

OPINION

# Bangladesh: the 1971 war crimes trials and the Shahbag Square protests

The world mustn't misinterpret a country's fight for its syncretic soul

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**Several misconceptions are afloat around the war crimes trials in Bangladesh, as well as the Shahbag Square protests, that are putting pressure on the government to take concrete steps against the Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh.**

Critics of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) have voiced reservations about the process of the trial, some have dubbed it 'unfair'. Another allegation is that the trials are being used against political rivals and 'opposition' political figures. Such concerns have percolated through the western media, lobbied by a well-oiled PR machinery working on behalf of a few leading Jamaat figures.

What these detractors fail to understand is that the country, after sending a powerful army back to the barracks through a popular uprising in 1989, is trying its best to get back to its founding principles—the syncretic secular values of the Bengali culture. It is also extremely important for them to have a closure to events surrounding the '71 war of liberation—a massively emotive issue among a majority of Bangladeshis, both in the country and abroad. The ICT is a major step towards these goals.

The country and the state hasn't created lynch mobs or death squads, or set up summary trials and simply kill opposition leaders, many of whom had admitted to have been involved in the atrocities committed in 1971. The ICT is pursuing the rule of law—however flawed—based on established norms. Also, let us not forget that the establishment of such special tribunals have always been a matter of huge debate all over the world—hailed or abused depending on which side tends to be on trial.

One sees mostly simplistic commentaries in the Indian and the international media. The huge gatherings at Shahbag Square are not about demanding death for a few Jamaat leaders. It is a lot more than that. It is going to decide which way Bangladesh will turn—towards its secular base founded on syncretism, or towards religious extremism, an alien concept imported by the Jamaat.

Leading figures of the current movement that calls itself 'Generation 70' did not even witness the war of liberation in '71 and the atrocities committed by the brutal Pakistani army and its collaborators—Jamaat-led groups like Razakars and al-Badar. Memories of those atrocities have been etched forever in the collective consciousness of the nation. But this younger generation is not just drawing inspiration from memories; one must keep in mind that many of them did lose near and dear ones, killed by the collaborators. Not surprisingly, their demand for justice for the 1971 atrocities resonated with Bangladeshis, and they spontaneously began converging on Shahbag Square.

In a way, this younger generation has been able to rekindle the spirit of the 1952 language movement, which was mounted against attempts by the ruling West Pakistani elite to impose Urdu as the national language on the Bengali-speaking East Pakistan. That year also laid the foundation for a dream of a secular nation, a dream fulfilled in 1971 after a mass uprising followed by a bloody, nine-month war. Similarly, a multitude poured on to the streets in December 1989, fought pitched battles with soldiers, and forced the military dictatorship to abdicate power.

What these crucial events in the history of Bangladesh establish is that its people have a tremendous capacity to correct the path of its polity whenever it veered away from its core value of liberal syncretism.

Jamaat, an extension of the Salafist doctrine, is a living refutation of these Bangladeshi ideals. Hence, throughout the '80s and the '90s, targets of Jamaat and its associated terror groups such as JMB (Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh), JMJB (Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh) or HUJI (Harkat-ul-Jihad-i-Islami) were the progressive, secular elements of society and rural women empowered by NGOs.

The Jamaat is also in a desperate struggle. They can sense the rising public sentiment against them; thus they have embarked on a path of violent confrontation with the state. By blaming India, Hindus in Bangladesh and orchestrating attacks on minorities, they are merely trying to divert attention from the real issues.

The Shahbag Square uprising, fuelled by the elite, middle class and subalterns alike—in sharp contrast to the Anna Hazare-led movement in India—finds Bangladesh in another watershed moment in its history. The world is witnessing a course correction of momentous nature, but unfortunately fails to grasp its importance. Like 1952 and 1971, this uprising appears to be the beacon that will decide Bangladesh's future.

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