

Understanding the crisis in Bangladesh

By Duncan Pike

On July 2, heavily armed militants attacked a bakery in an upscale neighborhood in Dhaka, Bangladesh, taking 35 people hostage. Hours later [the standoff](#) ended as Bangladeshi forces took the building. 20 hostages were killed, as were six of the attackers. ISIS took responsibility for the attack, which follows a series of brutal murders targeting secular bloggers and other free-thinkers, perpetrated by individuals affiliated with terrorist groups such as Ansarullah Bangla Team, Ansar-al Islam (the Bangladesh branch of Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent) and Daesh (ISIS).

On June 7, Canadian Journalists for Free Expression (CJFE) hosted a [free public panel](#) at Ryerson University about the attacks against Bangladeshi free-thinkers. The panelists shed light on the political, religious and technological factors underlying the violence in Bangladesh. Speaking on the panel were Raihan Abir, a Bangladeshi blogger who found asylum in Canada; Brendan De Caires, Programs and Communications Coordinator for PEN Canada; and Wil McDowall, Vice-Chair of Centre for Inquiry Canada. CJFE Executive Director Tom Henheffer moderated the discussion.

Profile of the dissident as a young blogger

Brendan de Caires began by describing the growing threats that writers and journalists face around the world, and how those threats have changed since support networks for persecuted writers first emerged during the Cold War. When the Writers in Exile programs was established at PEN, many of the writers affected came from the USSR and were generally at risk because their work challenged the state. Fifty years ago there was a common profile to writers who came under threat: most often male, middle-aged public intellectuals who carried a certain cultural cachet. Often, though not always, they were creative writers. In any case, these were people who had status and a profile on the world stage, like Russian scientist and dissident Andrei Sakharov.

“What we’re talking about tonight is the opposite,” De Caires said. “The age has dropped. They’re not famous before they’re in trouble. They’re bloggers, not professional writers.”

“We have democratized political criticism, thereby exposing these writers to dangerous and often murderous backlash. Part of what we’re experiencing is that the public sphere has shifted, probably irreversibly, online. The age of writers at risk has been dropping dramatically. Younger and younger people are being persecuted for their work.”

“It’s no longer just columnists and newspaper writers who are reaching a wide audience and subsequently being targeted. Now it’s bloggers and ordinary citizens. The fact that these writers can so easily reach the diaspora and foreign populations extends their influence.”

De Caires cited a vivid example of how quickly this influence and recognition can spread. [Nasrin Sotoudeh](#), an Iranian human rights lawyer known for her advocacy of women's and children's rights, received a prize by PEN Canada at the International Festival of Authors. With just five hours to go before the ceremony, they were able to secure press coverage from the BBC. This coverage was then broadcast

in the United States, which was then shared in Iran, and then shared out of Iran via social media. The next day, an Iranian woman who worked at Brendan's daughter's school asked him if he had heard of the award given to a Nasrin Sotoudeh, which she had received word of via friends in Iran.

"All of this is to say that the opinions of a man like Raihan are no longer those of a gentleman amateur who speaks to a small audience or like-minded friends and supporters. They now effortlessly and instantaneously reach a worldwide audience. That's the context of how we should approach this subject," de Caires concluded.

The crisis in one sentence

Raihan followed De Caires, beginning his remarks by thanking CJFE, PEN Canada and Centre for Inquiry Canada for helping him flee Bangladesh after receiving multiple death threats. Raihan writes and edits for the English-Bangla website Mukto-Mona.com (meaning 'free mind'), where hundreds of thousands of free-thinkers, secularists and atheists gather online to write, debate and socialize.

Raihan summed up the crisis in Bangladesh in one sentence: Secular humanism in Bangladesh is under attack by Islamist extremists. [Two groups](#) are the main culprits: Daesh and the al Qaeda-affiliated Ansar Al Islam. The government has done little to protect its citizens and fight Islamist extremism. Raihan warned that the attacks in Bangladesh were in danger of becoming a horrendous human rights crisis. If it continues, Raihan believes Bangladesh will be worse than Syria.

Ansar Al Islam has targeted humanists and secularists, victims who they can label as anti-Islamic in order to elicit sympathy from the public. This is the main difference between al Qaeda and Daesh, the latter of whom doesn't care about public opinion.

Raihan wrote a book on atheism in 2011 with well-known blogger and activist Avijit Roy, who was murdered in February 2015 for his outspoken atheism. Roy's murder was followed soon after by the murder of his editor, then two of his publishers. Raihan was able to avoid this fate by coming to Canada. "My country didn't care about me, but Canada—a country thousands of miles away—cared enough to give me safe haven."

Failure and cowardice in Bangladesh's political leadership

The Prime Minister of Bangladesh was reluctant to say anything in public about the killing because of the stigma attached to Roy's atheism. More than just a blogger, Raihan said, Roy was the creator of an atheist and humanist movement in Bangladesh. "We have inherited this responsibility since he was killed."

His comrades were hacked to death for promoting liberal views, science and reason. "Our Prime Minister doesn't have the courage to stand beside us, but we continue to stand up for our rights."

Those who did seek out help from the state were turned away. [Niloy Neel](#) was followed home one day by a group of men and, fearing for his life, filed a police report, but authorities did not follow up on his

complaint. Neel was murdered in August 2015 after a gang armed with machetes broke into his fifth-floor apartment in the Goran neighbourhood of Dhaka.

It's not just active bloggers and journalists who are being targeted. "You just give a Facebook status, and you can get killed," Raihan said, citing the April 6, 2016 murder of [Nazimuddin Samad](#), who wrote frequently about secularism and criticized Islamist extremism on his Facebook page.

Raihan noted that Bangladesh's Home Minister put the blame squarely on the victims following Samad's death, following a pattern set by government officials: "Why are they [bloggers] using this kind of language against religious establishment?" He further stated that part of the investigation would be "to see whether he has written anything objectionable in his blogs," implying that would provide some justification for Samad's death.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was similarly supine in the face of this assault of free expression and democracy in her country, saying days later: "I consider such writings as not free thinking but filthy words. Why anyone would write such things? It's not at all acceptable if anyone writes against our prophet or other religions. Why would the government take responsibility if such writings lead to any untoward incidents? Everyone should maintain decency. Or else the government wouldn't take the responsibility for any uncivilised attitude."

This is the choice that the Bangladesh government is offering dissidents and secularists. "Bangladesh doesn't allow criticism," Raihan stated. "If you do, you will get killed or they will imprison you." Within two weeks of the statements by the Prime Minister and Home Minister, Bangladeshi LGBT activist and editor [Xulhaz Mannan](#) was murdered by Ansar Al Islam.

In contrast to the murders perpetrated by al Qaeda-affiliated Ansar Al Islam—which specifically target humanists, atheists, and LGBT activists—Daesh affiliates target a much wider group, including Shia, Hindu, Christians, religious converts and foreign aid workers.

Official discussion around the status of Daesh in Bangladesh is bizarre. The government claims there is no Daesh presence in the country, despite the fact that their leader in Bangladesh is well-known as a Canadian who used to live in Windsor, official Daesh media outlets openly claim responsibility for attacks, and the Daesh propaganda magazine, [Dabiq](#), has featured Bangladesh at least three times. Raihan personally knows someone who was radicalized in Bangladesh and travelled to Turkey to join the terrorist group.

This simultaneous denial of the reality of jihadism in Bangladesh, together with victim-blaming from the authorities, has left targets caught between the devil and the Bay of Bengal. As [Avijit Roy's](#) widow, [Bonya Ahmed](#), has said: "The liberal progressive secular community and minorities of all sorts in Bangladesh now don't just have to fear Islamic militants. We must also fear our own government, which shows no regard for its secular beginnings and chooses instead to appease the religious fundamentalists."

“The horror of this is sometimes too much”

Wil McDowall followed Raihan by describing the efforts of the Centre for Inquiry Canada to assist Bangladeshi secularists who fear for their lives, including Raihan and his wife. CFIC first began hearing from free-thinkers eager to get to Canada in 2015. At first McDowall assumed that those writing to him were exaggerating the danger because he had trouble believing the obscenely violent character of their accounts. “I had no idea how naive I was about that,” he said. At first all CFIC can do is convey information, and then work to get them here as quickly and discreetly as possible before they can claim asylum.

CJFE’s experience mirrors that of CFIC. Executive Director Tom Henheffer mentioned that the number of applications to CJFE’s Journalists in Distress Fund from Bangladeshi bloggers has also skyrocketed because of the attacks. The spirit of the Bangladeshi people remains strong, and writers are still speaking out despite the obvious danger. And Canada has potential leverage over the Bangladeshi government, given the depth of our trade relations. We can and must do our part to help solve the free expression crisis.

What the international community can do to help Bangladeshi bloggers

Raihan has talked with the Office of Religious Freedom (now the Office of Human Rights) about the dangers facing atheist bloggers. He was encouraged by their response, though this doesn’t mean that much can or will be done. Part of this is bureaucratic: the processing time is 40 months for new refugees. And even after getting refugee status, exiled free-thinkers still lack basic living support to help them transition.

Raihan advised those who want to help to call their local constituency and tell them you want something done. McDowall agreed, saying that citizens must show the Canadian government that they care about this issue, and that the government they must step up to help Bangladeshi bloggers. The best way to do this is the old fashioned one: Write a letter to your MP.

De Caires was a bit less sanguine about the potential of political pressure to make a difference. “Let me pour a bit of cold water on this: what makes a difference here is money.” He cited the example of jailed Saudi writer Raif Badawi, who is the subject of a massive global advocacy campaign. Despite the large spotlight on Badawi, our government’s relationship with Saudi Arabia hasn’t visibly shifted. “No government is going to trade the lives of a few problematic bloggers in Bangladesh or wherever for a multi-billion dollar arms deal.”

De Caires advocated for making use of Canada’s multi-billion dollar ties to Bangladesh’s garment industry: “We’re importing clothes from Bangladesh, so I don’t see why when putting pressure on these lines, why we don’t say we won’t buy clothes from countries where they refuse to protect the lives of bloggers. The international community must increase pressure on states that violate human rights. One way is to impose trade sanctions.”

Tweets vs. truncheons: Reassessing liberation technology

Brendan de Caires then broadened the discussion to the role of technology in this crisis, returning to the wider context of the violence following revolutions in the Arab world in 2011. In the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring there was a lot of self-congratulatory, techno-utopian rhetoric that stressed the liberatory potential of social media and telecommunications technology. "As though," said de Caires, "the geniuses of Silicon Valley had condescended to bring democracy to the Middle East." This is not a new attitude but has accompanied every new wave of technology, such as the impact of the fax machine on the fall of the USSR. "Never be beguiled by the transmission of information," he warned.

Technology will not set us free, and people are waking up to this fact. People set people free, and the bloggers in Bangladesh are on the front lines of this movement. Indeed, events in Azerbaijan, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen and beyond have shown that traditional mechanisms for enforcing state power, such as the capacity to jail people, are as strong as ever.

One of the dangerous fallacies of modern digital communications is that because they're ethereal, we disconnect them from their real world impact. Of the 10,000 messages that go off in every revolution, only a handful matter. Because of social media, you can quite quickly identify who these influential people are, as the Iranians discovered in 2009. This means that if you want to work out who is the most provocative voice in your society, it's not that difficult. Because of Facebook and Twitter, you can usually find these people quite easily.

As evidence of this, de Caires noted that Niloy Neel's assassins tracked him down from his Facebook profile. And in one of the marches where Islamists announced who they were going to kill next, they had a Facebook profile picture on the banner.

"A theatre of murder"

Social media often has an unpredictable impact, de Caires said. The infamous 'hit list' of Bangladeshi bloggers was not originally a kill list, for example, but rather a catalogue of 84 people who had especially annoyed a group of fundamentalist Muslims and were asking for action from the government against 'hurtful opinion'. And, indeed, many of these bloggers have been prosecuted. It was only later that jihadists converted the names into a checklist for murder.

Given that a relatively small number of people can have a significant impact, murder does become a viable option for fanatics looking to suppress debate, and social media makes these murders exemplary. Roy was struck down in public surrounded by a crowd of people, by design, making his murder a piece of chilling spectacle. "When Avijit Roy was struck down, it was a theatre of murder," de Caires said. "It was all about creating fear."

This is a very deliberate tactic, as confirmed in a [New York Times](#) article that describes how radicalized Bangladeshi Islamists are trained not just to hack someone to death with a machete, but to keep the crowd at bay with a pistol afterwards.

All of this is worlds away from how Facebook and Twitter, along with debates over religion, are conceived of in Canada. “We think of social media in a very trivial way. We also think of atheism in a very trivial way,” said de Caires. “But Bangladesh is a place where these beliefs have catastrophic impacts, with consequences that are literally unbelievable to us in the West.”

Why is the Bangladesh government allowing this to happen?

The panelists all agreed that the government has been worse than useless in its response to the violence faced by the free-thinkers. They disagreed as to why exactly the government is failing so comprehensively.

Wil McDowall cited the contradictory nature of Bangladesh, which has a constitutionally secular government while at the same time proclaiming Islam its state religion. He also believes many in the government are likely sympathetic to the killers. “We’re talking about zealous Muslims, who follow the Koran literally. There is a lot of death for speaking out in the Koran. If you are indoctrinated from birth that these things are right, you are going to believe that these edicts exist for a specific reason.”

De Caires disagreed that devout people are more prone to killing, saying that some people are more prone to killing even without religion. He pivoted to the United States and what he saw as the “quasi-religious” character of the obsession with ‘national security’ among the American elite. This can lead to violent outbursts, as seen in calls to kill Julian Assange after the Wikileaks disclosures in 2010.

What made the government lose its will to act decisively, says de Caires, was the clever conflation by Islamists of the secular intelligentsia with anti-Islam activists. That said, he agrees that the government has disgraced itself in its response to murders. It is important not to conflate secular ideas with the notion that those ideas are also mocking Islam. The government failed to do this. The result is that the label ‘blogger’ has become a dirty word in Bangladesh because it’s seen as equivalent to a childish insulter.

Raihan countered that this is a common Islamic narrative. No religion supports freedom of expression, he said, because it’s in the inherent nature of religion to deny the free mind. He doesn’t blame the government entirely for its response because he knows it is in part a reaction to a large majority of the Bangladeshi population, many of whom are often ferociously anti-atheist. He cites one famous Bangladeshi author who said that the only reason people write about atheism and homosexuality is because they want to be targeted so that they can claim asylum in Canada.

Another Muslim narrative that helps the government avoid accountability is to blame Jews for everything bad that happens around the world, including blogger murders in Bangladesh. The Home Minister, for instance, said that Israel may actually be behind the killings.

Raihan: You cannot silence us through murder

Raihan rejected the contention that these attacks will succeed in silencing atheists and free-thinkers in Bangladesh, citing the factual basis of his position, and the impossibility of wholly doing away with a skeptical mindset. “We talk about science and reason, and it makes sense,” said Raihan. “You kill one

Avijit Roy, and another thousand are created. Niloy Neal was writing on our website. He was writing on Facebook, criticizing religion. He knew he was a prime target, but he never stopped writing.”

But this indomitability does not extend to the Bangladesh government or others in society, who have accepted the killers’ veto over what they may or may not say. After the murder of Avijit Roy, the organizers of the book fair where Roy was murdered decided there must be no books that hurt people’s feelings. Nor has the book fair ever made a statement supporting or memorializing Roy.

The government thinks that people really get upset by Roy’s writing, Raihan said, but this is wrong. One does not even have to write for these people to get upset. If you are a musician you can be attacked because Daesh believes that "creating a music school also promotes atheism.”

Wil McDowall has followed similar challenges in other countries, where deviations from any form of groupthink produce violent backlash. He has seen how fear can do very different things to different people. “It really galvanizes some people to want to speak out more,” Mcdowall said. He finds hope in the impossibility of erasing someone’s voice from the Internet. As long as people are talking about the work of Roy and other bloggers, people will continue to spread it. They have become secular martyrs of a kind, not through suicide-murder, but through their unflinching and clear-eyed devotion to a set of ideas.

Roy’s father, after his son’s murder, said that those who think killing bloggers will lead to an Islamist utopia are living in a fool’s paradise. “People still speak out, and that’s a noble thing, and it’s hard not to be moved by it. Anyone trying to remove the message clearly doesn’t like independent thought. Maybe I’m optimistic, but I don’t think that will stop. There is fear. But there is still hope.”

“With digital communication the afterlife is potentially infinite,” McDowall said. “This means you can’t really kill the messenger.”

As McDowall notes, Avijit Roy’s final words were "the virus of faith is dangerously real."

“That’s not the sentence you want your victim to die on. That message is now amplified a million fold.”