

Death sentence for Bangladesh Islamic leader commuted

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Bangladesh's Supreme Court last month commuted the death sentence of Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) leader Delwar Hossain Sayedee to life imprisonment. Supreme Court Chief Justice Muzammel Hossain did not explain his decision for reducing the sentence.

In February 2013, the country's so-called International Crime Tribunal (ICT) sentenced Sayedee to death after finding him guilty on 8 out of 20 war crimes charges. These included mass killing, rape, arson, looting and forcing minority Hindus to convert to Islam, crimes committed during the country's secessionist war from Pakistan in 1971.

The Supreme Court verdict was in line with efforts by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government to avoid further violent clashes with JeI supporters and to strengthen its hand against the Bangladesh working class. Angry protests erupted across the country following last year's imposition of the death sentence.

Sayedee, who allegedly supported the Pakistani army as a member of its paramilitary Razakar force in 1971, was one of several JeI leaders charged with war crimes. JeI is the largest Islamist party in the Muslim-majority country and notorious for its religious provocations and violent attacks on political opponents.

The Awami League, which played a leading role in the 1971 secessionist movement, claims three million people were killed by the Pakistan military and pro-Pakistan Islamic fundamentalist formations in an attempt to suppress the uprising. Other estimates put the number at between 300,000 and 700,000. Over 10 million were forced to seek refuge in India. Fearing the conflict would spill across the border, New Delhi intervened militarily, defeating Pakistan and supporting the creation of Bangladesh under the Awami League.

The Hasina government, which came to power in

2008, took the decision to re-establish the ICT in 2010. Senior JeI officials and others involved in the Pakistani military's atrocities were put on trial not out of sympathy for war crime victims but as a political manoeuvre to divert growing opposition in the working class against abject poverty and increasing attacks on living conditions.

The ICT has so far convicted six JeI leaders—four received the death sentence, including Sayedee, and two others life imprisonment. Abdul Quadar Mollah, a senior JeI leader was given a life sentence last year but the Hasina government, backed by various protests groups, appealed to Bangladesh Supreme Court and he was hanged in March.

Hasina approved last month's Supreme Court ruling, cynically declaring that "the people would have been happy if the Supreme Court had upheld [Sayedee's] death sentence" but the judiciary was "independent." Bangladesh Attorney General Mahbubey Alam echoed this, stating that he had "hoped for the death sentence" but made clear that there would be no government challenge to the Supreme Court ruling.

Bangladesh's *Daily Star* also endorsed the verdict with an editorial on September 18 declaring that the verdict was based on "an exhaustive process" and "we respect the judgment." Likewise, a *Dhaka Tribune* editorial stated that the judges had "acted with due judicial regard for the facts before them."

Gonojagoron Moncho, a coalition of 23 protest organisations demanding maximum convictions for those charged war crimes, alleged that the Supreme Court ruling was a result of the Hasina government's "entente" with JeI.

Addressing a press conference in New York last week, Hasina rejected suggestions that her government had reached an accommodation with JeI. She was in the

US to attend the UN's annual general assembly meeting. Notwithstanding her denials the Hasina government in the recent period has softened its attitude towards the right-wing Islamist organisation.

While the Awami League supported a High Court action last year banning JeI from contesting this year's election, Bangladesh Law Minister Anisul Huq in May ruled out legal action against the JeI as a party to the war crimes, a reversal of the government's previous position. Huq's statement was widely criticised by Gonojagoron Moncho.

Prime Minister Hasina, however, defended her law minister, telling the press on May 31 that he "was legally correct" and that there were "legal obstacles" in prosecuting the JeI.

The JeI responded to last month's Supreme Court verdict with a statement criticising the ruling and the Hasina government, but limited its protests to two days.

In February 2013 and early this year, the JeI, backed by its main ally the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, called major demonstrations against Sayedee's death sentence. More than 100 people, mainly civilians, were killed during violent clashes with the armed forces.

Sheikh Hasina previously aligned herself with the JeI in the 1996 election campaign against the then Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government. JeI later became the main political ally of the BNP.

Although there is no overt indication of a deal between the ruling Awami League and the Islamist party, Hasina is hoping to politically isolate and undermine the BNP as it seeks to encourage more foreign investment.

The US and European imperialist powers have repeatedly warned the ruling Awami League and opposition BNP to avoid their bloody conflicts. The garment sector in Bangladesh has produced huge profits for US and European retail corporations. Their concern is that these clashes could further undermine social stability and force them to look for cheap labour elsewhere.

According to official government estimates, \$US142.56 million per day was lost to the Bangladesh economy during the violent protests leading up to last January's sham general elections. Garments account for 80 percent of Bangladesh's export income but working class unrest over wages and unsafe, appalling working conditions is widespread.

During a recent visit US Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Stephen J. Rapp also warned the Hasina government and Bangladesh's ruling elite not "to use the criminal process to prosecute a political party or a large group." Though no specific organisation was named, Rapp's comments were clearly directed to the government and its previous plans to prosecute JeI.

Washington's concern is not democratic rights. Its overriding objective is to secure the Awami League government's support for the US "pivot to Asia" targeted against China and a loosening of its economic and military relations with Beijing.



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