

## **The Threat to Secular Democracy<sup>1</sup>**

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The organizers of the London Conference on Human Rights in Bangladesh must be thanked and congratulated for this courageous initiative. Just the fact that the eyes of the world are upon us in a sense protects those who would protest injustice in our country. There have already been criticisms by those who would seek to suppress information about human rights abuses in Bangladesh, as they argue this would damage the “image” of the country. Perhaps they confuse the image of the country with that of the Government. Some apologists for the current BNP-Jamaat-i-Islami regime have even pointed to such abuses in other countries, as if this absolves them of any blame for their own miserable failures. These are people who appear to take comfort in the dubious phrase “moderate Muslim state”. In my opinion one must question any liberal democracy that is defined in such a way: does anyone, for example, speak of Denmark or Sweden as “a moderate Christian state”?

There has been a perceptible deterioration in the overall human rights situation in Bangladesh following the assumption of state power by the BNP-Jamaat-i-Islami coalition in 2001. Against a backdrop of concerted assaults on the integrity of key institutions of the Republic by the current Government (through the politicization of the civil service, undermining of the judiciary and utilization of the security forces to promote narrow party interests) there has been a surge in violent attacks on the minority groups, liberal writers and intellectuals, and members of the opposition parties. We have a situation now where the Law Minister of our country publicly defends the practice of extra-judicial killings.

Over the past three years bomb and grenade attacks have become all too common – the targets being cultural events, places of worship of minority communities, and political meetings. These attacks have gone largely unpunished, with the culprits rarely even identified, let alone brought to justice. The “masterminds” behind these attacks are never found, as investigations fizzle out and lead nowhere, as political interference prevents investigators from doing their duty. The perpetrators of these attacks operate in a climate of impunity, with the BNP-Jamaat-i-Islami government unable or unwilling to bring a halt to the killing. The failure of every investigation of the recent political killings to identify the masterminds suggests that the killers are protected by the higher levels of the Government.

My father Shah A.M.S. Kibria, M.P., was a victim of this upsurge of political violence. A former UN Under-Secretary General and former Finance Minister, he was also editor of a liberal weekly magazine and a noted columnist. On January 27, 2005 he was assassinated in a grenade attack at a political meeting in his constituency of Habiganj in northeastern Bangladesh. He died after bleeding to death, without any medical attention, as the Government refused requests to provide a helicopter to bring him to a hospital in Dhaka.

There has been a wave of anger and revulsion at the killing of my father, and a realization among many people that they must take a stand. Our family, led by my mother Asma Kibria, has

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undertaken a series of peaceful protest demanding a full and impartial investigation of the assassination and punishment of the killers as well as an end to political killings. Public support for our campaign has been very heartening but we are still far from achieving our goals. I should note here that the BNP-Jamaat-i-Islami Government has not so far hindered these peaceful protests, barring a few arrests in early weeks of our campaign.

The reasons for the attack on my father are still unclear. Some local BNP leaders have been charge-sheeted on the basis of the incomplete investigation that has been undertaken so far. His writings suggest possible motives: his most articles recent dealt with the rise of militant Islamic groups under the current BNP-Jamaat-i-Islami government and the Government's clumsy attempts to manipulate the framework for holding the next elections to ensure that these elections could be rigged in their favor. These writings are reported to have angered certain powerful interests.

My father was deeply concerned at the BNP-Jamaat-i-Islami regime's attempt to undermine the cornerstones of our Republic and distort the guiding principles upon which we fought our War of Independence in 1971. The principle of secularism was discarded by the defeated forces of 1971 after the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. The current Government has gone much further. Somehow they have turned nationalism into a form of xenophobia and democracy into a ruthless dictatorship of the majority party, while the quest for social justice has been overtaken by an unseemly scramble for power and wealth. What is most ominous is the state acquiescence to the use of violence to attack minority groups, silence the voices of dissent and eliminate the opposition. International interest in Bangladesh has been very tepid at best – we have no oil or even great strategic importance perhaps – but it is time that the world took notice of what is happening to our country. In this regard I would recall some comments made by President Karzai of Afghanistan recently, where he bemoaned the fact that the desperate efforts to alert the West to the dangers of the Taliban went unheeded until it was too late. Newspaper reports suggest that the jihadists have begun regrouping in Bangladesh. Perhaps this conference will serve as a wake-up call to those who would support liberal democracy throughout the world.

The forces of intolerance and hatred are well-funded and better organized – at present – than the forces of moderation and freedom. The leaders of some of these extremist groups say that the liberal democracies carry within them the seeds of their own downfall, that a small but determined group can successfully subvert a democracy. They are right – but only up to a point. The key here is eternal vigilance and a readiness to unite in the face of such danger. Bangladesh is now faced with such a situation, and the unity of all liberal and progressive forces is our only hope. We must not fail the generations to come – we must not resile from the challenge and dangers ahead.

This conference must be followed up with various actions that would bolster the forces of democracy and tolerance. It would be helpful to send a fact-finding mission from the EU to Bangladesh to identify possible actions to support the efforts of the people of Bangladesh to end the current reign of terror. I would also suggest a conference to be held in Bangladesh – perhaps in the winter – to discuss various perspectives on Islam, and more specifically, Islam and tolerance, to encourage a movement away from the current tendency to confuse secularism with atheism, and to associate piety with hatred of those of other faiths.