

# The paradoxes of Bangladesh's Shahbag protests

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*LSE's David Lewis contextualises recent protests in Dhaka and explains why subsequent political violence could threaten Bangladesh's democratic institutions.*

It began last month as a peaceful protest reminiscent of the 'Arab spring' as hundreds of thousands of youngsters, mobilised by Facebook messages and other online networking, gathered at the Shahbag intersection in Dhaka to seek justice for war crimes committed by members of Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JIB), Bangladesh's largest Islamic party. But the Dhaka protests have been followed by an outbreak of political and militant violence that now threatens Bangladesh's democratic institutions.



India has supported the Shahbag protests, with National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon praising the efforts of Bangladeshi youth to uphold democracy and challenge extremism. But the violence signals a crucial moment for domestic politics in Bangladesh, particularly as the clashes raise questions about the country's identity: secular or Islamic?

The emergence of the Shahbag protest has already been hailed as a key moment, representing a new grassroots movement expressing its distaste for the country's corrupt political culture. The protests reflected a desire to heal the country's wounds by seeking justice once and for all for the events of 1971, when the country secured independence from Pakistan following a violent war of secession. There was a strong element of youth participation in the protests as well as significant female presence; demands for justice and national reconciliation were coupled with anger at the current government. As such, the protests reflected the concerns of a new generation of Bangladeshis who are proud of their country's history and recent economic progress, but frustrated by continuing corruption and a dysfunctional political system.

But the organised backlash to the protests by JIB and its supporters, and subsequent government repression, has shown that Bangladesh's complex history cannot be mitigated through a moment of activism. Apologists for international religious interests, who see nothing to be gained by raking over the past, have made it difficult for the international community to understand these events. To do so requires recognising that the country is trying – however imperfectly – to [gain closure](#) on unresolved and deeply traumatic historical events that remain fresh in Bangladesh's collective memory.

When Bangladesh split from Pakistan in 1971, the Pakistan army extracted a terrible price. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed – some estimates put the figure as high as three million – in a coordinated military crackdown

that led to mass killings of civilians, targeted assassinations of intellectuals, and the systematic use of rape. During these killings, the Pakistan army found willing collaborators in the form of a minority of Bengalis who did not wish to secede from Pakistan, a viewpoint that has lived on amongst JIB and its supporters.

Pakistan had been established in 1947 on the basis of a Muslim religious identity that did not sit well either with Bangladesh's religious and cultural diversity or with its linguistic commonalities around the Bengali language. Bengalis who collaborated with the Pakistan army were ideologically motivated by a political-religious ideology that resisted the logic of Pakistan's break-up and distrusted the new secular (i.e. multi-faith) nationalist identity that emerged within the movement for Liberation.

But few Bengali collaborators were ever brought to book for their part in war crimes, and some of those implicated later rose to senior positions within JIB and other parties. Although JIB was banned in the new country after 1971, it was slowly rehabilitated over the decades by opportunistic military governments and by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP): to the dismay of many Bangladeshis who had lived through the Liberation period, BNP included JIB as its coalition partner in the 2001-06 government.

In the early 1970s, a War Crimes Tribunal was set up, but it proved unable to function in the struggling new nation. After Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the country's founder, was assassinated in 1975, successive military governments began building links with political Islam in an attempt to consolidate support for their unelected regimes—links that discouraged the Tribunal's efforts to prosecute war criminals. The so-called US foreign policy 'tilt' towards Pakistan also meant that there was little international support for a war crimes tribunal.

Popular demands for justice began to resurface in 1990 when democracy was restored (see, for example, Jahanara Imam's [war diary](#), published in 1986). When the Awami League won a landslide victory in 2009, its leadership decided to reactivate the Tribunal to attend to the unhealed wounds that festered beneath the surface of Bangladesh's body politic.

The decision to convene a national court on the basis of the 1973 International Crimes (Tribunal) Act has been controversial. There have been allegations that the Tribunal is politically motivated, and that it [does not meet international standards](#). The government has responded by arguing that these are old crimes that should be dealt with through a domestic process, and that they are being as fair as they can. Ten suspects undergoing trials before the Tribunal include senior JIB leaders and one former minister of the main opposition BNP.

On January 21, the Tribunal delivered its first verdict: capital punishment for Abul Kalam Azad. But the second verdict on February 5 was more lenient, sentencing Abdul Qader Mollah to life imprisonment. The perception that Mollah's sentence was the outcome of a deal that might result in his future release sparked the Shahbag protests as people gathered to call for the death penalty to be imposed as the country's law requires. Trouble really began when, on February 15, Ahmed Rajib Haider, a blogger who had helped prompt the protests, was killed by Islamist thugs, the first of a series of retaliatory attacks.

On February 28, the Tribunal reached a third verdict, sentencing Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, another JIB leader, to death. This time the Islamists took stronger action, with thousands of their supporters attacking government offices, police stations and minority communities around the country. Hindu leaders have reported that over 50 temples and at least 1,500 homes have been destroyed during recent weeks across the country; in the south, there are also reports of attacks on Buddhist communities. These attacks have been blamed primarily on JIB and its student wing Islami Chhatra Shibir. Meanwhile, human rights abuses are also being reported on the government side as it tries to police the unrest—[more than 100 people died](#) between 5 February and 7 March as law-enforcement agencies sought to control violence.

It is difficult to say what effects these events will have on JIB. Its leadership is now old, its support base in Bangladesh remains limited, and it may increasingly have to compete with other Islamist groups who view its policies as too moderate. But it has mobilised a fearsome backlash in the wake of the protests and the government

knows that banning the party at this juncture will only result in its followers reappearing in a different guise.

The Islamist backlash has also raised tough questions about Bangladesh's national identity: the majority of people in the country, while often deeply religious, still favour the multi-faith, tolerant Bangladeshi identity that was at the heart of the 1971 Liberation movement. They firmly reject the intrusion of religion into politics, and resent the way a flawed political and judicial system has persistently made it possible for those accused of these (and other) serious crimes to evade justice.

Against this backdrop, the many paradoxes of the Shahbag protests become clear: this is a peaceful mass protest that insists on the violence of capital punishment, and a popular demand for justice that is to be delivered from a flawed judicial process.

While Shahbag protestors and JIB supporters face off, an already weak and fractured political system is coming under severe pressure as a heavy-handed government seeks to control events. Business leaders within the country's export garment industry (a cornerstone of the economy) have broadly supported the Shahbag protests, but increasing instability and stoppages will doubtless have consequences for the economy. And the risk that the military could once again take control cannot be discounted. As such, this is a watershed moment that may ultimately decide Bangladesh's future.

### **About the Author**

*David Lewis* is professor of Social Policy and Development at LSE and author of *Bangladesh: Politics, Economy and Civil Society*.

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