

Bangladeshi government executes two opposition leaders

By Sarath Kumara
23 November 2015

Thousands of extra police and paramilitary border guards have been deployed across Bangladesh to suppress possible strikes, protests and wider unrest following Sunday's execution of two prominent opposition politicians for alleged war crimes committed during the 1971 secessionist struggle against Pakistan.

The ruling Awami League-led coalition of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina proceeded with the hangings of a senior Bangladesh National Party (BNP) leader, Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury, and the Islamist Jamaat e Islami (JeI) party general secretary, Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid, despite widespread objections to the flawed character of their convictions.

Over the past five years, Hasina's government has revived the 1971 charges against the BNP and its right-wing JeI allies as a means of diverting mounting working class and student discontent produced by the country's sweatshop labour conditions and the imposition of International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures.

Provocatively, Awami League supporters greeted the executions—carried out at Dhaka's Central Prison shortly before 1 a.m. on Sunday—by holding street parties and distributing sweets to children. The BNP accused Hasina of presiding over a politically-motivated killing, which was carried out only hours after the BNP's leader, Khaleda Zia, returned from a lengthy stay in London.

Convicted two years ago, Chowdhury and Mujahid appealed unsuccessfully to the Bangladesh Supreme Court against the capital punishment verdict imposed by country's so-called International Crimes Tribunal (ICT). In 2010, Hasina resurrected this tribunal, which had been short-lived when first set up in 1974, to consider allegations of abuses committed during the

1971 war.

Since 2010, 18 people have been convicted, but only two had been sent to the gallows until Sunday, both from JeI. Chowdhury, 66, a senior figure in the BNP, was the first to be executed from that party, the Awami League's main rival.

Mujahid was charged with leading a death squad responsible for killing intellectuals in 1971, while Chowdhury was convicted of collaborating with the Pakistani army's violence during that period. The Awami League claims that three million perished in the Pakistani army's ruthless efforts to crush the 1971 insurrection in East Pakistan, which became Bangladesh. Independent estimates put the number of deaths at between 300,000 and 700,000.

JeI and other Islamic groups were responsible for atrocities, but Hasina and her supporters clamoured for the barbaric death sentences in order to stir up reactionary nationalist sentiment as a means of derailing social and class tensions. She defied criticism by Amnesty International and other Western human rights groups, which accused the government of conducting flawed prosecutions as a political witch-hunt.

To undermine opposition in the days leading up to the executions, the government imposed social media bans. Initially, the entire Internet was blocked for 90 minutes and bans continue on numbers of sites.

Telecommunications Minister Tarana Halim said last Wednesday the ban was imposed “in the interest of national security.” Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu declared: “Facebook Messenger, Viber and WhatsApp have been temporarily blocked, as they are being used for making inciting remarks, issuing death threats, and carrying out violent acts.”

Hasina cancelled two official trips abroad—a visit to

Malta for the British Commonwealth heads of government meeting on November 24–25 and to Paris for the climate summit on November 30. Her office gave no specific reasons but diplomatic sources told the media there were concerns about the domestic political situation.

The right-wing opposition BNP is currently not represented in parliament after boycotting the 2014 general election. Earlier this year, it called protests that were subjected to bloody repression by the government.

Social tensions are rising. Several months ago, protests by university students erupted after the government's 2015–16 budget slapped a 7.5 percent VAT on tuition fees, affecting about 450,000 students.

Despite government claims of economic “progress,” more than a quarter of Bangladesh's 160 million people live below the poverty line. The economy is heavily dependent on the garment industry, which is worth \$25 billion in annual exports and employs at least four million low-paid workers,

The Awami League and the BNP represent rival factions of the Bangladesh ruling class whose bitter antagonism is being deepened by the global slump and growing geo-political tensions throughout Asia. Both parties are deeply hostile to the working class and rural masses and have used police-state measures to suppress opposition and resistance to their anti-working class policies.

The Awami League, which was installed in power in newly-independent Bangladesh in 1972 as a result of India's military intervention, accuses the BNP and other opposition parties of being backed by Pakistan. The BNP alleges that the Awami League is doing India's bidding.

Adding to the tensions, Islamist groups have conducted a spate of attacks, killing foreigners and others. Earlier this month, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), claimed responsibility for the shooting of an Italian doctor and a Christian missionary, saying it was their fifth attack in Bangladesh.

Hasina and her government have denied the existence of ISIS in Bangladesh, and blamed the BNP for the attacks, using them as a pretext to step up the Awami League's authoritarian methods.

The deepening instability in Bangladesh has fuelled concerns by the US and its allies. Washington recently

updated its travel warning for Bangladesh, stating that it was not safe for the foreigners because of the killings by Islamic fundamentalists. Britain and Australia also issued travel warnings.

Last Friday, Stephen J. Rapp, a former American ambassador who led the US State Department's Office of Global Criminal Justice, called Chowdhury's prosecution “particularly disturbing” because he was not allowed to call witnesses who could testify that he left Bangladesh in March 1971, and was therefore not in the country at the time of the crimes he was accused of committing.

Leaders of the US House Foreign Affairs Committee, in a letter issued last week, described the war crimes tribunal as “very flawed” and a means of political retribution. They further voiced concern that “democratic space is shrinking” in Bangladesh amid “a growing climate of violence, fear and self-censorship.”

Washington's interest is not in democracy in Bangladesh but that the government's crackdown could destabilise the strategically-located country, which the Obama administration has been seeking to incorporate into its “pivot to Asia” directed against China.

Earlier this year, the Bangladesh government acknowledged pressure from the US and India to halt Chinese investment in the country's ports. But China is Bangladesh's largest trading partner, and the government is desperate for Chinese investment to offset declining export revenue and foreign aid pledges.

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