

Islamist political leader executed in Bangladesh

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21 December 2013

Abdul Quader Mollah, a leader of Bangladesh's Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), was executed by hanging on December 12 after the country's Supreme Court rejected an appeal to review his death sentence. Mollah, 66, was the JeI's assistant general secretary. He was convicted of war crime charges, including murder and rape, related to the Pakistani army's repression of the 1971 mass uprising that led to the succession of East Pakistan and formation of Bangladesh.

The JeI collaborated with the army's brutal operations, which resulted in the death of hundreds of thousands of civilians, the widespread rape of women and destruction of property. More than 10 million refugees fled to India. Fearing that the mass movement would spill over the border, New Delhi intervened militarily to defeat the Pakistani army and support the creation of an independent Bangladesh headed by Awami League leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

While JeI leaders bear responsibility for atrocities, the current Awami League-led government is cynically exploiting the issue of "war crimes" in the lead up to national elections on January 5 to divert public attention from its record in office. There is widespread opposition among workers and the urban and rural poor to the government's austerity measures and the anti-democratic methods used against protests and strikes.

Last year, a High Court decision banned the JeI from taking part in elections on the grounds that it contravened the country's constitution by acknowledging "the absolute power of God." The government supported the case brought by the Tariqat Federation, itself a religious-based organisation for the Sufi Islamic sect.

Mollah was convicted in February by the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT)—a domestic Bangladeshi court set up in 2010 after the Awami

League won the 2008 election. The court and the trials have been widely criticised by international human rights organisations.

In a submission to the UN in April, the US-based Human Rights Watch commented: "The trials conducted thus far have been replete with irregularities. The defence has alleged intimidation and harassment of their witnesses, including the November 2012 abduction of a witness from the gates of the courthouse. In December 2012, the *Economist* published a series of intercepted communications between the senior judge and an external adviser, suggesting close and prohibited collaboration between the judge, prosecutors, and the government."

The Asian Human Rights Commission was even more scathing in its assessment, writing in March: "The tribunal is a political weapon of the incumbent government and its 14-party alliance led by the Bangladesh Awami League. Persons, who are close to the Awami League are not investigated for war crimes, though there are strong allegations against them. Similar allegations of bias exist concerning investigation and prosecution, that naturally is reflected in the adjudication of cases."

In the case of Mollah, he was initially sentenced to life imprisonment. This provoked protests by the largely middle-class Shahbagh movement in Dhaka, calling for the death penalty. The government used the demonstrations to justify amending the tribunal law to allow the prosecution to appeal the verdict. On appeal, the Supreme Court reversed the life sentence and imposed the death penalty on Mollah.

In addition to Mollah, the "international" tribunals have convicted 10 people, of whom eight have been sentenced to death. Another five accused are awaiting verdicts.

Mollah's execution was hailed in the mainstream media as well as by petty-bourgeois layers associated with the Shahbagh movement. The JeI is undoubtedly a reactionary Islamist organisation that has used violence against opponents. However, the anti-democratic methods by the government to try and execute Mollah will in the future be used against the working class.

Mollah's hanging has sparked fresh violence across Bangladesh. At least 21 people were killed during protests on Sunday and hundreds have been arrested.

The execution took place in the midst of political turmoil leading up to the January 5 election. The opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and its allies, including the JeI, have held six major protests since October, demanding the Awami League hand over power to a caretaker government. Another protest is due to start today. Since late November, more than 100 people have been killed—many of them shot dead by the police and paramilitary forces.

The government amended the constitution that called for the appointment of a caretaker government during an election period. In doing so, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina exploited the mass resentment towards the previous military-controlled caretaker government that postponed the election for two years.

The government is exploiting the political tensions to ensure the elections are held under conditions of a police clampdown. On December 12, Hasina told party leaders to “activate all fronts keeping the [party] workers and activists alert on the streets along with the law enforcing personnel till January 5 election.”

The election commission has called on the government to deploy 50,000 army personnel from December 26 to January 9 in the name of protecting the electoral process.

The government is campaigning against the BNP on the basis that the opposition is supporting war criminals. In response, BNP leader Khalida Zia accused the government of “using the trials to weaken the opposition.” In power, Khalida and the BNP were just as ruthless as the Awami League in their abuse of democratic rights and suppression of political opposition.

The US and European Union have expressed “concerns” over the hanging of the Islamic leader and election violence. The concern of these powers is not for the democratic rights of working people but over

worsening instability in a country that functions as a major cheap labour platform, especially for the manufacture of garments.



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