Section 4:
The Shahbagh Movement

"Those who do not like Joy Bangla slogan should go to Pakistan," Shahriar Kabir.

At one level, it’s a classical Bengali thing: hyper emotional, politically charged, liberal left, culturally decorated and resurrecting images and symbols that inspire them. Had the political structure of Bangladesh given them any space, Shahbagh would not have happened but that is exactly what Shahbagh is. It's a gut reaction of many to the exclusion from national politics, always a private monopoly of the party in power.

Afsan Chowdhury, BRAC University.

The Shahbagh movement is secular in nature, pro-Liberation War and intrinsically opposed to the growing power of Islamists. Many liberal Bangladeshis see their country at a turning point in its struggle with political Islam. Several newspapers and their staff openly took sides. Indeed as one Awami League sympathiser pointed out, civil society, not the political parties, is at the forefront of the struggle against Islamists.

The protests caught most off guard but captured the imagination of a younger, educated urban generation who’d never been involved in politics. Many described it as like the Arab Spring and the beginnings of a demand for change on issues like corruption and political reform.
The protests started on 5 Feb 2013 after one of the accused in the war crimes trial, Abdul Quader Mollah, was convicted of five offences involving crimes against humanity, and sentenced to life imprisonment on two charges. The gatherings were a challenge to the government, which had taken for granted the popularity it attracted for holding a war crimes trial. Initially the protestors’ main demand was the death sentence for Abdul Quader Mollah. The justification for this demand was if life sentences were awarded, they could be overturned by the next government, if it were a BNP-Jamaat alliance, or even the country’s President. Surprisingly there were no questions raised about the fairness of the trial process, merely a call for “hanging the war criminals”. The crowd saw itself as progressive defenders of human rights, but was calling for the use of the death penalty, which their equivalent in the West abhors. One liberal commentator said, “One has to be Bengali to understand the spirit” of this demand, arguing it was a different issue from the normal use of the death penalty for criminals. The protestors called for the separation of politics and religion and a ban on Jamaat-e-Islami and a boycott of businesses allegedly connected with the party.

Bloggers and online activists were instrumental in mobilising tens of thousands people to come on the streets and occupy Shahbagh square. It didn’t spread throughout the country because “in picking ‘secularism’ as a cause, that showed how naïve it was and if anything alienated from understanding the psychological framework of the ordinary people”. An unpublished opinion poll by Org-Quest Research Ltd reportedly found, ”Whilst 43 per cent of those questioned about the Mollah verdict supported Shahbagh’s central demand for imposition of the death penalty against Molla — 55 per cent did not.” Some suggested the issue of justice for war criminals only has an urban appeal because in villages revenge was taken at the time.

For the first week the Shahbagh protests were a genuinely spontaneous social movement. Some read this as a good sign for society that the younger generation had not lost their political consciousness and were inspired by the spirit of independence. Jamaat figures, though, question what young Bangladeshis really know about the War of Liberation, arguing that the boundaries were a lot more blurred in 1971 and many families contained figures who took opposing sides and then helped one another when in trouble.

The Shahbagh movement challenged the governing party, which quickly appropriated the initiative. They did this by making concessions and allegedly supplying food and protection to the demonstrators. People appeared to see this and withdrew.

Some argue the Shahbagh movement set a precedent for challenging the government and getting away with it. Members of the public effectively took the issue of justice into their own hands, forcing the government to pass a new law allowing the prosecution to appeal the sentence to increase it. They reason that, “By challenging the court verdict, Shahbagh went beyond the legal and constitutional space and by doing so helped create a huge battleground where just about anything goes… What Shahbagh and Hefajate Islam have in common is the rejection of the rule of law.” Some say it was a major blunder on the part of the government to pander to demonstrators and it
would have been better to clear them from Shahbagh Square because that would have been a sufficient concession to appease the Hefajate Islam protestors who came out to counter them.

Initially the BNP supported Jamaat but then its National Standing Committee issued a statement cautiously backing the Shahbagh movement and suggesting protestors also call for an impartial caretaker government to oversee elections, as has been the case four times in the past. Jamaat activists ran an aggressive online campaign against the Shahbagh organisers, showing blog posts defaming Islam.

Attacks on Journalists

From late February 2013 onwards there have been a series of clashes in which journalists have been injured, many from gunfire from riot police. Journalists have been attacked by Islamists too and have received death threats and warnings targeting themselves and their families. Some male journalists working for secular newspapers and TV stations were being urged by their wives to consider emigrating for fear that a pro-Islamic regime might come to power and want to take revenge.

On one day alone - 22 February 2013 - Reporters Without Borders said at least 23 journalists were injured. In Chittagong several were hurt after Islamist demonstrators broke into the press club office and the headquarters of the Chittagong Union of Journalists, after accusing reporters of supporting the Shahbagh movement. In Dhaka during clashes after a demonstration by Islamists at the Baitul Mukarram mosque, at least 10 journalists were injured. Reporters Without Borders says the demonstrators deliberately targeted journalists. The same day the website of The Daily Star was hacked by Islamists who inserted large headlines favouring Jamaat-e-Islami.

On 24 February 2013, Khelafat Andolon threatened a boycott of the media and demanded that the government arrest "atheist bloggers" for "blasphemy".

On 25 February 2013, a number of journalists and media organisations reported receiving telephone threats. On 6 April 2013 during a Hefazat-e-Islam rally a woman reporter was badly physically attacked and another severely harassed.

On 11 April 2013 the police arrested the acting editor of the pro-opposition Amar Desh, Mahmudur Rahman, for sedition and unlawful publication of a conversation that led to the resignation of the top judge in the War Crimes Tribunal. The same story was published in The Economist magazine. Amar Desh was also accused of inciting violence and religious tension. The state minister for home affairs, Shamsul Haque Tuku, told journalists the Amar Desh editor had been arrested to establish the rule of law. The Committee to Protect Journalists expressed concern about the editor, whose paper had been critical of the Shahbagh movement. Members of the Shahbagh movement considered Amar Desh pro-Jamaat-e-Islami and blamed the newspaper’s campaign against the bloggers for the death of Rajib. They demanded the paper should be closed within 24 hours and its editor arrested for inciting communal violence.

On 13 April 2013 the police arrested 19 employees of Amar Desh who were attempting to print the paper (which had not been banned) at the offices of Sangram, another pro-opposition daily affiliated with an Islamist party.

Woman Journalists Attacked.

These are the accounts by two women journalists of their experience at the hands of Hefajate Islam during their rally on 6 April 2013.

Nadia Sharmeen
Staff Reporter
Ekushey Television (ETV)
Age: 26

On that day we had another reporter to cover the main event – the rally of Hefajate Islam. I was there standing in for the reporter who was doing supplementary stories – such as who supplied food and water to the rally and if there was any signature campaign going on…My cameraman was filming, when I was approached by a man, whom I thought belonged to Hefajate Islam. He came towards me and said antagonistically: "You’re a woman, why are you here? Get out of here right now!"
I replied calmly, saying, “I am not here as a woman, I am here as a reporter, to cover your event.”
By that time a group had gathered around us, mostly Hefajat supporters I thought – around fifteen men. They started telling me, one by one, sometimes talking over each other, that we were agents from Shahbagh who manipulate and twist news to make those people look good and we are liars. And they complained we don’t give them live coverage. They also asked me, “Don’t you know about our 13-point demands? Why are you here, being a woman? Just get out of here!”
Some were wearing full-length white Arab style gowns (alkhallahs, Shalvar Kameez and skull caps), whereas others were in shirts and trousers.
I had a feeling that things could get nasty and out of hand really rapidly. I was telling them that I was a journalist and merely doing my job but that provoked them even more so I started to move away from that place. People around me advised me to leave the area. There was a microbus belonging to the Doctors’ Association of Bangladesh and the doctors took me inside it. By then, the number of people was increasing and they had started to throw things at the car and pound their fists on it. The doctors asked me to wind up the glass of the window. But the attackers continued to strike the car with such force that it seemed the vehicle would be totally destroyed – that they would smash it into pieces. I just didn’t know what to do, or how to escape. I was struggling to find a way out of the situation. At that moment I called the central news desk at my office to inform them that I was being attacked. Then I called my camera person, who was out there somewhere in the danger, to alert him.
Then someone tried to lead me away from the microbus and get me out of there – or so I thought at that time. In retrospect, I think the person was a Hefajat man. As I was walking, they were throwing brick chips, bottles, stones and pebbles – whatever they could get their hands on. I didn’t look back so I couldn’t really see exactly what they were throwing. I could just feel things hitting my head, back, legs and neck. There were other men beside me, and one of them was dragging me – he was holding my hand, and telling me to “run”. At that point, I didn’t want to run because I thought that would provoke the group even further and make them more violent. But I was forced to run by the person beside me who was holding my hand.
At one point someone pushed me from behind, and I dropped one of my two cell phones on the ground. A man coming from my front picked up my mobile phone and left the place after returning it to me. Then that man, who appeared to be helping me and giving directions, told me to get on a motorcycle that was on the other side of the road. He said give me both your phones, and get on that motorcycle. As soon as he took my phone from my hand, he disappeared into the crowd, never to be seen again.
But by then, worse things were happening to me. They pushed me on the ground and had started to beat me up violently. Along the way the number of men were 50-60 or more at that moment. They were hitting me everywhere and I thought I was going to die. I was sure they would kill me. There was nothing I could do to protect myself from all these men who were determined to kill me. Some fellow journalists from Diganta TV saw me being attacked and tried to rescue me. They were mainly from Diganta TV but some unknown people on the streets also tried to get me into the nearest building to save me. They tried to get me into the CITY bank building but the gates were closed. The bank was closed. They formed a cordon around me but even then the attackers were still trying to hit me. You can see it in the TV footage. I couldn’t stand up anymore, I was weak and injured, and I sat down, with people still forming a barricade around me. I was beaten up by the attackers five to six times. During this time the attackers tore a part of my shirt and were trying to tear my whole dress apart.
At this point some colleagues arrived and a police team. The attackers then tried to attack them as well. As this was going on, the crew of ETV and Diganta TV put me into one of Diganta TV’s cars. But the attackers continued to hit the car with their hands and with brick chips and many more hard objects. And they were berating me, using the filthiest language. I don’t use slang, sorry, I can’t repeat what they said to me.
But from the beginning, they were saying things like, “Haven’t you read our 13-point demands? Why are you here? Don’t you know women can’t be here?” They didn’t make any comment about my dress; if you see the footage, you will see that my clothes couldn’t have been more decent unless I wore a burqa; that is what they meant. I was dressed in a salwar kamiz, whose length was below my knees, and it had full sleeves and I had a dopatta. I also had a cap over my head. The way they were harassing me it would have been dreadful otherwise. They were almost tearing my clothes off.
As I was being whisked away by my rescuers, I heard the police and some people say, cover your head. Other than that, I don’t remember anyone explicitly saying anything about my dress. But then again, there was so much noise and people were shouting.
Thankfully, the car managed to escape through an alley and took me to Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

I am a crime reporter and I know that I might find myself in a difficult situation now and then. But this wasn’t anything I had ever experienced. They were like a bunch of hyenas, or wild dogs, not human. I thought then, and I think now, that they wanted to kill me. They wanted to tear me apart, limb by limb. Why else would they start beating me from Paltan all the way to Bijoynagar? They hit every conceivable part of my body. I had to have two CT scans and ultrasonography to see if my abdomen and some other parts inside my body were alright, four X-rays of my left knee joint, left shoulder, neck. I am very lucky to be alright, not to have permanent damage, but doctors say they are still not sure, especially about my head injury.

Obviously my family is very concerned. My mother is an ordinary woman and she was very scared when she heard the news and saw the TV footage. But even though they were scared in the beginning, they were by my side and supported me. They didn’t ask me to give up journalism because they know what it means to me.

Why would I give it up because of some cowards? Who are they if not cowards? When 50 - 60 or more of them beat up one unarmed woman? Is that their way of showing respect to women? How can they claim to be protectors of Islam when they treat women this way? How can they protect Islam if they can’t protect a woman journalist at their own event? I am a woman journalist. If I cannot stand there, if I cannot work side by side with men, then how can the Prime Minister of this country, or the opposition leader, be here? If they can’t accept me, why are they negotiating with political leaders who are also women, in what they claim is a man’s world. I was wearing decent clothes – everyone can see how I was dressed that day from the video footage. They were the ones who tried to tear my clothes off; in fact, they even succeeded in tearing some parts of it, they were so violent.

To civil society, journalists and other concerned people, I want to say one thing: how are you sure that the same thing that happened to me today won’t happen to you as well? I used to work with victims of violence; I never thought that something like this would happen to me. But it did. The same might happen to you too. If you want to live in this country and remain alive, then you have to do something about the changes that are going on. You have to resist these types of violence because no one can be safe in such a situation.

Hefajat has expressed sadness at the event and apologised but said that other forces had infiltrated their ranks and carried out the attacks. If their claims are true, then why don’t they find those responsible for these attacks? Why don’t they strongly demand an investigation to find the culprits? If their claims are true, then isn’t it also in their best interest to set the record straight? All in all, I want justice for what happened to me, and so should they. If they cannot protect women, how can they protect Islam and the rest of humankind?

Woman Journalist Harassed

Jakia Ahmed
Senior Reporter
Banglanews24.com
(Online news portal)
Age: 30

I was outdoors from early morning and toured different spots of Dhaka to see what would happen that day. In Shantinagar, in front of Karnafuli Garden City, I saw a huge procession coming from the opposite direction. So I asked my office auto rickshaw to stop. I stood on a divider in the middle of the road. I was writing down their slogans and what was on their placards. I don’t know exactly how many people there were but it was a huge procession.

A religious gentleman (hujur) dressed in traditional Muslim clothes and a skull cap, from the middle of the procession, asked me very fiercely, “Hey, girl, where is your scarf? Why is your head not covered?” Around him were some 14–15 year–old boys, who were clearly enjoying that I was being harassed. They were laughing and commenting amongst themselves. They were saying things like, “Why do women come out of the home? How dare she not only come out of the house, but also do journalism?” I was paralysed and didn’t reply. I felt that if I replied, they would hit me and assault me. At that moment, I really believed that they were going to beat me up; they were so fierce and hostile. The hujur in particular was so spiteful; he was looking at me as if I had committed the worst crime. I felt vulnerable and scared. So I left immediately, and thankfully nothing else happened.
That same morning, around 6.30 am, I was near the Malibagh rail gate. A small procession came my way. I tried to talk to them. I asked: "Where are you going and why?" They replied that they were going to the grand rally. One boy told me: "You are one of the journalists who cover Shahbagh. You see five people protesting there and you report there are thousands of people. Let us first punish the atheists and then we’ll sort out all you reporters." Then they left with their procession.

They were saying all these anti-women things in the name of Islam, but as far as I know Islam talks about equality between men and women. I think there is a need to understand what actually Islam and all other religions say about women. How can an organisation like Hefajat, which appeared out of nowhere, come to us with an elaborate agenda to suppress women in a democratic free country like ours? Women participated in the Liberation War – some directly fought in the war while almost all women took part in it in some way or another. Then consider the garments sector, which is our biggest exporter. Its driving force is women. What if women are not allowed to work there? The garments sector will have to shut down.

We are all contributing to the economy in our own ways. I am working as a journalist, you in your way. Who are they to tell me what I should do? How can they make such claims? What is their ideological position? Theirs are bogus explanations. Where in Islam does it say that women cannot come out of the house? They won’t be able to show it written anywhere? They want to suppress women and this just reflects their patriarchal mindset. They want to turn this country into Afghanistan.
Bloggers

The bloggers are a small group of urban educated middle class youths with access to the Internet. They’ve been active for some years and were not propelled to prominence until the Islamists suddenly seized on them as an issue.

On 15 February 2013 thirty-year-old blogger, Ahmed Rajib Haider, was killed near his home in Dhaka, according to police by the al-Qaeda style, Yemeni-inspired group, Ansarullah Bangla. Rajib was one of the organisers of the Shahbagh movement. Reporters Without Borders said he was well known for criticising Islamic extremism on the platform “Somewhereinblog.net”. Islamist websites continued to criticize Rajib even after his death, complaining of “state sponsored blasphemy” in Bangladesh. The local media reported that Rajib had attracted many death threats and one was reportedly posted on Sonar Bangla, a pro-Jamaat blog. The French news agency AFP reported that Rajib’s brother believed he’d been targeted by the Jamaat student wing, Chhatra Shibir, for his writing. Jamaat-e-Islami, however, condemned the murder and denied involvement.

Immediately after Rajib’s death, Islamists started branding him as an atheist and alleged he’d posted offensive and blasphemous content on the Internet on a site called nuranichapa. However a relative of Rajib said someone had hacked into his blog and posted controversial remarks after his murder. Other reports said there were 19 controversial entries posted between June and October 2012 on the site nuranichapa.wordpress.com but the first visit to the site was only on the day Rajib was killed and after a Pakistani website alerted people to its existence. A list of other bloggers deemed worthy of the death penalty was reportedly circulated using mobile phones.

Hefajate Islam published half-page advertisements in three newspapers, alleging anti-islamic content had been posted by bloggers. It stated the Shahbagh movement was against Islam. Jamaat-e-Islami echoed this, saying, “The main objective of the Shahbag protesters is to root out Islam from the country. They are involved in different anti-social activities there.”

Under pressure, the Information Minister said the government would not spare those who offended religious sentiments. The Telecoms regulator asked the host site, Somewhereinblog.net, to take down posts deemed blasphemous, which it did. Reports said the regulator was scrutinising other sites to identify and erase more “blasphemous blogs”. In another concession to the Islamists, on 13 March 2013 the Home Ministry formed a 9-member committee to “track bloggers and Facebook users who made derogatory remarks about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad.” The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, which sat on the new committee, requested information on a number of bloggers in an effort to ban writers deemed to have offended Islam. The government then reportedly blocked about a dozen websites and blogs. A group of Muslim clerics also submitted a list of 84 bloggers to the committee that they accused of atheism and criticising Islam.

In their demonstrations, supporters of Hefajat-e-Islam had carried banners with the pictures of the four bloggers.

![Image of banners from demonstrations]
Asked if the Bangladeshi government wasn’t making concessions to the Islamists that violated the right to free speech, the Foreign Minister, Dipu Moni, said in April 2013 that the bloggers had allegedly hurt Muslims by maligning religious sentiment and that was against the law in Bangladesh.

On April 2 and 3 the government arrested four bloggers. Their host website, AmraBlog, was shut down in protest. An announcement on the homepage said the site would reopen only after the bloggers were released unconditionally. Human rights groups expressed concern about the right to freedom of expression being violated by the arrests. Reporters Without Borders said Bangladesh should "stop persecuting news providers" and complained the Bangladesh government had given into pressure from Islamists.

AmraBlog’s announcement on its site as of April 2013

On 17 April the four bloggers were denied bail and charges were being prepared under the Information and Communications Technology Act, 2006, which could carry up to 14 years' rigorous imprisonment or a fine of Tk 1 crore.

Arrested Bloggers
Shockingly after their arrests, the four bloggers were photographed by police as if they were criminals, with their computers on display like a haul of captured weapons. Two of the bloggers, Shuvro and Parvez, were granted bail as of May 2013.

Websites supporting the Islamists also produced posters and petitions in English with the aim of winning international support against the secularists. This one is from: http://shahbagexposed.blogspot.de/2013/02/blog-post_26.html
The Four Arrested Bloggers:

1. Asif Mohiuddin
Aged 29 and an IT engineer, Mohiuddin described himself as a "militant atheist". The French newsagency AFP called his blog one of the most visited webpages in Bangladesh. Its title page said God was "Almighty only in name but impotent in reality". In July 2012, he ridiculed Muslims and the Quran in a satirical piece on "the mass conversion of supermen to Islam". He won a Deutsche Welle sponsored 'Best of Blogs' award in 2012 and was active on different blogs like "somewhereinblog", "dhormockery" and "amarblog". As of April 2013 his Facebook page had been suspended.

After his arrest Mohiuddin told reporters 120 of his posts had been removed by the telecoms regulator from the Internet. Some secular Bangladeshi journalists didn’t feel the arrest was an affront to their freedom of expression because they thought Mohiuddin had been unduly provocative and would actually be safer in jail.

In October 2011 the police had arrested Mohiuddin in connection with his blog posts, which they said had triggered student protests against fee hikes. He was detained for 18 hours and told to stop writing. Mohiuddin alleged he’d been blindfolded, starved, and kept awake and that the police had asked him to sign a statement promising not to blog anymore.

On 14 January 2013 Mohiuddin was attacked by three men wielding a machete near his office in Dhaka. He had to be operated on for more than three hours after receiving six cuts. Doctors said the attack was an attempt on his life, judging by the severity of the wounds.

2. Subrata Adhikari Shuvo
Shuvo (who is Hindu) was arrested on 1 Apr 2013. A Masters student studying Bengali at Dhaka University, friends said he was picked up from in front of his dormitory in a white microbus. He wrote a blog hosted on the Amarblog.com platform, using his own name. He’s also said to have published stories under the nickname, Lalu Koshai.

Aged 36, he is a physicist and teacher in an English-medium school. He has two main blogs, hosted in Somewherein.net platform and Amarblog.com. He’s accused of publishing inflammatory stories under the pseudonym Opobak.

Rasel Parvez was actively involved with the Shahbagh movement while Shuvo and Biplob were online activists of the movement. Just before his arrest Parvez had attacked the Awami League for making too many concessions to the Islamists.

4. Mashiur Rahman Biplob
Aged 42, he blogged under the pseudonym Allama Shoytaan (Mullah Devil) on various sites, including Somewherein.net.
Hefajate Islam

TIMELINE

22 Feb 2013 Reports that Hefajate-Islam have attacked the press club in Chittagong; bombs explode there on March 12 during the press conference of the Shahbagh movement.

25 Feb 2013 Hefajat threatens mass rallies in upazillas if the government doesn’t stop the Shahbagh movement; it calls for resignation of the Home Minister and the death penalty for Shahbagh organisers.

26 Feb 2013: The government sends SMS, according to the National News Agency BBS:

Mobile SMS against defamation of Islam

DHAKA, Feb 26 (BSS) - The information minister today sent messages to the subscribers of all mobile phone operators through short message service (SMS) to create awareness to stop propagation of any insulting remarks on Great Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH).

The message was sent through the Bangladesh Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (BTRC), said an official release.

The message reads: “The government is pledge-bound to stop defamation of Islam and the Great Prophet (PBUH). Remain alert against publication of false information insulting the Great Prophet (PBUH) and creation of troubles. Information Ministry.”

13 March 2013

Hefajat calls a hartal but this is the day the Shahbagh movement is to hold two rallies in Chittagong. The Shahbagh movement postpones its programme “due to security reasons” and then Hefajat withdraws its strike.

13 March 2013

The Bangladeshi Home Ministry forms a 9-member committee to track bloggers and Facebook users who insult Islam and the Prophet.

1 April 2013

Police arrest three “atheist bloggers” on the list of Hefajat on charges of hurting people’s religious sentiments: Subrata Adhikari Shuvo, Mashiur Rahman Biplob and Rasel Parvez (See profiles in Shahbagh section).

3 April 2013

Police arrest one more blogger, Asif Mohiuddin. In a statement Hefajat says those arrested were not well-known bloggers. It calls for the finding and punishing of the “real culprits”.

5 April 2013

Hefajat leaders reportedly asked the Prime Minister to root out Jamaat from the country, ban all books of Maulana Mawdudi, punish “anti-Islam bloggers”, and recognise all quomi madrasas and declare Ahmadiyya non-Muslim. The Prime Minister said her government would act against anyone who defames Islam and the Prophet: "As a Muslim I cannot accept any derogatory statement against Prophet Muhammad (pbut)."

6 April 2013

Hefajat calls for a ban on men and women mixing in public. Hefajate Islam held a rally at the capital’s Motijheel demanding punishment of the “atheist” bloggers of the Shahbagh who allegedly insulted Islam and Prophet Mohammad. The BNP-led 18-party alliance also lends their support to the radical group.

Twenty five socio-cultural-professional organisations had called a 24-hour shutdown from 6pm the night before to thwart the Hefajat programme and press for a ban on Jamaat. The Ganajagaran Mancha also enforce a 22-hour nationwide transport blockade starting from the same time to resist Hefajat.

The Shahbagh movement calls this “a second war of independence”. Attempts to prevent Hefajat supporters entering the capital fail utterly. One commentator said, “This counter plan was so amateurish that it defies understanding”.

7 April 2013

Hefajat calls nationwide hartal for this day, then says it will be a non-stop hartal if 27 pro-liberation organisations do not call off their hartal (calling for a ban of Jamaat and protesting the anti-Islamic activity of Jamaat!) on April 6 – the day Hefajat is holding its long march culminating in Dhaka.
20 April 2013

Hefajat threatens to topple the government if its 13-point demands, including the hanging of "atheist" bloggers, are not met by May 5. They make this announcement at a huge rally in Khulna presided over by Hazrat Mawlana Mostak Ahmed, ameer of Khulna District Unit of Hefajat. They demand capital punishment for journalist Shahriar Kabir, Prof Muntasir Mamun and Shahbagh spokesman Imran H Sarker along with the "atheist" bloggers. The BNP-led 18-party opposition alliance expresses solidarity with the rally.

5 May 2013

Hefajat holds its siege of Dhaka, occupying downtown areas like Mohtijeel. The government forcibly clears the area, known as Shapla Chhatra, with an unknown number of people killed. Islamic TV stations, such as Islamic TV and pro-Jamaat Diganta TV, are stopped from broadcasting the authorities' actions. Critics of the TV stations say they were openly encouraging people to come and join the protests in the teletext running at the base of their images. Junaid Babunagari, the secretary general, is detained on 6 May and Maulana Shafi is escorted back to Chittagong. More than 40,000-50,000 unknown Hefajat and Jamaat activists are shown as the accused in 19 cases but only 40 Hefajat activists are in detention.
The Hefajat Platform:

Based in Chittagong, this platform of traditional Islamists first came into existence in 2010 to oppose the Awami League government’s National Women’s Development Policy. By 2013, energised by the emergence of the pro-secular Shahbagh movement, Hefajat burst onto the political scene once again and became much more active, with mass rallies and marches. The general consensus is that Jamaat-e-Islami cleverly managed to instigate Hefajat e Islam by publicising the activities of the bloggers and possibly even providing funds for the protests.

Hefajat leaders were able to bring a hundred thousand *quomi* madrasa students on to the streets of the capital – many of them young teenagers. Some say the number was two or three times that figure. As one middle-class Dhaka commentator put it, "If Hefajat seemed so alien to many, it’s because we have no idea about the rural poor. The *quomi* madrasa system is the recipient of those who have no future." He went on to comment that the middle classes resisted by enthusiastically celebrating Bengali New Year in Mid-April as a symbol of cultural resistance to the Islamists. Another observer described Hefajat as the real youth of the country, whose identity is primarily as Muslims first and then as Bangladeshis second. The contrast with the Shahbagh youth, educated in English-medium schools, couldn’t be more stark. "For every Shahbagh guy there are ten in a madrasa - a new generation that’s been dormant till now," is how one commentator put it, "and now we’ve aroused them, politicised them."

Hefajat’s appearance was quite sudden; in early February 2013 the name Hefajat-e-Islam simply did not come up in Dhaka in a discussion of Islamic politics. A month later they’d shifted the political debate to Islamic issues and their street politics had weakened confidence in the government’s ability to control the situation. Shahbagh protestors and the Awami League suddenly found themselves on the back foot, having to defend themselves against charges of not being respectful of Islam.

The violent crackdown in May 2013 of Hefajat protests - and the suspension of broadcasts by two Islamic TV channels - badly alienated the madrasa students. The death toll is still hotly disputed. said one newspaper editor, describing the situation on 6 May 2013. "We were all taken by surprise and this frightened the West." Emotive images of bloodied corpses and elderly clerics being arrested circulated on the Internet.

Many also blame Jamaat and Shibir infiltrators for the violent destruction of property leading up to the police action, arguing that the madrasa boys were disciplined and peaceful. After the dispersal of Hefajat’s May siege of Dhaka, its Secretary General, Junaid Babunagari, was detained. Interestingly he blamed Jamaat-e-Islami and its student wing for the violence in Dhaka but then said Jamaat had funded the Hefajat protests.

The Bangladeshi police say the madrasa authorities are now under tremendous pressure from parents not to lead their children into violence on the streets. In most cases, young boys were brought to the capital to protest without the permission of their guardians.

Hefajat-e-Islam says it’s not a political party but it issued a list of political demands to the government:

**Translation of Hefajat-e-Islam’s 13-point demands:**

- Reinstate the phrase "Absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah" in the Constitution as one of the fundamental principles of state policy.
- Pass a law keeping a provision of capital punishment for maligning Allah, Islam and Prophet Muhammad and smear campaigns against Muslims.
- Punish the "atheist" leaders of Shahbagh, bloggers and anti-Islamists who make "derogatory comments" about Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).
- Stop killing, attacking and shooting Islamic scholars and madrasa students.
- Free all the arrested Islamic scholars and madrasa students.
- Lift restrictions on mosques and remove obstacles to holding religious programmes.
- Declare Quadianis (Ahmadiyya) non-Muslim and stop their publicity and conspiracies.
- Ban all foreign culture including free mixing of men and women and candlelit vigil.
- Stop setting up sculptures at intersections, colleges and universities across the country.
- Make Islamic education mandatory from primary to higher secondary levels after scrapping women policy and education policy.
- Stop threatening teachers and students of *Quomi* madrasas, Islamic scholars, imams and khatibs.
- Stop creating hatred against Muslims among young generation by misrepresentation of Islamic culture in the media.
- Stop anti-Islam activities by NGOs, evil attempts by Quadianis and conversion by Christian missionaries at Chittagong Hill Tracts and elsewhere in the country.
To this they later added:

- The arrest and trial of Shahriar Kabir, Nasir Uddin Yusuf Bachchu and Imran H Sarker for being ‘atheists’. 331
- Removal of the Bangladesh Workers Party chief Rashed Khan Menon, the Information Minister Hasanul Haque Inu and the Planning Minister AK Khandker from the Cabinet. 332

Bengali Version of Hefajat’s 13-point demands.

[Image of Bengali text]
Hefajate Islam Office Bearers:

**Ameer (President):** Shah Ahmad Shafi.

**Senior Nayeb-e-Ameer:** Mahibullah Babunagari

**Nayeb-e-Ameer:** Abdul Malek

**Joint Secretary General:** Mawlana Mainuddin Ruhi (Islami Oikyo Jote)

**Joint Secretary General:** Mufti Fayezullah (he said a group of 313 hardcore cadres will join suicide squads to defend Islam)

**Secretary General:** Junaid Babunagari

The Ameer of Hefajate Islam, Shah Ahmad Shafi, is said to command an "intense following and respect in Chittagong." As Chairman of the Bangladesh Quomi Madrasa Board, he is in charge of the clerics who run a large proportion of the madrasa in Bangladesh that are unregulated by the state. It’s these establishments that train the majority of Imams and muezzin for the increasing number of Bangladeshi mosques.

Shah Ahmad Shafi is also extremely influential as head of the 117-year old Hathazari Madrasa (Al-Jamiatul Ahlia Darul Ulum Muinul Islam). With 50,000 students, this is the biggest and oldest (Deobandi) quomi madrasa in Bangladesh. It’s said to be the second largest of its kind in South Asia, ranking in the top ten in the region in terms of scholarly reputation. He is also Chairman of the Quomi Madrasa Education Commission Bangladesh, which is negotiating with the government about official recognition for the quomi madrasa leaving certificates - to put them on a par with HSC and SSC certificates. Many secular Bangladeshis believe recognition of the most retrogressive madrasa education system would be nothing short of a disaster for the country and find it ironic that the Awami League is considering this step.

In interviews in the past, Shah Ahmad Shafi has been keen to dispel the idea that his madrasa has been involved in support for terrorism. He told one researcher he welcomed visitors to his establishment so they could see for themselves there were no illegal activities. By 2008 he said Hathazari madrasa was receiving frequent visits from "foreign diplomats, academics and journalists" from Britain and America, as well as visits from the Bangladeshi intelligence agencies.

Interestingly quomi madrasa students are not supposed to be involved in party politics at all. Shah Ahmad Shafi’s students have to sign an undertaking (halaf nama) in Urdu when joining the Hathazari Madrasa promising not work for any political organisation or even watch television or read any newspapers or magazines published by any other outfit.

**Undertaking by Madrasa Students**

I do hereby make an oath that I will not take part in any political activities such as attending meetings and seminars, becoming involved in student political work or forming political groups with my classmates while staying and studying at Darul Uloom Mueen ul Islam, Hathazari, Chittagong. Moreover, I will not read any newspapers or any books published by other institutions. I will also abstain from participating in any examinations held by any organisation other than this madrasa.

While studying at this madrasa, I will abstain from reading magazines, watching television, or taking part in any extra-curricular activities and games and sports.

I will pay due respect to my madrasa, its teachers and the other staff members working here.

I will strictly follow the Sunnah in my dress, manners and behavior. If I violate any of the aforementioned rules and regulations, I will be willing to accept any penalty awarded to me by the madrasa authority and will not object to the decision taken by my respected teachers.

I am signing this sworn statement consciously and with complete mental equipoise.

(Reproduced from *Views from the Madrasa: Islamic Education in Bangladesh*, by Mumtaz Ahmad)

However, Shah Ahmad Shafi has said, "To defend Islam and the Quran is a religious duty." In practice this has meant "sending madrasa students on the streets to protest against Taslima Nasreen’s writings, or to incite violence against the Ahmadiyya minority (which is considered ‘halal’ politics by the madrasa elders." Hefajat has also campaigned to prevent the establishment of a uniform education policy, prevent equal rights of women, prevent the restoration of the 1972 Constitution and prevent the abolition of quomi madrasa.

In April 2013, Shah Ahmad Shafi was reported to have administered the oath of martyrdom to 4000 people. At the 6 April 2013 rally of Hefajate Islam a booklet was distributed that said, "If alims and ulema can run Afghanistan, then Bangladeshi alims can run this country with Allah’s help."
Militant Links:

Further controversy was created by the presence of a former leader of the banned Islamist group, Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami (Huji) sitting on the stage at the 6 April 2013 rally of Hefajate Islam. This was Maulana Habibur Rahman from Sylhet, who runs the party Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish. Habibur had once given an interview admitting that he visited Taliban training camps and met Osama bin Laden. He was quoted at the time saying, "Only the establishment of a Khilafat-based state following the Taliban ideology can change the lot of the nation." In 2006 the Awami League had made a deal with him in return for electoral support, promising if they came to power to allow clerics to issue fatwa and to recognise the degrees given by quomi madrasa. Local Awami League workers protested vigorously and the 2007 elections were cancelled so the agreement lapsed. Habibur Rahman is said to be opposed to the concept of female leadership, but nevertheless negotiated with a party headed by a woman.

Women

Shah Ahmad Shafi believes women should be segregated. He said to a researcher in 2008, "Women are going out without maintaining modesty. Co-education is corrupting the character of students. We are not opposed to female education, but we want them to maintain their modesty. For this, they should be educated separately."

Academic Mumtaz Ahmad notes that not all quomi madrasa clerics believe in higher education for women, even if it’s Islamic in nature and conducted inside a madrasa. Maulana Mufti Abdul Rahman is critical of anything beyond elementary education for women; he believes they should only be taught to read and understand the Quran and know the basic teachings of Islam. Mufti Abdul Rahman was educated at Hathazari Madrasa and Deoband and was chairman of the Bangladesh Quomi Madrasa Education Board Federation and runs several madrasas.

Women journalists have been badly harassed and brutally physically attacked by Hefajat supporters, though the party has now apologised and denied involvement. The attacks on women reporters in April 2013 were unprecedented according to Bangladeshi journalists.

Ideological Differences Between Deobandis and Jamaat:

The clerics involved in Hefajate Islam are oriented towards Deoband in India and have a long-standing animosity with the Jamaat-e-Islami ideologue, Maulana Mawdudi, whose vision of Islam they say is distorted. For example, Fariduddin Masud, who is currently co-chairman of the Quomi Madrasa Education Commission Bangladesh, has said Mawdudi’s theories are more dangerous than those of the Ahmadiyya.

Jamaat sympathisers say Maulana Mawdudi was the editor of the newspaper representing the Deoband School before partition, so when he later attacked the leaders of Deoband it was taken as a betrayal. They say Maulana Mawdudi’s historical analysis of the Companions of the Prophet criticised them and this further widened the split.

According to Fariduddin Masud, there was a split among Deobandi scholars at the time of the Partition of India with some supporting the two-nation theory and moving to Pakistan in 1947, preaching a more political and extreme interpretation of Islam. Those who remained in Deoband believed the breakaway group had digressed from the real spirit of the school’s teachings. According to Fariduddin, the group that went to Pakistan became the basis for the Taliban’s ideology and their ideas also spread to Bangladesh, where they inspired the militancy of the mid-2000s. Fariduddin says the vast majority of quomi madrasa are followers of the Indian school of Deoband, which abhors terror and militancy.

The Quomi Madrasa Education Commission:

There are 17 members of this commission. Reports suggest five of them disagreed with the Chairman, Shah Ahmad Shafi, (who is the Hefajat leader) over whether it was appropriate for a secular government to give official recognition to an Islamic education system. Shafi ignored them and prepared a draft policy document, which has now been submitted to the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, who has directed the Education Ministry to take further steps. The five commission members who disagreed stopped attending meetings, saying they preferred to wait for a BNP-Jamaat government, which would be more Islamic in tone. The others countered that a government with Jamaat support would never recognise them because of their mutual animosity.

It’s also possible that the Quomi Madrasa Education Commission Co-Chairman, Fariduddin Masud, has struck some sort of arrangement with the Awami League. In 2005 he was arrested after the bomb blasts by JMB and was known for opposing Jamaat-e-Islami, then in power with the BNP. Recently he has publicly called for a ban of Jamaat-e-Islami and supported the war crimes trial and the Shahbagh movement, despite sharing the same ideological outlook as the Hefajate Islam leaders. It appears that when the Awami League government formed the Quomi Madrasa Education Commission in 2011 they may have reached an understanding with at least Fariduddin, if not other members, to offer them limited support. This strategy makes sense given the quomi madrasa had been
apolitical and shared the Awami League’s antagonism to Jamaat-e-Islami. The Awami League seems to have realised it couldn’t take on all the Islamists at once so it tried to divide them by wooing the *quomi* madrasa leaders with the prospect of official recognition of their educational certificates.

**Relationship with Other Parties**

Hefajat has received support from the BNP and the Jatiya Party of General Ershad for its anti-government rallies. BNP leaders attended the April grand rally by Hefazat[^344] and one reportedly said that he was “surprised how an ‘atheist’ like the slain blogger Rajib could survive for so long.”[^345]

Some have described Hefajate Islam as “the B team of Jamaat”, but when meeting the Prime Minister, the Hefajate Islam delegation is reported to have asked her to root out Jamaat from the country and ban all books by Maulana Mawdudi.

Jamaat supported Hefajat’s long march programme and their 13-point demand.[^346] While reports say Hefajat supporters chanted slogans in Chittagong demanding the release of the Jamaat leader Delwar Hossain Sayedee.

Most Bangladeshis believe Jamaat cleverly exploited the faith of Hefajat leaders to convince them Islam was under attack, offering the elderly clerics assistance for their programmes and steering events from behind the scenes. Even Jamaat sympathisers and members privately concede there was help given from a distance.

Experts[^347] point out that despite all the strategic and tactical differences, Islamists share a common aim of establishing an Islamic state. However there is competition too. Jamaat’s success in gaining disproportionate political influence considering its size, has led other Islamists to aspire to impact politics.

**Pro Government Islamists**

The government has clearly tried to employ a counter strategy of facing Islamists with Islamists. “One immediate consequence has been obvious — the political discourse is now dominated by the Islamists’ agenda.”[^348]

The Bangladesh Sammilito Islami Jote is one such pro-Liberation Islamic alliance.[^349] It has alleged the Hefajat leader, Shah Ahmad Shafi, was a collaborator with the Pakistani army in 1971 who helped form the Mujahid Bahini force.[^350]