

**Bangladesh Unrest Seen Intensifying**  
**By Syed Zain Al-Mahmood, the Wall Street Journal**  
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DHAKA, Bangladesh—Protests that have destabilized Bangladesh and challenged its garment industry are expected to intensify next week, as the country's war-crimes tribunal issues a fresh round of verdicts.

Disagreements over the tribunal, meant to heal wounds of a bloody war of independence against Pakistan in 1971, have led to mass street protests and strikes since February. The disturbances have hurt the \$20 billion garment industry, which estimates it lost \$500 million in orders to India in recent weeks due to street blockades and port shutdowns.

Some of the factories in the eight-story Rana Plaza building that collapsed last week, killing at least 400 people, were facing financial pressures because of lost orders, company executives have said. Rescue work continued Tuesday at the site of the accident outside the capital, with authorities saying the death toll could still rise significantly.

A combination of political turmoil and economic damage has dealt a heavy blow to the South Asian nation of 160 million people, most of them Muslim, which in recent years had shown signs of rare stability and economic renaissance.

Since 2009, the nation has been run by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League-led government, which styles itself as a defender of secularism and has arrested scores of alleged Islamist militants.

Much of the recent turmoil has been caused by proceedings before the war-crimes tribunal, set up three years ago to look into charges of human-rights abuses during the 1971 war. Tens of thousands of civilians died, mostly at the hands of pro-Pakistan Islamist militia.

Eight of the 10 people the tribunal investigated are current or former members of Jamaat-e-Islami, the country's largest Islamist party and an electoral ally of the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

The court handed down its first verdict in January, sentencing in absentia a former party leader to death. In early February, it gave Abdul Quader Molla, a senior Jamaat official, life in prison for involvement in mass murder.

That led secular bloggers to demand the death penalty for all Islamist leaders found guilty by the tribunal. They also want to bar Islamists from politics.

Parvez Alam, a 32-year-old blogger, and other online activists have brought tens of thousands of largely urban, middle-class people onto Dhaka's streets to protest against Islamists. After Mr. Molla was sentenced, bloggers organized protests in an area near Dhaka University known as Shahbagh. Students and middle-class families responded, some carrying banners calling for a ban on religious parties.



Marchers in Savar on Tuesday demand a death sentence for Sohel Rana, the owner of the building that collapsed last week, killing about 400. (Agence France-Presse/Getty Images)

The bloggers set up tents with rows of laptops in Shahbagh, using social media to help swell the numbers.

"The people want justice for 1971, when so many people were killed by the Pakistan army and its collaborators," said Lucky Akter, 23, another blogger involved in the protests. "We want to establish a society based on a Bengali identity rather than a Muslim identity."

One recent day, Ms. Akter screamed, "Hang, hang, hang them all," to roars of approval from the crowd. "The people want the hanging of the collaborators!"

Mr. Alam, who has used his blog to espouse atheism, expressing admiration for Nietzsche and his concept of the "death of God," said his group won't back down. "We want a country free of fundamentalists and that's what we're fighting for."

Islamists say they are being unfairly hounded by authorities. Police have killed dozens of pro-Jamaat protesters during clashes across Bangladesh in recent weeks as protests by both camps have mounted. "I don't recall Bangladesh ever being so alarmingly and poisonously polarized," said Shamsheer Chowdhury, vice chairman of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

In April, a group of religious schools calling itself the Hefazat-e-Islam, or Committee to Protect Islam, organized a large counter-protest in Dhaka, drawing an estimated crowd of 300,000 people from rural areas. The protest called for an anti-blasphemy law and published the names of 84 bloggers it said are "atheists," a loaded word in a nation where Islam is the state religion.

"The atheist bloggers have been attacking Allah and the prophet in their blogs in the most obscene language," said Junaid Babunagari, one of the coordinators of Hefazat-e-Islam. "As Muslims, we cannot allow this."

Protests over the tribunals have died down recently but could ignite again next week, when judges are likely to hand down more verdicts in the cases of Jamaat leaders.

Next week, Gulam Azam, the former head of Jamaat, the country's largest Islamist political party, and Qamar-uz Zaman, a party leader, face charges including murder, torture and genocide during the 1971 war. They have pleaded not guilty.

Government opponents say the war-crimes tribunal and the Shahbagh protests are being used to crush political rivals.

The Awami League denies doing so, but Ms. Hasina has criticized opponents of the trials for defending war criminals.

In April, authorities arrested 10 members of the opposition BNP on charges they were fueling communal violence by calling for nationwide strikes. The government on April 11 also arrested a pro-opposition newspaper editor on charges of sedition after the newspaper published material that questioned the independence of the war-crimes tribunal.

Bloggers like Mr. Alam acknowledge the Awami League's student wing quickly became involved in the Shahbagh protests, offering organizational support and money.

But Ms. Hasina's government also has begun to mollify the Islamist protesters, fearing an escalation of protests and losing the vote of conservative Muslims.

Although Ms. Hasina refused to support the Islamists' calls for a blasphemy law, her government has begun to crack down on some bloggers who have used online forums to ridicule Islam, arresting six for allegedly destabilizing communal harmony and blocking online content.

Mr. Alam's family didn't lose any members in the post-1971 violence. But he says his intolerance of religion increased as he became interested in science.

He went to high school in Dhaka, where he joined a Marxist student union. Later, he studied computer programming in Cyprus. He got into blogging late last decade, when a military-backed government held power.

He admits to having a limited interest in free speech. In February, he was among bloggers that called on the government to shut online content that opposed the Shahbagh movement. The government complied, shutting several conservative religious sites.

Like many of his fellow bloggers, he wants the religious parties to be banned, a move the government says it isn't considering.

Meanwhile, he wants the state to execute Jamaat leaders convicted of war crimes.

"We have been fighting for a secular society on the blogs for many years," Mr. Alam said. "Our fight has taken on a new urgency since the war-crimes trials began."

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