Words and violence: militant Islamist attacks on bloggers in Bangladesh and the UK

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Introduction

From 2013, secular and human rights bloggers and writers in Bangladesh were systematically targeted by groups associated with Al Qaeda or Islamic State for horrific killings, attacks, and sustained harassment. At least twelve writers were killed in Bangladesh during 2013–18 and several other murders were attempted. Numerous secular, gay, and women's rights activists in Bangladesh or in the Bangladeshi diaspora were threatened. The killings were linked to Al Qaeda, Islamic State and other salafi-jihadi groups. In parallel, there were vociferous ideological campaigns by the Jamaat-e Islami and the Hefazat-e Islam in Bangladesh and internationally. These activities were directed at secular bloggers and activists living in Bangladesh, the UK, north America, Europe and South Asia (Roy 2015; Graham-Harrison and Hammadi 2016; Quadir 2016; Daily Dhaka Times 2015; Hammer 2015; Anand and Manik 2016). In previous decades, many Bangladeshi writers had faced threats from political Islamists, including Taslima Nasreen, who had to flee the country in 1994, and the academic Humayun Azad, who was severely attacked by the Jamiatul Mujahideen in 2004. The ferocity of the more recent murders followed a different pattern, though one strikingly similar to the way violent Hindutva (Hindu far-right) groups had targeted and killed several humanist and secularist writers in India from 2013–2017 (Faleiro 2015).

Conceptual issues

The brutal attacks on the bloggers reveal several national and international political processes that are explored below. The attacks on the bloggers occurred during a harrowing period of wider political violence in Bangladesh enacted by political-religious movements, armed groups, and the 'secular' state. Within this context, the bloggers were isolated as outside the field of legitimate politics because of the words they wrote. The horror and complexity of the situation in which many of the bloggers found themselves raises multiple theoretical issues that inform this article. The events demonstrate longstanding political conflicts about the meanings of 'secularism' in Bangladesh and its distance or otherwise from political religion. Within UK Bangladeshi communities, these same conflicts complicate the politics of antiracism and multiculturalism, as they do many academic discussions about ethnicity, secularity, minority religion and anti-Muslim hatred (Eade and Garbin 2006). Key to the events were transformations in political communication

engendered by social media (Nagle 2017), as well as how – and against whom – online political 'toxicity' translates into murder and violence 'in real life'. If social media has transformed the nature of political communication (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018; Gerbaudo 2018), the events exemplify some of this transformation. This includes the severe polarization within many civil societies such that a relatively innocuous Facebook post results in a person being killed in a cruel, visceral public execution. Social media communication is often highly abrasive, and it is no longer unexpected that 'shaming', death threats, threats of serious violence and toxic abuse can be received routinely following accusations of 'hurt' and 'offence' that accompany the expression of alternative opinions. Yet, only for some groups does this translate into brutal killings. The murders were public, brutal and 'exemplary'. They were acts of political intimidation that were intended to instil considerable fear, and create a political optics of fear, to prevent others from writing. The generation of fear, initially on social media and then through killing, illustrates the importance of fear as a political disposition (Robin 2004; Özsoy 2015), and thus the importance of 'negative' emotions for politics. The events also demonstrate how self-authorised political violence, including assassinations and martial executions, escape central authority but are instead the product of sparse, distributed networks with small, self-selecting memberships, loose coordination, and highly autonomous actions that are effective at international scales (Roy 2006; Sageman 2008). In the examples discussed below, a small self-enrolling self-directing terrorist group undertook brutal acts for which another independent entity (Al Qaeda) claimed responsibility, thus re-granting the authority to kill others. Some groups emerged as groups precisely to execute those whose words they disapproved.

Multiple institutions, secular and religious, framed the bloggers as outside the boundaries of social and political acceptability and as having brought their fate upon themselves. A formally democratic secular state can work in consonance with authoritarian religious movements to exclude a group from the sphere of legitimate political expression and isolate it such that it becomes extremely vulnerable to being killed by those who object to its existence. The effect is the sanctioning of killings outside of sovereign structures that are empowered to decide who is disposable (Mbembé 2003; Agamben 1998). Despite great divides that separate liberal democracy from secular authoritarianism, and the latter from religious absolutism, some groups are made 'dispensable' for reasons of secular political expediency and religious dogmatism. The situation of the secular Bangladeshi bloggers also represents a deeper form of political abandonment that was reproduced across different planes of social action and at different geographical scales. While all the murders occurred in Bangladesh, various 'kill lists' named Bangladeshis living across the world. Brutal killings in Bangladesh were claimed by Al Qaeda and planned by an independent group led by a British citizen. Threats made in Bangladesh were amplified by followers of a mosque in east London. A common reaction of the police services in two very different countries was: stop writing. The 'politics of scale' (Cidell 2006) thus becomes important in the strikingly homologous political responses in these two countries, ones that reduced the spaces for political secularity.

Methodological note

This sensitive qualitative research was subject to a range of ethical considerations. Several interviewees were on the Ansarullah Bangla Team's (ABT) global 'kill list' and all interviewees had received serious threats. During the fieldwork period, several interviewees continued to receive online threats and one interviewee was physically attacked. The ongoing safety of the interviewees was therefore a priority. Face-to-face depth interviews in secure venues in London were conducted during 2017 with nine largely UK-based bloggers, and a further interview was undertaken by Skype. Three women and seven men were interviewed, six in July 2017 and four in August 2017. The majority had been brought up in Muslim religious traditions. Seven of the interviewees were working in professional occupations. Most face-to-face interviews were recorded in private enclosed university premises, though some were undertaken in quiet public venues well away from the person's residential location. A further discussion took place in July 2017 at a London public venue with a young woman blogger who had featured on 'hitlists' in Bangladesh. With one exception, interviewees requested complete anonymity, though it was decided to anonymize all interviews. Several other bloggers and activists were approached for interview but declined. A separate informal meeting was also arranged in March 2019 with a group of six young bloggers and activists (four women and two men) who had faced threats in the UK. Of these, two had been interviewed previously. Observation research was undertaken at two Bangladeshi community events in Tower Hamlets to mobilize community support for bloggers facing serious threats (April 2017 and June 2018, with approximately 60 and 30 attendees respectively). The author spoke at both events on the situation that bloggers faced. Discussions with four key informants were undertaken in the period 2017–2019. Most interviews were conducted in English, but a translator assisted with Bengali language interviews. The interviews were one to three hours in length.

The violence and its context

The attacks on secular bloggers in Bangladesh occurred against a complex political history. Following the end of military dictatorship from 1991, patronage-based electoral politics has dominated Bangladesh's political landscape, the latter characterized by protracted, often violent conflicts between the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Awami League over 'power sharing and access to resources' (Siddiqi 2011), with the political Islamist Jamaat-e Islami being a key BNP ally in the recent period (on political Islam in Bangladesh, see Riaz 2004, 2008; Islam 2015; Allchin 2019). Claims over who 'owns' authentic nationalism and the war of liberation, including the political memory of the 1971 genocide, characterize dominant forms of political discourse. The Awami League, which fought for independence from Pakistan, is said to claim the mantle of secular Bengali nationalism, one ostensibly amenable to Bengali (including Hindu influenced) culture, with its opponents typically branded as anti-national, anti-secular and pro-Pakistani. The BNP, conversely, furthers an Islamically-oriented Bangladeshi, rather than Bengali, nationalism, its opponents typically branded as anti-Islamic, pro-India and pro-Hindu (ibid). However, despite its formally secular orientation, the Awami

League has formed key alliances with authoritarian religious movements since Independence. The political style of its leader, Sheikh Hasina, includes the public demonstration of religious devotion and the unequivocal disavowal of any criticism of religion (Interview 3). It has even been argued that the two main political parties do not represent a division between Awami 'secular' and BNP 'religious' orientations, but represent variants of political Islam (Hasan 2020).

In 2009, the Awami League government, which had won the general elections the previous year as part of the Grand Alliance, initiated the International Crimes Tribunal for Bangladesh (ICT-Bangladesh). The war crimes tribunal was to investigate and bring to trial Bangladeshis who were involved with the Pakistan Army in the 1971 genocide that targeted Bangladeshi nationalists. Most academic estimates usually state a figure of between 300,000 and 3 million Bangladeshis who died during the genocide, most of them killed by the Pakistan Army and its allied Islamist militia, such as the Razakars. Several hundred thousand women were raped during the violence. The genocide targeted the Hindu population, supporters of the Awami League, the police and armed forces, intellectuals, journalists, teachers, students and other professionals (Riaz 2004; Umar 2004; Tripathi 2016; Mookherjee 2015). Despite the relative international neglect of the 1971 genocide, it remains alongside Cambodia from 1975, Yugoslavia from 1992, Rwanda in 1994, among others, one of the world's major post-Second World War mass atrocities. The memory of the genocide and the demand for the perpetrators to be brought to justice have been major features of politics in Bangladesh and the diaspora. Most of the interviewees described horrific stories of the genocide and its continuing relevance in their lives.

> My mother's family had to flee to India [and] took refuge there. For nine months, they stayed there. Their houses were burnt. Mum was a little girl then and she lost one of her siblings in the refugee camp … My grandfather was a teacher and [he] could not stay in the house … They came to our house looking for him, and they took my grandma [and] tortured her on the way [to the] camp … They burnt our home … we lost our land, our houses were looted, my grandfather's best friend was killed. Those were the stories that I heard [and] that stayed in my mind. (Interview 1)

Despite demands in the intervening four decades, relatively little concerted effort was made to charge perpetrators until the ICT-Bangladesh. Those brought to trial were largely key figures in Islamist militia linked to the Jamaat-e Islami political party and several were senior members in the opposing BNP-Jamaat-e Islami alliance that had lost the 2008 election. Abdul Quader Mollah, a Jamaat-e Islami politician and leader in the Razakar militia during the genocide, was charged with the murder of several hundred civilians as well as rape and arson. Delwar Hossein Sayeedi, a revered Jamaat-e Islami politician and Razakar organizer, was charged with numerous crimes, including murder, rape and arson. Sayeedi had been a regular

speaker at events in Britain at the invitation of the UK Jamaat-e Islami. Chowdhary Mueenuddin, a highly influential figure in UK government multicultural and interfaith initiatives, a founder of the Jamaat-e Islami influenced East London Mosque in Whitechapel, and chairperson of the Muslim Aid charity, faced charges of killing journalists, teachers and medics (Talwar 2013; Mueenuddin 2013 is a response to the allegations). The Jamaat-e Islami, which had claimed (to great public outrage) that it had worked for Bangladesh's independence and that no war criminals existed in the country, held several extremely violent protests in Bangladesh against the charges (Daily Star 2007, 2012).

During the tribunal hearings in Dhaka, vigils were held by secularists demanding the death penalty for those convicted. When Quader Mollah's sentence of life imprisonment was announced in February 2013, a spontaneous demonstration of an estimated half a million people (though other reports claim three million) erupted in Dhaka's Shahbag Square (Roy 2020; BBC News 2013a). One of the reasons given by interviewees was the smile and victory sign given by Quader Mollah outside the court following his conviction. Shahbag demonstrators interpreted his actions as a victory for impunity because the opposition BNP-Jamaat-e Islami alliance would simply pardon him if they won the next general election.

The Shahbag demonstrations had developed independently of any political party and relied on young activists making use of social media. While nonviolent in form, the demonstrators used slogans that demanded the death penalty and violence against Jamaat opponents. Some of the demands of the protestors were articulated in the following way:

> We swear an oath that the leadership of mass people from the Gonojagoran Mancha [Forum for the People's Awakening] will continue the movement from Teknaf to Tetulia until capital punishment is handed down on those Razakar and Al-Badr members who committed crimes against humanity like mass killing and rape in 1971. We take the oath that we will remain vocal both on the streets and online until politics of war criminal Jamaat-Shibir [Jamaat-e Islami and its youth wing] is not [sic] banned and nationality of their members not [sic] cancelled. (Daily Star 2013)

Significant for this critical political moment in Bangladesh's post-Independence history were not just the convictions for war crimes and crimes against humanity some 40 years after the genocide, but demands for the death penalty for those convicted. These were opposed by Bangladeshi human rights organizations who otherwise supported the aims, if not the process, of the tribunal. There is not the space here to explore the various independent human rights critiques of the ICT-B, which ranged from claiming serious failures in due process and poor treatment of alleged perpetrators and witnesses, to claims that the tribunal was a political attempt

to undermine the BNP-Jamaat opposition (Beringmeier 2018; Bergman 2011; Samad 2016; Islam 2016; Chopra 2015; Razzaq 2016). But the demand for capital punishment was unequivocal and was a powerful driver of the Shahbag movement. The Shahbag protestors were successful – the government introduced legislation that allowed it to appeal the verdicts of the ICT-B, and the Supreme Court subsequently handed down some death sentences.

The Shahbag demonstrations foregrounded a new secular-oriented, confident youth politics as part of a movement for people's awakening. These political formations emerged virtually entirely through independent youth activism, the movement being seen by some as 'completely an initiative of the bloggers' (Interview 4). As with the Tahrir Square demonstrations, the movement arose as a spontaneous youth mobilization rather than through older forms of political organization (Roy 2020; Sajjad and Härdig 2017). Several interviewees described the inspiration of the Shahbag movement.

> I still remember, it was the 5th February at one o'clock, we got the verdict from the court that, yes, they admit that Quader Mollah … was involved in a big massacre … So, all the bloggers came out in the street … The thing is, I know all of them personally, because we used to blog together on the same platform … So, they said: 'We will go to that place in Shahbag until the verdict is … changed or the government do something. We will not move from there' … We were there at the start, three people's protest becoming three million people's protest … I remember my father was even pushing my sisters to go to that protest, [saying]: 'Why are you sitting at home?' (Interview 3)

The Shahbag movement challenged the political uses of religion by political Islamists and criticized Awami League authoritarianism and its support for conservative religious forces. The movement neither paid obeisance to the post-Independence 'secular nationalist' politics of the Awami League, nor was it controlled by the Awami League. Though the League had co-opted elements of the Shahbag leadership (Roy 2020), the independence of the movement was a key factor in the Awami League's fateful orientations towards it. Political Islamists, meanwhile, tried doggedly to characterize the movement as 'atheist', 'blasphemous' and 'anti-Islam.' As the death sentences were handed down by the tribunal for Quader Mollah, Sayeedi and others, the Jamaat-e Islami called a general strike, an action which led to weeks of violence in Bangladesh (BBC News 2013b). Earlier, the Jamaat had organized a sophisticated international campaign, often using the slogan 'Save Bangladesh', to discredit the ICT-B internationally. It made strong use of its international networks and establishment base in the UK as well as the services of UK human rights lawyers. The ICT-B was perhaps the largest direct attack ever on the Bangladeshi Jamaat-e Islami, and so it mobilized heavily against the tribunal, including in the UK.

While already being vilified by the Jamaat-e Islami, the Shahbag movement was targeted by the Hefazat-e Islam, a massive political-religious movement that relaunched with a march to Dhaka in April 2013 of over a million supporters. The Hefazat movement was the conservative religious response to the Shahbag movement's secularism (Sajjad and Härdig 2017). Demanding punishment of 'atheist bloggers', it claimed that 'Islam was under threat' with it being the religion's 'protector'. It presented the government with a list of thirteen highly authoritarian demands, one of which focused on the Shahbag protestors:

> The campaign and propaganda of the atheists, apostates, and Islam haters connected to the so called 'Ganajagaran Mancha' must be stopped. And the atheists, apostates, and Islam hating persons or organizations that are trying to create discord in the country by publishing malicious and slanderous contents in any medium must be arrested and given exemplary punishment. (Hefazat-e Islam 2013)

Considerable violence followed in the wake of the Hefazat demonstrations in April and May, which included ferocious state violence against Hefazat demonstrators. The Sheikh Hasina government, however, quickly made several major overtures to the Hefazat leadership. Key informants interviewed during this research argued that working with the Hefazat was a strategic move to outflank the BNP's claim to represent religious interests, while also working to prevent the formation of an electoral combine involving the BNP-Jamaat and the Hefazat by splitting the latter and drawing away moderates. Furthermore, violently attacking the Hefazat and then co-opting it can also be seen as a demonstration of singular Awami League power. The Awami League, moreover, has an enduring history of forming alliances with political Islamists. Before the 2006 general elections, for example, Sheikh Hasina agreed a memorandum of understanding with the Bangladeshi Khilafat Majlish, a movement that sought to create an Islamic state, declare Ahmadiyyas 'non-Muslim', extend the blasphemy laws, and make all sharia judgements legally binding.

The Awami League's wooing of an overwhelmingly authoritarian, antisecular movement was seen as a major 'betrayal' by supporters of the Shahbag movement. At the same time, the Awami League distanced itself firmly from the bloggers. The characterization of the Shahbag protestors and secular bloggers as 'atheist' became widespread, crossing from the Jamaat-e Islami and BNP to the Hefazat and the Awami League. The energetic mass movement of young activists that had emerged in Shahbag Square in 2013, and had initially received strong sentiments of support from the Awami League, was now castigated across the political spectrum and in innumerable news and media reports as 'anti-Islamic', 'atheist' and 'blasphemous'. The Islamists 'were successful to label it as an atheist movement' (Interview 1). A key step in the political exclusion of the bloggers (and implicitly the Shahbag movement) from the sphere of legitimate political expression in a formally democratic country was to render them 'toxic' – labelling them atheists and therefore apostates, 'the

harmful, filthy, [immoral] segment … who have no place in this religious society' (Interview 2). Bloggers thus became prime, isolated targets for the violence that was to come.

Following the death sentences handed down to Quader Mollah and others, the ferocity of the violence and the threats from political Islamists increased. In March 2013, before the Hefazat-e Islam's march to Dhaka in April, a list of 84 'atheist' bloggers was presented to the government. The Prime Minister's Office appeared to agree to a call by religious leaders that the bloggers seek 'repentance for making offensive statements against Islam' (bdnews23 2013). The provenance of this list is unknown, but elements from it started being circulated on social media. Names of 'atheist' bloggers were also published in major Bangladeshi newspapers. An editor of a religious newspaper named nine blogs that 'were spreading propagandas against Islam' (ibid). Some major daily newspapers published the names of key bloggers and activists, often on the front page and typically calling them 'atheists'.

> So, [on 10 March 2013, a major newspaper] wrote my name [saying] that I am one of the masterminds behind the Shahbag movement. [Name of UK blogger] was there, my name was there, [name of another UK blogger] was there, Ahmed Rajib Haider's name was there, [name of a Bangladeshi blogger] was there … [Of] the bloggers they named, [name of blogger] was attacked, [name of UK blogger] and me were threatened … [name of blogger] is [now living in another country], [name of blogger] was attacked, and Rajib was killed. Afterwards, [the Islamists] published [a list of] 84 blogger's names that they want to kill. (Interview 3)

On 15 February 2013, the architect and secular blogger, Ahmed Rajib Haider was killed in a brutal machete attack in Dhaka. The blogger Asif Mohiuddin was attacked in Dhaka a month earlier, but fortunately survived, though he and several other bloggers were arrested in April and around eight blogs were closed down by the Awami League government for 'insulting' Islam and 'hurting' religious sentiments (BBC News 2014). In April 2013, a 'Message to the people of Bangladesh' released by Al Qaeda's official media wing, stated:

> My dear brothers in Bangladesh! By Allah, this is not a political tussle; it is a battle between disbelief and Islam. Many more cursed people like Ahmad Rajab Haider are roaming around alive. Their pens and tongues continue to spill venom against the Noble Prophet (peace be upon him) and his Shariah. These wretched creatures that are worse than animals have no right to live. Targeting each one of them and killing them in the streets the way this cursed blogger was killed is an obligation imposed by the Shariah. (Farooq 2013).

Al Qaeda issued a further video statement in early 2014 from Ayman al-Zawahiri in which he talked about the violence that followed the Hefazat demonstrations. In this video, he mentions 'transgressing secularists who are heaping insults and vulgar abuses on Islam and the Prophet of Islam'. Ahmed Rajib Haider is named, alongside Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasreen (al-Zawahiri 2014).

In November 2014, the sociology professor and humanist from Rajshahi University, Shaiful Islam, was brutally killed. In February 2015, Avijit Roy and Bonya Ahmed, both US citizens and well-known intellectuals, were leaving the Dhaka Book Fair and were viciously attacked by a group of men with machetes near the University of Dhaka buildings. Avijit Roy was killed and Bonya Ahmed was very seriously injured. In the same year, the writers Washiqur Rahman, Ananta Bijoy Das, Niloy Chatterjee and Faisal Arefin Dipan were killed in similar machete attacks. Several other humanist publishers or writers, including Ahmedur Rashid Chowdhury Tutul, were attacked that year but survived. In April 2016, the law student and blogger Nazimuddin Samad was killed in an attack with machetes and guns. Within days of each other, the academic Rezaul Karim Siddique, and the gay rights activists, Julhaj Mannan and Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy were murdered.

> Julhaj Mannan, the gay activist, he was my elder brother at my school. I knew him personally … Obviously, on 14 April 2016, they were following him because, for the first time [in Bangladesh], he organised [a] big parade for LGBT people … We guess, from that day he was targeted … There were three people in that room when they were killed. One was Mahbub Tonoy and the other was Julhaj Mannan. (Interview 3)

In 2015, the Ansarullah Bangla Team, an affiliate of Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, issued a further 'hitlist'. Among numerous bloggers in Bangladesh, this list included nine bloggers and activists in the UK, and several others based in north America (Burke 2015). Another 'hitlist' of ten individuals was purported to come from Islamic State (Author archive). A further 'hitlist' disseminated on Facebook and other social media had the names and photographs of the 'Top Ten Nastik of UK', 'nastik' being a pejorative term for 'atheist' (Author archive). Several other 'hitlists' related to Bangladesh or the diaspora were disseminated. While violence against Hindu and other minorities has been common in Bangladesh, from 2015 Islamic State also started claiming responsibility for the killings of numerous Hindu, Buddhist, or Sufi individuals (First Post 2016).

Al Qaeda issued another video in 2015, *The Dust Will Never Settle Down: From France to Bangladesh*, which celebrated the killing of six Bangladeshi bloggers, including Ahmed Rajib Haider, Avijit Roy and Washiqur Rahman (Umar 2015). During 2015, the Ansarullah Bangla Team released a series of statements that claimed responsibility for the murders of several bloggers, publishers, and activists,

including Faisal Arefin Dipan, Nazimuddin Samad, Julhaj Mannan and Mahbub Tonoy (Ashraf 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c; Ansar al-Islam 2016). The ABT statement regarding Ahmedur Rashid Tutul (who survived the attack) and Faisal Arefin Dipan said:

> O! Enemies of Islam! Listen carefully, you and your protectors, here and abroad!! We have warned you before about the result of your felon acts against Islam under the pretext of so-called 'free-thinking'. Today, your mates are suffering the consequences of what we warned against. (Ashraf 2015)

This harrowing period of violence culminated in an attack in July 2016 on customers of the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka by a group of five men armed with bombs, guns and machetes. Twenty-four people were killed in the attack and Islamic State claimed responsibility, though seven men from the Jamiatul Mujahideen Bangladesh were later convicted and sentenced to death (BBC News 2019). The Awami League government's orientation by this stage was to be unhappy about what the bloggers were writing and unhappy about those who were unhappy enough to kill them (Daily Star 2016). The events also demonstrated the extent to which disparate political forces that ranged from official secularism to political Islam to salafi-jihadism had generated an equivalence between secularism and atheism, and between the right to freedom of expression and blasphemy.

The rise of the Bangladeshi blogosphere

The killings had a devastating impact on the rich and open online culture that had developed from the early 2000s in Bangladesh and its diaspora. The period from the early 2000s until the end of that decade was described by several interviewees as one of stifling, authoritarian political-religious rule under the BNP-Jamaat-e Islami. Websites such as Mukto-mona ('Freethinker'), initiated by Avijit Roy from 2001, were thus of signal importance for opening spaces for debate and disseminating rationalist and humanist ideas.

> Mukto-mona very quickly became the popular platform for the free thinkers, atheists, agnostics in the Bengali-speaking world. [Avijit Roy] was not only the founder, he was a writer, and writing was the passion of his life. He has written eight books and edited two and written ... hundreds and hundreds of blogs on all kinds of issues. But his main focus was free thinking, the philosophy of atheism, the rational and scientific world view. (Interview 2)

In addition to Mukto-mona, a range of other blogs (such as somewhereinblog.- net, amarblog.com, ebangladesh.com, shadakalo.blogspot.net, sachalayatan.- com, nagorikblog.com, istishon.com and motikontho.wordpress.com) became important

from the middle of the decade onwards. Some interviewees were instrumental in the development of Bengali and English blogging platforms.

> I was the editor, developer and publisher of [name of first blog], started from 2006 … I developed [a blogging platform] and all the prominent bloggers were blogging there, all the top bloggers in Bangladesh … It was by nature an anti-army anti-extremism blog, but it was a moderated blog. But [my second platform] was the only blog in Bangladesh [with] no moderation. Anybody can write anything … So, whoever is atheist, they could write anything … extremists can also write … nothing was controlled … [Ahmed Rajib Haider] who was killed in Bangladesh, he was mainly writing at [my platform] and [name], the Jamaat extremist, was [also] writing at the same platform … We had nearly a hundred thousand users at that moment. (Interview 4)

Several interviewees vividly remembered the dynamic intellectual ferment generated by the Bengali-language blogging sites, including open discussion of science and evolution, cosmology, biology, gay, lesbian and transgender minorities, and atheism. Interviewees described a 'new era' in which the previous restrictions on the expression of 'free thoughts' underwent a 'revolution' (Interview 8). As significant was the 'critical mass' generated for radical atheism. These activities also led to some formerly religious individuals, including political Islamists, adopting rationalist ideas (Interview 2). Interviewees who had no prior experience of political activism started blogging or commenting on Facebook about the sentencing for life of Quader Mollah or the Shahbag protests and were consequently thrown into the world of militant religious politics (Interview 5).

Are you aware of this?

The same period also saw the rise of well-organized political Islamist sites like Basher Kella (bkella.com, facebook.com/newbasherkellla), widely believed to be linked to the Jamaat-e Islami's youth wing. This inevitably resulted in interactions and debates between humanists and political Islamists: 'Some people are following what I am writing [and asking]: "Is it against religion?"' (Interview 10). Criticisms escalated into 'flame wars' and abuse. As threats began, some bloggers took precautions regarding their personal information.

> I just wrote a small post in my Facebook [and political Islamists] picked it up within two or three days and gave me a big answer from their blog. Then I understood, they are watching everyone. Wherever you are, whatever you are writing, they are basically watching. (Interview 3)

If the use of social media means assenting to entering an environment of considerable discursive toxicity, the torrent of threats and abuse meant that interviewees found it difficult to distinguish tangible threats from the toxic milieu from which they arose. Bloggers described an environment where they got 'used' to receiving online threats but did not necessarily consider these to be serious.

> The writers of Mukto-mona became the focus [of the threats] slowly ... There were many blogs created by the Islamists who started debating with the Mukto-mona writers, and especially with [Avijit Roy]. And they started threatening us ... In 2006, the threat level went up, and then in 2013 the final blow came. A guy called [name] threatened Avijit in 2013. He debated with him and [he] openly said: 'As soon as you land in Bangladesh, I will make sure that you get killed.' But we did not take that seriously. We thought: 'Ok, this guy is crazy!' (Interview 2)

Online threats of violence and death were frequent enough that they were a routine background for most interviewees. Facebook was repeatedly referred to as the site from which the most sustained and violent threats emanated.

> I was always receiving Facebook threats ... 'Wherever you go, we are following you, you will be killed' ... It's always from Facebook groups ... [Even] this morning, someone posted a video against me. So, what I can do? There is nothing to do, actually - just to absorb and just to ignore. (Interview 4)

Women bloggers were typically targeted with threats of sexual violence or were vilified as prostitutes. One aim in the targeting of women was to destroy their reputations and bring shame to their families in the wider community: 'to defame me socially [and] make it difficult for my family' (Interview 1). A regular term of abuse against bloggers was '*nastik*', essentially a pejorative term meaning 'atheist' and therefore 'apostate'. The popularization of this word was traced by some interviewees to the political speeches of several Jamaat leaders, including Delwar Hossein Sayeedi. '*Nastik*', as well as '*kafir*', an abusive term for those considered 'unbelievers', became identified with secular bloggers, regardless of whether they were believers or not: 'The word 'blogger' was made synonymous with '*nastik*' by the Islamists' (Interview 4). In newspapers, television and social media from 2013, the word '*nastik*' was used so frequently that 'whoever blogs, everybody understands that he is a *nastik*' and 'no one will help them' (Interview 4). As significant was the use of the racist slur '*malaun*' ('accursed') towards bloggers who were brought up in Hindu religious traditions. In naming someone '*nastik*' or '*malaun*', individuals are being characterized as those who could be considered worthy to be killed by unspecified others at an unknown time, and that honour is attached to killing them.

After Quader Mollah's life sentence was changed to death, the threats from political Islamists escalated, including in the UK. An interviewee described repeated calls on her phone, sometimes 'ten a day', threatening her and her children. She had also been followed and threatened by small groups of men on the London tube (Interview 7). Another interviewee had received repeated threats on Facebook. In 2013, leaflets branding him as an 'atheist' were found posted on walls around Brick Lane and distributed at Whitechapel tube station in east London. He reported the leaflets to the police services, but said they did nothing initially. Subsequently, the police visited him, told him he was on a 'hitlist', and asked 'whether it is possible for me to change my [home] address' (Interview 3). Other interviewees reported similar situations:

> Last year, Christmas Eve, somebody comes up [and] rings the doorbell. Really posh looking, one guy and one woman in their thirties turned up. They said they are from [counterterrorism] and they said they saw a video coming out from ISIS, Bengali ISIS, and they are declaring death threat for five people. I am the third person, the first one being [name], then [name] and then myself and two others … They said: 'Are you aware of this?' (Interview 5)

In addition to these direct threats, a profound pattern that emerged during interviews was the targeting of the families and friends in the 'home' country to intimidate an individual living in the Europe or north America. Intimidation and harassment of distant relatives, local campaigns against a UK resident undertaken in an area of Bangladesh where their family resides, threats of violence against their family, or the burning of their property were described by most of the interviewees. An interviewee living in the UK explained how he posted a small message of support for Shahbag on his Facebook page. In a matter of days, several thousand people gathered outside his family's house and threatened his family, saying that their son is a '*kafir*'.

> I am here, why will my family be attacked, [they] are not involved … I was thinking: 'My family will be threatened because of me. They can't do anything to me so that's why they are doing this to them' … In front of my parents' house, [political Islamists] made an effigy of me and shouted: 'This *kafir* needs to be hanged' … My cousin said: 'Your family is under risk now, so they have to decide one thing. They have to disown you or otherwise they wouldn't be safe because the Islamists are demanding that you need to be disowned.' 'Disowned' means I am not [legally] my dad's son anymore [*tejjo-putro*, 'abandoned son']. They demanded [of my dad]: 'You have to register with the [government high court that] this guy is not your son anymore and he will not inherit your property.' My father did that. My father had to do that. And I understand. I felt no father disowns his own son. I am his own son. I came to this world from someone … My family became safe, because they disowned me … I am on the ['hitlist'] of my village, the highest one on the list in whole

district. All the madrasas know me. If I go back and someone sees me, an Islamist sees me, they will kill me. (Interview 10)

See! I am laughing!

The murders in Bangladesh had a deeply traumatic impact on secular bloggers and activists – and liberal Bengali society – as indeed, they were intended to. Almost all the interviewees knew several of the bloggers who had been killed. An interviewee described the blogging platform he cofounded: 'One of our bloggers got killed because of writing in that blog'. Another well-known blogger from the same platform had to leave Bangladesh because of threats and is living in a safer country (Interview 3). Another interviewee described how a student became involved with Mukto-mona and wrote about the Gonojagoron Mancha: 'He was killed 2 months after. We knew that he would be killed' (Interview 2). Interviewees described the harrowing impact of the killings on themselves, families and friends, and the wider blogging community.

> It is extremely, extremely dangerous back home – the number of people being killed, it's not just a threat, it is real. They made a list and they killed one after another, and they killed all over the country. One of the bloggers [name] was very close to me – basically, a neighbour to me back home in Sylhet … He was killed in front of his house. His house is 300 yards from my house. I know all his family. (Interview 9)

> See! I am laughing! And I'm telling you that I can guarantee [name of friend] will be killed. See how our mentality has been changed now that we know that we are under the knife, our life is under the knife. (Interview 3)

The motive for Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent was not simply to 'punish with death' those opposing religious ideology, but to intimidate and terrify bloggers and enact 'exemplary' punishment. The killings were undertaken by a small group and intended to be public, brutal and cruel. Consequently, personal safety, especially for bloggers in Bangladesh, became an imperative. Some bloggers went underground, or left Bangladesh and sought asylum in India, Nepal or Europe.

Interviewees described an immediate impact on their blogging. This included stopping writing, acts of self-censorship, changing online account names or deleting accounts (Interview 8). Blog administrators also deleted accounts from major platforms.

> We removed 20 bloggers and all their writings from the entire blog ... [By] the middle of 2013, all the bloggers had stopped writing and most requested us to delete their writings. This is because of fear. Though the [Shahbag] movement was started by the bloggers, blogging activity went down from that point. (Interview 4)

Just as interviewees described the hopeful rise of independent, confident youth activism following the Shahbag protests and then its decline, they described the rise and then fall of independent blogging and the terrible fear and dejection in the face of the killings. The killing of Avijit Roy was seen as 'a breaking point' for the Bengali blogosphere, after which blogging activity diminished (Interview 1).

> Some of the young people from the left, some of them were killed, some became demoralised. They no longer do the blogs, websites. The blogs that I used to see in 2013–14 are no longer there at all. I don't see anybody challenging Islamism anymore publicly ... The government took a line, if someone was killed, they are saying: 'Why did you [write this]?' – basically, blaming the victims (Interview 9)

A common response by the government and police in Bangladesh was that bloggers should stop writing and had brought their situation upon themselves. Some UK bloggers at serious risk complained of little police action, whereas others described detailed assessments of their safety, advice on panic alarms and CCTVs, police community support officer visits, priority in emergency calls, and other security measures. A striking pattern, however, was that the British police advised them to delete their online accounts and stop writing, the same response as in Bangladesh (Interview 4, Interview 9).

Bangladeshi secular activism in the UK

Other international convergences were vividly illustrated by a demonstration on 9 February 2013 at Altab Ali Park, east London, to show solidarity with the Shahbag protests. This event was seen as critical by some young bloggers in their transformation into activists and their stark awareness of what they were facing: 'That day changed my life ... since that day, I am an activist and here I am' (Interview 1). Captured within this powerful event is the essence of the conflict in the UK Bangladeshi communities between secularists and political Islamists, one significant enough to have helped shape the national political landscape of the UK with regard to anti-racism, multiculturalism and religious politics (Bhatt 2006).

> I saw people started to gather in Shahbag, news was flooding in on Facebook. Then some of my [colleagues], I started calling them: 'Can we do something

here?' Then somebody told me: 'Let's call a demonstration in Altab Ali Park'. I never organised any protest before. I don't know how! I opened a Facebook event. (Interview 1)

This young woman put a message on Facebook to a handful of her friends to organize a solidarity demonstration in Altab Ali Park, east London. On arrival at the park, the young people found several hundred men calling them 'atheists' and 'blasphemers' and demanding that Quader Mollah and other perpetrators be set free.

Altab Ali Park is named in honour of a young man murdered by racists in Brick Lane in 1978, his death sparking a powerful Asian youth movement in East London, one arising from the tradition of secular anti-racist organizing that dominated black politics in the 1970s and 1980s. The Shaheed Minar (martyr's memorial), a gendered symbol of the nation and its children, was itself a monument to Bangladeshi nationalists who had died in the 1950s defending Bengali language and culture against the Urdu hegemony being imposed by Pakistan. Both the park and the minar represent symbolically the secular anti-racist and Bengali nationalist tradition of the East End. Yet, the park and the minar were now 'occupied' by political Islamists who arose from a directly opposed movement that did not want Bangladesh to become independent, who followed an ideology of an Islamic state, and who wanted alleged war criminals involved in the 1971 genocide to be freed.

The five young people remained defiant. Serendipitously, an older man who had fought in the Bangladeshi war of independence, happened to walk past and asked the young people if they were safe. He phoned others and more people arrived in the park to support the five until their demonstration had also grown to several hundred people.

We were so emotional, it felt like a war going on in the park ... On [the Islamist side] there was a councillor from Tower Hamlets Council, a deputy mayor [name], he even gave a speech ... They were taking photos of us, and it was so intimidating ... The way they were swearing at all the ladies [saying] we are all 'going to hell', we are 'prostitutes' ... Some of their people were [preacher], Islamists from 'Save Bangladesh' [the campaign against ICT-B] and people from East London Mosque. (Interview 1)

After an eight-hour standoff, the secularists were eventually given permission by the police to lay flowers at the Shaheed Minar and demonstrators from both sides dispersed. On leaving, several of the secular demonstrators said they were physically attacked. Attacks by UK political Islamists on South Asian Muslim secularists are not unusual. In 2010, an actor, having performed in a play about the Bengal Language Movement, was leaving the public venue and was surrounded by a large group of

men and beaten very grievously. He showed me photographs of his truly appalling injuries. He said the attackers shouted: 'Why do you act in a drama that is against Allah and our Prophet?' (Interview 6). Reported to this project were numerous other physical attacks following the 2013 death sentences in Bangladesh, the attackers said to be associated with a family of named UK political Islamist organizations (Interviews 1, 4 and 9).

Conclusion

In September 2015, Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion arrested and charged several ABT members in Bangladesh for the murder of Avijit Roy and Ananta Bijoy Das. One person charged was Touhidur Rahman, a 58-year old British IT worker who was alleged to have planned and financed the ABT's campaign against the secular bloggers (Green 2015). In December 2015, two ABT members were given the death penalty for killing Ahmed Rajib Haider and, in February 2017, further arrests were made in relation to his murder. In August 2015, two ABT members were arrested in relation to the murder of Niloy Neel, and arrests were made for other blogger murders. The ABT murders appeared to stop, but then Shahzahan Bachchu, a secular writer and publisher of poetry was brutally killed in Dhaka in June 2018 by the Jamiatul Mujahideen Bangladesh, and other threats continued. At the time of writing, numerous bloggers and writers live in Bangladesh, Europe, South Asia and elsewhere through prisms of fear and defiance. While interviewees expressed fear, some said that showing they are frightened means they will be harassed even more forcefully. While living in Bangladesh was considered 'dangerous' by all the interviewees, the fear of being attacked was not tied to any particular country. For some, the UK is 'extremely dangerous for me, seriously dangerous place' (Interview 4) because of social media and the international organizations of political religion. Some of the bloggers interviewed were indeed considered at risk by the British police services.

In examining the violence and threats against bloggers, many processes converge. In Bangladesh, the main political Islamist parties and the ruling secular government identified bloggers as atheists and blasphemers, this act immediately delegitimizing them politically and making them 'toxic' socially. On social media, already layered with noxious discourse, direct, personal and violent threats were repeatedly made against bloggers. A piece of text composed in Dhaka is amplified rapidly and globally through Facebook, finding itself being handed in printed form to tube passengers in east London. Such material sometimes contained little other than names, faces and the word '*nastik*'. Variants, reposted on Facebook, inspired violent mobilizations in villages in Bangladesh. Authoritarian religious movements mobilized their supporters at a variety of geographical scales. In the UK, they mobilized through social media and at community level against 'atheist bloggers', such that even the friends of some individuals made death threats against them (Interview 3). Others marshalled international networks to threaten distant relatives of people living in the UK. Meanwhile, groups linked to Al Qaeda covertly planned grotesque executions. If

the violence against bloggers symbolises how, in dissimilar countries, the power of political religion eclipses the freedom to express views about religion, it also shows how fear and intimidation work as political instruments across various institutional and geographical scales of analysis. In aiming to intimidate and instil fear, the attackers themselves understood fear, including its 'moral vigour' and thus practical utility for politics (Kapust 2008). Unlike the way political fear often manifests (Robin 2004), we instead see being created a political apprehension of the unpredictable, unknown, determined, targeted and intimate. If salafi-jihadi terrorism has had to transform from major spectacular events to self-directed violence by individuals and small groups, a different phenomenon is illustrated in the example of the bloggers. This is the novel convergence of the toxic, polarizing culture of social media, international political networks, and fearsome acts of terrorism. If 'shaming' and 'cancelling' are common on social media, their 'real life' consequences include the expulsion by religious and secular forces of non-violent writers of disagreeable words from the sphere of legitimate politics, in full awareness that the ostracization of those writers will likely lead to their killing by anonymous others. This highlights a novel form of political violence of which we are seeing the early emergence and for which the political toxicity of social media is a critical factor.

Acknowledgements

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