

# Attack on Bangladesh opposition rally heightens political tensions

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Bangladesh faces further political turmoil after a deadly attack on a rally of the opposition Awami League on August 21, which almost claimed the life of party leader and former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Blaming the ruling coalition, the Awami League has held a series of protests and strikes throughout the country, demanding the government's ouster.

The attack took place during a rally of 15,000 Awami League supporters outside the party's headquarters in the capital Dhaka, called to protest bomb attacks, political killings and the rising Islamic fundamentalism. Grenades were thrown at the stage as Sheikh Hasina was finishing her speech. Hasina was bundled into her bulletproof car and rushed away. While she escaped major injury, 20 others were killed and 300 were injured.

A number of prominent party leaders were injured, including former water resources minister Abdur Razzak, former Dhaka mayor Mohammad Hanif, and presidium members Kazi Jafarullah and Ishak Ali Khan. The leader of the Awami League's women's wing, Ivy Rahman, succumbed to her injuries three days after the attack.

The attack, which involved the use of military grenades, appears to have been well planned. A little-known Islamic fundamentalist organisation, Hikmat-ul-Jihad, claimed responsibility but gave no reason for the bombing. In a letter to the media, the group warned: "Don't think that Sheikh Hasina is out of danger. We missed... but now we will be very careful in our mission."

The bombing, which was the third this year on an Awami League rally and the second during August, sparked violent anti-government demonstrations across the country. In Dhaka, Awami League supporters clashed with police through the night of August 21 and the next day. Around 230 people were arrested in the main port city of Chittagong on charges of violence. Nationwide strikes on August 24-25 brought the country to a halt.

Further wildcat strikes have brought several cities to a standstill. Universities, higher education institutions and schools closed last weekend after the Awami League's student body announced an indefinite national strike. On August 30, the Awami League women's wing called another hartal—a strike and closure of businesses—the fourth since the attack. The

government has reacted with a mass mobilisation of police.

The Awami League has accused the Bangladesh National Party (BNP)-led government of Prime Minister Khalida Zia of being behind the attack. Opposition leaders point to the fact that the BNP is in coalition with two Islamic fundamentalist parties—Jammat-e-Islam and Islamic Oikya Jote. These parties, they allege, "want to destroy secular politics".

For its part, the government has denied any involvement. Zia condemned the attack as "cowardly and heinous" and expressed her "deep shock" over the incident. The government has appointed a senior High Court judge, Jaynul Abedin, to probe the attack. The Awami League has angrily rejected the proposal, noting the failure of similar inquiries in the past, and called for an international investigation.

BNP political secretary Harris Chowdhury rejected the claim that Islamic extremists were to blame. "One thing I want to make sure—this country had been established and identified as a moderate Islamic country," he said. "There is no room for fundamentalism here. If fundamentalism appears on the scene that should be dealt with seriously."

While the BNP and its Islamic allies may not have directly organised the attack, they bear a major responsibility for the political climate in which Islamic extremist groups have grown in influence. Military dictator Major General Zia ur-Rahman established the BNP in 1977. He appealed to Islamic communalism as a means of countering the Awami League, which led the breakaway from Pakistan in 1971 on a vague program of secularism, nationalism and socialism.

After Zia was assassinated in 1981, his successor Lieutenant General Hossain Muhammad Ershad adopted an explicitly communal orientation. He made Islam the state religion and revived the Jamaat-e-Islami, which was widely despised in Bangladesh for its opposition to the 1971 breakaway. Jamaat-e-Islami leader Motiur Rahman Nizami is accused of leading a militia that tortured and executed those fighting the Pakistani army. The current BNP leader Khalida—Zia's widow—retains close ties to the military apparatus and Islamist organisations.

The ability of the BNP to hold onto office, as well as the emergence of Jamaat-e-Islami and other Islamic fundamentalist groups, is, however, a function of the political bankruptcy of the Awami League and its various left apologists. Bangladesh

remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with immense social disparities between rich and poor. The Awami League won office in 1996 election but failed to fulfill any of its promises to ameliorate the social conditions. The party was widely viewed as being just as corrupt as the rival BNP.

The BNP won the October 2001 election by exploiting popular hostility not only to the Awami League, but also to the preparations for the US attack on Afghanistan. The British-based *Economist* magazine noted at the time that “the election campaign is being given much less prominence in the country’s newspapers than the events in Afghanistan and Pakistan”. In the past three years, Jamaat-e-Islami, which was represented in cabinet for the first time, and other Islamist groups have sought to channel the growing opposition to Washington’s criminal policies in Afghanistan and Iraq into a reactionary communal direction.

Like the Awami League, the BNP has proven incapable of addressing any of the pressing social issues confronting the Bangladeshi masses. The *Daily Star* recently bemoaned the fact that in a nation of 140 million around 70 million people live below the official poverty line, 30 million are unemployed or underemployed and 80 million people are illiterate. Some 60 million people have no access to safe water and between 110 and 130 million have no access to natural gas, even though the country has vast gas deposits.

As opposition has mounted toward the government, Zia has become increasingly reliant on her allies—the police and military, on the one hand, and Islamic extremists, on the other. The August 21 bombing of the Awami League rally was not an isolated incident but is part of an escalating climate of political violence. At each turn, the government has used outbreaks of violence as the pretext for major police mobilisations that have been directed as much at the opposition parties as the alleged perpetrators. In December 2002, for instance, Zia seized on a series of cinema bombings to arrest prominent Awami League leaders.

Zia’s actions have emboldened Islamic extremists, who feel that with parties like Jamaat-e-Islami in power they can act with relative impunity. An armed Islamist group known as the Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) has been operating openly the northwest of the country since April, terrorising villagers and imposing its own version of Islamic law. Headed by “Bangla Bhai” (Bengali Brother), the group has killed at least 10 people, two of whom were tortured to death. Although Zia has ordered his arrest, the police have not detained Bangla Bhai.

The Ahmadiyya, a tiny Islamic sect, which is regarded as heretical by Sunni extremists, has also come under attack. Its mosques have been repeatedly surrounded by hostile mobs that have disrupted religious ceremonies and defaced walls. Accommodating to this pressure, the government has banned the group’s books, declaring that they distort Islam. The BNP’s ally, the Islamic Okiyo Jote, has issued an ultimatum to

Zia to declare the Ahmadiyya as “non-Muslim” if she wants to stay in power.

The country’s press has also come under pressure. *Prothom Alo* recently confronted mass protests by fundamentalists after suggesting that Islamic religious schools in the rural southeast were being used to train Islamic militants. The newspaper’s editor Matiur Rahman told *Time* magazine that copies of the paper have been burned at demonstrations and a bomb has been thrown at one of his journalists. The protesters demanded the paper be closed and the editor arrested.

Sections of the media have criticised the government for its “indifference” to political violence and the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism. Referring to the government’s attitude to Islamic extremists, the *Daily Star* commented in an editorial on the August 21 attack: “Using these deviants for selfish purposes would be giving life to a Frankenstein.” Nevertheless, like the Awami League and its allies, the press has no political answers to any of the underlying social and political contradictions fuelling the current crisis.

The bombing of the Awami League rally provoked concerns in Washington and New Delhi. US ambassador Harry Thomas visited Hasina to express his sympathy. The US State Department issued a statement, declaring: “The perpetrators of this heinous act clearly intend to undermine democracy in Bangladesh... They must not succeed.” But the Bush administration’s neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq has been a major factor in enabling Islamic extremists to gain a hearing in Bangladesh.

India, Washington’s strategic ally in the region, is considering a more direct role in Bangladesh. Dr. Subhash Kapila from the Indian thinktank, the South Asia Analysis Group, wrote on August 23: “The United States and India, chiefly, need to put their heads together to prevent the emergence of another security headache in South Asia, impinging on their national security interests and also their mutual convergences in this field.”

Zia has no desire to alienate Washington but she is walking a fine line and cannot afford to lose the support of her Islamist allies. The prime minister turned down a suggestion from Saudi Arabia in early August to provide troops for a Muslim force to assist the US occupation of Iraq. She also refused an Indian offer of police assistance in the investigation of the bombing of the Awami League rally.

Any attempt by either the US or India to intervene more aggressively in Bangladesh will only further destabilise what is already a highly volatile political situation.



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