administrative power rather than will of common people. Hefazat-e-Islam-e-Islam knew very well about the weakness of government. They took the chance to implement their agendas using the weakness of the government and sentiment of the fanatic Muslim of the Country. Before the verdict date Hefazat-e-Islam with other Islamic fundamentalist group of Bangladesh started to threat continuously that abolishing Islam as religious state from constitution would bring disaster for a country compromising 90% Muslims.

Threat of the radical Muslim group's worked like tonic. The Court rejected the petition and at last Bangladesh, which established as secular country turned into an Islamic Country declaring as State Religion is Islam' by the verdict of 'biased' court. The most alarming part of that verdict was that it happened during the ruling time by a party which used to be thought as committed to uphold the dignity of Secularism in Bangladesh. The rejection of the petition by the court or in other words making the court to reject it put the government in a favourable

position. It is reported that such a strategy allowed the government to avoid setting out its position, which could have been fraught with political danger.

Going back to the 13 points Charter from Hefazat-e-Islam, the rejection of the case by the Court is the first massive success to attain their Goal. The first point of their charter was to restore the term 'complete faith and trust in the name of almighty Allah'. Upholding Islam state religion does not fully but nearly recognise 1st point of Hefazat-e-Islam's charter. Since bringing public, the 13 points charter in 20013, Hefazat-e-Islam got their first massive success on 2016 within 3 years of time.

Pushing Hard:

This success encouraged them to go further down to achieve their goal. Shah Ahmed Shafi the supreme leader of Hefazat-e-Islam started to be vocal more than ever regarding different contemporary issue of Bangladesh. They started to push harder the government for their fanatic Islamic demands. In late 2015 amid frequent occurrence of the rape in Bangladesh Shah Ahmed Shafi the Ameer of Hefazat-e-Islam opined that 'dresses' of female is the reason for rape. By the term 'dresses'; he pointed that not maintaining the Islamic dress code is the reason of Rape. Instead accusing the rapper, his blaming towards girls for wearing dress accordingly their choice is nothing but justifying rape. His word came like as 'Fatwa'. His hundreds of thousands fanatic young Muslim followers since then, have been carrying the messages through social media and every possible means that if the women of Bangladesh do not follow the Islamic dress code they might have to be victim of rape. It is alleged that a lots of female have been the victim of rape just because not following the Islamic dress code. Very recently a prominent media person of Bangladesh had to apologise public amid extreme threat from radical Muslims of the country for saying "dresses" is not the reason of rape in a television program. Shah Ahmed Shafi further opined the women are nothing but mouth-watering tamarind which means Women have nothing do in the world but satisfying men's physical demand. His every word is being sent through in every single corner of the country and social media is being used for that. As a result, apart from the main cities of the country girls are scared to go for outing with their boyfriends in fear of being harassed or even something worse. Though all these radical activities is visible in the social media and the government has been using ICT act strictly to control any opposite opinion they are more likely to reluctant to take steps against those fanatic Muslims.

The more Hefazat-e-Islam are achieving the more they are getting outrageous to achieve their demands. From 2016 they started demand to remove all the sculptures from the country which is 7<sup>th</sup> of their 13 point demand agitation. In 2017 they went to hard-line to remove statue of lady justice symbolising justice from all from the Supreme Court premises claiming the statue represents idol worship which is forbidden by Islam. They demanded to replace the statue with a gigantic Quran. Hefazat-e-Islam warned they would go for mass movement if the statue remained there. Progressive people of Bangladesh strongly protested against the demand of removing the statue but the government got scared of another demonstration and removed the statue amid Islamist's demand. Removing the lady's justice statue is thought as one of the biggest slaps in the secular characteristic of Bangladesh in time to remember. However this was not the first time a statue has to remove by radical's demand. Numerous numbers of sculptures or artworks either had to remove or vandalised by the Islamic radicals themselves, in Bangladesh claiming existence of idols is against Islamic structures.

From the middle of 2016 Islamic Scholars (led by Hefazat) of Bangladesh started to demand change in the text book of national curriculum by removing the 'atheistic' contents. Changing

the book of national curriculum was the 5<sup>th</sup> demand of Hefazat-e-Islam's 13 charters. When the books were distributed in January 2017, it was appeared that 17 poems and stories, deemed 'atheistic were removed from Bangla book. Some other changes were made as well. On first grade, studying 'o' for 'ol' a type of yam was replaced by 'orna' a scarf which a girl in the starting of her puberty, is insisted to wear by the devoted Muslim parents. Furthermore, in 6th grade a travelogue describing Hindu-Dominated place was replaced as well.

Steeping Next:

The biggest achievement was gained by Hefazat-e-Islam is compelling the government to recognise the degree of Qawmi Madrasha, the ultimate power house of Islamic radicalism in Bangladesh. The decision by the government to recognise Qawmi degree raised many eyebrows in the country as nobody actually knows what the curriculum in those Madrasas is. None of those Madrasas teach Science, literature categorising them to encourage atheism. Only a few numbers of those Madrasas teach Bengali and English in their curriculum.

Demand of recognition of Qwami Madrsa degree came to the force font for the first time in 2006. The then PM, Khaleda Zia, declared on 21 August 2006 that, they decided to recognise Qwami Madrasha degree. This was nothing but a political announcement which was made just 3 months before the General Election of the country. The main target of such a declaration was to be supported by the Islamists of the country during the transitional period.

However, Awamileague instead of BNP formed the government in the next election which was held in 2009 instead of 2006. Madras teacher and other 'Islamic-Scholar' kept pressuring the government for the recognition. In the face of their demand current government initiated steps to reform Qwami Madrasha education system, by forming a commission of 17 members and making a draft policy to improve their education system with inclusion of modules like Bengali, English, Science and then recognising their degree.

A draft was proposed by the commission and was scheduled to be placed in the Cabinet meeting for approval on 28 October 2013 but the ministry stepped back on the face of threat of 'breaking civil war in the country' by Hefazat-e-Islam chief Shah Ahmed Shafi for any attempt of controlling Qwami Madrassa education system.

After 4 years of that threat by Shah Ahmed Shafi a curriculum was revived by a committee led by Shah Ahmed Shafi and PM Sheikh Hasina declared to recognise Qwami degree on April 12, 2017 in a meeting with 350 Qwami Madrasha representative led by Shah Ahmed Shafi.

Conclusion:

After the introduction of 13 Charter by Hefazat-e-Islam in 2013, within 5 years unexpectedly and surprisingly they have managed to establish some of their demands. And the achievement was made during the power of such a political party in Bangladesh that was thought to be more committed than others to uphold the dignity of secularism in the country.

Current Ruling Party who allegedly compromised with Hefazat-e-Islam apparently controlled the radical demands of Hefazat in their first term of power from 2009-2014. But during the second consecutive period of their state power they started to be more amicable to the radical group.

It is thought by the common people of Bangladesh that an uncontested election led Awamileague, present ruling party, to negotiate with Hefazat. Such an approach has brought a disastrous effect by allowing Hefazat-E-Islam to influence in the important policy of the country.



Minority safety has reached in a critical stage in time to remember in the Bangladesh. Many a number of Hindu Families of the country is crossing the border everyday due to continuous systematic oppression. Secularists have been cornered. Bloggers and Writers are being attacked continuously. It is warned by the secular people of Bangladesh that if the Hefazat-E-Islam can't be stopped not they are turning in yet another Islamic Radical Monster in South Asia.

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## Lives of Bangladeshi bloggers in jeopardy: Constant death threats

*Special report By Md Abdun Nafi*



Bangladeshi bloggers today are on the brink of extinction. Although on paper this South Asian nation practices secularism, it is evident that it is actually dominated by Islamic fundamentalism, based on the recent grisly murders of free-thinking bloggers in the country. These constant brutal assaults on bloggers for the past 3 years has left writers,

literary artists and bloggers constantly fearing the worst.

This past 2<sup>nd</sup> June, a list bearing the names of 10 bloggers was published by one '[Ansarullah Bangla Team](#)' on all mainstream news outlets and electronic media. There the organization warned said bloggers 'tread carefully' from now on and that death may soon pay them a visit. These 10 bloggers are – (1) Asif Mohiuddin (Germany) (2) Omi Rahman Pial (Switzerland) (3) Sanyasi ratan (Norway) (4) Omar Faruque Lux (Germany) (5) Parvej Alam (Bangladesh) (6) Syed Sunvy Anick Hossain (London) (7) Nur Nabi Dulal (Germany) (8) Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury (London) (9) Shamima Mitu (Bangladesh) (10) Ananya Azad (Germany)

It is important to mention that, not all of these 10 names reside in Bangladesh. Instead, they are scattered about in different corners of the world.

In 2004, whilst exiting the Bangla academy book fair, Dr. Humayun Azad, infamous in Bangladesh

for perceptions in serious social media attacks on fundamentalists. He was hacked repeatedly with sharp weapons. Later an organization calling themselves the Jamaitul Mujahidin claimed responsibility for that attack on Dr. Azad. Nearly a decade later after that incident, on December 2012, atheist blogger Asif Mohiuddin was hacked with sharp weapons as well, a few months after which saw a member of the Bangladesh Gonojagoron Moncho and atheist blogger Rajib Haider aka "Thaba Baba" hacked to death by terrorists.



Later on, another Islamic fundamentalist group calling themselves the "Ansarullah Bangla Team" claimed full responsibility for the attack. Given the circumstances, the government failed to react quickly to tackle and subside these atrocities, which paved the way for the further murders of 4 more atheist bloggers. They are as follows, [Doctor Abhijit Rai](#), Washiqur Babu, Ananta Bijoy Das, Niloy Nil. Dr. Abhijit Rai, who was an American citizen as well, was killed by fundamentalists during his visit to Bangladesh with the intention of publishing a book he wrote. His wife Rafida Bonna who was with him that day was gravely injured.

It took only till the month of October (2015) to kill Dr. Abhijit Rai's publisher, Mr. Faisal Arefin Dipon whose death was synonymous with that of another publisher Mr. Rashid Tutul, who died on the same day. The South Asian Al-Qaeda conducted a press release saying that he committed a crime when he published Dr. Abhijit Rai's book, and as such, these are the consequences.

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[Political Manhunt: Alongkarpur Local Wanted By RAB For 'Anti-Government' Activities](#)



*“There is no freedom in this country. It is barbaric to invade and assault someone’s home just because of the way he expresses himself.”* These are comments made by a spokesperson (who wishes to remain unnamed) of the Upazilla BNP headquarters, and they come after another raid last night involving the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) no less.

In what was a confusing, but uneasy few hours for the residents of Alongkarpur village, Baliakandi, Rajbari, a team dispatched by the local RAB headquarters shut down the whole area denying access in our out. Their objective was to locate one Md Sabbir Hossain, a local, whom they accuse of “actively partaking in anti-government activities”.

Mr Hossain, son of Moslem Uddin Biswas (a long time local of Alongkarpur) has been accused of producing deceptive and hostile content towards the current regime and publishing them across several media platforms including popular social media outlets. According to local sources, Mr Hossain is an active supporter of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). He apparently has also dabbled in politics quite early in his life, namely as one of the leaders of the Monsur Ali degree College Chatradal. Mr Hossain currently resides in the United Kingdom.

At around 12 am on Friday night after the locking Alongkarpur down, the RAB team proceeded to locate Mr Hossain’s family home, before infiltrating it and staying there for a good few hours. There are rumours that the RAB team engaging in destruction of valuables inside Mr Hossain’s home, but we were unable to confirm that for Mr Hossain’s family refused to speak to journalists following the incident. We were told Mr Hossain’s father is nowhere to be found in the immediate aftermath of the raid, but the rest of his family are fine for now. The whole ordeal though has made for a tense atmosphere inside Alangkarpur and it is likely to be that way for the next few days.

We approached the Rajbari RAB headquarters for comments and one of their spokespersons offered, *“We cannot say much, for we are yet to concluded preliminary investigations on it. We are carefully considering all the information available to us, with regards to any possible conspiracy against our government”*. We were told to vacate the premises immediately afterwards.

Anup Roy/56AR/23/Delhi

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## UK Awami League demonstrates in London, demands Tarique's extradition

A day after Sheikh Hasina said her government is trying to negotiate the extradition of Tarique Rahman, the UK chapter of the Awami League has demanded that the top BNP leader be sent back to Bangladesh to face justice.

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They staged a demonstration in front of the British Parliament at London's Westminster on Wednesday to put pressure on Prime Minister Theresa May's government.



The protest was also meant to counter demonstrations by BNP activists in London on the same day as Prime Minister Hasina is attending the Commonwealth summit. Now heading the BNP from exile, Tarique is convicted of money laundering and corruption in two separate cases.

He is also being tried in many other cases, including one on charges of attempted assassination of Hasina.



The prime minister on Tuesday said they were trying to get the British government to extradite the BNP leader from London. "The UK is a free country, anybody can take shelter, refuge...that's true. The crime that the person committed... and already he is convicted," Hasina said.

"And I don't understand how UK enjoys keeping a convicted person," she had remarked.

Hasina also said her government was "eager" to take Tarique back.



"He should face the court," she said. "Well, we are talking to the British government about it and definitely one day we will take him back," she added. BNP Senior Vice-Chairman Tarique, in London for a decade, is standing in for his mother Khaleda Zia who was jailed for five years for corruption on Feb 8.

He has also been sentenced to 10 years in prison in the same case. He had earlier got a prison term

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