

Bangladesh's "freethinker" movement - The Price of Secularism in Bangladesh

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In support of gender equality, human rights and civil liberties, a group of bloggers is doing battle with Islamists online — and paying dearly for it.

Until he was stabbed multiple times with a kitchen knife and forced to flee to Europe two years ago, Asif Mohiuddin was a leading member of Bangladesh's "freethinker" movement and the country's best-known secular provocateur. We met last June at a cafe on a pedestrian promenade around the corner from his apartment, a sunlit space in a shabby-chic neighborhood in northern Germany. (He asked me not to name the city.) Mohiuddin, dressed that day in jeans and a green T-shirt that proclaimed "American Atheists Convention, Memphis, April 2-5, 2015," was still getting used to the tranquillity of his new surroundings. Shortly after he secured a fellowship at a German institute and left Bangladesh, extremists serially murdered four of his friends — all secular bloggers who had criticized fundamentalist Islam and whose names appeared on "hit lists" assembled by hard-liners and disseminated on social media. "Everybody is wondering who will be next," Mohiuddin told me while picking halfheartedly at the kiwi slices on his plate.

Mohiuddin, who is 31, grew up in a Muslim family in Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital city of 14 million. The son of a middle-ranking civil servant, he studied religion after school at a mosque. "I learned many ridiculous things — that I would get virgins in heaven, or that I would suffer the ultimate punishment in hell for eternity," he said. At 13, he declared himself an atheist. Muslims make up 89 percent of Bangladesh's population (Hindus, Buddhists and Christians constitute most of the rest), and belief in God is near universal; for a child to profess such lack of faith was unheard-of, and his father was deeply shamed. While in high school, Mohiuddin read "A Brief History of Time," by Stephen Hawking, which he calls "a major influence." At 16, he picked up a Bengali science magazine that used relativity theory and other scientific principles to explain miracles described in the Quran. He felt compelled to challenge the article in print. "I wrote that it was scientifically impossible for the Prophet Muhammad to ascend to heaven on a horse," he said. The science magazine barred him from its pages, but he began contributing to the religion section of Dhaka newspapers, sharing the space with believers. "The Islamists would write during Ramadan that fasting is very good for health, that it creates new brain cells, and I would write back, 'This is [expletive],' " he told me.

In 2008, after earning a degree in computer science, Mohiuddin turned to blogging. Writing in Bengali for a website called Somewhere in ... Blog [\[1\]](#), he drew upon the thinking of Bangladeshi philosophers and agnostics like Humayun Azad, whose most famous work, "Nari," criticized the chauvinistic attitude of Islam toward women and was banned by the Bangladeshi government in 1995. (The ban was lifted five years later.) Mohiuddin's online writing grew even more strident. His posts — advocating women's rights and secular education, criticizing a law banning marriages between Hindus and Muslims, condemning communal violence targeting Hindus and questioning the infallibility of the prophet — attracted as many as one million views. They also enraged the country's

Islamists, a relatively small but increasingly vocal part of the country's population of 168 million. Mohiuddin was sometimes challenged by the Islamists to debates in Dhaka, packed public forums during which he would only anger them further. "They said, 'You should say the prayer to Muhammad before we start,' " he said. "And I said, 'Why should I?' " Gradually, the invitations stopped, and the threats began.

Threats of violence against freethinkers in Bangladesh were common, but at that point they had seldom been carried out. A rare exception was in February 2004, when Azad, then a professor at the University of Dhaka, was stabbed and critically wounded by radical Islamists near campus. He fled the country and died six months later of heart failure in his Munich apartment. Eight years on, when the radicals began to make threats against Mohiuddin, he brushed off the possibility that he would be killed.

Late one night in January 2013, four men surprised Mohiuddin as he stepped out of a motorized rickshaw in front of the I.T. firm where he worked night shifts as an office manager. The assailants struck quickly. As Mohiuddin paid the driver, they approached from behind and hit him with an iron rod, then delivered a series of rapid cuts using a standard kitchen knife with an eight-inch blade. The attackers fled down the deserted street. At first, Mohiuddin didn't realize he had been knifed; a bystander told him that he was bleeding heavily from his neck and back. He began to feel dizzy and weak, and he staggered across the road to a small private hospital. A law in Bangladesh at the time made it difficult for doctors at private clinics to treat victims of violent crimes until the police arrived to investigate. (Months after the attack on Mohiuddin, the government changed the law.)

"They said, 'Sorry, it is a police case, and we cannot save you,' " Mohiuddin recalled. "And I was shouting at them — 'Why?' "

Mohiuddin flagged down a rickshaw and made it to a second hospital, where a physician probed the two inch-and-a-half-deep wounds in his neck with his finger; he determined that he had suffered no spinal-cord damage and advised him to seek treatment at Dhaka Medical College Hospital, the city's largest hospital, which was obligated by law to treat him. By now, Mohiuddin had managed to call two of his sisters and his brother-in-law, as well as several fellow bloggers, to tell them that he had been attacked. Together they drove to the college hospital, arriving two and a half hours after the stabbing. "When I saw him on the gurney, covered with blood, I thought that he had no chance to survive," Baki Billah, a fellow blogger, later told me. Mohiuddin had lost three pints of blood and was fading in and out of consciousness, but surgeons managed to stop the bleeding from his neck and upper back. "They told me that the knife had missed my spinal cord by half a centimeter, and if it had touched my spinal cord, my body would have been paralyzed," he said, pulling down his shirt to show me a grid of reddish scars covering his left upper back.

Months later, a group of Islamic hard-liners called Hefajat-e-Islam threatened to rally tens of thousands of its followers in Dhaka unless the government arrested Mohiuddin and three other secular bloggers. There is a seldom-used British-era law — Mohiuddin had never heard of it — that mandates a two-year prison term for insulting religion. A second law, enacted in 2006 and criticized often by Mohiuddin on his blog, makes "publishing fake, obscene or defaming information in electronic form" punishable by a sentence of seven to 14 years. Bangladesh's secular government shut down Mohiuddin's blog and arrested him on April 3, about a month after his release from the hospital, on charges of violating both laws. (The hard-liners went ahead with their rally anyway three days later, drawing more than 100,000 people to Dhaka. A second anti-blogger rally a month later turned violent, leaving at least 27 people, including two policemen, dead.)

Still recovering from his injuries, Mohiuddin now found himself locked inside Dhaka's vast Central Prison. One day, as he walked along the corridor outside his cell, he heard someone calling his name

from the catwalk one flight above.

“I looked up and saw a young man on the balcony,” Mohiuddin recalled. “He said, ‘Asif, do you remember me?’ I said, ‘No, who are you?’ He said, ‘I was the one who knifed you.’ ‘O.K.,’ I said, ‘so come down, and we can talk.’”

The man came downstairs and told him that he had “wanted to do something for jihad.” An imam from a Dhaka mosque recruited him and the three other attackers, he said. “He was proud, and he was a little bit sorry, because I survived,” remembered Mohiuddin, glancing out the window of the cafe. “I asked him, ‘What will you do if you get out of the prison?’ He said, ‘I will try again.’”

When I arrived in Bangladesh on a steamy morning in early November, the country had just been shaken by a new wave of violence. Two secular publishers were targeted, and one killed, in coordinated assaults. Like Mohiuddin, they were activists engaged in a mission that has few counterparts elsewhere: challenging Islamic fundamentalism online and in print in the hope that they can slow its spread. Militant Islamists have shown increasing savvy about using the Internet as a tool to recruit followers, threaten enemies and rally ideological soul mates to jihad. They have waged hate campaigns on social media against secular writers around the globe, including the Algerian journalist and novelist Kamel Daoud and VP Rajeena, a female Indian journalist who graphically recounted sexual abuse at a madrasa in Kerala state. The bloggers of Bangladesh have co-opted the militants’ methods — facing them down on Facebook, Twitter and, above all, on the writing platforms that have proliferated in Bangladesh during the last decade — even as it has cost some of them their lives.

The online movement in Bangladesh started in chat forums in 2001 and then found a home on a website called Mukto-Mona (“Freethinker” in Bengali) [2]. The site’s founder, Avijit Roy, a Bangladeshi-American living in Atlanta, described the site as “an Internet congregation of freethinkers, rationalists, skeptics, atheists and humanists of mainly Bengali and South Asian descent who are scattered across the globe.” Members of Mukto-Mona shared their essays and those of writers they admired. Typical contributions, which often appeared in both Bengali and English, included “Why I Remain an Atheist,” by Shabnam Nadiya, and “Should Evolution Be Considered Part of Science?” by a writer who called himself T.H. Huxley Redux. The group endorsed the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights; opposed discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities, women and homosexuals; and vowed to take on “everything that hinders people’s access to civil liberty, freedom, democracy and secularism.”

At the time, few people in Bangladesh had access to the Internet, and the impact of the site was limited. That changed three years later, when a Bangladeshi woman named Syeda Gulshan Ferdous Jana, along with her Norwegian husband and a computer programmer, introduced software that converted a standard keyboard into a Bengali phonetic keyboard. They also started Somewhere in ... Blog, the first all-Bengali-language blogging platform. “Freedom of expression is a basic human right, and blogging provides us with that,” Jana told an English-language newspaper in Bangladesh as the site was gaining users. Around the same time, the government removed prohibitively expensive taxes on laptop computers, and prices dropped drastically. The open exchange of ideas on the Internet became accessible to a new generation of Bengalis. (Today, 15 million people in Bangladesh use the Internet, versus one million a decade ago; 175,000 of them contribute to the Somewhere in ... Blog.)

Mohiuddin began emailing Roy in 2007, exchanging ideas about the dangers posed by fundamentalist Islam. Mohiuddin believed that most of Mukto-Mona’s bloggers were too moderate, but considered Roy a “strong voice” whose antipathy to religion resembled his own. Roy mocked religious visions — the “Virgin Mary’s face in clouds, Hindu symbol of ‘Omm’ on cows ... or the

glorious name of 'Allah' on the waves of a tsunami" — as symptoms of an infectious disease. "Religion has been used all throughout history to justify war, slavery, sexism, rape, racism, homophobia, polygamy, mutilation, intolerance and oppression of minorities," he wrote. "These atrocities are the products of virus-infected minds."

Other prominent bloggers echoed Roy's criticism. Writing on Mukto-Mona, the satirist Oyasiquir Rhaman lashed out at what he saw as the ease with which Bangladeshi Muslims could be led into violence. "They cannot differentiate between good and bad," he wrote. He likened their behavior to "the way babies get upset and break a lot of things," adding, "They would from time to time burn the houses of the wrong kind of religious people and slaughter the atheists."

The bloggers and secularists were confronting a deeply entrenched Islamist movement, one that dates at least to the country's founding. Bangladesh was born after a war over religion. In 1947, British administrators created the mostly Muslim nation of Pakistan, dividing it into eastern and western halves with India in between. In December 1970, a moderate, secular party led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a native of what was then Eastern Pakistan, won nationwide elections. But Pakistan's military rulers annulled the vote, and troops opened fire on demonstrators. Militias loyal to the regime, including those affiliated with an Islamist political party called Jamaat-e-Islami, began house-to-house killings of intellectuals, scholars, university students, Hindus and others. After a nine-month war, in which as many as three million people died, the East emerged victorious and declared itself the independent nation of Bangladesh.

But peace didn't last. In 1975, Rahman was assassinated during a military coup, and the country began a long slide into sectarianism and political and religious violence. Military-led or military-backed governments with Islamist leanings encouraged the spread of madrasas across the country. Today, madrasas that focus entirely on religious education have expanded by some estimates from 4,100 schools in 1986 to 14,000 in 2015, educating more than one million students. These schools operate without government supervision, and many, according to a Bangladeshi former general and counterterrorism expert I met with, serve as breeding grounds for extremism.

The current government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, has pledged to uphold the democratic values that her father enshrined in the 1972 Constitution, but she has been forced to straddle an uncomfortable chasm between a professed embrace of secularism and an increasingly vocal fundamentalist movement. In a show of its commitment to secular principles, her government initiated a war-crimes tribunal for a dozen members of Jamaat-e-Islami who carried out atrocities in 1971. The group was driven underground but long remained a powerful force in Bangladeshi politics, calling for the creation of an Islamic state and the implementation of Shariah law.

In February 2013, a Jamaat leader put on trial was found guilty of crimes against humanity and sentenced to life in prison. The bloggers saw this punishment as insufficient. Hours after the verdict was read, protesters gathered at a traffic circle called the Shahbag roundabout to demand the death penalty for those indicted on war-crimes charges. The crowds swelled to tens of thousands, many alerted by notices on social media. "They were ordinary people, but the bloggers had started it all," said Mohiuddin, who was among the leaders of what soon became known as the "Shahbag movement."

Ten days after the Shahbag protests began, machete-wielding assailants murdered a young blogger, Ahmed Rajib Haider, on a street near his home in Dhaka. In February 2015, two years after Mohiuddin was attacked, Roy and his wife, Rafida Ahmed Bonya, returned to Bangladesh from Atlanta to promote his book, "The Virus of Faith," at an annual literary festival. "I warned him repeatedly: 'Do not come back now. It isn't safe for you,'" his father, Ajoy Roy, told me in Dhaka.

“But he didn’t listen.” Two weeks after his return to his homeland, as he and his wife were leaving the book fair in a rickshaw, two men set upon Roy with machetes. In front of dozens of horrified witnesses, they struck him three times on the head, penetrating his brain and killing him. His wife lost a thumb trying to protect him. The killers dropped their weapons and disappeared into the crowd.

“The police were standing nearby and watching the spectacle,” wrote a prominent blogger named Ananta Bijoy Dash, basing his commentary on eyewitness reports. “Later, the police claimed that there had apparently been no dereliction of duty.”

The attacks on Mohiuddin, Haider and Roy marked the start of a war against the blogging community. Weeks after Roy’s killing, two men armed with meat cleavers struck down the satirical blogger Rhaman. In May, masked men murdered Dash. PEN International, a group that promotes free speech, had invited Dash to Stockholm, but the Swedish Embassy in Dhaka, suspecting that he intended to overstay his welcome, rejected his visa application. He was killed a few weeks later. “It was a terrible bureaucratic mistake,” says Ola Larsmo, the chairman of PEN International’s Swedish Center. Then, in August, attackers slashed the blogger Niladri Chatterjee, who went by Niloy Neel, to death with machetes after talking their way into his Dhaka apartment. “His eyes were open,” his wife, Asha Mone, told me. “I thought that he was alive. The whole floor was completely covered with blood.”

@The attacks that occurred just hours before my arrival in Bangladesh showed a growing level of sophistication. They appeared to be coordinated, targeting two of Roy’s publishers simultaneously. One, Faisal Arefin Dipan, was killed in his office; the other, Ahmed Rahim Tutul, managed to survive. When I found Tutul, he was recovering at the Dhaka Medical College and Hospital, a cavernous structure dating to the British-colonial era. Tutul lay on his side in checkered pajamas on a narrow bed in a private air-conditioned room. His long black hair, flecked with gray, was damp, and sweat dappled his face. Three red gashes ran down his right cheek, from earlobe to jaw, and two stretched across his face, ending at his beard and mustache. “I can’t hear well,” he said weakly, asking my translator to speak up. “My ear is filled with blood.”

Tutul described a hunt that had lasted for months. First, he received suspicious calls on his phone. Then, in late October, two well-dressed young men showed up at his office, claiming to be shopping around a manuscript and peppering with him odd questions: How much rent did he pay? What hours did he work? Tutul filed a routine police report but didn’t ask for protection — and the limited resources of Dhaka’s police force meant he probably wouldn’t have received it anyway. Instead, he began keeping odd hours at his office and taking different routes to work.

Then, two days before we spoke, his assistant opened his office door in response to an innocent-sounding query from someone wanting to buy books. Wordlessly, a clean-shaven man in his 20s ran at Tutul with a sword and began hacking at his head. Two other men followed. Tutul survived after falling between a table and a chair, a niche that offered him some protection from the blows. Two friends who were in the room then fended off the two other attackers, and all three would-be killers escaped.

I asked Tutul if he planned to return to work once he recovered, and he nodded. “It’s more than a business; it’s ideology,” he told me. “I think that’s how I can change the mind-set of people. I want to go back to it.” Tutul’s wife, observing us from a corner of the room, told me that her husband needed to rest. As I left, a young police officer motioned for me to wait and sidled up to me in the hallway with a sheepish look on his face.

“Baksheesh?” he murmured, using the universal word on the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere for

“small gift” or “bribe.”

When I visited Monirul Islam, a joint commissioner of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police, in his cluttered office late one night, he complained that the government deprived him of the resources he needed to do his job. There was no separate investigative unit to deal with the blogger killings, so he was forced to handle them along with all the robberies and ordinary murders. Even so, maintained Islam, a slender, soft-spoken man, the department had made some progress.

In the spring of 2013, he and his men arrested a dozen young madrasa students involved in the attacks on Mohiuddin and Haider. All readily admitted their roles and laid out the inner workings of an extremist cell that was created with the specific intent of murdering secular bloggers. The killers were associated with a shadowy terrorist group called the Ansarullah Bangla Team that professed its admiration for Al Qaeda and published the translated pronouncements of Osama bin Laden on its website. Senior leaders of the group, Islam told me, included Jasimuddin Rahmani, a magnetic preacher at a mosque near the center of the capital. “Rahmani sermonized against the atheists,” Islam said. A mosquegoer told me: “There was a magic in his speech.”

Rahmani had no knowledge about computers, but he employed two assistants at the mosque who scoured secular websites and identified potential targets. “They would tell him, ‘Look what these people are writing about,’ ” Islam said. Rahmani set up safe houses in Dhaka where his students learned to kill. “Rahmani showed them how to conceal a machete on their bodies,” the commissioner told me, and how to deliver “two swift chops to the back of the neck, to sever the spinal cord.” Rahmani favored killing by machetes rather than by guns, Islam explained, because the weapons killed silently. “They were taught that killing with swords is more virtuous,” Islam said, “because that is how they killed infidels during the prophet’s time.”

Under interrogation, the killers detailed a painstaking methodology. Mohiuddin was the first target, but when they found him, they had only kitchen knives, and he survived. Haider was next on the list. Haider blogged on Mukto-Mona and other websites under a pseudonym, Thaba Baba, and had never publicly revealed his true identity. The five-man team assigned to kill him pored over photos of Shahbag members on Facebook, identifying him through a process of elimination. Then they followed him home from a rally and studied his movements over a period of days. On the day of a protest strike called by Shahbag, the killers played cricket in the street in front of Haider’s home, waiting until he ventured out alone at night. When he finally did, Islam said, they “slaughtered him in the road.”

The police eventually arrested a total of 15 suspects in the murders of Roy, Rhaman and Neel. But even when an arrest is made, securing convictions is difficult. The judiciary system is filled with Islamist sympathizers and is widely regarded as corrupt. “We are frustrated,” Islam told me. One of Mohiuddin’s would-be killers, I was told, was the nephew of a deputy government minister. Released from prison on bail, he turned up again as a chief suspect in another killing. Even government officials told me they were powerless to stop the violence. In his Dhaka office, the Bangladeshi information minister, Hasan Haq Inu, said: “This might continue for a certain time, and anyone can be hit. Everybody is in danger.”

With law enforcement crippled and the government unwilling to push back on fundamentalists too hard, the bloggers have been left to protect one another. Days after I arrived in Dhaka, I found myself in a three-room apartment, where 20 young men and a handful of women sat around a large table covered with parathas and steamed sweetened rice-flour cakes known as pitha. This was the unmarked headquarters of the Shahbag movement.

A cloud of cigarette smoke hung over the scene. “We’re so tense these days that everybody has

started smoking again,” said Arif Jebtik, a strong-shouldered man in his 30s who was a regular guest on TV talk shows until the killings required him to lower his profile. Jebtik told me that he now occupied first place on a new hit list. “I replaced Niloy Neel,” he said. Since Neel’s murder, the bloggers have worked together to hide those who feel that their lives are in danger. “We tell them, Lay low, and don’t use the Internet,” Jebtik said.

Still, most of the bloggers had no intention of abandoning the fight. “The Islamists are growing stronger,” Maruf Rosul told me. “They are trying to establish Shariah law and convert Bangladesh into a religious country. If you present an obstacle, you can be killed. But it’s a risk we have to take.”

Most bloggers I spoke with believed that they were up against a hidden hand — probably Jamaat-e-Islami, the fundamentalist party. The government banned Jamaat in 2013 from participating in elections, and most of its members had gone underground. Several of those facing execution for their role in the 1971 massacres had been top officials in Jamaat, and it was widely assumed that the party was targeting the bloggers in revenge for organizing the demonstrations supporting the death penalty. “We have a tradition of secularism in this country, and we have to fight for it,” Obinu Kabira said. “We have to fight for Hindus and Muslims living together, and fight for tolerance.” Making their task more difficult, he said, was their sense that Sheikh Hasina’s government was not behind them. “The governments of this country have always compromised with the extremists,” Kabira said. “This government has attacked Shahbag, saying that we are dividing the nation.”

The bloggers suspected that Jamaat-e-Islami was now working through another fundamentalist movement that had not yet been broken up by the government: Hefajat-e-Islam, the group that called for the arrests of Asif Mohiuddin and other bloggers. In the spring, Hefajat had circulated a list of 13 demands, calling for banning women from the workplace and enforcing a total separation of the sexes in public life. “The extremists are going to declare this a religious country, so we have to protect the values of our Liberation War,” said Imran Sarker, the spokesman of Shahbag, evoking the 1971 struggle that many Bangladeshis regard as a fight to the death to build a democratic society.

The Shahbag leadership had tried to reach out to the hard-liners, in a show of dedication to the open exchange of ideas. During a television appearance in the summer of 2013, Jebtik proposed a public debate with the nonagenarian leader of Hefajat-e-Islam. “We told him: ‘We are not against religion. We just want to make a good Bangladesh.’” Jebtik told me as I got ready to leave the apartment. “He said: ‘We have nothing to say to you. We just want that you should be hanged.’”

Later, Jebtik and other Shahbag leaders organized a road trip to Chittagong, a humid port city 150 miles southeast of Dhaka that serves as Hefajat-e-Islam’s headquarters. But before leaving, Shahbag members said they had received threats from Hefajat leaders, including Secretary General Junaid Babunagari, and they ultimately had to abandon the trip when the police refused to let them into Chittagong. Had they made it, an organizer told me, Babunagari said he’d be waiting and promised to cut one of them “with a sword into a hundred pieces.”

A green gate, barely noticeable along a rickshaw-choked street, marks the entrance to the Hathazari Madrasa, the country’s oldest Quranic school, which is now run by the top leaders of Hefajat-e-Islam. Visitors are rarely invited inside, but after the most recent wave of violence, the madrasa officials agreed to my request for an interview. Babunagari himself greeted me as I emerged from the taxi and beckoned me past surprised students. I walked across a scruffy, palm-fringed lawn, through an enormous complex of mosques, classroom buildings and five-story dormitories that house 5,500 students. (An additional 3,500 are day students.)

A heavysset figure with gold-frame glasses and a white shalwar kameez that strained over his ample belly, Babunagari is a highly divisive figure in Bangladesh. The local news media reported that under interrogation, he had confessed to plotting to overthrow the government by creating chaos in the streets of Dhaka in 2013 and installing an Islamic government. “The media distorted what I said — our aim is not to grab state power,” he told me, surrounded by several other Hefajat leaders. “We came without any arms, to protest peacefully, because people were using abusive words about the prophet.”

Sitting with me in the conference room, leaning back in his chair and resting his hands on his belly, Babunagari denied accusations that his movement had compiled a hit list of bloggers and activists. “We are peace-loving people,” he said as dozens of students peered at us through the open door, watching the encounter with fascination. “We are against taking the law into our own hands.” It was up to the government, he said, to “deal with the blasphemers,” by arresting them, trying them and sentencing them to a “just” punishment. Babunagari suggested that “14 years in prison” would be appropriate, though a Hefajat-e-Islam spokesman I met in Dhaka had told me that they should all be put to death.

Babunagari insisted that the bloggers had mischaracterized his movement as intolerant fanatics intent on establishing a theocratic state in Bangladesh. “We don’t have any plan to turn Bangladesh into a Saudi Arabian society,” he said. “When we consider the reality of Bangladesh right now, this is not a favorable environment to do so. We have Hindus, Christians — we want to ensure a peaceful society for them as well.”

He went on: “Islam teaches to love peace and discipline for all the people, from all religions. So according to Islam, we have been working for people from all religions. There is a Hadith about this: ‘If any Muslim kills an innocent non-Muslim for any reason, that Muslim will not be able to obtain even the smell of heaven.’”

I asked Babunagari if he had threatened to cut the Shahbag leaders to pieces with a sword if they showed up in Chittagong. “I never uttered this statement,” he said, shaking his head vigorously.

“Is it possible that you let something slip out in anger?”

“The Quran teaches us that a Muslim cannot utter a word that may hurt someone else,” he replied. “Islam teaches us to control our tongues, even in anger. You cannot say it is a slip of the tongue.”

There was ample reason to believe that Hefajat was not as peaceful as Babunagari was letting on. In 2012, hundreds of young men, many believed to be Hathazari students, vandalized several Hindu temples and burned the homes of more than 50 Hindu families in Chittagong. Last year, the police raided another affiliated madrasa, which led them to stockpiles of weapons and explosives. But evidence of misdeeds as elusive and untraceable as inciting violence against bloggers is difficult to come by. Even a well-funded, fully uncompromised police force would have difficulty. The ideas that drive these attacks could come from anywhere — from individual imams or a school as large as this one.

After lunch, Babunagari took me on a tour of the madrasa. We walked down corridors, past enormous lecture halls. In the Faculty of Hadith, an instructor chanted verses from the Quran Sharif, a revered collection of sayings of the prophet, to 2,500 students, who sat in rows on the floor and followed along in large, leather-bound volumes. In the Department of Islamic Law and Research Center, I asked a 27-year-old postgraduate fellow how those who mocked Islam should be punished.

He shifted nervously. One of Babunagari’s colleagues whispered something into the fellow’s ear.

“There is a solution for that,” the student said, but he declined to elaborate.

Joshua Hammer

P.S.

* “The Price of Secularism in Bangladesh”. The New York Times Magazine. DEC. 29, 2015:
http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/03/magazine/the-price-of-secularism-in-bangladesh.html?_r=0

* A version of this article appears in print on January 3, 2016, on page MM44 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: Fighting Words.

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.somewhereinblog.net>

[2] <https://mukto-mona.com/en>