

Shahbagh: what revolution, whose revolution?

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[William Gomes](#) [1] 26 February 2013

The protests in Shahbagh erupted apparently spontaneously in response to the first verdict handed down by Bangladesh's domestic tribunal for war crimes committed during the war of independence in 1971. The primary demand? The death sentence.

In 1973, the Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat) was banned from politics soon after Bangladesh's liberation, by the first president of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Now the daughter of Mujibur Rahman, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is planning to ban Jamaat again, in response to the demands raised by the Shahbag movement which began on 5th February 2013.

Jamaat was banned from politics by Mujib for its alleged involvement in war crimes in 1971. In 1978, Jamaat was allowed to take part in politics through the enactment of the Political Party Regulation (PPR) by President Ziaur Rahman.

In 2013, after 40 years, thousands of people went down into the road, demanding the banning of Jamaat from politics. The Shahbag protest has spread to other parts of the country, with sit-ins and demonstrations taking place in Chittagong, Sylhet, Barisal, Mymensingh, Khulna, Rajbari, Rajshahi, Rangpur, Sunamganj, Noakhali and Narsingdi and Bangladeshis in different parts of the world expressing their solidarity for the movement.

The Shahbag movement has been widely reported positively by local and international media. But selected media outlets that support opposition political parties have continued to denounce the Shahbag movement as a well-orchestrated play made by the government.

People in Bangladesh remain politically polarized between supporting and opposing the Shahbag movement and its demands.

A straw man?

On 12 February 2013, Abdul Latif Siddiqui, the Jute and Textiles Minister of the government, confirmed to media that the preparation of a draft bill banning Jamaat-e-Islami from Bangladeshi politics is underway. Journalists asked Mahbubul Alam Hanif, Special Assistant to the PM why the government did not take the initiative to ban Jamaat before, why the government is taking that initiative after demands from the Shahabg movement. Hanif answered that the government was looking for people's support before taking any major decision like this.

But many people who oppose the Shahbag movement repeatedly stress that it is the other way round: the government is trying to create anti-Jamaat sentiment by bringing forward this Shahbag movement.

People involved as organizers of the movement have publicly denied this allegation. They have repeatedly said that they are a non-political movement, and are in the road with specific demands: capital punishment for Abdul Quader Mollah as well as for all war criminals; the banning of Jamaat-e-Islami from Bangladeshi from politics and the boycott of all educational and economic institutions run by Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh.

On February 15 a protester and blogger named Ahmed Rajib Haider, who had actively participated in

the Shahbagh protest from the beginning, was killed. People involved with the Shahbagh movement claimed that Rajib was killed by the student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami, Chhatra Shibir. Jamaat have publicly denied their involvement in Rajib's murder.

The major opposition media outlets, Daily Amar Desh and Daily Nayadiganta published a series of stories quoting different blog post of Rajib and other people involved in Shahbag movement and tilted them as anti Islamic and atheist. The Shahbag movement now faces violent counter-protest called by different Islamic parties in the country.

These series of events raise many questions about the role of and reasons for the Shahbag movement. At the same time it also raises questions about the role of the main opposition party and Islamic parties, and their reactionary counter Shahbagh movement.

Just and spontaneous demands

The major demand of the movement is to ban Jamaat from politics. The first question, then, is why should the government ban Jamaat from politics?

People who are in favor of the Shahbag movement counter the question by saying that Jamaat opposed Bangladesh's independence and collaborated with the Pakistani army during 1971, so they have no rights to do politics in a free Bangladesh.

Jamaat and its supporters have repeatedly denied Jamaat's and their leader's involvement in war crimes and claim that the war crimes charges brought against the party leaders in Bangladesh's notorious International Crimes Tribunal are politically motivated false cases.

Many common people ask why the Awami government needed 40 years to identify Jamaat as a party, and their leaders as individuals, as war criminals. In the recent past the Awami League even allied with Jamaat against President Ershad. This raises the next question: what made the Awami League move to ban the political party, previously their allies, now?

An electoral tipping point

The answer is quite simple. The Awami League will benefit greatly from the ban in the forthcoming general election.

Jamaat is a big challenge for the Awami League, because of its growing popularity and its close alliance with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. It is in the air that the Awami League has planned to ban Jamaat before the next general election in order to clear the path and make the electoral battle easy.

In the last general election, held in 2008, Jamaat was part of a four party alliance. Jamaat contested in 39 seats and won only two, which is [4.6% of the total](#) [2]. The main ally of Jamaat in the alliance, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) contested in 256 seats and won 30, which is 33.2% of the total.

The winning alliance led by the Awami League [won 230 seats, which is 49.0% of the total](#) [3]. Its main ally, the Jatiya Party, won 27 seats which is 7.0%. The other parties in the coalition are much smaller: Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal won 3 seats, which is 0.6%, the Workers Party of Bangladesh won 2 seats which is 0.3% out of total, and the Liberal Democratic Party won 1 seat which is 0.2% out of total.

The Jatiya Party have declared they will contest separately in the next general election. This has left the Awami League to fight the election with some small, less popular political parties. In addition, the Awami League government has [lost much public support](#) [4] due to the mass corruption and poor performance of the government.

The Jatiya Party's strategic move weakens the position of the Awami League and strengthens the BNP. Jamaat's record electoral success was in 1991 when they won 18 seats. Polls have suggested that Jamaat may break this record in the next election.

If Jamaat gains more votes than the Awami League's allies in the ruling coalition at the next election, it would change the whole political landscape, perhaps resulting in a win for BNP and bringing down the present government.

In 2008, Jamaat played a vital role in anti-government protest along side of BNP. If Jamaat is banned from politics before the next general election not only would it alter coalition politics, but the BNP itself would be weakened, with a less effective campaign and fewer seats.

So should Jamaat be banned?

Jamaat has participated in many parliamentary elections since 1986, alongside many other democratic parties and following due democratic process.

In the 1986 general election Jamaat won 10 seats. Voter turnout was 61.1%, out of which Jamaat gained 1,314,057 votes: 4.6% out of the total.

In 1991, Jamaat won 18 seats. Voter turnout was 55.4%, Jamaat got 4,136,461 votes which is 12.1% of the total vote.

In 1996 Jamaat won 3 seats. Voter turnout was 75.6%, the second highest to date. Jamaat got 3,653,013 votes or 8.6%.

In 2001, Jamaat won 17 seats. Voter turnout was 74.96%. Jamaat got 2,385,361 votes or 4.28%.

In 2008, turnout was 80%, the highest in the history of Bangladeshi elections. Jamaat got 3,186,384 votes, which is 4.6% out of total and entailed two seats.

This continuous participation in almost all of Bangladesh's general elections and the numbers of votes cast in favor of Jamaat, shows that they have citizens in the country who support them.

Given this, whether to ban Jamaat from politics should be widely discussed among Bangladesh's citizens. Not to do so ignores and excludes those citizens voting in favor of Jamaat.

Jamaat's control of institutions

The second demand is to boycott the different institutions controlled by Jamaat. These include financial and educational institutions, and media outlets. Jamaat isn't the only political party to have influence in Bangladesh's economy. The leaders of different political parties have their own businesses, notably much of the media is owned by members of the ruling party. However Jamaat indirectly owns and controls these institutions, and their supporters get priority in terms of employment. But why is it amongst the list of demands at Shahbagh, and who will benefit from such a boycott?

Over 42 years Jamaat as an institution has become financially very strong. In contrast the Awami League, in spite of ruling the country, mainly depends on donations from different financial institutions and persons. It has been alleged that the Awami League's manner of collecting donations is forceful, even a type of extortion. In 2007 an extortion case was in fact filed against Sheikh Hasina, leader of the Awami League and current Prime Minister.

While the Awami League depends on direct fundraising of this kind, Jamaat as an institution has emerged as a powerful economic force, a shadow government. Jamaat has developed its presence in almost all sectors, from banking, education, health care and the media to industry and trade such as food, drugs and pharmaceuticals, garments and textiles, paper, leather, cement, iron and steel.

Let's take a close look at the Jamaat banking institution, Islami Bank Bangladesh Ltd (IBBL). This is the largest private banking network in Bangladesh with \$244.87 million in authorized capital, and \$122.53 million in paid-up capital. It has \$4,176.44 million in deposits and a \$3,943.33 million investment including investment in shares.

After the boycott call government supporters set fire to IBBL and Jamaat educational institutions. The offices of the Daily Amar Desh and Nayadigant, Daily Sangram, Diganta TV, all of which are well known as pro-opposition newspapers and channels, [were attacked](#) [5] in different parts of the country.

If people keep boycotting the bank, there will be a gap, and the close competitors of the bank will be the benefactors. In terms of the consumer and investment banking market it is not clear who would emerge to fill the gap. However in terms of Jamaat's political competitors, there is a clear beneficiary.

It is believed that the political activities and activists of Jamaat are financially supported by their economic activities, such as IBBL. By boycotting or destroying the different institutions of Jamaat, the government is trying to break the financial backbone of Jamaat.

Is there a case to single out Jamaat?

There may be cause for concern that a political party like Jamaat should have so much economic power. But then why isn't the Shahbagh movement demanding the boycott of the largest state-owned commercial bank, Sonali Bank Limited? Sonali Bank Limited is responsible for illegally disbursing a loan of Tk 260 bn (USD 3 bn). Some have said that the Shahbagh movement should widen their demands to include other issues, such as the endless corrupt practices of different government institutions. But organisers of the Shahbagh protests have said that this movement is solely for the demands already stated.

And so we turn to the final demand: the execution of Jamaat leader Abdul Quader Mollah and all other war criminals. This demand forms the centre of the case for singling out Jamaat. Judges should give verdicts based on evidence presented in court and not simply in response to street pressure. The demand is contrary to the rule of law.

The effects of Shahbagh

Moving their attention away from Jamaat slightly, the Shahbag movement has also demanded the boycott of several major newspapers and television channels - The Daily Amar Desh, Daily Nayadiganta, Diganta Television and Islamic TV. All these media groups are known as pro-opposition news media.

If it is a social movement not directed by a political party, why do the Shahbag protestors demand the boycott of these media producers specifically? And who will benefit from the boycott? Again the answer is clear: freedom of expression and media is a pre-condition of, and essential for, democracy. The beneficiaries of the boycott are therefore not interested in democracy.

The Awami League government has already [closed Channel One](#) [6]: the channel went off air on 27 April 2010. The channel's founder, Giasuddin Al Mamun, is known to be a close associate of BNP chief Khaleda Zia's son Tarique Rahman. The last caretaker government shut down CSB News, Bangladesh's first 24 hour news and current affairs channel, in September 2007. CSB News was initiative of Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury who is a member of the Standing Committee of Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

Apart from the Daily Amar Desh, Daily Nayadiganta, Diganta Television, and Islamic TV, most media in the country is owned by the supporters of the Awami league. For example Desh TV is owned by Awami MP Saber Hossain Chowdhury, Somoy TV is owned by Qamrul Islam, State Minister for Law,

Gazi Tv is owned by Awami MP Gazi , the ironically named Independent TV is owned by businessman and Awami supporter Salam F Rahman and Mohona TV is owned by Awami MP Kamal Majumder.

Media shapes our country today and tomorrow. It shapes how people will think, how they will act, and of course how they vote. The coverage of Shahbag by pro-government media is playing a vital role in shaping Bangladesh – the future may hold an even greater stranglehold over Bangladeshi politics and economics.

The ruling Awami League government is trying to override the existing political system to remain in power beyond their democratic mandate. The purposive actions and structural forces behind this movement make it very clear what, and who, the movement is for: the ruling political elite. The shahbag movement was never a people's movement but has been designed to disrupt the processes of social revolution, by uprooting the government's political opponents from the field to avoid a political revolution at the next election.

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 About the author

William Gomes is a Bangladeshi journalist and human rights activist, and was a visiting fellow at the Centre for Applied Human Rights at the University of York in 2012. He has also worked for the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC). Follow him on twitter @wnicholasgomes.

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[17]

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