

Dozens shot in Bangladesh protests against death sentence for Islamic leader

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As of yesterday, at least 62 persons were dead after a crackdown by security forces on protests led by the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) party against the death sentence issued by Bangladesh's International Crime Tribunal (ICT) against JeI Vice-President Delwar Hossain Sayedee. Several people also died in attacks by JeI activists.

Sayedee, an opposition parliamentarian whose organization is allied to the main bourgeois opposition party, the Bangladeshi National Party (BNP), was sentenced on February 28.

These tribunals have been reconstituted by the ruling Awami League (AL) to prosecute war crimes charges arising from the 1971 mass uprisings in Bangladesh against Islamist officials.

The AL government of Prime Minister Sheik Hasina deployed tens of thousands of police, border guards, and military forces throughout the country, including in the capital, Dhaka. The government also banned public assemblies. After the JeI called a two-day protest strike yesterday, the military was mobilized in the country's northern districts as well. Protestors clashed with police, attacked ruling party offices, and set fire to vehicles.

Over 98,000 JeI leaders and activists "have been sued in 15 districts in connection with Thursday's [February 28] violence", *The New Nation* reported.

The JeI is a reactionary fundamentalist outfit, which is notorious for its violence against political opponents and its record of participating in war crimes and religious provocations. Discredited in the population, it won only 3 seats in parliament in the last general election in 2009. However, the Hasina government is using the war crime tribunals and provocations to divert mass opposition against its rule and strengthen its hand against the working class.

Sayedee, 73, was the third person tried by the ICT. On January 21, the tribunal imposed capital punishment on a former JeI leader, Abul Kalam Azad, in absentia. On February 5 JeI Assistant General Secretary Abdul Quader Mollah was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Sayedee was indicted on charges of murder, rape and torture, and forcible religious conversion of Hindus. He allegedly supported the Pakistani army as a member of its paramilitary Razakar force. A three-member panel imposed the verdict, which his defense lawyers refused to accept.

Seven more verdicts are due. They include JeI leader Motiur Rahman Nizami and Ghulam Azam, the party chief in 1971. Two leaders of the opposition right-wing Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) also face similar charges.

The government claims the charges are related to the war crimes committed by the JeI during the mass uprising demanding greater autonomy for East Pakistan, what later became Bangladesh, in 1971.

Pakistani forces unleashed bloody repression on the insurgent masses. Bangladesh maintains that 2-3 million were killed, while other estimates put the number between 300,000 and 500,000. Women were raped, properties destroyed, and over 10 million fled to India as refugees. Fearing mass movement would spill across the border, New Delhi intervened militarily, defeating Pakistan and supporting the creation of Bangladesh.

Islamic fundamentalist groups including JeI opposed independence from Pakistan and backed the crimes of the military. The ICT was first established in 1973, by then-Bangladeshi President and AL leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Mujibur was ousted from power and killed in a coup in 1975, and the military ruled Bangladesh until 1990. The military was forced to

allow a return to civilian rule amid mass struggles that developed against it.

When Hasina's party came to power in the 2008 elections, amid a sharp political and economic crisis, it declared it would investigate war crimes. It reconstituted the ICT in 2010.

The war crimes probe, nearly 40 years since creation of Bangladesh, has nothing to do with concern for war crimes and democratic rights. This tribunal itself is a travesty of democratic rights, in which politically-manipulated courts issue expedited verdicts up to and including capital punishment.

Hasina's discredited government, which faces a national election later this year, is seeking to divert mass disaffection through a patriotic campaign. At the same time, her government wants to maintain the abject poverty of workers and rural and urban poor to attract international investments into Bangladesh. Facing US and EU economic meltdown, the country's garment exports—its life-line of export income—has started to drop.

The government has been shaken by mass strikes and protests in the textile industry, including after last year's deadly factory fire. (See: "Worst factory fire in Bangladeshi history")

Protests that started on February 5, demanding death sentences for individuals found guilty of war crimes, reacted jubilantly to the Sayedee verdict. They began pressing for the reversal of the earlier verdict against Mollah and the imposition instead of capital punishment. Protests continued for several days in Shahbagh, a Dhaka locality, attracting students and youth through social media and obtaining the support of poets, artists and intellectuals.

This movement appeared to be a spontaneous expression of outrage over war atrocities. However, its main demands—for death sentences against the accused and for a ban on the JeI—would only strengthen the hand of the government and the state. Already, the Hasina government and the corporate media are using these demands for their own reactionary purposes.

Hasina reportedly told the media that ICT judges should be sympathetic to protesters' demands. Her government has brought retroactive laws to appeal for a harsher sentence against Mollah.

Attending a funeral of a student believed to have been killed by JeI goons, Hasina hinted that her government

would ban the organization. She added: "We will do to them what is necessary. They have absolutely no right to be in politics in free Bangladesh".

The BNP, the main opposition party, which is in a front with the JeI, is seeking to exploit the government's anti-democratic crackdown. BNP has called a strike on Tuesday after the JeI-called protest is over. At a public meeting, BNP leader Khalida Zia demanded Hasina's resignation, pointing to her statement requesting that ICT judges be sympathetic to protesters' demands.

The *Daily Star*'s March 1 editorial, titled "Sayedee reaps as he sowed", wrote that the tribunals and their procedures "have been successfully tried out, with the result that the processes have been strengthened for justice to be done to the victims of the crimes against humanity in the 1971 Liberation War".

The Stalinist Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), the Socialist Part—an AL ally—and other fake left parties have backed Shahbagh protests to confuse workers and youths and are pushing the government to ban the JeI and "other religion-based political parties". They are working to strengthen the AL and the state, under the pretext of suppressing the right.

Hasina government's moves are a warning to the Bangladeshi working class. Unable to address any social and democratic issues, the Bangladeshi government is going further to the right.



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