

Bangladesh government exploits bomb blasts to detain political opponents

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The Bangladesh government has used a series of bomb blasts on December 7 to intensify a crackdown on its political opponents, including the arrest of prominent leaders of the opposition Awami League (AL). The bombs exploded simultaneously in four cinemas in the town of Mymensingh, 110 km north of the capital Dhaka, killing 19 people and injuring more than 200 others.

The cinemas were packed with thousands of ordinary working people who had gone to see a film to celebrate the end of Muslim fasting month of Ramadan. A number of those taken to hospital were in a critical condition. No one has claimed responsibility.

Without providing any evidence, Prime Minister Begum Khalida Zia immediately accused “those making a smear campaign against Bangladesh at home and abroad”—a thinly-veiled reference to the opposition—of being behind the attack. In the two days after the bomb blasts, police rounded up some 40 opposition activists.

Those detained included Saber Hossain Chowdhury, political secretary to opposition leader Sheik Hasina, and Awami League student leader Shafi Ahamed. Chowdhury was first arrested in October as part of a sweeping dragnet by the military, known as “Operation Clean Heart,” which was supposedly launched to curb crime. The government had to release him when a high court ruled that his arrest was illegal.

Two writers, Muntasir Mamun and Shahriar Kabir, were also arrested. Both are prominent anti-government critics. Kabir, who is a free-lance journalist and human rights activist, was arrested last year on sedition charges and kept in Dhaka Central Jail for two months before being released on bail. He has accused government supporters of carrying out communal attacks on the country’s minority Hindus.

None of those arrested have been charged with involvement in the bombings. The round-up took place under Bangladesh’s Special Powers Act, which provides for detention without charge in cases involving anti-state activity. Amnesty International expressed concern about the arrests and the fate of those who are being held incommunicado.

While Prime Minister Khalida was quick to blame the Awami League, she immediately ruled out any connection to Muslim fundamentalist groups. “The planning of these simultaneous bomb attacks may look like the work of a well-organised terrorist group such as Al Qaeda but in fact this is not their handiwork,” she said.

Khalida’s Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is in coalition with two Islamic fundamentalist parties, Jamaat-e-Islami and Islamic Oikya Jote, which opposed the US invasion of Afghanistan and are openly sympathetic to the Taliban and Al Qaeda. As a result, the prime minister is sensitive to the issue of Al Qaeda activity in Bangladesh, which has the potential to open up divisions in the ruling alliance.

Last October, the BNP regime angrily rejected claims made in *Time* magazine that Al Qaeda members were present in the country. Last month, the government also detained two journalists from the British Channel 4 television network, who were making a program on Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh, and asked them to leave the country.

Khalida is engaged in a balancing act. She is in a coalition with Islamic fundamentalist parties but at the same time seeks to maintain relations with Washington. If the government comes under pressure from the Bush administration to act against alleged Al Qaeda elements in Bangladesh, it will create tensions in the ruling coalition and also add further fuel to growing popular

hostility to the US administration's policies.

The Awami League has denounced the detention of its members and blamed the bomb blasts on Islamic fundamentalists connected to the government. "It appears that an identified fanatic terrorist group within the ruling alliance is behind the heinous crime," opposition leader Hasina declared. She demanded the immediate arrest and trial of the offenders.

Sections of the ruling elite are seeking to strengthen an alliance with Washington under the guise of a joint struggle against terrorism. An editorial in the *Daily Star* commented on December 10: "Be it the act of a local crime cartel or a religious group with international terror links, the incident has once again given us a reminder that the country is not at all prepared to fend off global terrorism." Two days later, the newspaper openly called for "US or European assistance in this matter".

It is not clear who carried out the bomb blasts. But the target could indicate the work of Islamic fundamentalist groups that have previously denounced films, including popular Bengali action movies, as an anti-Islamic Western influence. Whoever was responsible, the bombings were callous acts calculated to kill and injure as many innocent people as possible.

The explosions occurred as the government mobilised 40,000 troops, along with police, as part of its "anti-crime" Operation Clean Heart, which has resulted in the arrest of around 10,000 people. Soldiers in Mymensingh were immediately deployed to cordon off the theatres and to maintain public order. But the question remains as to how the perpetrators were able to carry out the bombings in the midst of the dragnet.

The blasts conveniently diverted public attention from Operation Clean Heart as it was coming under growing criticism. At least 38 of those arrested in the round up have died in unexplained circumstances. While the military has put the deaths down to "heart attacks," friends and relatives have blamed the methods used by soldiers and police. In late November and early December, numerous letters appeared in the Bangladeshi newspapers questioning the army operation.

The Mymensingh bombings were not an isolated incident. In September, a bomb blast in Satkhira, a district town 180 km south of Dhaka, killed two people and injured more around 200. Last year, nearly 100

people were killed in a series of bomb attacks at open-air functions, public meetings, a mosque and a church. These terrorist acts are a symptom of a deep-going social and political crisis that no section of the ruling class has any solution to.



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