

BANGLADESH 2015: THE EMERGENCE OF RADICAL ISLAM

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1. *Introduction*

The main factors which characterised Bangladesh's political evolution in 2015 were the emergence of radical Islamic terrorism, the continuation of the trials related to the war crimes committed by pro-Pakistani organisations during the 1971 civil war, the continuation of the Rana Plaza case¹ and the positive evolution of relations with India.

In a country which, since its foundation, has been dominated by a combination of autocracy, political violence, Islamic extremism and terrorism, the spread of the radical Islam threat was more than predictable. In such a climate, it is difficult to define the dividing line between the domestic and IS (Islamic State) related roots of the wave of terrorism which engulfed the country in the year under review. But it is a fact that, in 2015, Bangladesh was wracked by continual attacks against exponents of the civil society, against Christians and foreigners, and by a massive return of political violence.²

It is worth stressing that, in 2015, political violence changed its targets and strategy. In 2013, when it had reached unprecedented heights since 1971, violence was characterised by riots and *hartals*,³ which targeted mostly political activists and law enforcing subjects.⁴ In 2015, violence was directed mainly against the common people,⁵ including children. Its dimensions were such as to make many analysts fearful of serious adverse consequences even for the promising Bangladeshi economy.

The description of the violence that upset Bangladesh in 2015,

¹ Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh in fiamme: dallo scontro politico alla guerriglia urbana', *Asia Maior 2013*, pp. 167–180.

² Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2014: Old Patterns, New Trends', *Asia Maior 2014*, pp. 223–240.

³ Mass demonstrations accompanied by the total shutdown of workplaces, offices, shops, courts of law, etc.

⁴ Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh in fiamme', pp. 172–174, 167–180.

⁵ 'IPCS Forecast: Bangladesh in 2015', *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS) Website*, 31 January 2015, p. 1.

which will be given below, may seem exceedingly detailed. However, it is necessary to realise that, although the international media have concentrated almost entirely on the attacks taking place in the West, the same situation has held true in other parts of the world, including Bangladesh. Indeed, Africans and Asians were exposed to the same threats faced by Westerners.

2. *The first anniversary of Hasina's second term (and its aftermath)*

The year began with the government's restrictions over the celebrations, on 5 January, of the first anniversary of the 2014 election and the opposition's protests, which signalled the return to «uncertainty in the political landscape of Bangladesh».⁶

A few days earlier, police and sand-laden lorries had blocked Khaleda Zia—leader of the main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)—in her office in Dhaka, allegedly to protect her. Long-distance bus services were suspended and gatherings were banned. Fakhru Islam Alamgir, the BNP secretary general, was arrested, while many other party leaders went into hiding. Tariq Rahman, Khaleda Zia's son living in London to escape the consequences of corruption charges, publicly incited the Bangladeshi people to overthrow the government. The owner of the television station that broadcast his speech was arrested, although allegedly not for political reasons, but because charged with pornography. Mahfuz Anam, editor of the *Daily Star*, condemned the «mindless suppression of the opposition».⁷ Mohammad Ershad, former dictator and leader of the Jatiya Party, Bangladesh's third largest party and a League ally, warned that his party's ministers could quit the government.

The Awami League celebrated the anniversary as «Constitution and Democracy Protection Day», while the opposition renamed it «Democracy killing day».⁸ After the assassination of two BNP members, allegedly killed by Awami League activists in the northern district of Natore, the BNP called an indefinite national transport strike. The month-long blockade turned immediately into turmoil. Bombs were thrown into two buses and about 60 people died in clashes.⁹

In spite of this new spell of violence, a year after her electoral success, Sheikh Hasina seemed firmly in control and appeared to be strengthened by international support. The US government, which in 2014

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 2.

⁷ 'Drama queens', *The Economist*, 10 January 2015.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ 'On fire', *The Economist*, 7 January 2015.

had expressed much criticism of Hasina's policy, «stopped putting public pressure on the Bangladeshi government».¹⁰

In 2015, the trial against those responsible for war crimes during the 1971 liberation war continued, with two more executions.

3. *The trial goes on*

The trial against the 1971 war criminals, started by the Awami League in 2010, went on among the usual controversies and violent retaliations.¹¹ Since the beginning of the trial, the court had prosecuted 17 people.¹² In spite of internal and international criticism, the sentences were severe. In February 2015, the tribunal ordered the execution of Abdus Subhan, age 79, former vice-president of the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), declared guilty of six out of nine charges, including murder, genocide and torture. According to the prosecutors, during the 1971 war, Subhan was the head of the JI and of a pro-Pakistani militia in the district of Pabna, in the north-west of Bangladesh. Subhan was accused of having murdered hundreds of villagers in his area, most of them Hindus.

After the sentence was passed, some disorder occurred outside the court, where three Molotov bombs were thrown by suspected opponents of the government.¹³ On 16 June 2015, the Supreme Court upheld the death penalty for 67 year old Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed, Jamaat-e-Islami's Secretary General, charged with abduction, torture, genocide and the killing of intellectuals. Mojaheed had been a minister in the Khaleda Zia government between 2001 and 2006. The Jamaat-e-Islami immediately called a 24-hour nationwide strike.¹⁴ At the end of July, the death sentence for the opposition leader and former BNP Member of Parliament Salauddin Quader Chowdhury, aged 68, was also upheld. Chowdhury was proved guilty of nine charges out of 23, including genocide, murder, torment, and forced and unfair extradition of people. Chowdhury committed the crimes while supporting Pakistan's occupation forces during the 1971 liberation war and made use of his house in Chittagong as a torture detention centre. Among Chowdhury's victims were Sheikh Mozaffar Ahmed, the founder of the Awami League in Chittagong, and his son Sheikh Alamgir.

¹⁰ 'Drama queens'.

¹¹ Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh. Crescita economica e mutamenti sociali in un paese «nuovo»', *Asia Maior 2012*, pp. 235–236; Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh in fiamme', pp. 169–171; Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2014', pp. 228–230.

¹² 'Bangladesh orders top political figure to hang', *Aljazeera*, 18 February 2015.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ 'Bangladesh upholds death sentence for top Islamist for war crimes', *Asia Times*, 16 June 2015.

BNP and JI activists loudly protested against what they claimed to be an unfair sentence. However these protests remained at the verbal level, as the BNP and JI did not call for agitation. By then, after the three month long nationwide blockade, the opposition was politically weakened.¹⁵

3.1. *The executions*

On 18 November, the Supreme Court rejected the petitions filed by Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed and Salauddin Quader Chowdhury and once again upheld the death sentences. The Jamaat called for protests the following day,¹⁶ but to no avail, as the two men were hanged on 22 November. The opposition immediately called for a general strike but, in order to prevent major disorders, thousands of police and border guards were deployed in Dhaka, Faridpur and Raojan, respectively Mojaheed's and Chowdhury's hometowns, where the funerals were held on the morning of 22 November. The Awami League's supporters greeted the executions and held parties in the streets, distributing sweets¹⁷ while, thanks to the massive police deployment, protests were muted. The general strike went on without demonstrations and the day was peaceful.

The Prime Minister has, however, been sharply criticised. Since the beginning of the trial, the main charge was that Sheikh Hasina was exploiting the trial for political gain. Some analysts warned that the executions might provoke further bloodshed in Bangladesh. However, it is a fact that an overwhelming majority of people were in favour of the trial and the execution of the war criminals.¹⁸

The issue provoked tensions with Pakistan. On 22 November, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar expressed «deep concern and anguish» over the executions.¹⁹ This statement provoked an immediate reaction from the Bangladeshi Foreign Minister, A.H. Mahmud Ali, who publicly criticized his counterpart and recalled the Bangladeshi envoy in Dhaka. As a response, Pakistan's Foreign Ministry recalled its deputy High Commissioner in Bangladesh.²⁰

¹⁵ 'Ex-opposition leader's death sentence in Bangladesh open old wounds', *Asia Times*, 31 July 2015.

¹⁶ 'Death sentences for two Bangladesh leaders upheld', *Aljazeera*, 18 November 2015.

¹⁷ 'Bangladesh hangs opposition figures for war crimes', *Aljazeera*, 22 November 2015.

¹⁸ 'Bangladesh PM's gains from shock hangings seen short-lived', *Asia Times*, 25 November 2015.

¹⁹ 'Pakistan deeply disturbed by Bangladesh executions: FO', *Dawn*, 22 November 2015.

²⁰ 'Dhaka to review ties after Islamabad's concern over execution of 2 war criminals', *Asia Times*, 6 December 2015.

Some observers pointed to the trial as the main source of political polarisation,²¹ but this view appears simplistic and biased to this author. Even if the death penalty is objectionable, justice had to be done for the 1971 war crimes.

While the sentences were issued and the political confrontation turned increasingly bitter, violence proliferated and manifested itself in a number of attacks against multiple targets, especially exponents of the secular civil society and minorities.

4. Political violence and its multiple shapes

By the end of February 2015, strikes, blockades, protests and arson had caused 30 deaths (many, including children, burned to death) and hundreds of injuries, while more than 7,000 people had been arrested.²² Many analysts compared the 2015 violence with the 2013 riots, but the 2015 wave of violence differed from that of two years previously. In 2013, the violence took the shape of clashes between at least two different factions: the supporters of the Awami League government and its opponents, especially the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami followers. In contrast, as already pointed out, the violence in 2015 was indiscriminate, directed against the common man, characterised by attacks on the crowd carried out by politically oriented gangs trained in urban guerrilla actions. Buses were the preferred targets: bombs were thrown inside them or they were set on fire, causing severe casualties and panic. Moreover, private properties and vehicles were looted and damaged or destroyed. By the end of January 2015, more than 600 motorcycles had been burned. The perpetrators were clearly connected with the opposition, especially with the BNP. The violence was indeed the uncontrolled result of the BNP's call for strikes. The outburst of violence in February 2015 has been correctly defined «as the most anti-people, unimaginative, cruel and destructive programme that the BNP is embarking on».²³ This agenda alienated the already low public support for the BNP and other opposition parties.

In the following months, the features of the violence changed and differentiated. They took three main shapes: attacks against secular writers and media people, especially bloggers; attacks on foreigners and minorities, especially Christians; and terrorism.

²¹ 'Execution of Bangladesh war criminals may trigger more revenge attacks', *Asia Times*, 5 December 2015.

²² '30 dead as Bangladesh political violence escalates', *The Guardian*, 23 January 2015.

²³ 'IPCS Forecast', p. 1; 'Bangladesh and Nepal: Review of IPCS Forecast', *IPCS*, 23 February 2015.

4.1. *Secular and independent media under attack*

In 2015, four bloggers were hacked to death. All the killings were executed with identical modality. All the victims were attacked by masked assailants who acted in groups of between two and four men. All the victims were butchered with cold weapons, such as machetes, knives or meat cleavers. On 26 February 2015, Avijit Roy, a US national born to a Bangladeshi Hindu family in 1972, was killed in the street in Dhaka. His wife, Rafida Ahmed Bonia, was also seriously injured in the attack. On his Facebook profile, Roy defined himself «as an engineer by profession and a writer by passion».²⁴ Avijit Roy had founded his own blog, *Mukto Mona*, and also contributed to other blogs and newspapers. He had authored about ten books on secularism and against religious fanaticism. Roy's most famous book was *Biswisher Virus* («Virus of Faith»). In his writing, he frequently compared religion to a disease and denied any scientific reliability in the Koran. His views about Islam were very radical, as he did not acknowledge the existence of any tolerant stream in the Muslim religion. Roy publicly condemned the attack on the school in Peshawar and on Charlie Hebdo in Paris, and debated provocative issues like homosexuality, upsetting many conservative Bangladeshis.²⁵ In spite of death threats, Roy had just arrived from the US a week before being killed. On 29 March 2015, another secular blogger, Washiqur Rahman Babu, age 27, was assassinated in Dhaka. He was so maimed that the police identified him from his voter card. Washiqur Rahman had attacked the fundamentalists in his blog.²⁶ On 12 May 2015, Ananta Bijoy Das, 32 years old, was murdered in Sylhet. Das was a banker, a progressive writer and editor of the science fiction magazine *Jukti*. He was also an activist in the Gonojagoron Mancha («People's Resurgence Platform»), an organisation connected to the Shahbag Square movement, supporting the International Crimes Tribunal and the death penalty for the criminals.²⁷ Das was connected with Avijit Roy, as he had written blogs for Roy's *Mukto Mona*. Das had also criticised Islamic fundamentalism in his blog.

²⁴ 'Avijit Roy, the blogger who wouldn't back down in the face of threats', *The Guardian*, 27 February 2015.

²⁵ Among Avijit Roy's books: *In Search of Life and Intelligence in the Universe* (2007); *Caravan of Darkness Walking with Light in Hand* (2008); *Homosexuality: A Scientific and Socio-psychological Investigation* (2010); *The Philosophy of Disbelief* (2011); 'Secular publisher hacked to death in latest Bangladesh attack', *The Guardian*, 31 October 2015.

²⁶ 'Washiqur Rahman: Another secular blogger hacked to death in Bangladesh', *CNN*, 31 March 2015.

²⁷ Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh in fiamme', pp. 169–171.

Within a few hours of Das' murder, a message was posted on Twitter by somebody concealing himself behind the nickname «Ansar Bangla 8», claiming responsibility for assassinating the blogger. Apparently, the nickname referred to the Ansar Bangla or Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), namely an extremist organisation implicated in various criminal activities, including murder and bank robbery. The same username later tweeted the message: «Al-Qaeda in Indian Sub-Continent (AQIS) claimed responsibility of [sic] killing Ananta Bijoy in Sylhet.».²⁸ AQIS posted another message in *Justpaste.it*, threatening those who insulted Allah and the Prophet Mohammed.²⁹

The police headquarters asked the Home Ministry to ban ABT for its involvement in several attacks on secular bloggers and writers.³⁰ One more attack took place on 6 August, when 28 year old Niloy Chatterjee—pen name Niloy Neel—was killed in his flat in Dhaka. Chatterjee too was a Hindu and belonged to the Gonojagoron Mancha. Responsibility for the murder was claimed by an organisation named Ansar al-Islam, apparently a local affiliation of Al-Qaeda. Niloy's wife reported that her husband had tried to file a complaint about having been threatened, but the police had refused to receive it.³¹

On 31 October, two attacks took place in Dhaka against two publishers. Both had printed Avijit Roy's books. During the first attack, the office of the Shudhdhoswar publishing house was assaulted by three men carrying cold weapons. The publisher, Ahmed Rahim Tutul, was in a conversation with two writers when the killers broke into his room. Both Tutul and the two writers were seriously wounded and had to be

²⁸ 'Al-Qaeda's Indian offshoot claims responsibility for blogger Ananta's murder, says Ansar Bangla 8', *bdnews24.com*, 12 May 2015.

²⁹ 'Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent claims responsibility for murder of Bangladesh blogger Ananta Bijoy Das', *DNA*, 12 May 2015.

³⁰ The attacks had a huge resonance in the English language press. The following is a selection of articles on the subject: 'Avijit Roy was hacked to death for his secular views. Let's share his story', *The Guardian*, 2 March 2015; 'Washiqur Rahman: Another secular blogger hacked to death in Bangladesh', *CNN*, 31 March 2015; 'Bangladesh murdered bloggers: Avijit Roy, Washiqur Rahman and Ananta Bijoy Das', *BBC*, 12 May 2015; 'Bangladeshi secular blogger Ananta Bijoy Das hacked to death in third fatal attack this year', *The Washington Post*, 12 May 2015; 'Secular blogger Ananta Bijoy Das hacked to death in Bangladesh', *The Guardian*, 13 May 2015; 'Bangladesh must act on these brutal attacks on bloggers', *Aljazeera*, 21 May 2015; 'Bangladesh: Freedom and Death', *Asia Times*, 18 May 2015.

³¹ 'Fourth secular Bangladesh blogger hacked to death', *Aljazeera*, 7 August 2015; 'Bangladesh, blogger ucciso a Dacca. È il quarto dall'inizio dell'anno', *la Repubblica*, 7 August 2015; 'Islamists use machetes to hack to death Bangladeshi blogger in his home in Dhaka', *The Daily Mail*, 7 August 2015; 'Fourth secular blogger hacked to death in Bangladesh', *The Hindu*, 8 August 2015; 'Endangered blogger', *Frontline*, 19 August 2015.

hospitalised.³² During the second attack, which occurred a few hours later, Faisal Arefin Dipan, head of the publishing house Jagriti Prakashani, was assaulted in his office in the Shahbag area and stabbed to death.³³ Both publishers had filed a complaint with the police claiming they were being threatened.³⁴ However, in these cases again the police did not take any precautions.³⁵

The attacks on the two publishers have been claimed by AQIS's affiliate Ansar-al-Islam. In a message sent to the media, Ansar-al-Islam asserted: «These two publishers were worse than the writers of such books, as they helped to propagate those books and paid the blasphemers [a] handsome amount of money for writing them».³⁶

After the attacks on the publishers, writers and citizens alike turned out in large numbers for a rally on the streets of Dhaka on 3 November, asserting the right to free speech.³⁷

The attacks on bloggers and publishers have been strongly criticised by several eminent voices including the Committee to Protect Journalists, the Blogger and Online Activist Network, and Human Rights Watch, who urged Sheikh Hasina to take steps to ensure the safety of secular writers in Bangladesh.³⁸ About 150 writers, including Salman Rushdie, Margaret Atwood, Yann Martel and Colm Tóibín, signed a letter condemning the attacks and asking the government to take measures to prevent similar events.³⁹

The role of the police is not clear. At least three victims had sought help from the police, who did not take any steps to protect them, even when the blogger issue had clearly become an emergency. The Inspector General of Police, after defending the free thinkers, declared that respecting religious feelings is a duty, so much so that: «Any offender of religious beliefs may get the highest punishment of 14 years».⁴⁰ Many

³² 'Secular publisher hacked to death in latest Bangladesh attacks', *The Guardian*, 31 October 2015.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ 'Al-Qaeda affiliate claims killing of secular publisher in Bangladesh', *Asia Times*, 31 October 2015.

³⁵ 'Bangladesh blogger killed by machete gang had asked for police protection', *The Guardian*, 7 August 2015; Sanjana Hariprasad, 'Is Bangladesh Doing Enough To Protect The Freedom Of Speech Of Its Citizens?', *South Asia Program At Hudson Institute*, 9 November 2015.

³⁶ 'Al-Qaeda affiliate claims killing of secular publisher in Bangladesh'.

³⁷ 'Bangladesh writers stage freedom rally despite fear of attacks', *Asia Times*, 3 November 2015.

³⁸ 'Secular blogger Ananta Bijoy Das'.

³⁹ 'Militant group publishes global hitlists of bloggers, activists and writers', *The Guardian*, 23 September 2015.

⁴⁰ 'Bangladesh protesters demand justice in wake of latest blogger murder', *Asia Times*, 10 August 2015.

labelled the Bangladeshi bloggers «atheists», but none of them published any blasphemous message.⁴¹

The attacks had several aspects in common: the targets, the methods and the weapons. As far as the methods are concerned, they were clearly inspired by the Charlie Hebdo assault. This aspect can be explained in two ways. The attackers may have been affiliated to IS and therefore shared its targets and methods; or they could just be politically motivated local gangs, who flaunted their affiliation to radical Islam and emulated its methods, but pursued different goals, most probably connected to local politics. The victims have some common features. Two were Hindus and two belonged to Gonojagoron Mancha. They were not common people, but they had the capacity to voice some of the values that the government was trying to promote, like the trial of the war criminals, secularism, freedom of speech and belief. These assassinations, therefore, could not just be directed against the offenders of Islam, as officially claimed, but targeted government policies, particularly the war crimes trials. Gonojagoron Mancha started in 2013 in connection with the above quoted Shahbag Square movement and can be considered the Shahbag online voice. Gonojagoron Mancha rapidly became a nationwide movement, demanding capital punishment for war criminals and safeguarding of the «nation's secular ideals that were attained through the liberation war in 1971».⁴²

In September 2015, the ABT published a hit list of 18 secular bloggers, writers and activists to be killed if they did not stop criticising radical Islam or writing about «blasphemous» topics. The targets were not only Bangladeshis living in the country, but also Bangladeshi nationals based abroad, individuals with dual nationality, and citizens of Western countries. The list includes nine persons living in the UK, seven in Germany, two in the US and one in Canada.⁴³ A prominent name in the list was Taslima Nasreen, who has lived under police protection in India for the past 21 years, after receiving death threats from Muslim fundamentalists.⁴⁴ Some individuals in the list declared their decision to continue writing and blogging. Some of them approached the police after the publication of the list. The authorities seem to have taken the matter seriously and advised the writers to take precautions to reduce the risk of

⁴¹ Nilanjana S Roy, 'The hit list: Endangered bloggers of Bangladesh', *Aljazeera*, 14 August 2015; Aroon Habib, 'Endangered bloggers', *Frontline*, 4 September 2015; Oshua Hammer, 'The Imperiled Bloggers of Bangladesh', *The New York Times*, 29 December 2015.

⁴² 'Endangered bloggers'.

⁴³ 'Militant group publishes global hitlists of bloggers, activists and writers'.

⁴⁴ 'Bangladesh jihadist group includes Taslima Nasreen in global hit list of bloggers', *India TV Website*, 25 September 2015.

attack.⁴⁵

It is unclear if the ABT has the capacity to act abroad, but the publication of the list may be a call for action potentially capable of triggering a witch hunt outside Bangladesh. The publication of the black list, indeed, may call for «lone wolf» action around the world.⁴⁶

4.2. Attacks on foreigners and religious minorities

On 28 September, the Italian aid worker Cesare Tavella was killed on a street in Gulshan, Dhaka's diplomatic area, while he was jogging. A 50 year old veterinary surgeon, Tavella was working as project manager for the Dutch NGO ICCO, within the programme Cooperation's Profitable Opportunities for Food Security (PROOFS). Witnesses reported that the assailants fled on a motorcycle and that one of them was carrying a gun. The forensic expert Qazi Md Abu Sharma, after inspecting Tavella's body, told the media that the Italian aid worker had been «shot three times from behind at close range» with a revolver.⁴⁷ The American SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors online activities of radical Islam, reported a statement released shortly after the murder, where IS claimed that a «security detachment» had tracked Tavella through the streets of Dhaka and killed him with «silenced weapons». The statement warned that foreigners should not feel confident in Muslim lands. It announced more attacks in Bangladesh on citizens belonging to «the crusader coalition».⁴⁸

The «crusader» Tavella had chosen to work in Bangladesh (as he

⁴⁵ 'Militant group publishes global hitlist of bloggers, activists and writers', *The Guardian*, 23 September 2015.

⁴⁶ 'Militant group publishes global hitlists of bloggers, activists and writers'.

⁴⁷ 'Cesare Tavella, il veterinario che voleva insegnare ad allevare animali nei Paesi più poveri', *La Stampa*, 28 September 2015; 'Italiano Cesare Tavella ucciso in Bangladesh', ANSA, 29 September 2015; 'Security alerts issued for foreigners in Bangladesh following aid worker's murder', *Asia Times*, 29 September 2015; 'Bangladesh PM blames opposition parties for foreigner murders'.

⁴⁸ 'Cesare Tavella, Isis rivendica l'omicidio del cooperante italiano: «Colpito uno spregevole crociato»', *Il fatto quotidiano*, 28 September 2015; 'Bangladesh, Islamic State militants claim murder of Italian volunteer', *Asia News*, 29 September 2015; 'ISIS Says it Killed Italian Aid Worker in Bangladesh', *The New York Times*, 29 September 2015; 'Islamic State claims shooting death of Italian aid worker, first attack in Bangladesh', *ABC*, 29 September 2015; 'ISIS claims responsibility for death of Italian man in Bangladesh', *The Guardian*, 29 September 2015; 'IS claims responsibility for killing Italian in Dhaka', *The Hindu*, 30 September 2015; 'ISIS Says it Killed Italian Aid Worker in Bangladesh', *The New York Times*, 29 September 2015; 'Islamic State claims shooting death of Italian aid worker, first attack in Bangladesh', *ABC*, 29 September 2015; 'ISIS claims responsibility for death of Italian man in Bangladesh', *The Guardian*, 29 September 2015; 'IS claims responsibility for killing Italian in Dhaka', *The Hindu*, 30 September 2015; 'Shrug off IS angle', *Asia Times*, 5 October 2015.

did in several other developing countries) to train farmers to breed cattle.⁴⁹

According to the Bangladeshi authorities, Tavella's murder was planned, but he was not the objective. The attack was rather directed against the Western presence, activities and interests in Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi authorities and the Prime Minister denied the presence of IS cells in Bangladesh.⁵⁰

According to the Italian diplomatic and intelligence authorities cooperating with the Bangladeshi investigators, the attack was deliberately directed against Tavella, yet the reasons for the murder had to be clarified.⁵¹ However, the thesis supported by the Bangladeshi authorities, according to which the terrorists' targets were not specific individuals but foreigners as such, seems to be more plausible, as shown by the assassination of a 65 year old Japanese farmer, Kunio Hoshi, on 3 October. Kunio was killed by three masked gunmen, who shot him while he was on the way to his farm in Rangpur.⁵² The murder was claimed on the same day by the IS, but the Prime Minister, who met the journalists at her residence on 4 October, once again denied any IS involvement. She asserted that the killings of the two foreigners were «part of a conspiracy to tarnish the image of the government».⁵³ The paradoxical nature of these rather indiscriminate attacks is highlighted by the fact that Kunio Hoshi had recently converted to Islam.⁵⁴ The murderers kill people who are either concerned about Bangladesh's development or who share their assailants' faith.

The murders of two foreigners in less than a week increased the alarm of Western authorities. Before the killings, the Australian and British embassies had informed their citizens that «there is reliable information to suggest that militants may be planning to target Western interests in Bangladesh».⁵⁵ After Tavella's murder, the Canadian Embassy issued a web site alert to its nationals, informing them that «attacks cannot be ruled out and could be indiscriminate. Terrorist attacks could occur at any time and could target areas frequented by expatriates and foreign

⁴⁹ 'Cesare Tavella, il veterinario'.

⁵⁰ 'Bangladesh, Islamic State militants'; 'Bangladesh PM blames opposition parties for foreigner murders; Shrug off IS angle', *Asia Times*, 5 October 2015.

⁵¹ 'Cesare Tavella, Isis rivendica'.

⁵² 'Masked gunmen kill Japanese national in Bangladesh', *Aljazeera*, 3 October 2015.

⁵³ 'Second foreigner killed in Bangladesh as Isis claims responsibility', *The Guardian*, 3 October 2015; 'Bangladesh denies Islamic State link in murder of Japanese national', *The Japan Times*, 5 October 2015.

⁵⁴ 'Japanese Kunio Hoshi converted to Islam three months before murder, locals claim', *bdnews24.com*, 5 October 2015.

⁵⁵ 'Security alerts issued for foreigners in Bangladesh following aid worker's murder', *Asia Times*, 29 September 29, 2015.

travellers. Limit your attendance at events where Westerners may gather, for example in hotels or conference centers».⁵⁶ The message issued by the American authorities warned that «in case of increased threat, US citizens should maintain a high level of vigilance and situational awareness and should exercise caution in public places including restaurants, hotels and other places frequented by foreigners».⁵⁷ Before Tavella's killing, Cricket Australia (CA) delayed the arrival of its cricket team in Bangladesh because of security concerns. The Australian authorities had received «reliable information» on the possibility of attacks by Islamic militants. A few hours before Tavella's murder, the Bangladesh authorities had already provided the Australian team with the highest security.⁵⁸

Attacks on foreigners represent a serious threat to Bangladeshi business, which depends upon foreign investments, export of Bangladeshi goods and delocalisation in Bangladesh. One of the main disruptive effects of the climate of terror spreading in the country is its negative consequences for the economy. Investors—especially in the ready-made garment sector, which is the backbone of Bangladesh economic development—have cancelled their trips to the country.⁵⁹

Sheikh Hasina promised prompt action to capture the culprits of the attacks on foreign citizens.⁶⁰ Once more, the government blamed the opposition for the violence against foreigners.⁶¹

On 5 October, a 52 year old Bangladeshi pastor from Pabna survived a vicious assault by three men who came to his house, pretending to be interested in learning about Christianity. The assailants, between 25 and 30 years old, attacked the pastor with knives. The man suffered minor injuries.⁶² Less than two weeks later, on 18 November, an Italian missionary and doctor, Piero Parolari, was gunned down by three men while riding his bicycle to church in Dinajpur. The assailants fled on a motorbike. The priest survived the wounds. Parolari had been living in Bangladesh since 1984.⁶³ IS claimed responsibility for the attempt.⁶⁴

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ «Security alerts issued for foreigners in Bangladesh following aid worker's murder».

⁵⁹ «Terror experts question Islamic State involvement in Bangladesh bombing despite claim», *Asia Times*, 26 October 2015.

⁶⁰ «Bangladesh PM».

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² «Bangladeshi pastor survives knife attack at his home», *Asia Times*, 6 October 2016.

⁶³ «Bangladesh: missionario italiano ferito in un attacco armato», *Rai News*, 18 November 2015; «Italian priest attacked by 3 gunmen on bike in Bangladesh», *Asia Times*, 18 November 2015.

⁶⁴ In the statement, the assailants also claimed an attack on a member of the Bahai religion and the murder of the politician Rahma Ali. «Islamic State claims attack on Italian missionary in Bangladesh», *Asia Times*, 19 November 2015; «Bangladesh, missionario italiano ferito in un attacco armato», *Corriere della sera*, 18 November,

Alok Sen, leader of the Hindu-Bouddho-Christian Unity Parishad in Faridpur, survived an assassination attempt. The assailants were armed with kitchen knives. The attempt on the religious leader took place on 24 November, the day after Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed's burial in Faridpur.⁶⁵

Besides the attempts on individuals, the terrorists carried out attacks on religious crowds and holy places. The Shia community was repeatedly targeted between October and December. The first strike took place on 24 October, the day of Ashura, when a series of bomb blasts killed a boy and wounded over a hundred people gathered for a procession in the old part of Dhaka. When claiming responsibility for the attack, IS defined the religious gathering as «polytheist rituals».⁶⁶

An almost identical attack killed 16 people during a Shia procession in Pakistan hours earlier, but the Bangladeshi Home Minister, Asaduzzaman Khan, denied any involvement of extremists or any connection between the two attempts. The minister, as usual, blamed the opposition for «aiming only to destabilize the situation of the country».⁶⁷ The attack provoked consternation in the country, as the day of Ashura in Bangladesh has been peacefully celebrated for some four hundred years and the Shia community had rarely been under attack in the past.

National and international experts, including the Italian Ambassador and the Italian media,⁶⁸ shared the Home Minister's doubts about IS involvement in the violence that upset the country throughout the year. An international relations expert who did not want to be identified noted that militant organisations have the tendency to attack targets where «casualties are likely be higher», ensuring that their names make headlines across the world. «By all means, this seems to be a conspiracy at maligning [sic] the global image of Bangladesh», he said.⁶⁹

On 26 November, three young men stormed into a small mosque in the Bogra district and opened fire indiscriminately on the worshippers during the function after locking the main gate. The muezzin was killed and three people were wounded. The attack has been claimed by IS, but

2015; 'Bangladesh, ferito un prete italiano', *il Giornale*, 18 November 2015; 'L'Isis rivendica l'attacco a un missionario italiano in Bangladesh', *Il Sole 24 ore*, 19 November 2015. The Italian media also reported the attack on the Shia mosque in Dhaka.

⁶⁵ 'Leader of religious unity forum attacked in Bangladesh', *Asia Times*, 24 November 2015.

⁶⁶ 'Islamic State claims responsibility for Bangladesh bombings on Shias', *Asia Times*, 24 October 2015.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ 'Cesare Tavella, Isis rivendica'.

⁶⁹ 'Terror experts question Islamic State involvement in Bangladesh bombing despite claim'.

the authorities continued to question IS's involvement and suspected that the banned Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) might have been behind the attack.⁷⁰

On 5 December, three crude bombs exploded outside Kantaj Temple in Dinajpur during a religious gathering. At least ten people were injured, three of them seriously.⁷¹ The attempt took place in Faridpur, Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed's birthplace, the same area where Parolari was assaulted a month earlier.

IS involvement in the attacks in Bangladesh is not beyond doubt. The hypothesis that the mainstream opposition parties may exploit radical Islam as an instrument to destabilise the country and topple the government cannot be discarded. Indeed, this hypothesis is shared by most analysts and by the Bangladeshi government alike. As shown above, the latter has consistently denied the affiliation of the killers to Islamic State and «blamed domestic Islamist militants and parties for orchestrating the violence in a bid to destabilise the nation».⁷²

5. *A wave of arrests*

At the time of writing this text, the attitude of the police regarding the assassinations was unclear. As already seen, in some cases the police did not take proper action to protect the victims who reported harassment and did not take any measures to protect them. The Bangladeshi authorities have been under international pressure, including in consideration of the high exposure of foreign citizens living in Bangladesh and the size of foreign investments in the country. The police's reaction only came in August 2015, perhaps after government pressure. Since then, the police have become very efficient and have carried out a series of notable arrests. When the violence against foreigners became an embarrassing issue, the police, about a week after Niloy's August assassination, arrested two suspects, Saad al-Nahin and Masud Rana, both members of the banned ABT. Nahin was on bail on the charge of attempted murder of another blogger in 2013. A further three men were arrested shortly afterwards, on 17 August 2015. They too belonged to the ABT. According to a spokesman for the Rapid Action Battalion, a paramilitary police unit, Touhidur Rahman, a 58 year old

⁷⁰ 'Islamic State claims responsibility for Bangladesh mosque attack', *The Guardian*, 27 November 2015; 'Bangladesh: Local militants stage «IS» raids to become noticed by the terror group', *Asia Times*, 3 December 2015.

⁷¹ '10 hurt in bomb attack on Hindu gathering in Bangladesh', *Asia Times*, 5 December 2015.

⁷² 'Secular publisher hacked to death in latest Bangladesh attack'.

British national of Bangladeshi origin, was the «mastermind and financier of the attacks» on Avijit Roy and Ananta Bijoy Das.⁷³ Another of the three arrested, Sadek Ali Mithu, 28, acted as the «bridge» with the alleged head of the ABT, Mufti Jasim Rahmani, in jail for the assassination of a blogger in 2013. The third man arrested, Aminul Malik, 35, apparently was not directly involved in the murders, but helped the ABT militants to escape abroad by furnishing them with forged passports. By the beginning of September, the police had arrested seven militants.⁷⁴

Cesare Tavella's alleged killers were arrested a month after his assassination, on 26 October 2015. Dhaka police held four people, three of whom have been identified as Tavella's killers.⁷⁵ The suspected assailants of the Italian priest Piero Parolari were held immediately after the attack. The Secretary General of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Mahbubur Rahman Bhutto, has been arrested, while ten more people have been held in custody.⁷⁶

At the end of November, the police detained two members of the Jamaat-e-Islami. One of them spread pro-Caliphate propaganda on Facebook under the pseudonym Jihadi John.⁷⁷

On the evening of 4 November 2015, commandos, armed with machetes, rode on motorbikes up to a checkpoint in Baroipara, in the Dhaka suburbs, and assaulted the stationing policemen. Three were seriously injured and one was killed. Most probably the attempt was a retaliation against the police for the crackdown of the previous months.⁷⁸ Between October and November, another three attacks on policemen were carried out and another officer was killed.⁷⁹

At the end of the year, on 24 December, the police raided a building

⁷³ 'Bangladesh police arrest 3 suspects in bloggers' murder', *Asia Times*, 18 August 2015.

⁷⁴ 'Two suspected Islamists arrested over killing of secular Bangladeshi blogger', *The Guardian*, 14 August 2015; 'Bangladesh police arrest 3 men in bloggers' murders', *The Globe and Mail*, 18 August 2015; 'Arrests in Bangladesh blogger murder case fail to allay fears', *Asia Times*, 18 August 2015; 'Bangladesh arrests three men including Briton over murders of secular bloggers', *The Guardian*, 18 August 2015; 'Bangladesh police charge «Islamist militants» over atheist's murder', *The Guardian*, 1 September 2015.

⁷⁵ 'Four held in Bangladesh over murder of Italian aid worker', *Asia Times*, 26 October 2015; 'Bangladesh: arrestate 4 persone per l'omicidio del cooperante Tavella', *Corriere della sera*, 26 October 2015; 'Bangladesh, quattro arresti per l'omicidio del cooperante italiano Cesare Tavella', *TGCOM24 Website*, 26 October 2015.

⁷⁶ 'Bangladesh, Isis rivendica l'attacco al missionario italiano', *Corriere della sera*, 19 November 2015.

⁷⁷ 'Bangladesh detains «Jihadi John» for IS propaganda', *Asia Times*, 25 November 2015.

⁷⁸ 'Progress fan flames of militant unrest in changing Bangladesh', *The Guardian*, 7 November 2015.

⁷⁹ 'Bangladesh to block messaging and calling apps following terror attack on law enforcement', *Asia Times*, 12 November 2015.

in the capital and seized a massive quantity of weapons and explosives, including bombs, grenades, suicide belts and substances to produce at least 200 bombs. In the operation, the police detained seven men associated with the banned Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh. When the raid started, the militants exploded bombs, fortunately without consequence.⁸⁰

Apart from the arrests, the Bangladeshi government also took several measures to combat radicalism at the international level. According to security and intelligence sources in Dhaka, Bangladeshi diaspora communities in the UK finance and encourage young Bangladeshi radicals to join the international jihad. The Jamaat-e-Islami is very active in East London. Two of three British citizens recruited by IS and killed by drone strike in Syria in August 2015 were of Bangladeshi origin. Sheikh Hasina urged David Cameron «to do more to combat radicalism, as British jihadists play a prominent role in fomenting the Muslim radicalism in Bangladesh». «The British government should take more steps on the ground», the Bangladeshi Prime Minister told the press.⁸¹

In November, the Bangladeshi government, considering that the criminals made use of apps and social media, decided to block Viber, WhatsApp and the social media for some days. On 11 November, the Prime Minister announced to parliament the decision to suspend the internet connection in the country for some days.⁸² Most probably, the internet blackout allowed the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) to put into operation Internet Safety Solutions, a system to monitor the social media and cyber activities. Several agencies have been involved in efforts to prevent cybercrimes.⁸³

On 23 December, the second secretary in Pakistan's high commission in Dhaka, Farina Arshad, was recalled to Islamabad following a request by the Bangladeshi authorities. She was suspected of having financed a member of the Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh on

⁸⁰ 'Bangladesh detains members of banned armed group', *Aljazeera*, 24 December 2015; 'Bangladesh arrests seven suspected Islamist terrorists', *The Guardian*, 24 December 2015.

⁸¹ 'British jihadist in Bangladesh fanning flames of extremism, says Dhaka', *The Guardian*, 16 September 2015. In September 2014, the Bangladeshi police had arrested a British citizen of Samiut Rahman, suspected of recruiting fighters for the Islamic State: 'British ISIS suspect is arrested in Bangladesh on suspicion of recruiting jihadists to fight in Syria', *Daily Mail*, 29 September 2014.

⁸² 'WhatsApp, Viber to be blocked, when needed: PM', *The Daily Star*, 11 November 2015; 'Internet access restored in Bangladesh after brief shutdown', *bdnews24.com*, 18 November 2015.

⁸³ 'Bangladesh to block messaging and calling apps following terror attack on law enforcement'.

trial for espionage.⁸⁴

6. Bangladesh's Muslim radicalism: identity and financial sources

In a year, the Bangladeshi authorities arrested 15 IS suspects.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, official sources continued to deny any IS involvement in the series of bloody attacks that shocked the country in 2015. Most attacks and murders have been claimed by IS and most of the arrested seem to have actually been connected with the group. However, as maintained by the government, the opposition may be involved in most, if not all, the attacks, through its militant wing, the Jamaat-e-Islami.

In a context like the intricate Bangladeshi political scene, it is difficult to identify the dividing line between domestic political radicalism and international militancy. Political identities and demands are changing in Bangladesh, where there are no less than 125 Islamist militant organisations. Seven of them are prominent: the already mentioned Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), AQIS and Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB); plus the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B), the Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT), the Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), and Sahadat-e Al-Hikma (SAH).⁸⁶ Among them, the most active groups are the ABT and JMB. They may be connected with IS, as claimed by IS itself after the attacks and confirmed by information obtained from the arrested. As far as AQIS is concerned, in September 2014, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, in a video released by Al-Qaeda, announced the formation of a new body: «Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent».⁸⁷

The emergence of violent radical Islam in Bangladesh may be explained by the competition between Al-Qaeda/AQIS on one side and IS on the other. Both organisations aspire to obtain the international leadership of Islamic extremism and both seek maximum visibility for their actions. AQIS may try to strengthen its presence in South Asia in order to claim a role in a post-American Afghanistan and in a post-Zawahiri Al-Qaeda, remaining active in a region—South Asia—where Al-Qaeda has its historical roots. On its part, IS may be engaged in challenging Al-Qaeda's influence in South Asia. In fact, at the end of January 2015, IS announced its formal establishment in the Af-Pak

⁸⁴ 'Pak diplomat recalled from Dhaka over «extremist link»', *Asia Times*, 23 December 2015.

⁸⁵ '15 IS suspects held in Bangladesh in 1 year: Police', *Asia Times*, 8 October 2015.

⁸⁶ 'Bangladesh: Freedom and death'.

⁸⁷ 'Al-Qaida leader announces formation of Indian branch', *The Guardian*, 4 September 2014.

region.⁸⁸

According to Abul Barkat, Professor of Economics at Dhaka University and an expert in the economics of fundamentalism, the Bangladeshi Islamist extremist organisations are «the militant front of the mainstream Islamist Party», the Jamaat-e-Islami. JI has created «a state within a state» and an «economy within an economy» in Bangladesh.⁸⁹ The Jamaat has established its presence in most sectors of Bangladesh civil society and economy: NGOs and microcredit, madrasas, mass media, banks and finance, the pharmaceutical industry and healthcare, real estate, trade and transport. Professor Barkat has calculated that the Jamaat's annual net profit amounts to about US\$ 278 million. The largest part of JI's income, 27.5%, derives from bank, insurance and finance. The second main source of income, 18.7%, is from the NGOs. About 10% of the total amount goes to the party's political activities. The strongest business lobbies in Bangladesh are connected with the BNP and JI, and many persons accused of war crimes control this business. Mir Quasem Ali, a Jamaat-e-Islami executive committee member sentenced to death for crimes against humanity in the 1971 war, was a business tycoon and the director of the Islamic Bank of Bangladesh Ltd. (IBBL), Jamaat's principal source of funding. The IBBL has been involved in illegal activities, some of which were carried out on Jamaat's behalf. In 2006, Mir Quasem Ali was prosecuted under the Money Laundering Act for crimes committed through the IBBL. The Islamic Bank of Bangladesh was founded in 1975 at the initiative of the Saudi Ambassador in Dhaka, Fuad Abdullah Al Khatib, and has become one of the largest banks in South Asia, with 60% of its shares held by Saudi Arabian subjects. Recently, the IBBL extended its connections with the Islamic world, forging links with the Razeed Bank of Saudi Arabia. Besides IBBL, Jamaat controls fourteen other banks, including the Islamic Bank Foundation (IBF), an affiliate of IBBL. Mir Quasem is the chief of the IBF and of the Saudi Arabian NGO Rabeta-al-alam-al-Islam. With other NGOs like the Kuwait Relief Fund and the Al-Nahiyah Trust from Saudi Arabia, Rabeta runs several projects in Bangladesh.⁹⁰ Therefore, the government's explanation for the insurgence of Islamic radicalism in Bangladesh seems to be correct. IS is probably a label to cover a network of local political

⁸⁸ Arif Rafiq, 'The New Al Qaeda Group in South Asia has Nothing to Do With ISIS', *New Republic*, 5 September 2014; 'al-Qaeda's India affiliate Made Official', *Independent Strategy and Intelligence Study Group Website*, 6 September 2014; 'ISIS Formally Establishes an Affiliate for the AF/PAK Region', *Independent Strategy and Intelligence Study Group Website*, 2 February 2015.

⁸⁹ Amitava Mukherjee, 'Economy of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh', *Dhaka Tribune*, 9 February 2016.

⁹⁰ Amitava Mukherjee, 'The Economics of Islamic Fundamentalism in Bangladesh', *Geopolitical Monitor*, 28 May 2015.

movements and organisations coordinated by JI, with the common dual objective of overthrowing the secular tradition and values represented by the Awami League since the foundation of Bangladesh and attacking the local religious minorities, namely Shia Muslims, Hindus and Christians.

7. Will IS proliferate in Bangladesh?

The attention of international experts, analysts and governments is focused on Syria, Libya, Afghanistan and other areas in the Middle East and Africa, considered the core of IS and international jihadism. Bangladesh is somehow neglected as a potential laboratory and a manpower reserve for international terrorism. However, Bangladesh, the world's third most populous Muslim country, should not be underestimated as a potential recruiting ground for radical Islamic organisations. The same applies to the huge Bangladeshi diaspora. Even if it is not possible, at present, to quantify the phenomenon, Bangladeshis living in Great Britain and other European countries are a fertile recruiting ground for radical Islamic organisations. For instance, in April 2015, an entire family of eleven people based in Britain disappeared. It reportedly joined the Islamic State in Syria. At the beginning of July, IS posted a message asserting that the family was «safer than ever with the Islamic State».⁹¹

Adherence to radical Islam is a phenomenon which involves middle class families living in metropolitan cities in Bangladesh or abroad. They are isolated, tend to lose their family networks and, therefore, recognise themselves in the religious community that symbolically replaces the extended family.⁹²

The Bangladeshi diaspora, along with Islamic charities, is the main source of IS financing. The reasons—which explain the growth of Islamic radicalism among Bangladeshi youths, both in their homeland and abroad—are similar to those which apply to other Muslim youths living in Muslim countries, in Europe and in the United States: unemployment, lack of prospects, social and political exclusion, lack of government measures and discrimination have created space for radical Islam. Within the mosques, these youths feel acknowledged and involved. Those who

⁹¹ 'Islamic State wants you! Why some Bangladeshis heed the call', *Asia Times*, 29 July 2015.

⁹² *Ibid.* A similar process has been described with reference to the spread of Hindu political radicalism among the India urban middle class in late 1980s and early 1990s. See Tapan Basu, Pradip Datta, Sumit Sarlar, Tanika Sarkar, Sambuddha Sen, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags. A Critique of the Hindu Right*, Orient Longman: New Delhi, 1993.

join the armed units are well paid. Jihad becomes a job.⁹³ In 2014, the unemployment rate among Bangladeshis in the UK over 16 years of age was 13.4%, which, as far as unemployment is concerned, made them the third most affected community in the UK after Pakistanis (16.9%) and Africans and Caribbeans as a whole (15.3%).⁹⁴ IS is able to capitalise on the lack of social and economic integration not only in Western societies, but also in Bangladesh.

Besides political violence, the country is still affected by social insecurity and a lack of fundamental rights. Among the many other challenges Bangladesh has been facing since its foundation, from poverty to climate change and environmental problems or women rights, two are particularly alarming: the violence against minors and the labour conditions.

8. *Minors at risk*

Between July and August 2015, three teenagers and a small girl were brutally killed. Muhammad Samiul Alam Rajon, 13 years old, was killed in Sylhet on 8 July. He was tied to a pole and tortured for about an hour. On 3 August, in Khulna, Rakib Hawladar, a 12 year old, was tortured to death with unthinkable cruelty. On 4 August, Sumaiya Akter, a 3 year old girl, died after being heavily beaten by her parents. The next day, Robiul Awal, 15 years old, was beaten to death for allegedly having tried to steal food. Rakib Hawladar was murdered by the owners of the garage where he had worked because he moved to another nearby garage. Witnesses reported that the boy had previously been harassed and tortured on many other occasions. Sumaiya Akter's father, Emran Hossain, was a carpenter who had fallen into debt. In order to earn some money, he and his wife duped people into thinking they had supernatural powers and could exorcise them from evil spirits. The couple used the girl to simulate a ritual, where she was beaten to expel the evils from her body. These facts attracted people's attention.

A friend of Rakib Hawladar witnessed part of the scene and reported the facts to the local media. The boy was rescued, although too late, by bystanders who, after his death, broke into the garage and brought the owners to the attention of the police. Rajon's murder was filmed and the video went on Facebook. It outraged the public and stirred a public outcry across the country. One of Rajon's murderers, Kamrul Islam, managed to

⁹³ 'Islamic State wants you!'; 'British jihadist in Bangladesh fanning flames of extremism, says Dhaka', *The Guardian*, 16 September 2015.

⁹⁴ 'Fact File – UK Labour Market Status by Ethnicity' (April–June 2014); 'Business in the Community' (<http://www.bitc.org.uk/leadingchange/Factfile/>).

flee to Saudi Arabia, but was caught by some Bangladeshi expatriates and handed over to the police. The post «#JusticeforRajon» circulated on Twitter, Facebook and the main social media. In November, four men involved in Rajon's murder and two in Rakib's murder were sentenced to death, to the cheering of the crowd gathered outside the court.⁹⁵

Thanks to the public uproar, the police were compelled to act promptly. On 12 August, people were arrested for Rajon's murder, while Rakib and Robiul's killers and Sumaiya's parents were arrested on the spot.⁹⁶ According to the Bangladeshi Shishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF)—a Dhaka based organisation promoting children's rights—at least 154 children were killed in Bangladesh between January and June 2015, 292 in 2014 and 180 in 2013.⁹⁷ Children in Bangladesh are victims of rape, sexual and other kind of abuse, and are often killed for insignificant reasons.⁹⁸ These facts prove not only that children's rights in Bangladesh are still not respected and that childhood is exposed to tremendous risks, but also that the combination of poverty and ignorance can be deadly. All the murders described above had economic motives: Rakib was a working child; Robiul was compelled to steal food; Sumaiya died because of her parents' economic problems; Rajon came from a poor family.⁹⁹ The poor in Bangladesh are powerless and are often blackmailed by criminals. Children fall prey to sexual exploitation, child labour and kidnapping for illegal trafficking.

On 14 March, the dead body of ten year old Abu Sayeed was discovered in the house of a police officer in Sylhet. When arrested, the man confessed that the boy had been abducted. The General Secretary of the Sylhet Ulama League and an officer of the Rapid Action Battalion were involved in the murder. The kidnappers had demanded a ransom of 500,000 Taka—less than 5,000 euros—from Sayeed's family.¹⁰⁰

Child suicide is on the increase in Bangladesh. In 2014, about 95 children took their own lives. According to the experts, children are depressed because they are affected by poverty, child marriage and child labour, and are forced to take responsibilities they cannot bear at an age when they should only study and play. In metropolitan areas, there are not

⁹⁵ '6 sentenced to death for murder of minors in Bangladesh', *Asia Times*, 8 November 2015.

⁹⁶ 'Series of gruesome child murders shocks Bangladesh', *Aljazeera*, 7 August 2015.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ 'Public uproar as spate of child murders continues in Bangladesh', *Asia Times*, 11 August 2015.

⁹⁹ His father was a microbus driver and his mother a housewife. Rajon was the older of two brothers. At school he attended only the fourth class; afterwards, in spite of his age, he had to sell vegetables to support his family. See Syed Tashfin Chowdhury, 'Bangladesh: A dangerous country for children', *Asia Times*, 15 July 2015

¹⁰⁰ '3 to hang for killing Sylhet schoolboy Sayeed', *Daily Sun*, 30 November, 2015.

even playgrounds, as land is being used to erect buildings and shopping centres. Children play on the streets and are frequently victims of accidents.¹⁰¹

Children have always been exploited and abused in Bangladesh. The people's fierce reaction and the role of social media in denouncing the crimes prove that awareness of children rights is increasing, but also that much has still to be done.

9. *The Rana Plaza issue*

Other powerless subjects in Bangladesh are factory workers, especially those employed by Western garment firms. According to a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report published on the occasion of the second anniversary of the Rana Plaza disaster of 24 April 2013,¹⁰² the workers continue to suffer from poor working conditions, «physical assault, verbal abuse, forced overtime, unsanitary conditions, denial of paid maternity leave, and failure to pay wages».¹⁰³

After the Rana Plaza collapse, the Western retailers set up two consortia, the Accord on Fire and Building Safety—a group of 180 companies based mainly in Europe—and the Alliance for Bangladesh, representing 26 North American firms. The two institutions have helped Bangladeshi businessmen to improve the structures of their firms and to set up an inspection regime. The two organisations oversee more than 2,000 factories. On its part, the Bangladeshi government has facilitated the registration of new unions. These now number about 400, three times more than in 2012. According to the HRW report, workers who try to form unions are often intimidated, dismissed or physically assaulted.¹⁰⁴

The Clean Clothes Campaign—an alliance of unions, NGOs and other organisations in sixteen European countries—has been campaigning since the April 2013 tragedy, demanding that companies and retailers compensate the families of the victims and the injured. The Clean Clothes Campaign has exposed many world famous companies whose clothes were produced by the factories housed in the Rana Plaza building and has

¹⁰¹ 'Bangladesh: A dangerous country for children'.

¹⁰² In the Rana Plaza disaster, 1,137 garment workers lost their lives and about 2,500 were injured in the collapse of a factory in Dhaka. Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh in fiamme', pp. 172–174.

¹⁰³ 'Bangladesh garment workers suffer poor conditions two years after reform vows', *The Guardian*, 22 April 2015.

¹⁰⁴ 'Bangladesh: Garment Workers' Union Rights Bleak', *Human Rights Watch*, 22 April 2015; 'Bangladesh: 2 Years after Rana Plaza, Workers Denied Rights', *Human Rights Watch*, 22 April 2015.

mobilised more than a million consumers.¹⁰⁵

In September 2013, representatives from the Bangladeshi government, local and international garment companies, trade unions and NGOs came together to form the Rana Plaza Coordination Committee. With the International Labour Office (ILO) acting as a neutral chair, the Committee aimed «to develop a comprehensive and independent process» to support the victims, their families and the workers, according to international standards.¹⁰⁶ In January 2014, the ILO set up the Rana Plaza Donors Trust Fund to collect the financial resources to refund loss of income and the medical expenses faced by the victims and their families. The ILO was the sole trustee. The fund was financed by a combination of donors, including buyers, companies and individuals who wished to make a voluntary donation.¹⁰⁷ In November 2014, the Rana Plaza Coordination Committee announced that about US\$ 30 million was required to cover the refund costs.¹⁰⁸ In April 2015, a week before the anniversary of the Rana Plaza disaster, 21 million dollars had been collected and nine million were still missing. Benetton, which sourced clothes from a Rana Plaza factory, eventually promised to donate 1.1 million after denying any connection with the factories in the collapsed building. Benetton's donation came after protests and a petition signed by one million people asking the Italian corporation to donate alongside other Western companies.¹⁰⁹ The companies were supposed to contribute on the basis of their share of production at Rana Plaza factories, according to ILO compensation conventions. Benetton's share was 1.8%. The Italian company donated an extra 500,000 dollars to BRAC, the main Bangladeshi NGO.¹¹⁰ Other Western companies that manufactured in Bangladesh but not in the collapsed building, donated to the fund: the US\$ 30 million target was eventually reached in June 2015.¹¹¹

On 1 June 2015, the Bangladeshi authorities filed murder charges against 41 people for the Rana Plaza collapse. Among the accused were the owner of the building, Sohel Rana, his parents, the owners of seven

¹⁰⁵ 'We Won!! Rana Plaza workers get compensation', *Clean Clothes Campaign*, 8 June 2015.

¹⁰⁶ See Rana Plaza Coordination Committee Website: <http://www.ranaplaza-arrangement.org/>.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ 'Bangladesh Rana Plaza factory fund finally meets targets', *The Guardian*, 8 June 2015.

¹⁰⁹ 'Rana Plaza disaster: Benetton donates \$1.1m to victims' fund', *The Guardian*, 17 April 2015.

¹¹⁰ Benetton's "Scheme of Compensation" for Rana Plaza victims, April 2015 (http://static.benettongroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Benetton_Groups_Report_16_April_2015.pdf)

¹¹¹ 'After two years the Rana Plaza fund finally reaches its \$30m target', *The Guardian*, 10 June 2015.

factories housed in the complex, and some government officials. Initially, the defendants were charged with culpable homicide, but later the court, due to the gravity of the accident and at the investigators' request, decided on a charge of murder. In the latter case, the defendants risked the death penalty, whereas the maximum punishment for culpable homicide in Bangladesh was only seven years in jail. The investigators changed their attitude after discovering that the management of the factories, on the day of the accident, forced the workers to enter the building despite the fact that it had developed major cracks the previous day. The police defined the Rana Plaza collapse a «mass killing». Other charges were related to the violation of safety rules, as additional floors had been built up over the existing five and had illegally housed additional factories. In December, the court issued arrest warrants and ordered the seizure of the properties of 24 suspects who had absconded. The defendants were asked to report to the police, in order to be arrested, by 27 January 2016.¹¹²

10. *A promising economy constrained by political turmoil*

Despite a slight decline in economic growth in the fiscal year (FY) 2015¹¹³ and all the challenges it was facing (on which more below), Bangladesh, according to the World Bank and the IMF, advanced 14 steps from 58th position in the world economy in 2013 to 44th position in 2015.¹¹⁴ Indeed, Bangladesh's economic growth did well in the first half of FY15.¹¹⁵ The growth rate was 6.4%—a good result, but far below the 7% rate expected by the government.¹¹⁶ According to the World Bank, the GDP growth rate should rise to 7.5–8% to accelerate the poverty reduction and improve shared prosperity.¹¹⁷ In the second part of 2015, the World Bank and the Asian Development bank had to revise their growth forecasts respectively to 6.8% and 6.7%, while inflation was expected to remain at about 6.2%.¹¹⁸

There is no survey-based evidence on poverty reduction in

¹¹² 'Rana Plaza collapse: dozens charged with murder', *The Guardian*, 1 June 2015; 'Rana Plaza: 24 murder suspects abscond before trial', *The Guardian*, 21 December 2015; 'Bangladesh: 41 on trial for the Rana Plaza disaster', *European Affairs*, 24 December 2015.

¹¹³ In Bangladesh, the fiscal year begins 1 July and ends 30 June. Accordingly, FY 2015 coincides with the period 1 July 2014 to 30 June 2015.

¹¹⁴ 'Bangladesh economy moves up 14 places on World Bank, IMF scale in two years', *bdnews24.com*, 10 June 2015.

¹¹⁵ 'Bangladesh Development Update', *The World Bank*, April 2015, p. V.

¹¹⁶ 'IMF Worried about Bangladesh's Growth', *Forbes Asia*, 11 March 2015.

¹¹⁷ 'Bangladesh Development Update', pp. 14–15.

¹¹⁸ 'What 2016 holds for Bangladesh economy', *The Financial Express*, 6 January 2016.

Bangladesh since 2010; however, it is assumed that the sustained GDP growth of approximately 6% has been the result of agricultural growth of 3.3% and remittance growth of 6.7%, which, taken together, made possible an annual poverty decline of 1.74% between 2000 and 2010.¹¹⁹

During the year under review, the global growth recovery—in particular in the US and Europe—had positive repercussions on Bangladesh, while the low international commodity prices favoured the investments and helped to contain inflation. The 12 month average inflation decelerated from 7.6% in February 2014 to 6.8% in February 2015.¹²⁰

The fiscal deficit was stable. The total budget deficit in the first half of FY15 amounted to 108.96 billion against 118.70 billion in the same period of FY14.¹²¹

The Eighth Pay and Service Commission suggested a 100% salary increase for civil servants. It was recommended that the lowest basic salaries be raised from 4,100 Taka (US\$ 52) to 8,200 Taka, and the highest basic salaries from 40,000 (US\$ 510) Taka to 80,000 Taka. The government planned to implement the Commission's recommendations gradually, beginning in FY16.¹²²

Despite its promising results, Bangladesh's economy was exposed to several challenges. In 2015, the political turmoil took a heavy toll on the economy and tested the resilience of Bangladesh's growth. Disruptions to domestic transportation due to the blockades in the first months of 2015 broke the supply chains. The apparel sector, which improved after the Rana Plaza reforms, recorded losses due to order cancellations, shipment delays and vandalism. Retailers cancelled trips and orders, shifting them to India, China, Pakistan, Myanmar, Vietnam and Indonesia. The Bangladesh Shop Owners' Association, which represents 2.5 million retailers, reported that sales dropped from 30 billion to 9 billion Taka a day.¹²³

Disruptions also had a negative effect on revenue collection, which in the first four months of FY15 was 3.2 lower than the corresponding period of FY14.¹²⁴ The pessimistic investment climate was confirmed at the end of 2015, due to the persistent risk of political instability.¹²⁵

Besides political unrest, other risks threatened Bangladesh's development. The financial sector was weak due to rigid lending rates,

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 4.

¹²⁰ 'Bangladesh Development Update', pp. V–VI and 5.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* p. 9.

¹²² *Ibid.* p. 10.

¹²³ *Ibid.* p. 3.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 7.

¹²⁵ 'What 2016 holds'.

nonperforming loans, financial scams and lack of accountability in bank management.¹²⁶ The land market was very inefficient because of long delays and high costs in property registration, lack of ownership data, weak computerisation of land records, poor zoning laws and high transaction costs. The availability of land for manufacturing enterprises was insufficient.¹²⁷

On 18 February 2015, the government approved a proposal to establish 17 special economic zones (SEZs) to attract local and foreign investors. However, the implementation of infrastructural projects was poor as a consequence of resource constraints, unrealistic targets and procedural lapses between the initiation and the completion of the projects. Corruption was often behind the delays. Sometimes projects were approved far beyond the planned inception date. Procedural delays and post-approvals held back the projects' start-up. Key projects started in 2014, mostly with foreign investments—such as the Dhaka-Chittagong four lane highway, the double tracking Dhaka-Chittagong railway, the Dhaka metro rail, the Moghbazar Flyover, the two Bibiyana gas power plants and others—were proceeding disappointingly slowly.¹²⁸

Apart from domestic factors, Bangladesh is expected to face global challenges in the short and medium term. The slowdown of the European economy may compromise Bangladesh's export competitiveness in the main European markets. Moreover, exports to the European Union risk being cancelled or reduced if Bangladesh does not succeed in improving labour and safety standards in the garment sector.¹²⁹

Female employment is the key factor in Bangladesh's short and medium term development. The country is facing a potential decline in GDP growth from the present 6% to 5.7% in FY17, because of both the labour force's decline and reduced growth in productivity. The labour force has begun to decline because of ageing, wider access to education and migration. There is a chance to increase the labour force growth by improving female employment, however: women make up a little over half the national population, but their contribution to the country's economy is far below its potential. In spite of significant progress in recent times, the labour market remains divided along gender lines and the promotion of gender equality in employment has stalled. It has been estimated that if female labour participation rates were to rise by 2.1 million a year for ten years, pushing up the total female participation to 75% of its full potential and reaching the level of Thailand in 1990, the

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 6–7.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 18.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 8–9. Regarding Bangladesh's ambitious infrastructural projects launched initiated in recent times, see also Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2014', pp. 230–237.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 14.

growth rate would rise to 7.3%. The leverage to stimulate women's participation is developing early childhood and tertiary education, technical training, and reducing legal and social impediments to pursuing a profession.¹³⁰

11. *India-Bangladesh ties grow up*

«Hum paas paas hain, hum saat saat bhi hain» (literally, «we are close close, we are also together together»)¹³¹ The sentence sounds like a line of a *ghazal*, but it is part of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's talk on the occasion of his two-day visit to Bangladesh on 6 and 7 June 2015. «We are close and united» was the ultimate meaning of Narendra Modi's words.

India is adopting a leading role in the region, with the objective also of containing China's expansion into the Bay of Bengal. In this context, Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh was the first tangible act of rapprochement between the two countries after the tensions caused by the territorial dispute dividing them and Modi's electoral and post-electoral declarations about Bangladeshi illegal immigrants in India. In fact, during his electoral campaign in 2014, Modi declared that if the BJP came to power, the «Bangladeshis would have to pack their bags and leave India».¹³² In June 2015, however, the Indian Prime Minister carefully avoided the subject. On Modi's initiative, the land boundary agreement—which had been inked in 1974, namely 41 years before, but never ratified—became effective on 6 June 2015. The agreement swapped 160 enclaves on both sides of the border, whose residents, up to that moment, had been stateless people. The enclaves were created in the eighteenth century by princely rulers and were like islands where stateless people of either country used to live. The Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) allowed about 51,000 people to choose between Indian and Bangladeshi nationalities, also giving them the right to decide to stay where they were, or to move to the other country.¹³³

In June 2015, Bangladesh and India signed 22 more agreements and Memoranda of Understanding, including «blue economy» and maritime

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 15 and 18.

¹³¹ «PM Modi in Dhaka: India, Bangladesh seal boundary agreement, pledge zero tolerance to terrorism», *Hindustan Times*, 7 June 2015.

¹³² Marzia Casolari, «Bangladesh: Old Patterns», pp. 231–232; «Modi visit: All you need to know about India-Bangladesh pacts», *Hindustan Times*, 7 June 2015.

¹³³ The India-Bangladesh enclaves date back to 1713 as the result of an unclear treaty between the Koch Bihar Kingdom and the Mughal Empire. There are 102 Indian enclaves and 21 counter-enclaves in Bangladeshi territory and 71 Bangladeshi enclaves and 3 counter-enclaves in Indian territory.

cooperation agreements. India obtained the use of the Chittagong and Mongla ports. Chittagong was developed through Chinese investment, like several other major ports in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Apparently in a rather paradoxical development, India will be able to make use of an infrastructure built by her main rival for influence in the Indian Ocean region. In fact, this development is not as paradoxical as it appears, but is the result of a tripartite agreement between Bangladesh, China and India.¹³⁴ Part of this agreement is the fact that India will build the infrastructure that will facilitate the traffic of goods not only between the Indian state of West Bengal and Bangladesh, but also between China and the Indian Ocean.¹³⁵ Also, China continues to be the main supplier of military equipment to Bangladesh and Dhaka's «most dependable partner», according to official sources.¹³⁶ On the other hand, India is emerging as Bangladesh's potential key partner in the energy sector. In fact, India has agreed to raise the power supply to Bangladesh from 500 to 1000 MW and has supported a sale to the Bangladesh Power Development Board of 3000 MW at a cost of US\$ 3 billion. In addition, two coal-fired plants with a capacity of 1600 MW are expected to be set up by the Indian corporation Adani Power, at a cost of US\$ 1.5 billion. Last but not least, Narendra Modi announced a line of credit of US\$ 2 billion to Bangladesh, while Sheikh Hasina pledged zero tolerance of terrorism.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ I want to thank Nicola Mocchi for bringing this to my attention.

¹³⁵ 'Why is India serious about Chittagong Port and Bangladesh?' *The Indian Iris*, 6 June 2015.

¹³⁶ Harsh V. Pant, 'How PM Modi's visit to Bangladesh will help reduce trust deficit in bilateral relations', *DNA*, 5 June 2015.

¹³⁷ 'Modi announces \$2-bn credit to Bangladesh', *The Hindu*, 6 June 2015; 'Modi visit'; 'PM Modi in Dhaka'; 'Modi bridges gaps between India, Bangladesh', *Asia Times*, 12 June 2015; 'Modi-fying India-Bangladesh Ties', *IPCS*, 15 June 2015; 'Modi in Bangladesh: Developments and Disappointments', *IPCS*, 23 June 2015.