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Original Citation

Syed, Jawad (2016) Targeted Killings in Bangladesh: Diversity at Stake. The Huffington Post.

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Syed, J. (2016). Targeted killings in Bangladesh: Diversity at stake. The Huffington Post, April 28.
Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/jawad-syed/targeted-killings-in-bang_b_9789716.html

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Targeted Killings in Bangladesh: Diversity at Stake

Posted: 28/04/2016 15:30 BST | Updated: 28/04/2016 15:30 BST



Since 2013, Bangladesh has repeatedly been in headline news across the world due to systematic and incessant targeted killings. In the mainstream media, both in South Asia and the West, the focus has been generally on high profile murders of secular and progressive bloggers. This includes the recent worldwide broad coverage on the tragic murder of Xulhaz Mannan, editor of Bangladesh's first LGBT rights magazine. However, not many know that these killings are only one part of the story. Secularists and bloggers are not the only community under attack in Bangladesh. Unless other pieces of the story are taken into account, the picture will remain incomplete and a meaningful resolution may remain evasive.

A cursory macro-level glance indicates systematic attacks on free thought and alternative voices belonging to diverse backgrounds and ideologies in Bangladesh. For a detailed breakdown of these attacks (29 targeted murders during Jan 2013 - April 2016 including 11 Sunni Sufis, 10 secularists, 3 Shias, 2 Christians, 1 Hindu and 2 foreigners), refer to Table 1 and this [University of Huddersfield study](#). In addition to secularists, liberals and atheists, victims also include people of faith, such as those from Shia, Sunni Sufi, Ahmadi, Christian and Hindu backgrounds.

Table 1. An overview of targeted killings in Bangladesh (Jan 2013 – Apr 2016)

Source: www.gcehr.org

Date	Victim/s	Identity
25 Apr 2016	Xulhaz Mannan (35); Tanay Majumder	Secular; LGBT rights activist
23 Apr 2016	A.F.M. Rezaul Karim Siddique (61)	Progressive; academic
6 Apr 2016	Nazimuddin Samad (28)	Secular; blogger
22 Mar 2016	Hossain Ali (68)	Christian convert from Islam
15 Mar 2016	Abdur Razzak (48)	Shia Muslim
21 Feb 2016	Jogeswar Roy (45)	Hindu priest
27 Dec 2015	10 injured	Ahmadis
27 Nov 2015	Moazzem Hossain (70) (killed); 3 injured	Attack on Shia mosque
17 Nov 2015	Piero Parolari	Italian priest and doctor
31 Oct 2015	Ahmedur Rashid Tutul; Ranadipam Basu; Tareq Rahim (injured)	Publisher; writer
31 Oct 2015	Faisal Arefin Dipan (43)	Secular; journalist
24 Oct 2015	A boy (14) killed; 50 injured	Shia Muslim
6 Oct 2015	Luke Sarker (51) injured	Christian pastor
5 Oct 2015	Muhammad Khizir Khan (68)	Sunni Sufi saint (pir)
2 Oct 2015	Kunio Hoshi (66)	Japanese farmer
28 Sep 2015	Cesare Tavella (50)	Italian aid worker
4 Sep 2015	Lengta Fakir (shrine's custodian); Abdul Kader (assistant)	Sunni Sufi
7 Aug 2015	Niloy Chakrabarti Neel (40)	Secular; blogger
12 May 2015	Ananta Bijoy Das (33)	Secular; blogger
30 Mar 2015	Washiqur Rhaman (27)	Secular; blogger
26 Feb 2015	Dr Avijit Roy (42)	Secular; blogger
15 Nov 2014	Shafiqul Islam (est. 55)	Humanist;
27 Aug 2014	Nurul Islam Farooqi (60)	Sunni Sufi
21 Dec 2013	Lutfur Rahman Faruk (60); 5 others	Sunni Sufi
15 Feb 2013	Ahmed Rajib Haider (35)	Secular; blogger
14 Jan 2013	Asif Mohiuddin (31) (injured)	Secular; blogger

On the surface, it is hard to find a common denominator amongst the victims of targeted attacks in recent years. Some of them were practicing Christians or Muslims of Sunni Sufi or Shia backgrounds, others were secularists while a few were atheists. Instead of finding commonality in these diverse victims, it may be more productive to focus attention on their killers.

Media reports suggest that militants affiliated with the Islamic State (IS), Al Qaeda in Subcontinent (AQIS), Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), Ansar al-Islam and Jamayetul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) are involved in these attacks. What is common in these murderous groups is the radical Salafi/Wahhabi and Deobandi ideology that is extremely intolerant of dissent and pluralism. Any person or community that does not subscribe to their doctrinal beliefs or political agenda of global Islamist domination (Caliphate) is considered fair game for violence.

In recent years, the Indian police has made several arrests and found that at least two of the AQIS top leaders studied or were affiliated with the Darul Uloom Deoband, the historical seminary where the Deobandi ultra-orthodox movement began in 1866.

Bangladesh has a rich culture and pluralist traditions; it is after all the land of the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore. With a population of more than 162 million (2016 est.), it is a diverse country in terms of religious ideology. About 87% of Bangladeshis are Muslims, followed by Hindus (12%), Buddhists (1%) and Christians (0.5%). Sunni Muslims mainly comprise of Bareilvi (Sufi), Deobandi and Salafi (Ahl-e-Hadith or Wahhabi) denominations. There are also Shia and Ahmadi communities.

The roots of religious extremism can be traced back to 1971 when the Jamaat-e-Islami and its activists in Al-Shams and Al-Badar militant groups were involved in the systematic murders of nationalist intellectuals, activists, writers and academics in Bangladesh. Many Jamaat's top leaders have been tried and convicted on charges of crimes against humanity committed during the country's independence war in 1971. Three of those have already been hanged.

A recent issue of IS's magazine hailed the spate of attacks as the "revival of jihad in Bengal" and urged its followers to target foreigners, Shia and Christians in Bangladesh.

While the government seems to deny the presence of the IS in Bangladesh, it is true that all of the attacks perpetrated against secularists and persecuted religious communities are being carried out by interlinked groups operating under different names. However, in their core, the attackers seem to share the murderous Takfiri Salafi/Wahhabi and Deobandi ideology.

A Takfiri is a radical Islamist who considers all those religious groups and individuals kafir (infidel) and worthy to be killed who do not subscribe to his religious doctrine or political agenda. Salafis are an ultra-orthodox minority within Sunni Islam and are heavily sponsored and funded by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Arab Sheikdoms. Wahhabi is the Saudi version of Salafis. Deobandis are the South Asian variant of Salafis/Wahhabis, and despite some differences of jurisprudence, align themselves with global Salafi and Wahhabi movements.

As an example, Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda are primarily Salafi/Wahhabi outfits with some participation by Deobandis while Taliban (TTP), Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and Lashkr-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) are Deobandi outfits with some Salafi Wahhabi participation. In this context, JMB and ABT, not unlike Jamaat-e-Islami, could be seen as joint outfits of Deobandi and Salafi Wahhabi Islamists in Bangladesh.

In his research on terrorism, Chris Blackburn (2006) notes that the followers of the Deobandi sect of South Asia and the Wahhabi sect of Saudi Arabia follow an ultra-orthodox interpretation of the Islamic faith, which has often led them on a collision path with other sects who have more tolerant and progressive attitudes within Sunni Islam. Blackburn further notes that Gulf States continue to promote Wahhabism in the Muslim world- with the Deobandi movement being a close ally.

Just like Bangladesh, Pakistan has seen the systematic targeting of free thinkers and alternative voices. From Rashid Rahman (lawyer and rights activist) to Shabbir Shah (academic) and from Parween Rahman (social worker) to Sibte Jaafar (poet and rights activist), this radical ideology has claimed countless lives of diverse communities and faith groups across Pakistan. Just a year ago, brutal assassins linked to the proscribed terror outfit SSP murdered Pakistan's leading progressive activist and micro-blogger, Sabeen Mahmud. Whether it is the Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh or its ideological affiliate, Sipah-e-Sahaba in Pakistan, the tragic results have been the same. Hate ideology cannot thrive amongst vibrant alternative discourses and their only methodology is the brute suppression and elimination of diversity.

Thus, an urgent crack down on these militants and their clerics, madrassas, literature and media that propagate such ideologies is necessary to protect vulnerable religious communities and secularists as well as the diverse and pluralistic fabric of Bangladeshi society.

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