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# Shahbag protesters versus the Butcher of Mirpur

TAHMIMA ANAM

It all began with a victory sign. When Abdul Quader Mollah, assistant secretary-general of Bangladesh's Jamaat-e-Islami party, emerged from the Supreme Court on the afternoon of Tuesday February 4, he turned to the press waiting outside, smiled, and made a victory sign. An odd reaction for a man just sentenced to life in prison.

Mollah smiled because for him, a man convicted of beheading a poet, raping an 11-year-old girl and shooting 344 people during the 1971 Bangladesh War of Independence -- charges that have earned him the nickname the Butcher of Mirpur -- the life sentence came as a surprise. Earlier this month, a fellow accused, Abul Kalam Azad, who is reputed to have fled to Pakistan, was sentenced to death in absentia.

When Mollah emerged from the courthouse, a group of online activists and bloggers assembled to protest against the verdict, demanding that Mollah, like Azad, be given the death sentence. They set up camp in Shahbagh, an intersection at the heart of Dhaka, near the university campus, and staged a small sit-in. They collected a few donations and ordered *khichuri* (a mixture of rice and lentils) to keep them going through the night. Word spread on Facebook and Twitter. The next day, a few news channels began covering their protest. By the end of the week, they had managed to put together the biggest mass demonstration the country has seen in 20 years.

The movement -- centred around Shahbag, which some have renamed *Projonmo Chottor* (New Generation Roundabout) -- shows no sign of abating. It reached its peak on Friday, when the organisers called a grand rally. Numbers vary, but are estimated to have been anywhere from 100,000 to 500,000. Traffic in the city, already notoriously slow, ground to a halt. Because it was a weekend, many people brought their children, their faces painted in the red and green of the

Bangladeshi flag. The mood was like that of a fairground, with vendors selling fried snacks and spicy puffed rice; small groups within the throng sat in circles, singing, reciting poems and playing guitars. A tailor set up his sewing machine, making replicas of the national flag for people to wear around their heads. A play was staged at one end of the roundabout.

For people like me who are opposed to capital punishment, Shahbagh has posed an uncomfortable question: can a movement that began with a call for the death penalty, with cries of *Fashi Chai! Fashi Chai!* (Let him hang!), go beyond a simple baying for blood?

But the call for Mollah's death is about more than revenge. He committed his crimes during Bangladesh's nine-month struggle for independence from Pakistan in 1971. Mollah and the 11 others who stand trial with him -- 10 of whom are members of Jamaat-e-Islami -- are accused of collaborating in war crimes with the Pakistani army. Between March and December of that year, the Pakistani army unleashed a campaign of mass murder against Bangladeshi civilians. War crimes were ubiquitous in 1971 -- as is evidenced by the discovery of mass graves throughout the country, Pakistani documents detailing operations and massacres, hit-lists of local collaborators, journalists' reports, photographs and video footage, and, most importantly, the eyewitness accounts of the survivors.

Since Bangladesh's independence, the state had done little to bring people such as Mollah to justice. The erasure of the war began in 1972 with the granting of amnesty

to the Pakistani army officers who led the killings. During the decades of political turmoil that followed in Bangladesh, the war, and its crimes, were buried, while one regime after another contributed to the rehabilitation of the Jamaat party. Internationally, charges of genocide were never formally brought to the United Nations. The world quickly forgot the Bangladesh war.

That is why Mollah flashed his victory sign outside the courthouse. Because, for the first 40 years of independent Bangladesh, no government had sought to

campaign included a promise to set up a tribunal to prosecute those who had committed war crimes in 1971. The International Crimes Tribunal was set up in 2010. Since then, the court has been gathering evidence and hearing testimonies against the accused.

Because the trial has been so long in the making, the verdicts are watched by millions of people waiting anxiously to see if their families will finally get justice. And for them, after 42 years, a life sentence for a man convicted of mass murder, arson and rape was not punishment enough.

In addition to the perceived inadequacy of the sentence is an abiding anxiety about the way it will be carried out. It is ingrained in the public imagination that justice always takes second place to political expediency. Mollah knows that if his party or its allies were to come to power again, he would almost certainly be freed. That is why the protesters at Shahbagh are calling for his death: it is the only way they can be sure the episode will come to an end.

In Shahbagh, the organisers have refused to allow political parties to take the stage. Instead, freedom fighters and activists are invited to speak. Zafar Iqbal, a beloved children's writer and columnist, arrived on stage mid-afternoon on Friday. The first thing he did was ask for the crowd's forgiveness. "I have complained about your generation, saying that all you do is go on the internet and check your Facebook. I said that you would never come on to the streets. I am so happy to have been proven wrong today." A few days later, the Bangladesh cricket team turned up to show

their support. With the chanting and singing spreading across the grounds, the protesters of Shahbagh often resemble a jubilant flash-mob.

Shahbagh is unique for Bangladesh on two important fronts. First is the prevalence and visibility of women, who are among the core organisers. Unlike in many public spaces in Bangladesh, women have been highly visible. They frequently take the microphone to lead the crowd in chanting. Second is the movement's use of social networking on Facebook and Twitter, and dependence on the 24-hour satellite news channels that have been covering the protest since the first day.

In the days leading up to the Mollah verdict, the Jamaat party called a succession of *hartals* (strikes), in an attempt to bring the country to a standstill. Activists burned cars and clashed with police. Four innocent people died in the crossfire. Now the Shahbagh demonstrators are calling for an end to Jamaat and its student wing, Shibir. Though the Jamaat party only won two out of 300 seats in the last election, their presence as a powerful third party in politics has remained unquestioned -- until now. There is a sense of a shifting political landscape: the people keeping vigil at Shahbagh are young, possibly undecided voters who are looking for leaders. Who knows what this means for the old guard?

The next few weeks will be crucial for the Shahbagh movement. There is fear, and there is hope. Fear that the protest will be co-opted by greater political forces; that violence will erupt and women will no longer be safe; that the cries for Mollah's hanging will overpower all other forms of resistance, and anyone who disagrees will be branded a traitor. But there is hope, too: that the protest will become a movement for a fair trial, and for a final, definitive and unbiased account of what happened in 1971; for the strengthening of secular, progressive politics in Bangladesh.

The writer is author of *The Good Muslim* and winner of the Commonwealth Award for Best First Book. (This article appeared in *The Guardian* on February 13)



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try him; because he, along with the rest of his party, were courted by politicians at home and abroad. His fellow party leaders were elected to parliament and made ministers. None of them ever thought they would appear in court. One of Mollah's fellow accused is rumoured to have regularly announced in public: "I am a *Razakar!*" (war criminal).

The tide finally turned in 2008, when the Awami League (the party whose then leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, had led the independence movement) won a landslide victory at the general election. The

## The youth and their demand

SAEED KHAN

THE youth who have grown up since 1990 seem to be the leading actors and participants in the programme that started from the Shahbagh crossroads and has now spread all over Bangladesh. The fact that it was started and is being carried on mostly by a generation that came into consciousness after 1990 is significant. Unlike the previous generations who were subject to biased propaganda and information, this generation has had more access to information and freedom to share it, and to ascertain the facts from the different points of view.

Some people say that the young should raise their voice against rampant corruption and other deficiencies in governance instead of fixating on an issue that is 41 years old and causes considerable discomfort among people of a certain bias. They miss the whole point of this spark. The reason that the youth have galvanised around the issue of trial of war criminals is directly related to addressing the issues of corruption and immunity for criminals in our society.

The reason they have singled out this issue to pursue is that when they took in all the information from the last 41 years regarding Bangladesh they realised that the whole culture of immunity for criminals began with the release and establishment of the collaborators. They have rightly pinpointed the fact that once society saw that the people who openly committed criminal acts against the whole nation were not only let off the hook but were also rewarded with power over the same nation that fought to get rid of them has traumatised the nation into a cynical state where justice is no more. This, the youth of today see as the starting point of the slippery slope of decay that has so far plagued the nation. As time, technology and economy have now presented them an opportunity to correct the wrong and thus bring an end to the culture of immunity for criminals, they have started their work.

Of course, the two very powerful political parties of Bangladesh will try to use this to their advantage. And, unfortunately, they might succeed for the short term. Awami League has an upper hand in it as it was the leader of the Bangladesh freedom struggle and was at the receiving end of the atrocities committed by the collaborators in 1971; even though it had in the recent past made certain political alliances for electoral gain.

On the other hand, the BNP as a party started with a group of NAP supporters who were at first Maoists and then turned to quasi-Islamic socialists, and everyone else in between who stood to gain from opposing Awami League -- chief among them being the collaborators who were banned or banished from this country. That during the time of the BNP's founder the collaborators were not only let off the hook but also established in society aroused the current generation, who have a clearer vision unclouded by any personal affiliations.

On top of that, the association of different kinds

WAMEQ RAZA

I'm a non-resident Bangladeshi, and ever since I heard of the Shahbagh movement I longed to be there with those at ground zero with every fibre of my being. I was born in the '80s, and many tagged our generation with terms such as apathetic, nonchalant, self-serving/absorbed, Facebook clickers and bloggers. Most of us were in fact



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all those things, until now.

Our generation probably became politically cognisant around the mid-90s, during our early teens. Every time we heard the phrase "*jonogon chay*" spewing out of our politicians' mouths to justify one more egregious thing they did or were about to do, we thought to ourselves, who in the world is this *janagan* they speak of, and ultimately chalked it off as just another of the silly things they usually say.

But around a decade ago, we evolved.

Suddenly, being made fools of in such a grand scheme in the name of democracy took a very real meaning for us. We realised that problems that plague our society really do affect us directly. Many became vocal critics and thus the bloggers and Facebookers were born. The art of taking to the streets for righteous protests seemed to have taken on a foul meaning, as ingloriously exemplified by rivaling factions of political student wings

about tenders and whatnot. So we protested online. As politically incorrect as it may be, many of my peers along with myself were quite excited during the tenure of the caretaker government after the past BNP tenure. Oh how we gleefully watched as corruption was brought down to its knees, at least in the beginning. Alas, those days passed with new promises, the crown jewel being the trial of the alleged war criminals. Mind you, the word alleged is used in the loosest conceivable sense imaginable. This was one of the fundamental reasons why there was such a high turnover of young voters bringing AL to power.

Four years had gone by and my optimism turned sour. Sagar and Runi were brutally murdered in front of their young child; our honourable ministers told us, essentially, to get over ourselves about the border killings; Biswajit was just another well publicised tragedy, but at the end of the day, merely another nail in the coffin. We were angry, but hadn't yet reached the tipping point. It wouldn't be wrong to agree with the notion that

our generation had never actually owned up to or participated in anything real when it comes to our motherland.

But the political bigwigs of our time made the grave error of mistaking this dormancy with complacency. Patriotism runs as deeply within our blood as it does in every citizen of this country of ours. To the politicians on all sides of the fence, we say distortion of history is no longer an option. Ladies and gentlemen, we have reached our destination: the tipping point. President Bush put it eloquently: "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me." No longer will we be made fools of, or have our intelligence insulted with the *janagan* chay talk.

The distortion of history must be remedied from the beginning, and only then can we begin to heal as a nation and purge the deeply embedded rot. This is where we make our stand. Our demands for justice must be met, starting with the proper trial of the war criminals. My friends who are at ground zero, though I long to be standing next to you physically, every Bangali all across the globe including myself is there spiritually. You carry on this noble undertaking with integrity and determination. But let not this achievement be the end of your zeal. We must surge ahead and not stop until all wrongs have been righted. As Tirtho Mahmud (*The Daily Star* Feb 11) so eloquently put it, challenging the status-quo will not be a walk in the park as there are too many powerful forces invested in keeping it the way it is. To strive for excellence, we must persevere determinedly and united, and then and only then, will we succeed. We are here to take back what is rightfully ours to own, our country and our future.

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