VIEWPOINT

OF DEATH AND DEMOCRACY:
BANGLADESH’S CONTESTED SECULARISM AND THE ROAD AHEAD

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Every year in February the Dhaka University area proudly hosts its "Ekushey Boi Mela" or the Book Fair commemorating the 21st of February, now celebrated as the International Mother Language Day. With spring in the air, the fair is a time of celebration of the Bengali language and the struggle for cultural sovereignty that gave the language its place in the world. It is a festive event that energizes Bangladesh’s intellectual capacity and their conviction in the power of words and the pen. This year, the boimela was taking place amidst turbulent national politics, stemming from a seemingly unresolvable struggle for power between the Bangladesh Nationalist Politics (BNP) and the Bangladesh Awami League, in which the general populace has been held hostage since January 5th of this year. The current round of trouble began when the opposition party and its leader Khaleda Zia’s proposed rally marking one year of what they and many others saw as an illegitimate election was thwarted. Khaleda Zia’s office was blockaded with trucks full of sand bags so that she could not hold the rally. Her confinement led to protests from the BNP who called for blockades disrupting travel and movement of people and goods into and out of the capital city of Dhaka. The BNP also called hartals—or a general strike during the five working days of the week. Blockades and hartals, as disruptive as they are for the economy and everyday life, have gained acceptance as “legitimate” political protest over the course of time. What stands out as unacceptable this time is the unleashing of petrol bombs and other explosives on ordinary citizens compelled to disregard strikes due to the necessities of everyday life and livelihood. The “targeted” killing of citizens and the dead and charred bodies are what a struggle for power between the two political parties seems to have been reduced to. While negotiations between the two parties, strengthening of democratic institutions towards a way out of the impasse would have given citizens hope, they are now left with the images of the dead bodies, accompanied by a certain despair and hopelessness of things to come.

The Ekushey book fair brought some semblance of normalcy drawing in the crowds, authors, poets and activists, for festivity and also in the hope that words and ideas may continue to be celebrated in Bangladesh. The annual fair, however, was not to end on a hopeful note. Avijit Roy, a prominent blogger and activist, was hacked to death just outside the fair grounds on the last evening. Avijit, who lived and worked in the United States, was on holiday in Bangladesh with his wife. He had been on the target list of Ansarullah Bangla—a militant, Islamist group who had Avijit on their list to kill for his writing allegedly against religion in general and Islam in particular, promoting rather a scientific and rationalist worldview. Avijit formed and regularly wrote on the blog “Muktomona” (the free-minded). This was not the first murder committed for offending religious sentiments. Writer Humayun Azad was brutally hacked on the very same date eleven years ago outside the book fair. While he had survived that attack, several others in more recent times, have not been as fortunate. In 2013 when Shahbag was soaring with demands of the death penalty to war criminals of 1971, Rajib Haider was brutally murdered, also for hurting religious sensitivities by allegedly defaming Prophet Muhammad. In 2014, two other murders took place. One was of a university professor, and the other a “moderate” Muslim clergy.
The killings have not gone without protest, aired on the media, voiced by civil society members and some politicians. However, none of the cases have been resolved and the murderers brought to justice. Lapses in the investigative and judicial apparatus in the country parallels a certain societal attitude where many voices echo the sentiment that these writers should not have written all they did, that perhaps it would have been prudent on their part to draw a line before such calamity befell them. The larger issue that these opinions reflect is that of freedom of expression in a nation where secularism has gone through several amendments and where Islamists have become a political power broker. Many agree that today in Bangladesh, a conservative Islamic rhetoric enjoys greater cultural acceptance than possibly ever before. This embattled history of secularism takes place in the midst of struggle for refinement of a democracy that took off on the heels of electoral participation, with even that currently jeopardized. However, the contested socio-political terrain is not without its “achievements.” Bangladesh boasts a continuous growth rate of 6%. It is the second largest ready-made apparel exporter in the world, and it ranks higher than its neighbors on key social indicators such as female education, rates of maternal mortality, and a lower rates of son-preference.

Successes in economic and social indicators have rendered Bangladesh quite the poster child of development. Given its aspiration to become a middle income country within the next decade, Bangladesh’s problems lie more in issues around political and economic governance. Can Bangladesh truly attain its economic potential, or more importantly will the political turmoil and governance failures allow Bangladesh to reach these goals? The question of democracy, democratic practice and institutions thus becomes almost singularly relevant to ensuring prosperity and justice. Currently, the political terrain offers two groups that are locked in a bitter battle, and where neither side promises to deliver on the required standards of a peaceful democracy. The democratic era of 1991 to the present time has not seen the emergence of an alternative political party or platform ready to contend with the two existing parties. Most alarming is both parties’ increasing courtship with violence that attacks each other as well as the ordinary citizen. A dysfunctional and extremely centrally authorized political culture only breeds and even naturalizes violence. Thus, the kind of brutality unleashed on Avijit may indeed signal the rise of militant Islam aiming to proscribe freedom of expression, but it does so on the wings of a larger political culture almost formalized within the “democratic era” whose capital is violence and incentives impunity. Furthermore, the hostility shown by political parties towards civil society groups and their demands foreshadows proscription of speech, ideas and mobilization—a hostility that can be hijacked, translated and applied to different victims towards different ends.

It would be a waste to have these deaths go in vain. Literature in the social sciences suggests that dead bodies are symbolic, and in the midst of political turmoil they foretell political transformation. As we mourn Avijit and demand that his murderers are tried and punished with no delay, it is important to think about what kinds of overlapping and cross-cutting transformations await Bangladesh. If the order of today’s modern world is democracy, what kinds of changes would do justice to the bodies brought to public view in the name of democracy, or secularism or religion? And in charting those changes, how do we write the narrative of a secular Bangladesh that has wrestled with its history, its people and ideas and practices of tolerance and respect? These are some of the issues that are brought to light again through the murder of Avijit Roy. It is these questions that keep occupied those Bangladeshis who direly want a change out of impasse and bloodshed.

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