

## **On the Shahbagh Movement Against War Criminals of 1971**

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Some young people gathered on the crossroads of Shahbagh in Dhaka on February 5, 2013, to protest against the judgment of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) which sentenced Kader Mollah, a 1971 war criminal, to life imprisonment. They demanded capital punishment for Mollah and eight others who are now under trial in the ICT.

In many ways it was an extraordinary situation. First, this demand was being made to a war crimes tribunal which has been constituted for the first time after forty-two years since the end of the war of independence and the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971. Second, the trial is being conducted only of some local collaborators of the then Pakistan government and the Pakistan army. The 195 Pakistani army officers who were initially identified as the principal war criminals and on whose bidding the collaborators committed their crimes have been left out of this trial.

Today it seems amazing that, in spite of the Bangladesh government occasionally demanding apology from Pakistan government for war crimes of 1971, a demand for the return of the 195 army criminals for trial in Bangladesh was never made. Instead, the Awami League (AL) government under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had forgiven all the arrested Pakistani army personnel, including the 195 identified criminal army officers, and returned them to their country as a gesture of goodwill towards Pakistan! In this case, in their own interest, India played the role of a decisive mediator. Referring to this gesture of goodwill Sheikh Mujibur Rahman 'magnanimously' declared that the people of Bangladesh knew how to forgive and forget.

Yet in spite of this, in fact false, declaration of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on behalf of the people of Bangladesh, the latter never forgot the atrocities committed against them, and they have always sought justice against the military and civilian war criminals who perpetrated every imaginable crime against them. Nothing could be a more conclusive proof of this than the movement for the proper trial and punishment of the 1971 war criminals which began on February 5.

A small number of young men and women started the movement, but almost immediately it began to spread like wildfire all over the country. The way it spread cannot be properly explained only in terms of people's desire to try and punish the war criminals of 1971. In this connection it should be noted that the movement was started by a new generation of people who had no direct experience of Pakistani atrocities committed in 1971. They were not even born at that time. Thus the stirring which happened was caused by reasons other than the mere desire of the people to punish the war criminals, though on the surface nothing else was visible. It actually happened because the ground was prepared by what happened to the people of this country since the independence of Bangladesh.

During the independence movement and the war, the aspirations of the people were very high. But after independence the government led by Sheikh Mujib threw overboard what the people actually stood for and what they understood by the spirit of the liberation war.

This is a situation which cannot be understated in trying to understand the Shahbagh movement. It appeared as the focal point of the revolt against what the ruling classes of Bangladesh and the ruling parties, including the AL, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), etc, had perpetrated upon the people of this country since independence.

Generally, people, including the online bloggers (initiators of the movement), suspected that the failure to impose the death penalty on Kader Mollah was a result of a secret understanding between the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat) -- the party which opposed the independence war and collaborated with Pakistan -- and the Awami League, who were believed to be trying to isolate the Jamaat from the BNP and break up their election alliance. Thus initially the Shahbagh movement was directed not only against the Jamaat, but also indirectly against the Awami League government who were assumed to have influenced the court.

The movement against war criminals gathered considerable momentum on February 6 and huge masses of students and young people, in tens of thousands, assembled in Shahbagh and continued to stay there round the clock. They began to stay there even during the night, chanting slogans demanding the death sentence for Kader Mollah and others under trial. They also declared that they would not allow any political party to join the movement. They even threw water bottles at some AL leaders who went there and wanted to speak. Realizing the seriousness of the situation and in order to direct attention away from them and to somehow contain the movement, the AL moved quickly. Direct interference being out of question, they employed some pro-AL intellectuals who are always found at their service. Taking advantage of the anti-Jamaat position of the bloggers who are leading the movement, AL intellectuals and cultural activists aligned themselves with them and saw to it that no other issues were raised by the Shahbagh movement except death penalty for the war criminals and imposition of ban on Jamaat-e-Islami. In this they succeeded. But it was quite significant that no picture of Sheikh Mujib was displayed at Shahbagh, which is very usual in situations like this, and no slogan was permitted to glorify him in spite of some sporadic attempts to do so. Occasionally a few AL leaders could manage to speak there, but their profile was low and they were convincingly marginalized. It was quite amazing because of the fact that in order to show their after-the-fact support for the Shahbagh movement the AL government took the unprecedented step to supply food and drinking water to the thousands of people who maintained their presence day and night uninterruptedly for weeks at the Shahbagh crossroads. Temporary toilet facilities were also provided. Adequate police protection was given to protect them against any possible Jamaat attack.

The bloggers used modern technological facilities to communicate with one another and more widely, and to gather the people at Shahbagh and then spread the movement to other areas of the country. But a few of them, numbering about five, being quite irresponsible, overzealous, and mischievous launched an anti-Islam propaganda and even slander campaign against prophet Mohammad. It would not be a matter of surprise if this was instigated by some quarters as a part of an expectable conspiracy. But whatever was the case, the Jamaat people found it quite handy

as a strong propaganda issue. What might seem surprising is that some of the pro-Jamaat newspapers, websites, and spokespersons reprinted and extensively publicized the same slanders against Islam and the prophet which they themselves denounced. They spread the material far beyond what was possible for the original bloggers in order to denounce all the bloggers and the Shahbagh movement as anti-Islamic. In spite of repeated and strong protests by the leaders and workers of the movement, the Jamaat propaganda continued unabated. They tried to divide the people as pro- and anti-Islam. This helped the AL immensely, because it provided an opportunity for them to fraternize with the activists of the Shahbagh movement.

The Jamaat-e-Islami continued their propaganda against the bloggers, began to call strikes day after day, and then unleashed a reign of terror on the streets by throwing cocktails and home-made bombs, torching vehicles, shops, and office buildings and making attacks on innocent office-goers and other commuters. They even set fire to inter-city trains in Rajshahi and Dhaka.

On February 28, the ICT gave death penalty to Delwar Hossain Sayedee, a Jamaat leader and war criminal. The Jamaat reacted against it by declaring a strike and indulging in large-scale vandalism in Dhaka and throughout the country. The police, including armed police, came out in large numbers, baton-charged and tear-gassed them, and in an unprecedented manner opened fire upon the crowds, killing about a hundred people and injuring hundreds of others in a single day. A few policemen were also killed during the confrontation.

At this stage, the BNP, which had so far kept distance from the Jamaat and had not aligned themselves with their agitation, came out in support of Jamaat. Departing from their earlier position they also termed the Shahbagh movement as a movement of atheists and anti-Islamic elements. The organizers of the Shahbagh movement were not anti-religious or anti-BNP. They had requested them to support their cause. They opposed all strikes called by the Jamaat, but declined to oppose a strike called by the BNP, declaring at the same time that they were not against other political parties and their programs. But the BNP, by joining the Jamaat movement against the trial of war criminals, tended to push the Shahbagh movement closer to the AL.

The leaders of the Shahbagh movement have declared that their movement would continue until all the war criminals are hanged. But no movement like this can retain its steam for long. It may continue somehow, but a return to the days of February is unlikely. If the movement could develop into a movement for democratic rights, for fulfillment of the aspirations of the people during the war of independence, then it could be a different story. But the bloggers are no politicians, they have no deeply rooted ideological orientation for leading, or even initiating, a political movement, and in spite of not allowing any direct involvement of the AL with this movement, they are under the umbrella of pro-AL intellectuals and cultural activists. It now seems that the Shahbagh movement is losing its steam and has already begun to peter out.

But this does not mean that the movement will fail to create a positive impact on the subsequent political developments in this country. This uprising of the great masses of young people happened because the social ground for this kind of movement was already created by the situation obtaining in the country and the Kader Mollah case was the spark which made it happen.

It turned out to be a big and widespread spontaneous movement. But a spontaneous movement does not mean a movement that emerged without the prior development of necessary objective social relations and conditions. The failure to try and punish the war criminals by the regime of Sheikh Mujib and the successive regimes, the wanton plunder of public property and resources, the high and widespread corruption by the ruling parties, the deprivation of the people in all areas of life, and the brutal suppression of all democratic and progressive political activities and movements for a long forty-two years have created a situation in which people are desperately wanting a social change. The movement indeed started by calling for the death penalty of 1971 war criminals, but this only superficially indicates the real cause of this movement. It may be considered as a spark which initiated it. But the real causes lie deep in the womb of the society.

It has to be mentioned at this point that the inability of the pro-Awami League intellectuals and cultural activists to display the picture of Sheikh Mujib, the so-called father of the nation, at the Shahbagh crossroads; their inability to raise slogans for glorifying him, and the inability of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to visit Shahbagh and address the gathering there clearly indicate a process of rejection of the existing pattern of politics, including the amorphous political humdrum of the AL in the name of preserving and promoting the spirit of the liberation war.

For forty-two long years the newly-formed middle class people, the students, and the youth of this country had been engaged in the pursuit of their own interests and remained politically inactive. Taking advantage of this, the ruling-class political parties drew the students and the youth into their orbit, the vicious circle of their corruption, plunder, and terrorism. Any thought of social change and action was almost completely absent among them. In spite of the fact that the objective of the Shahbagh movement has no direct relation with a movement for social change, in spite of the fact that the state of the society would remain unchanged even if all the war criminals were hanged, the political situation in Bangladesh will not be the same. It is not blind optimism to believe that henceforward the students and the youth, and the people in general, would turn their attention to the basic problems facing the people, that they would rapidly and increasingly realize the need for a basic and meaningful social change, try to organize and formulate their social and political thinking, and begin the fight for the kind of social change which would fulfill the aspirations of the working people.

In 1971 the people of this country achieved independence and got a new state, but their aspirations were thrown down the drain by the new predator ruling classes and the political parties. In this sense the war of people's liberation remained incomplete. In spite of certain great limitations of the Shahbagh movement, and in spite of political difficulties created by both sections of the ruling clique raising the bogey of communalism, a new chapter in the struggle for social change has been inaugurated. The people of Bangladesh -- Bengalis, Santals, Mundas, Rakhains, Hajangs, Garos, Biharis, the ethnic communities of Chittagong Hill Tracts and others, irrespective of religion and language -- are henceforward not going to be passive onlookers of the criminal exploitations and repressions of the ruling classes and their parties. Conditions for their rise to the occasion have been created by the Shahbagh movement in spite of the many serious limitations and failings of the movement itself.

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