

Nineteen sentenced to death over 2004 grenade attack in Bangladesh

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On October 12, a Bangladesh special tribunal sentenced 19 people connected to the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) to death over a 2004 grenade attack at a political rally held by current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who was then the leader of the opposition.

The verdict, delivered 14 years after the attack, comes amid mounting conflicts within the political establishment. Hasina's Awami League-led government is seeking to cripple the opposition BNP and intimidate any opposition to its rule.

The grenade attack killed two dozen people and wounded around 300, including Hasina. In his sentencing remarks, Judge Shahed Nuruddin said the attack was intended to kill the Awami League's leadership.

The convicted include former Home Affairs Minister Lutfuzzaman Babar and a deputy minister of industry, Abus Salam, both of the previous BNP government. Tarique Rahman, the son of the main opposition leader Khaleda Zia, was sentenced to life imprisonment. Rahman, who is in exile, was tried in absentia.

Others who face the death penalty include alleged members of Jarkat-ul-Jihad, a banned Islamic fundamentalist group. Seventeen others received life imprisonment. Another eleven received sentences of between six months and two years.

The ruling Awami League welcomed the decision, but those convicted protested their innocence. Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, the BNP's general secretary, claimed the verdict and sentencing was a "naked manifestation of political vengeance" orchestrated by the Awami League.

The BNP is known for brutal attacks against political opponents and may well have been behind the crime. However, the harsh sentences dovetail with the

attempts of the Awami League to eliminate opposition to its rule, in the lead up to a general election slated to be held later this year or early 2019.

Khaleda Zia was sentenced to five years' imprisonment last February, on trumped-up corruption charges. She is now in a state-run hospital, afflicted by multiple medical problems. Khaleda and her son Rahman, the BNP's most prominent figures, cannot contest the election because of their convictions.

The infighting within the ruling elite comes amid a turn toward increasingly autocratic forms of rule by the Hasina government. Amid mounting social tensions, it has taken steps to muzzle the media and attack protesting workers and youth.

The administration is preparing to enact a new digital security law that will further erode press freedom and curtail dissenting voices online. The Digital Security Act was approved by the country's president, Abdul Hamid, on October 8. It combines the draconian colonial-era Official Secrets Act with new repressive measures.

Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu claimed that the law was necessary to "safeguard the digital space and society." He stated: "It is not a law against mass media or democracy."

Journalists and human rights groups rejected these assertions. Amnesty International warned that the legislation could be used to limit online political discussion and crack down on dissent, labelling it a "dangerous restriction on freedom of expression."

Dr. Asia Nazrul, a professor of law at Dhaka University, told *Prothom Alo*, a Bangladesh newspaper, the laws were one expression of "the darkest period in the name of Bangladesh's democracy."

Under Section 25(a) of the legislation, individuals can be sentenced to up to three years in prison for

publishing information that is “aggressive or frightening.” Section 31 provides for sentences of up to 10 years’ imprisonment for posting information that “ruins communal harmony or creates instability or disorder or disturbs, or is about to disturb, the law or order situation.”

Media organisations are already under attack. Bangladesh ranks 146 on Reporters Without Borders’ world press freedom index, behind Burma, Cambodia and South Sudan. Its ranking was 118 in 2002, when the index began.

There are also reports of opposition leaders, students and activists disappearing under suspicious circumstances. The Dhaka-based human rights group Odihikar commented: “The fear that opposition leaders and activists could be subjected to enforced disappearance ahead of upcoming elections is now taking place in reality.”

A report released by Odhikar this month said 30 people were picked up by law enforcement agencies in September alone for political reasons, a sharp increase from a total of 28 in the first eight months of the year. Three of the latest victims were found dead and one remains missing, while 26 were belatedly confirmed to have been arrested. Meetings and protests of the opposition also have been obstructed.

On August 5, Shahidul Alam, a prominent photo-journalist, was arrested for giving an interview to *Al Jazeera*, in which he accused the government of clinging to power by “brute force.” Despite 25 human rights organisations, including the Committee to Protect Journalists and Amnesty International, issuing a statement calling for his release, Shahidul remains behind bars.

The Awami League government fears that the growing discontent among ordinary people will trigger a social explosion. In July, the government brutally suppressed protests by university students and unemployed graduates who were seeking changes to quotas for entry into government jobs.

Anger among the country’s 40 million garment workers, over poor working conditions and poverty wages, is also growing. Hundreds of workers demonstrated in Dhaka last month for a minimum monthly wage of 16,000 Taka (\$US189.63).

The government and the major employers rejected the demands, seeking to ensure that the industry remains

globally competitive, on the basis of super-exploitation.

The increasingly autocratic measures of the government are a further warning that it is preparing to unleash the full force of the state against the emerging struggles of the working class.



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