

# Ten key questions (and answers) about the attacks on atheist bloggers in Bangladesh

Monday 4 July 2016, by [BERGMAN David](#) (Date first published: 12 April 2016).

**The murder of 28-year-old law graduate on Wednesday was the sixth such killing since February 2015.**

What can one conclude from Wednesday's murder of 28-year-old law graduate Nazimuddin Samad who was hacked to death by assailants in Bangladesh's capital city of Dhaka, bringing to six the total number of men killed in a similar manner since February 2013 [[1](#)]?

Here are 10 key points about the attacks on young atheists in Bangladesh.

**1. Who's at risk?:** If you are currently living or staying in Bangladesh and write, or have in the past written, critically about religion on any website, blog, Facebook or Twitter account, you are at risk from being attacked and killed by Islamic militants.

That may sound dramatic, but that is the unfortunate reality. Social class will obviously play a role – and elite atheist bloggers (so-called, even though some of them seem to have been targeted for expressing themselves on any form of social-media) are less vulnerable than middle or lower middle class people like Samad, who do not have their own cars and who have to walk to work, or take public transport.

The only positive point that can be said is that the attacks are not frequent. It seems that the number of militants involved is small, and they do not have the logistical ability, at present, to organise more than the occasional attack.

**2. Who's responsible?:** The organisation Ansar al-Islam Bangladesh, which used to be known as the Ansarullah Bangla Team, issued a statement claiming responsibility for the killing. The local militant group is a known affiliate of Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent [[2](#)] and has previously claimed responsibility for a number of the previous killings of "atheist bloggers".

It is not likely that this Al Qaeda outfit has any actual presence in Bangladesh – Ansar al-Islam has perhaps simply decided to affiliate itself with this international militant organisation for prestige purposes. It is not known the extent to which the Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent actually provides them assistance – or indeed whether these string of murders would have taken place even if there were not this international linkage.

These "blogger murders" appear to be distinct from other killings, involving the murder of foreigners and attacks on Shia gatherings, that have taken place since the middle of 2015, and for which Islamic State have claimed responsibility.

**3. Who else faces threat?:** According to reports [[3](#)], the Ansar al-Islam statement stated that "We don't attack people for being atheist in their personal lives .... We only target those who deride Islam

and the Prophet.” It then went onto say that they killed Nizam Uddin for committing “blasphemy against our beloved Prophet,” and referred to three particular posts that he had written on his Facebook page.

However, the statement also reportedly went onto threaten to target judges, lawyers, engineers and doctors “who don’t allow others to follow the rulings of the Islamic Shariah.” [\[4\]](#)

It is not clear what this means in reality – since this constitutes an enormous class of people. However, perhaps a greater concern is that other secular activists, who may not necessarily be atheists (or at least do not write publicly about their views ) could be at risk in the future.

This could include for example those who protest against Islamic fundamentalism and campaign in support of imposing the death penalty on those convicted of war crimes at the International Crimes Tribunal (see below). At present, while many “atheist bloggers” are also involved in or support these activities, it is their so-called atheistic writings that makes them the target. It is certainly possible, however that this could change.

**4. Why are these attacks happening now?:** There are a number of factors, but without the exponential increase in the use of social networks, these attacks would not be taking place. With social networks, anyone can write and publish whatever they want. And anyone in the world with an internet connection can then read it.

Ten years ago, perhaps the same number of people in Bangladesh had views critical of religion – but nobody then knew who they were or read anything they may have written. This has now changed – and intolerant Islamic militants can now read what they say, find out whether they live and target them.

**5. Do these murders reflect wider conflicts within society?:** Yes, these murders are also a reflection on the longstanding conflict within Bangladesh about the role of religion in the country [\[5\]](#).

The country fought to be independent from the Islamic state of Pakistan and Bangladesh’s original constitution emphasised secularism, and banned religious political parties. However, after the assassination of the country’s independence leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, things changed. The ban on religious parties was lifted, secularism as a fundamental principle was removed from the constitution, and in time, Islam was made the state religion.

The current government however has reintroduced secularism. Islam, nonetheless, remains the state religion, in apparent acknowledgement of the deep divide within the country about the role religion should play. These murders are a stark reminder that this divide remains very potent.

**6. What role does the International Crimes Tribunals play here?:** These attacks also have to be seen in the context of the International Crimes Tribunal which were established in 2010 to prosecute those accused of war crimes during the country’s independence war and which pits the State against the leaders of the Islamist party, the Jamaat-e-Islami. These attacks also have to be seen in the context of the International Crimes Tribunal which was established in 2010 to hold to account those accused of war crimes during the country’s independence war. What that meant in effect was the State being pitted against the leaders of the Islamist party, the Jamaat-e-Islami.

The trials, in which supposedly pious religious politicians faced the prospect of the death penalty, always created the risk of some kind of blow-back – a risk that was perhaps exacerbated by criticisms regarding the fairness of the trials. And whilst there is no evidence to suggest that Jamaat

themselves have been involved in these blogger killings, it is very possible that the perverted minds of the men involved in these murders consider their involvement in “avenging blasphemy” as similar in some way to the death penalties imposed by the state following these trials.

**7. Is there a connection with the Shahbagh Movement as well?:** The secular progressive anti-fundamentalist mass protests, which were triggered by a decision by the Tribunal in early February 2013 to impose a sentence of imprisonment rather than that of death on a convicted Jamaat leader, known as the Shahbagh Movement, is also significant.

In order to delegitimise this movement [6], its opponents began claiming that the huge daily protests taking place in Shahbagh crossing were connected with “atheist bloggers” whose comments about Islam were published in some newspapers.

On February 15, 2013, Ahmed Rajib Haider, an atheist who wrote critically about religion [7], and was also involved in organising the Shahbagh protests, was hacked to death, the very first such murder.

**8. Is lack of democracy also responsible?** In the *Wall Street Journal* [8], Shafquat Munir, a respected security analyst at the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies is quoted as saying that “The shrinking democratic space and the absence of a credible opposition creates a political void which then allows radicals, extremists and fringe elements to take centre stage.” This general position also seems to be reflected in a new report published by the International Crisis Group [9]

Whilst Bangladesh’s lack of democratic space – due to the absence of legitimate elections in 2014, the brutal crackdown on opposition leaders and activists including the filing of hundreds if not thousands of apparently false criminal cases, and the countless disappearances and extra judicial killings, along with the crackdown on the independent media – is certainly a very serious problem in Bangladesh, it seems too simplistic to suggest that this provides an explanation for recent killings.

Of course, if proper democratic politics does not return to Bangladesh, more people may will turn towards the extremes. But, even if Bangladesh’s opposition was allowed to function, it is likely that for the reasons set out above, these killings would still have taken place.

**9. Can the police protect these bloggers?:** Apart from the authorities not having the capacity and resources to protect such a large number of potential victims, the police cannot be trusted to be on the side of the so-called bloggers. This is because Bangladesh has a panoply of laws that criminalise those who write critically about religion.

Under the 1860 Penal Code, it is an offence to deliberately “outrage the religious feelings” of any class of citizen as well also deliberately intend to “wound the religious feelings of any person”. It is also an offence under the Information, Communications and Technology Act 2006, to write something on the internet that “causes to hurt or may hurt religious belief” which has attached to it a minimum sentence of seven years imprisonment.

It should therefore be no surprise that “atheist bloggers” are wary of seeking the protection of the police, as they could be arrested for any of these offences. Many social network activists claim that they fear being arrested if they seek protection from the police. “I have not gone to the police because police actually tried to arrest me in 2013,” CNN reported one atheist blogger in Bangladesh as saying [10].

**10. What is the government’s stand in all this?** Whilst most Bangladeshis would expect that the

government to unconditionally condemn these killings, the government seems unclear quite how to react. Whilst there are voices within the government that do condemn the killing, others also seem to have half an eye on its lack of diligence in enforcing the laws criminalising “hurting religious feeling”, and the other half on not wanting to be seen by religious constituencies in the country supporting people with views critical of religion.

This confusion, results in a failure of the government to take a clear principled position against the killings. Instead, for example, one has the home minister focusing on what exactly it was that Nizam Uddin wrote. “It is needed to see whether he has written anything objectionable in his blogs,” he told the BBC Bengali service [11].

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**P.S.**

\* Scroll.in. Apr 12, 2016 · 06:30 pm. Updated Apr 12, 2016 · 08:24 pm:

<http://scroll.in/article/807070/meet-the-four-indian-writers-in-the-running-for-2016-commonwealth-short-story-prize>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attacks\\_on\\_secularists\\_in\\_Bangladesh](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attacks_on_secularists_in_Bangladesh)

[2] <http://www.en.prothom-alo.com/bangladesh/news/101155/Ansarullah-Bangla-Team-reorganised-as-Ansar>

[3] <http://www.wsj.com/articles/al-qaeda-affiliate-claims-responsibility-for-killing-bangladeshi-student-1460200949>

[4] <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/04/09/asia/bangladesh-al-qaeda-atheists/index.html>

[5] See available on ESSF (article 37780), [According to the Bangladesh court, while secularism is one of the constitution’s fundamental principles, Islam is nonetheless the state religion.](#)

[6] <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/02/27/world/asia/bangladesh-protests/>

[7] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/31/two-sentenced-death-bangladesh-blogger-ahmed-rajib-haider>

[8] <http://www.wsj.com/articles/al-qaeda-affiliate-claims-responsibility-for-killing-bangladeshi-student-1460200949>

[9] See, available on ESSF (article 37781), [Asia Report: Political Conflict, Extremism and Criminal Justice in Bangladesh.](#)

[10] <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/04/09/asia/bangladesh-al-qaeda-atheists/index.html>

[11] <http://www.thedailystar.net/city/govt-scrutinise-slain-nizams-writings-minister-1205716>