

Blasphemy in Bangladesh:

Attacks on Secularist Bloggers and Why They Should Matter to Canadians

Rafida Bonya Ahmed and Eric Adriaans

On February 26th of 2015, Islamic terrorists attacked Rafida Bonya and her husband, Dr. Avijit Roy, as they left the Annual National Book Fair, a nationally renowned event attended by thousands of Bangladeshi citizens. Dr. Roy and Ms. Bonya were Bangladeshi-American citizens and Humanists, visiting their homeland. This article contains comments and perspectives of Rafida Bonya, first presented at the British Humanist Association's 2015 Voltaire Lecture, and of Eric Adriaans, National Executive Director of Centre For Inquiry Canada.

When we were leaving the well-lit, crowded book fair to get back to our car, Avijit and I were brutally attacked by Islamic fundamentalists. In an area surrounded by police officers, video cameras and thousands of people, we were stabbed repeatedly with machetes. Nobody came to help us. The police stood by. We owe thanks to a young journalist who rushed us to a nearby hospital a little later. But Avijit was killed and I was badly injured as a result of four stab wounds around my head and my thumb was sliced off. I have had multiple surgeries to repair damaged nerves and arteries. I am still undergoing medical treatments.

Avijit was perhaps the most prominent victim of machete-wielding fanatics, but he was neither the first, nor the last victim. Since his murder at the end of February, Islamist fundamentalists have assassinated another three humanist writers in Bangladesh. The list of mur-

ders has become long and terrible. Washiqur Rahamn Babu was killed on March 30th. Two men arrested at the scene by bystanders – no thanks to the police – said they killed Washiqur despite never having read his blog themselves, but under orders from someone at their madrasahs. On May 12th, Ananta Bijoy Das was killed. Like Avijit, Ananta wrote about science and philosophy, and he edited a journal called Reason. He was very close to us, he called me sister and worked with us for a long time. On August 7th, Niloy Neel was murdered in his own home. After all of these attacks, which go back all the way to 1999, I will ask, “How did it come to this?”

Avijit created the first online freethinking platform in Bangla called ‘Muktomona’ (which means ‘Freethinker’) in 2001 when he was a bio-medical engineering PhD student. Muktomona is not just a blog, it is a platform and a community for Bangla-speaking secular humanists. Avi was an atheist, a blogger, a writer, and above all he was a secular humanist who tried to answer the larger questions in life. Avijit wrote about science, which he loved; one of his last books was about how the universe could emerge from nothing. He wrote books about the origin of life, the science behind homosexuality and about love from the perspective of Evolutionary Psychology. He even wrote a literary piece regarding the relationship between Nobel Laureate Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore and the Argentinian feminist writer

Victoria Ocampo. But two of his books, titled *Philosophy of Disbelief* and *Virus of Faith*, created far greater attention.

For religious fundamentalists, criticism of religion is blasphemy. In Bangladesh, there is no blasphemy law, but religious fundamentalists do not care about secular laws unless they can use them to their own purposes. On October 19, 2015, these fanatics issued oppressive and bigoted threats to mainstream media, as reported by BD News 24, which included the statement that “Our directives will be the law for you from today. The consequences will be severe if you do not walk the path of Islam. Towering buildings will crumble to the ground, your heads will roll at the feet of the soldiers of Islam.” Though Avijit’s books were exceedingly popular with young and progressive readers, they attracted hostility and anger from religious fanatics.

We wrote in *Bangla* because we wanted to popularize basic, as well as cutting edge, concepts of science and philosophy in this language. I wrote a book on biological evolution named *Along the Path of Evolution*. Avi wrote countless articles and blogs; to be honest he expressed himself better through writing than talking! In fact we wrote handwritten letters to each other all the time, through all the highs and lows of our short but beautiful 13 years of life together. Anyway, he not only wrote about science and atheism, he wrote in opposition to all kinds of prejudice, injustice, unscientific and irrational beliefs. He protested injustice and intolerance in society anywhere, something which can be demonstrated in the breadth of topics he covered in his writings. His topics ranged from women’s rights to nationalism, he protested the Iraq war, wrote against the torture in Abu Ghraib, massacres in Gujrat, Palestine, even the nationalistic

views of the Bangladeshi Government and military actions against the minority ethnic groups in south-eastern Bangladesh.

Avi was also a normal human being who made his fair share of mistakes and had flaws. Above all, he knew what he was doing and

where he wanted to go. And he knew the colossal risk he was taking by standing up and being counted. He said in one of his writings:

“Those who think victory will be realized without any bloodshed are merely living in a fool’s paradise. We risk our lives the moment we started wielding our pens against religious bigotry and fundamentalism...”

Which brings us on to deeper history. Bengal was a part of the Indian

subcontinent under the British Empire for more than 200 years. In 1947, the colony was divided into two independent countries: India and Pakistan. The hasty boundaries correlated roughly with the divide between Islam and Hinduism. And, of course, that divide would result in hundreds of thousands of deaths and one of the largest human migrations in history. East Bengal became the eastern portion of Pakistan (East Pakistan) which was separated from West Pakistan by thousands of miles of Indian territory. In Bengal, a dichotomy of Bengali and Muslim identities was prevalent from the very introduction of Islam in the region. However, the Bengali cultural identity was more deeply rooted and it was inevitable that it would resurface under the political and economic discrimination and oppression of Bengalis by the ruling Pakistanis. So, the desire for independence began early and, in 1971, after an arduous nine-month Liberation war which killed millions of people, East Pakistan emerged as an independent nation-state called Bangladesh.

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The new constitution of Bangladesh had secularism, nationalism, democracy and socialism as basic principles. In reality, none of them were implemented fruitfully. The country saw an astonishing emergence of the Muslim identity after a coup overthrew the government in 1975. Principles of secularism were replaced with “absolute trust and faith in the almighty Allah” and “democracy” was replaced with autocratic military rule. Despite this, when we were teenagers during the mid and late 80s, it felt like Bengali Muslims were liberal, certainly compared to today. Since then, the political and social landscape has changed, religious fundamentalism rose in Bangladesh. A major player in this rise is the international Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami. They have their fingers into business and politics, into the most religious conservative parts of society, and they wield the financial and demographic might to influence the government.

Governments have bent their knees to their demands one way or the other.

The ruling political party in Bangladesh is the Awami League. They are supposed to be the largest secular political party in the country. Yet, in the name of political expediency, they have repeatedly submitted to religious fundamentalists, acceding to their demands and granting their wishes, in order to secure their votes. Last time they came to power with a mandate to identify senior political figures connected to contemporary Islamist parties and holding them accountable for crimes they committed in the liberation of Bangladesh.

In 2010, the War Crimes Trials began and came to a head in late 2012 and early 2013. As

the Islamists found themselves under extreme pressure, with voter support for Islamist parties declining and senior Islamists finally being found guilty of war crimes, they turned their attention to atheists. If Islamist leaders might be put to death for war crimes – that’s the sentence for War Crimes in

Bangladesh – then the secularists and atheists who called for justice must themselves be scapegoated and meet the same threat.

Fundamentalists in the past few years have therefore produced a number of hit lists, naming intellectuals, writers and bloggers they want to see dead, and made them widely available online. They came up with the infamous “hit list” of 84 bloggers in 2013, backed by mainstream political parties, who presented it to the government as a list of bloggers they would like to see arrested for “insulting religion” and sentenced to death. They proposed a new blas-

phemy law that would be punishable by death. They wanted this law to be applied retroactively to bloggers deemed to have insulted Islam. It named targets that good Islamists could assassinate; we are here reminded how medieval theologian Al-Ghazali gave all “good” Muslims the right to kill Muslim philosophers who had different opinions about metaphysical doctrines. In other words, political Islamists and extremists are systematically threatening those who dare oppose them, issuing new death threats and creating a culture of fear.

At this point, perhaps, Sheikh Hasina could have exercised secular authority. She could have said no, people have a right to demonstrate, to write, to question, to criticize. But instead, this

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is what she said: we do not need a new blasphemy law, because we already have a law against “hurting religious sentiments” and we can prosecute the bloggers under that law! So authorities received the list of suspect bloggers resulting in four arrests for prosecution.

What happens when you give bullies what they want? What happens when you accede to crazy demands? Soon, there were one-hundred thousand Islamists marching on the streets of Dhaka demanding not just “death to atheist bloggers,” but for the cancellation of planned education reforms that would

have helped girls into education. Concessions were made again. Since 2013, Islamists have been granted demand after demand, while the attackers of the first scapegoated victims – Ahmed and Asif – were never found.

Another example, most pertinent to the anti-atheist violence, is a 2013 amendment to the Information and Communication Technology Act. The Act, produced by the previous conservative government, was already oppressive – outlawing any publications, broadcasts, or websites that are “fake and obscene” and outlawing any expression which may “corrupt.” Furthermore, the Communications Act outlaws any communications that “causes to hurt or may hurt religious belief.” Those convicted of this improbable crime can be imprisoned for up to ten years, and may also be given a hefty fine.

The punishment is severe. But remember that we are talking about the original act of 2006. In this original form, all the penal sections were “non-cognizable.” This is a term unique to the penal codes of Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan; a “non-cognizable” offence is one that police officers cannot investigate, or make an arrest under, without prior permission of a magistrate. However, the amendment of 2013 made four sections of the law cognizable so that judicial oversight would not be required to en-

force these pseudo-blasphemy law provisions. It also made them non-bailable. Although section 57 (which criminalises the publication in electronic format of information that is false, obscene, defamatory or hurts religious belief) itself is not one of the “cognizable” offences, in most cases, people arrested under the cognizable section 54 (which gives police a wide power to arrest without a warrant or court order) are then also implicated with section 57 offences. This is how the law is being used in the interest of the religious fundamentalists, such that in principle any

complaint of “blasphemy” can now be escalated by any police officer.

In addition to the offence of defamation, the Penal Code had something to say about “hurting religious belief” which was applicable for only print media, and the punishment for that was also 2 years of imprisonment. As if the Penal Code was not already restricting freedom of expression enough, the new amended ICT Act has made the criticism of religion on the internet punishable with up to 14 years of imprisonment.

Islamic fundamentalism has spread for many years through Bangladesh via the support of political parties and a growing number of mosque-madrassa complexes which have been established all over country. Islamic fundamentalists use many madrasas as a way of spreading their message of hate and intolerance.

It has become a part of Bangladesh’s culture to use cleavers to protest writing. Still, after so many murders, the taboo we had of taking a stand for an atheist and practitioner of freethought has broken down.

Whenever I start to sink into the deep sense of my personal loss, I realize that for all intents and purposes that I, like *Humanist Perspectives* readers and writers alike, stand as a privileged person. We have been given platforms to speak and communicate. What of those who have no

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voice, no agency, no platform? When thousands of men and women get trafficked through the wild ocean, when girls get gang-raped in a public vehicle, when ISIS butchers behead, when they force girls into sexual slavery, when Boko Haram abducts hundreds of young women and sells them off like property, when thousands of children die in poverty-stricken nations, I see that they do not have a voice. We need to have

a collective responsibility and consciousness. As the world contemplates the massive migrations of people displaced from their homes in Syria and surrounding countries by religion-based war and violence, I urge you to consider Bangladesh, a secular nation of over 156 million people. How many of those 156 million Bangladeshis will flee from their homes in Bangladesh as religious intolerance becomes more severe and oppressive? These are not isolated events; we need to understand the global phenomenon, the political, economic and social connections.

We must, right now, in this world on the brink of so many extraordinary outrages, reach out across international borders, extend our personal circles of care and empathy to include everyone – every human being – fully and confidently as a person of moral worth. This is the way we can celebrate Avijit's life and all those who have suffered or who are at risk. In Bangladesh we are fighting machetes with pens. Everywhere, we must fight fundamentalism, the very idea of blasphemy and faith-based oppression, with compassion, rationality and universalism, and with a deeper understanding of the conflicts. This is the twenty-first century challenge of humanism.

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for the Bengali-speaking Freethinkers, and widow of assassinated writer-blogger Dr. Avijit Roy. She is also a Senior Director in the Finance Industry.

Eric Adriaans is the National Executive Director of Centre for Inquiry Canada.

Postscript

After this article was written, on October 31, Faisal Abedin Deepan of the Jagriti Prokashoni publishing house, who was the

publisher for Avijit Roy and other secular authors, was hacked to death in Dhaka, while another publisher and two writers were attacked in a separate incident. Deepan had received death threats on Facebook, his friends say. -Ed.

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