

THE SOVEREIGN TERROR



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POLITICAL events often fade away without leaving immediately palpable effects. Loud as their arrivals are, most political events tend to disappear much like a whimper. The Shahbag movement's arrival was rather thunderous. It developed with unprecedented momentum, intensifying as it did older and newer forms of political antagonism. Following a dramatic face-off with the Islamists gathered under the banner of Hefazat-e-Islam, it was ended rather unceremoniously. The sudden political energy that the movement brought forth might seem to have dissipated after the fulfillment of its immediate demands. But the distance of a couple of years tells us something else: the event of Shahbag—and its reactions—has altered the contours of our political landscape. If we have forgotten it, the almost ritualistic murder of another blogger has reminded us of it yet again. While the act of killing resonates with the nihilistic terror that religious extremism is inflicting upon in various parts of the world (and no doubt it derives inspiration from those practices), it has a very specific local history. It lies in the nature of encounter that the Shahbag movement had with its opposition. The Hefazat reaction could not quite oppose Shahbag in the latter's own terms. That is, it could not fault Shahbag for mobilising populist-nationalist discourses. What Hefazat adopted instead was the roundabout strategy of constructing Shahbag as an assemblage of "atheistic" forces. The reaction to Shahbag

thus became displaced and their focus shifted to the more or less isolated individuals who were involved in a rather peculiar form of online propagating and expounding of literature critical of religion since the emergence of blogosphere in Bangladesh. Regardless of the specific identity of the militant group(s) involved in those political murders, the act itself is in direct continuity with the paradigm that emerged through the Shahbag's eventful encounter with the Hefazat. The very institutional structure of Bangladesh, much like many other countries of the Global South, exhibits responsiveness to political demands as long as there are people taking the street on behalf of those demands. The reason that the BNP failed so miserably to force the regime to conduct an election under the conditions it finds agreeable has to do with its impotency to mobilise crowd on the streets, however partisan the nature of that crowd might have been. In any case, returning to the present subject, there is no significant constituency to which one can trace back the targeted bloggers. They appear to be a group without the aegis of a distinct public. Apart from the routinised international condemnations that hold little sway over the policies of the regime and the rather faint internal pressure for subjecting the perpetrators to legal measures, there is no real political pressure on the government. Given the nature of this state, such a pressure can only come from the street and the targeted bloggers lack that political capacity to summon a public on the street. The party of terror who is committing these crimes, on

the other hand, is terroristic in a resolute sense: they show no desire to make their contentions public, while opting for the secret strategy of murdering targeted individuals in private spaces with the aim of making a public statement. They have entitled themselves with the primordial sovereign right: the power to choose whom they will let live and whom they will not. Interpreted along this way, there is no doubt that the extremist violence stands as a profound threat to the polity (and not just to the handful of bloggers) because of its very nature, regardless of the question regarding their organisational power. One of the curious features of the Shahbag movement was its ambivalent relationship with the state. At the initial phase, when the movement's nationalistic zeal was unperturbed by the outlandish accusations propagated by its opposition, the AL government did all it could to appropriate it. When the Hefazat discourse arose, the government quickly distanced itself from the Shahbag. Indeed, the government conceded

demands to both the Shahbag and Hefazat for reasons that owe both to political pressure and their own expediency. This practice continues up until today. As the victims' identities have become established as "atheist bloggers," the government appears to be all too eager to distance themselves from the victims. Worse still, given the political structure that facilitates an identity between the state (not only government) and the ruling party, the police and other authorities have shown little interest in fulfilling their duties of bringing the perpetrators to justice. Much like the end days of the Shahbag, the government seems to act on the hunch that they have less to gain from this conflict and more to lose (in case they too are being portrayed as anti-religious). The regime appears to be careless enough to ignore the fact that these murders are out-and-out political acts, and precisely for that reason, the state has a special responsibility to address this sovereign terror with utmost priority. While the government must be severely criticised for its obvious inability to crackdown on the killers, there is no space for indulging in the argument that the militants are no force on their own. The rightful criticism of the government must be accompanied by an equal awareness about the extraordinary threat that this militant group poses to the core of whatever democratic tradition is left in the

embattled polity. Given the political root of militants and the sovereign manner in which they are spreading their terror, one cannot expect that sheer law and order initiatives will wipe them out. There has to be a public dimension to resistance, and that will not arise unless we move beyond the banalities of conspiracy theories that are increasingly getting by as political analysis. Those who reject this party of terror—and those who have any minimal commitment to democratic ethos are surely unified in their denunciation—must not underestimate the danger at stake. To be specific, they should not limit themselves to the mere condemnation of a government that shows no sign whatsoever of prioritising its political duties over myopic self-interests. These ritualistic murders of the bloggers signify, if anything, the insidious violence that erupts when such party of terror endows itself with almost sovereign rights to choose their victims. The nature of the crime makes it a threat to the very body of the polity. This is what makes it a matter of imminent importance to resist the present terror also at the level of public persuasion and mobilisation. Needless to say, even the best of the states cannot ensure it. It is something that the concerned citizens must do for themselves. The writer is a PhD student of political theory at the University of Chicago.

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