primary orality than to literacy. This has been made possible by the development of computer-mediated communication (CMC) systems. This new form of orality occurs in real-time and is asynchronous. Although based on text, the discourse in these computer-mediated forums exhibits many qualities of an oral culture. The existence of this text-based orality may imply that discourse need not be based upon sound in order to have oral characteristics. Rather, oral characteristics grow out of computer-mediated communication which gives participants greater independence over time and space than paper-based text communication. These CMC forums give rise to communities of people who participate with emotion, involvement, and expressiveness.

While it is true that the new digital media has helped enormously in the Arab springs movements and the free democratic movements around the world, has brought about the fall of tyrants and the reinstating of democracies, and helped in installing liberal leaders in positions of power, it has also been used by right-wing groups round the world to spread hatred and homogenize thinking to fanatic frenzy. While this same tool can be used by forces of democracy and civil and cultural liberty, it can very easily and effectively be used by its detractors to take them away. I feel that while we are swayed away by the great potential this tool has to give freedom, we must be aware of the same potential to take it away.

The Political Economy of Digital Propaganda of Islamists Against Liberal and Secular Writers and Bloggers and Their Social Movements in Bangladesh: A Critical Inquiry
Abdur Razzaque Khan

Abstract
The Islamic parties and their activists in Bangladesh have launched a massive propaganda against the liberal and secular writers/bloggers/journalists/artistes and progressive intellectuals through their digital means of communications for quite a long time. They openly term these progressive people as atheists and threat to kill them as their holy responsibility for the sake of Islam in Bangladesh via social media. Apart from this, these Islamist groups are very much critical of the ShahBagh Movement and the Ganojagoron Mancho (Stage for People’s Uprising)—a platform of bloggers and online activists in Bangladesh—that has initiated a social movement for the capital punishment to the war criminals of Bangladesh in 1971 since February 5th 2013. The brutal killings of bloggers Ahmed Rajib Haider, Dr. Avijit Roy and Wasiqur Rahman within a short space of time indicates that it becomes common practice of these Islamist groups who felt offended by the writings, posts or statements of those ‘atheists’ or non-believers and inspired to carry out such heinous acts to save holy religion, Islam. This paper will try to examine what is the political economy of these extreme Islamists in Bangladesh? Why, when and how these groups are using Islam for their political interest openly via different social media? In fine, what is their political motive behind these extreme criminal activities of their Islamisation process in Bangladesh?

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In recent time Bangladesh has experienced a shocking wave of killing progressive writers and bloggers one after another by the extreme Islamists. These Islamist groups even swooped on publishers who have published books of the progressive bloggers in the country. This has created a culture of fear and frustration among the progressive people of the country. The progressive bloggers and writers are withdrawing themselves from different blogs and go on hiding for fear of life. Some of them have already left the country considering they might be the next target of the extreme Islamists. In such a situation, the role of the government is not enough to ensure safety of these progressive bloggers. This is simply because nothing tangible has been done from government side to address all these killings. The situation worsens when ministers and government officials ask the bloggers not to write against any religion which might hurt the feeling of the common people in Bangladesh. In fact, this sort of statement by high government officials encourages the Islamist zealots to carry on their mission with zest and zeal. However, when Rajib Haider was killed in 2013, “Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina called him a martyr”(Subramanian, 2015). At present the government doesn’t want to go for any stern action against these bigot Islamists rather Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her cabinet colleagues advised the bloggers not to write against any religion and hurt to the beliefs of the Muslims and other religions in the country. As Subramanian (2015) goes on:

More recently, Hasina has advised writers to refrain from distorting religious beliefs. When she did not publicly condemn Roy’s murder, her son and adviser, Sazzad Wazed, told Reuters, “We are walking a fine line here. We don’t want to be seen as atheists.” Another government adviser told me, “If we allowed bloggers to write shit about Prophet Muhammad, the people would reject us.” He added, “They’d think we started all this with our secularism business. That’s the reality. This isn’t London or New York. This is Dhaka” (Subramanian, 2015).

Who are the Islamist Militants and why they run after bloggers

The Islamist activists think that blogger is a synonym of atheist. Hence, they consider all the bloggers and progressive writers are atheists. It is their holy duty to kill all these bloggers with a view to protecting the religion “Islam.” By doing so, they will be rewarded by the God “Allah” in the next life. This is a general understanding of these Islamists about their acts. In fact, they are being trained with this ideology. These young Islamists somehow are and were related with the Jamaat-e-Islam Bangladesh (JIB) and its student wing Islami Chhattra Sibir (ICS). Ali Riaz (2010) finds that all the arrested Islamists of Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB, the Assembly of Holy Warriors) confessed to the police that at one stage of their lives they had been involved with JIB and its student wing ICS. Moreover, they were inspired by the speeches and writings of JIB leaders. As Ali Riaz (2010) confirms:

Delwar Hossain Saidee, whose speeches are available as audio and video tapes, within and without Bangladesh, sends a clear signal to the audience that these messages are sanctioned by Jamaat-i-Islami Bangladesh. The messages provide legitimacy to hate, anger and violence, and contribute to an atmosphere supportive of militant Islam. On many occasions police have found cassettes of Saidee’s waz mahfil speeches in militant hideouts. Some of the militants, notably Javed Iqbal (alias Aman Ullah alias Mohammad alias Abu Hurra), the chief of JMB Chittagong region, confessed to the law enforcing agencies that “he was imbued with the spirit of jihad to establish Islamic rule in Bangladesh after listening [to] the speech of Maulana Delwar Hossain Sayedee [sic] at Tafsir Mahfil held at the parade ground in Chittagong.” (Ali Riaz, 2010 :58)

Imbued with the spirit of Jihad (holy war) these Islamists killed five bloggers and one publisher in the last 32 months (B. Ahmed, 2015). Their last victim was publisher Faisal Arefin Dipon, who was killed on 31st October in 2015 at his office. Faisal Arefin Dipon was a close friend of blogger Avijit Roy and published some of his books. On the same day these Islamists swooped on another publisher of slain Avijit Roy, Ahmedur Rashid Tutul and two other bloggers Tareq Rahim and Ranadipom Basu at Tutul’s Lalmatia office in broad daylight. All the three victims had a narrow squeak for their lives. The Islamists first killed Rajib Haider near his Dhaka home on 15th February in 2013. Since then the killing process is being continuously carried out by the Islamist militants. They killed Bangladeshi born American citizen Avijit Roy on 26th February 2014, Washiqur Rahman on 30th March 2015, Niladre Chatterje Niloy on 7th August 2015. Niladre was killed at his home on Friday. These four bloggers were killed in Dhaka. Only Ananta Bijoy Das was killed
in Sylhet on 12th May 2015. All the killings were carried out in the same way attacking on neck and head by using machetes. The fact is that eight of the listed (list made by violent Islamist organizations and their allies) 84 free thinkers, activists, bloggers already have been killed in similar way in recent years.

The Islamists in Bangladesh are divided into different groups with different objectives. But they have one common goal to actualize their objectives through political Islam like JIB and ICS. In fact, all the Islamist groups are more or less connected with JIB and ICS with same political objectives. As Riaz and Fair (2010) find:

“the Islamists” of Bangladesh are not a monolithic and homogenous group of actors who adhere to a consistent set of objectives to be actualized through political Islam. Rather, there is a wide array of groups and individuals who seek to instrumentalize Islam in the pursuit of their specific organizational and perhaps individual political objectives (Ali Riaz & Fair, 2011: 3).

The political economy of their ugly propaganda in social media

The main objective of the ugly propaganda of these extreme Islamists against the progressive writers and bloggers is to defame them and to assassinate their character as atheists and so on. Through their social media they continuously propagate against these progressive writers and bloggers. And even they openly threat the progressive writers and bloggers to kill them. These Islamists try to portray the bloggers as anti Islam and against the Holy Scripture Quran and the prophet Muhammad. They want to label these progressive writers and bloggers have strong hatred against Islam and Muslims. In such a way, they want to buy both the support and sympathy from the common Muslim people in Bangladesh. Through Facebook they try to motivate and convince the common people in Bangladesh against progressive writers and bloggers with their political posts which are full of lies and ill-intention to create unrest in the society with a view to creating their political hegemony over the common people of Bangladesh in the name of protecting the Holy religion Islam. They have created four groups in Facebook—Hefazot-e-Islam Bangladesh, Nastik mukto Bangladesh chai (we want an atheists free Bangladesh), IS Bangladesh and Basher Kella (Bamboo Fort).

Through these four groups they continue to carry on their dirty propaganda against all progressive forces --writers, bloggers, journalists, artists and intellectuals in Bangladesh. Their propaganda in social media took an ugly shape when the Shahbagh Movement was launched on 5th February in 2013 demanding death sentence of the infamous war criminal Abdul Kader Molla, assistant secretary general of JIB and other war criminals (Raychoudhury et al 2015). The International Crimes Tribunal (ICT)-2 sentenced Abdul Kader Mollah to life imprisonment. The judgment was unexpected even to Molla simply because of his heinous crimes during Liberation War in 1971 in Bangladesh. That’s why Molla left the court by showing V-sign to his supporters after sentencing.

Molla, who led a razakaar squad during the war and is known as the Butcher of Mirpur, had good reason to rejoice – he had been expecting the death sentence, sitting silently as witness came forward to testify to his crimes – raping an 11-year old girl, beheading a well-known poet and shooting 344 people in the Mirpur area (Sen, 2013).

The members of Bangladesh Online Activists Network (BOAN) assembled at Shahbagh and spread the news of Kader Molla’s case judgment in social media. All on a sudden, people from all walks of life – from an infant to a septuagenarian—gathered at Shahbagh in demand of the death sentence to Kader Molla.

The same evening, a small group of young political bloggers started a sit-in at the Shahbagh intersection near Dhaka University, a traditional venue for both protests and celebrations. The news spread quickly on blogs and social media, and other joined in, mostly young people and students, but also veterans of the Mukti Bahini, members of progressive organizations and others (like the Ekatorrer Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Samity) who had long been demanding justice for war crimes (Sen, 2013).

Jammat-e-Islam Bangladesh (JIB) and its student wing Islami Chhattrra Shibir (ICS) and other Islamist parties and the then leader of the opposition party in the parliament Begum Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist
Party (BNP) were against this Shahbagh Movement and termed it was a movement of atheists and Islam haters. JIB and ICS started online propaganda in social media against the Shahbagh Movement and its organizers. Again and again they were labeling the movement as the movement of atheists and Islam haters. When the entire nation expressed its solidarity with the Shahbagh Movement in demand of the capital punishment to the arrested war criminals of Jamaat-e-Islam Bangladesh at that moment Jamaat, BNP and their allies were trying to label this movement as the propaganda of Islam haters.

Again and again they were trying their best to motivate people not to support the Shahbagh Movement via social media, political meetings and gatherings. Begum Khaleda Zia herself termed the Shahbagh Movement was the movement of a group of atheists and writers who want to defame Islam and Muslims of the country in several political meetings.

When the bloggers and online activists of BOAN were peacefully leading the Shahbagh Movement for the demand of highest punishment to the war criminals then the JIB and its student wing ICS launched their killing mission of the progressive bloggers. They first brutally killed Ahmed Rajib Haider, an architect by profession and one of the pro-Shahbagh movement bloggers, near his home on 14th February in 2013. Ahmed Rajib Haider was the first victim of JIB and ICS heinous acts for gearing up Shahbagh Movement. JIB and ICS termed Rajib as an atheist and Islam hater. He was given online threats, including a ‘death warrant’ posted on a JIB website and on the recently abolished pro JIB ‘Sonar Bangla’ blog (Roy, 2014; Sen, 2013). In fact, Rajib wrote regularly on his blogs against Jamaat’s activities (Raychoudhury et al. 2015).

When the verdict of capital punishment was given to Sayedee by the tribunal ICT on 28th February (at first, the capital punishment verdict was given by the tribunal and after the appeal it was downgraded to a life sentence). After the verdict Jamaat Shibir allies spread violent riots around the country that killed more than 30 in different parts of the country. The casualties included six policemen, three of whom were beaten to death in the northern Gaibandha district, in a Jamaat protest involving about 2,000 supporters. In addition, a Hindu temple and houses belonging to Hindu families had been attacked in Noakhali (BBC News, 2013).

Apart from this, Sayedee’s supporters spread different rumors by using new media. One was ‘Sayedee on the Moon’, - the implication that some people had seen Sayedee on the moon. A photo of ‘Sayedee on the Moon’ was spread throughout the internet and was announced it from the mosque at mid night. It has created outrages in different place. On March 3, 2013, when the rumour was spread in Nandigram upazila soon thousands of Jamaat-Shibir activists and their supporters equipped with lethal weapons rushed to the upazila parishad area and vandalized local police station and 16 other government offices. Over the same rumour, the same political groups’ activists and supporters ran amok also at other places in Bogra on the same day. (The Daily Star, 2013)

Ajivit Roy was given continuous threat to his life via different social media by the JIB and ICS activists. Even it was said that Avijit Roy lives in the USA so they can’t kill him and as soon as he comes to Bangladesh he will be killed. “On Facebook, one extremist wrote, “Avijit Roy lives in America, so it’s not possible to kill him right now. But he will be killed when he comes back”…”(Subramanian, 2015).Finally, they succeeded in killing Avijit Roy on 26th February in 2014.

Why JIB and ICS are openly involved in this sort of dirty propaganda in the name of saving and protecting Islam religion in Bangladesh? The political economy of their dirty and ugly propaganda against progressive writers and bloggers in Bangladesh is two-fold. Firstly, they want to stop the on-going trial of all the war criminals that are main figures of JIB.

The online activists and bloggers demanded ban of Jamaat from politics and urged the nation to quit all institutions (educational, pharmaceutical company, media, Bank other service sectors which are a huge economy ) of Jamaat. Abul Barkat, a professor of Economics at Dhaka University, pointed that Jamaat earns an annual profit of $278 million from different business endeavors it runs in Bangladesh.

‘Barkat has calculated that Jamaat’s net annual profits from such ventures amounts to about $278 million and the largest chunk —27.5%—of this comes from banks, insurances and leasing companies. The NGOs contribute 18.7%, 10.5% comes from trade and commerce, 10.1% from pharmaceutical industries and healthcare institutions, 9.4% from the education sector, 8.8%
from real estate business, 7.3% from transport and 7.7% from the media and information technology business.’ (Mukherjee, 2016).

Hence, they want to create unrest and disturbance in Bangladesh society so that the present Hasina Government cannot carry on the trial of the war criminal which the Awami League (AL) pledged in its election manifesto in 2008 general election. Secondly, they want to capture political power by any means to run the country. ‘Islamists in Bangladesh, as elsewhere, often express their disdain for democracy and declare their intent to use elections merely as a means to power” (Ali Riaz, 2010: 99)

Conclusion

The Islamisation process was begun in Bangladesh after the killing of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. Sheikh Mujib and along with all his family members but two daughters were killed in a coup d’etat in the early hours of 15th August in 1975. Since then most of the governments in Bangladesh took a soft stand towards the Islamists in the country. General Ziaur Rahman started the Islamisation process by allowing Jamaat-e-Islam and other Islamic parties to do politics in the country. Secularism was one of the four principles of Bangladesh’s constitution. General Zia removed it and added the Quranic phase “Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim” (In the name of God, the Most Gracious, and the Most Merciful) in the constitution in 1977. Zia blended religion with politics for mere his political interest.

Later General H. M. Ershad declared Islam as the state religion and added it in the constitution by the 8th amendment in 1988 for the same purpose like Zia. These steps encouraged and helped the Islamists to carry on their mission with a view to making Bangladesh an Islamic state like Pakistan. After 1990s when electoral democracy was restored, Begum Khaleda Zia and her Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) took a pivotal role for speeding up the Islamisation process by forming alliances with the extreme Islamists. In her second regime 2001-2006 Begum Zia developed very close connection with the extreme Islamists and included them in her cabinet.” The close ties between the militants and the ruling parties (2001-2006) are also obvious from the presence of a number of individuals in the close circles of the then ruling coalition” (Ali Riaz, 2010: 46). Extreme Islamists and their organizations mushroomed in the country which made progressive people hopeless and hapless. “Undoubtedly the rise to power in 2001 of the four party coalition led by the BNP created a favorable atmosphere for the organizations’ proliferation; the government then allowed the Islamist groups to carry on their activities with impunity” (Ali Riaz, 2010: 45).

In fact, all the political parties in Bangladesh extend support for establishing mosque and madrasa in the country. The people and political parties should not over look what is going on inside the madrasa. In some madrasa they teach hatred against progressive people like writers and bloggers. As Rafida Bonya Ahmed finds (2015)

Islamic fundamentalism has spread for many years through Bangladesh via the support of all the political parties, growing number of mosque-madrasa complexes all over country which have been established and funded by locally influential people or through the funding from a few countries in the Middle East. Islamic fundamentalists use many madrasas as a way of spreading their message of hate and intolerance (R. B. Ahmed, 2015).

Establishing mosque and madrasa is a unique approach of the Islamic fundamentalists to produce the extreme Islamists. For madrasa they pick up children and young boys and girls to teach them so called Islamic education. In the name of Islamic education they train up these young people against the progressive forces of the society to fulfill their political goals and missions. Those who were involved in killing the bloggers said that they think it is their holy duty to kill the atheists and establish Islamic rule and law in the society. In fact, most of these young militants do not even know what does blogger mean and what the bloggers are writing about. In fact, a major part of them are in dark about bloggers’ writings and works.

Why are the extreme Islamist activists of JIB and their student wing ICS are killing progressive bloggers and writers one after another? The simple answer is that the progressive online activists of Bangladesh have launched a movement against the war criminals and Jamaat. They simply want capital punishment to these war criminals and ban Jamaat and all their organizations
which make a huge economy for their survival. The progressive online activists have urged common people of Bangladesh to boycott the products those are produced by Jammat’s organization. In fact, if it is done or followed then JIB will lose its political identity as a political party and its economy will collapse. That will be a disaster for the party. Their political and financial power will be ruined. JIB and ICS are afraid of these. That’s why they are killing the bloggers one after another with a view to protecting their political party and economic power for their future in Bangladesh.

The government must take into serious consideration of killing of bloggers one after another with a short span of time is deeply rooted with the militant Islamist groups’ political goals, mission and vision. They simply want to create a closed Islamic society where free thinking is not allowed at all. The ruling party cannot compromise with these groups by not taking serious stand against the extreme Islamists.” The growing militancy, especially the associated violence, needs to be seen with the context of the mode of governance pursued by the ruling classes of Bangladesh” (Ali Riaz, 2010: 47). In present Bangladesh, it is a reality that militancy has become a part of political culture especially in the case of extreme Islamic parties of the country like JIB and its ICB. “Islamist militancy in Bangladesh must be addressed as part of an overall progression towards political stability and democracy” (Ahsan & Banavar, 2011: 87)

It’s the government duty and only government can do it to give protection to the different voices they may be bloggers or not. Any sort of attack on the bloggers is an attack on the free thinking. Without free thinking a society cannot advance. Free thinking is a must of a civilized and democratic society. In a civilized society one cannot be killed for simply expressing his or her opinions which may not go with others’ opinions. The government should politically deal with the issue and ensure safety and security for all bloggers of the country. The government should not only ensure safety and security only to bloggers but to all citizens of Bangladesh. Every citizen of the country expects it from the government.

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