

Tackling the ‘killing machines’: Can NGOs help protect human rights in Bangladesh?

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*The problem of blogger murders in Bangladesh has become more serious in recent months as attacks are now targeting a wider range of citizens and the government has had limited success in curbing the violence. **Tasmiah Rahman** discusses how the situation has worsened over the last 18 months, and considers how Bangladesh’s celebrated NGO network and the international donor community could support efforts to protect citizens.*



In 2013, the [first blogger](#), Rajib, was hacked to death in Bangladesh. Labelled as ‘an atheist’, he was killed during the ‘[Shahabag Movement](#)’ where thousands of people protested for the death penalty of war criminals. At least 11 bloggers have died in similarly brutal fashion since then, and attackers are now targeting a wider range of citizens. According to a [popular local daily report](#), 47 people have been killed in the last 18 months. Victims include a non-Muslim small business trader, a publisher of secular books [Faisal Arefin Dipan](#), an English Literature professor [Rezaul Karim Siddique](#), an LGBT activist and a USAid employee, [Xulhas Mannan](#), and his friend. This month alone a [police officer’s wife was murdered](#) in the port city Chittagong, and on 10 June a Hindu ashram [worker](#) was killed in the North-Western district of Pabna.

Justice has been patchy: [2 killers were caught and sentenced to death](#) in a fast track court for the murder of Rajib, and [3 members of an extremist group](#) (including a British citizen) were arrested in connection with the murder of [Abhijit Roy](#), an American-Bangladeshi secular blogger and author. A student has been linked to the professor’s death, while [1 man has been arrested](#) for the double activist murder so far. Despite public protest and international concerns, the process of hunting down the killers and bringing them to justice lacks momentum.

Two groups claiming 28 of the 47 deaths are Ansar al Islam (previously known as Ansarullah Bangla Team), a pro Al-Qaeda group, and a second association which leans towards ISIS. While the former group is targeting the so called atheists, it is the latter that claims to be focusing on a broader range of Hindu, Christian and Sufi leaders, as well as professionals and foreigners. However, the government claims that there is no ISIS presence in the country. According to their statement, the killings ‘claimed’ by ISIS are actually committed by the banned Islamic fundamentalist organisation [Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh \(JMB\)](#).

Terror attacks in Bangladesh are sadly nothing new, as they have occurred periodically over the last 15 years. Starting from [2001, on Pohela Boishakh](#) (first day of the Bengali New Year) 10 people including a militant died in a series of blasts. In [2005, almost 500 bombs exploded](#) in 63 out of 64 districts in Bangladesh in the space of half an hour, and the list goes on. However, the targeted killings clearly mark new disturbing chapter, distinct from the string of bombings that came before.

The Government’s response

At first, the government took a very soft approach, for example by asking the citizens to [refrain](#) from writing against religious sentiments while exercising freedom of expression. But amidst the protests, the government has finally realised that much tougher stand is needed and the police recently conducted an anti-terrorist crackdown. More [than a thousand people, including 200 suspected](#) Islamist militants, have been detained since 10 June.

However, even the crackdown has come under fire, with questions raised about its effectiveness. [19 people including 5 militants](#) have died in so called ‘crossfire’: The man arrested for the professor’s murder was [mysteriously killed in police custody while the prime suspect](#) in Abhijit’s murder was also killed. Furthermore, there have been [reports suggesting that police are exploiting the crackdown](#) by harassing and threatening to detain innocent

members of the community if they don't pay bribes.

What is more alarming is that the attacks have persisted: on 15 June, a [Hindu college teacher](#), was assaulted on his doorstep (although he survived). Only one out of the three suspects was arrested. As a result, it is yet to be seen if the real players behind even the most high profile killings will be brought to justice.

The issue here is about the government's failure to enforce the rule of law. There was a clear negligence highlighted by the failure to contain the blogger killings when they started. If the government has learned anything from history, it should have taken threats made to ordinary citizens more seriously as the unchecked violence undermines the government and its sovereignty.

Can NGOs help in curbing this challenge?

NGOs like [BRAC](#), the world's largest NGO, and [Grameen Bank](#) come to mind when NGO 'success' in Bangladesh is discussed. In addition to these names, Bangladesh has almost 3000 NGOs that work in eradicating poverty, providing healthcare, education, microfinance and more to people that do not receive such support from the government.

[NGOs](#) initially evolved Bangladesh after the liberation war in order to provide post-war assistance. During the 70s and 80s the focus shifted to tackling natural disasters, poverty, healthcare issues and education. Today NGO activities tend to concentrate on microfinance, training on income generation, advocacy, women's empowerment and so forth. The NGOs have therefore evolved to provide services to the citizens where government has failed.

Where do NGOs fit in when it comes to curbing terrorism? Do they aim to tackle the inequality that propels a 'poor' boy to join a radical organisation? Can the NGOs not probe in improving the 'ethics' studies in schools so that radical ideas are discouraged? Can they not team up with thousands of [Islamic Scholars that have come forward to produce 'fatwa'](#) towards violent extremism? Can the 'rights' of minority community not be taught to citizens in homes, schools and workplaces?

It is true that NGO activities have also come under scrutiny. The wrong intentions, post-colonial mandates, false success stories, too much reporting are only a few challenges that NGOs have to face. NGOs have also been criticised by the government for [funding militancy](#) in the past. But without a doubt NGOs in Bangladesh have proved to be evolving institutions with more flexibility than the government. They also have access to the grassroots level citizens in Bangladesh and this network needs to be utilised for curbing terrorism. While civil society organisations/NGOs have strongly condemned both militant killings and crossfire deaths, activities on the ground have been largely about broad issues of human rights violations, rather than dedicated efforts to curb terrorism.

In a similar vein, the international donor community should do more to bring issues of governance into discussions, curbing terrorism and strengthening government capacity to maintain rule of law. Given how many organisations have adopted the '[rights based approach](#)', questions should be raised around why rights of the citizens are not being protected and what are NGOs doing about it? Are they afraid of asking these questions because then they would also be scrutinised by the government? Or do they think that this is beyond their capacity?

The solution lies in unity

There is no question that government should be looking for ways to work constructively with potential allies on this issue to promote accountability and secure a sustainable peace. Utilising the grassroots network of the NGOs, their research capacity and expertise of dealing with social problems can be a way forward in containing this crisis. Together, the government and NGOs, who have had success in tackling other crises in Bangladesh, should join hands, plan a road map and allocate funding in national budgets and from international community.

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