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Bangladesh: Sixteen sentenced to death over brutal murder of student

A Bangladesh court on October 24 sentenced 16 people to death for the murder of Nusrat Jahan Rafi, a student. While Rafi's murder is a heinous crime, the ruling Awami League is using the incident to strengthen the state apparatus and step up its law and order attacks on democratic rights.

Nineteen-year-old Rafi was set on fire by a group of students and others at the Sonagazi Islamia Fazil madrasa, an Islamic religious school, after she refused to withdraw allegations to the police that she had been sexually harassed by Siraj Doula, the school principal.

Rafi had been summoned to Doula's office on March 27 and alleged that he repeatedly touched her in an inappropriate manner. Rafi, who was from Feni, a small town 160 kilometres south of Dhaka, immediately reported the incident to the police.

Eleven days later, when Rafi went to the school to sit for her final exam, she was lured to the rooftop of a building and ordered to withdraw the police complaint. After she refused, she was doused with kerosene and set on fire. Rafi identified her attackers when she was taken to the hospital with burns to 80 percent of her body, but died five days later.

Three teachers, including the school principal and two local leaders of the ruling Awami League, Ruhul Amin and Maksud Alam, are among those who have been found guilty. Defence lawyers said that they will appeal the decision.

While Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League-led government has denounced those responsible for the young girl's brutal murder, it is attempting to cover-up the real issues that produced the crime.

The Awami League government claims to be "secular" but consistently caves in to the anti-democratic and socially reactionary demands of the Islamic fundamentalists. It has banned blogs accused of "blasphemy" and moved against those said to be using social media to "hurt" Islam.

In the 1996 election against the then Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government, Hasina aligned herself with the Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamic fundamentalist party, responsible for committing war crimes during the 1971 Bangladesh national struggle.

Members of the Awami League apparatus have also been involved in other violent attacks on those deemed to be denigrating Islam. On October 3, Bangladesh University of Engineering Technology (BUET) student Abrar Fahad, 21, was killed by members of the Chhatra League, the Awami League's youth wing.

Fahad was tortured and beaten to death with cricket stumps and other blunt instruments by leading members of Chhatra League's BUET chapter because he wrote a Facebook post criticising Bangladesh's agreement with India allowing the country to withdraw water from the Feni River.

The brutal character of Rafi's killing led to the eruption of mass protests and general outrage throughout Bangladesh. A comment from Anowar Sheikh on the BBC Bengali Facebook page said: "Many girls don't protest out of fear after such incidents. Burqas or even dress made of iron cannot stop rapists." In another Facebook page, Lopa Hossain commented: "I wanted to have a daughter my whole life, but now I am afraid. Giving birth to a daughter in this country means a life of fear and worry."

Young women face widespread mistreatment and revenge attacks in Bangladesh, including acid throwing, sexual harassment and rape. This underscores the reactionary nature of the ruling elite, which has been unable to resolve any of the basic democratic problems facing the masses since independence in 1971.

Article continues below the form

According to the Mahila Parishad women's rights group, in just the first six months of this year, 26 women were killed after being sexually assaulted in Bangladesh, and 592 were allegedly raped, including 113 gang-raped.

These are just the reported cases, however, with the real number probably much higher because when a woman reports sexual harassment in Bangladesh, she is generally blamed, not the culprit. This abuse, and the patriarchal attitudes towards women in Bangladesh, is not an isolated phenomenon but a product of the capitalist system.

While a small elite of Bangladeshi businessmen, landlords and corrupt politicians are fabulously rich, the country is marked by ever-growing social inequality, which is intertwined with religious bigotry and produces a toxic social environment.

This was reflected in the initial reaction of the police towards Rafi after she reported that she had been sexually harassed by the school principal. The court case, in fact, revealed that several policemen collaborated with those convicted of the killing by denying the sexual harassment allegations and spreading false information that the young woman had committed suicide. The court case only occurred after mass protests.

The Awami League government is not concerned about the democratic rights of the masses, including women, but with using the killing to promote a “law and order” campaign to strengthen the state apparatus. Though similar cases take years to conclude in Bangladesh, this was one of the quickest in the country.

The fast-tracked case took just 62 days, with Prime Minister Hasina declaring that “none of the culprits” would escape legal action and Prosecutor Hafez Ahmed cynically told the media “nobody will get away with murder in Bangladesh.”

The Hasina government’s law-and-order rhetoric is part of broader moves towards autocratic methods of rule amidst developing widespread anger among the workers against the appalling social conditions they face.

In January and February this year the Awami League government unleashed a violent crackdown against Ashulia district apparel workers who were protesting over low pay and demanding a wage rise. Thousands of mainly women workers were sacked and one worker shot and killed by the police.

Income inequality in Bangladesh has increased dramatically in the past 30 years. The *Dhaka Tribune* reported in April that “income held by the poorest 40 percent of the population in Bangladesh has declined from 17.41 in 1991 to 13.01 percent in 2016” with income held by the richest 10 percent rising from 23.3 percent to 26.8 percent in the same period. Another study noted that Bangladesh is home to 24.1 million extremely poor people (out of more than 163 million) who earn less than \$US1.90 a day, the international

poverty threshold, and that the country ranked fifth behind India, Nigeria, Congo and Ethiopia.

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