SHAHBAG STOLEN? THIRD FORCE DYNAMICS AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT The Shahbag Movement, demanding capital punishment for war criminals of the 1971 liberation war in Bangladesh, emerged in February 2013 in Dhaka. This youth-led grassroots movement erupted in response to infuriating establishment party politics as a populist third force, wanting closure to the painful memories of Bangladesh's freedom struggle by seeking justice for the atrocities of 1971. However, perceived as siding with secular forces, Shahbag became instantly embroiled in adversarial party politics and appears to have been hijacked, as is argued here, by both major political parties of Bangladesh.

Evaluating Shahbag as a case study for the framing tasks theory of social movements, the article supports its analysis through detailed empirical findings. Viewed historically, Shahbag may be treated as an initially powerful grassroots youth movement, akin to 'Arab Spring' phenomena, later stolen from the people of Bangladesh. However, a deeper analysis of Shahbag's dynamics, accounting for the impact of the controversial national elections of January 2014, yields crucial insights about the continuing scope for a 'third force' in the forthcoming elections scheduled for December 2018.

KEYWORDS: *Bangladesh, caretaker government, civil society, elections, framing, Islamists, Shahbag Movement, social movements, war crimes tribunal*

Introduction: The Shahbag Movement and Its Trajectory

The Shahbag Movement started on 5 February 2013, as a spontaneous sit-in protest in Shahbag, a busy intersection of Dhaka, capital of Bangladesh. It reacted instantly to the decision by the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) in Dhaka on that day, giving a life sentence to the senior Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JIB) leader Abdul Quader

Mollah. Shahbag protesters demanded the death sentence for this man. Found guilty of rape and killings, he had emerged from the proceedings with a victory sign (Islam, 2018: 27–8). This verdict was viewed by the protesters as insulting to his victims and a denial of justice (*The Economist*, 2013; Zaman, 2016). But Shahbag also opposed what looked like unpalatable collusion between the two major political parties of Bangladesh, the ruling Awami League (AL), which had struggled for years to activate the war crimes tribunal, and the opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which sought to protect its political alliance with JIB by more or less tacitly supporting the accused persons in the legal proceedings.

The tribunal was in effect a domestic war crimes tribunal, rather than a tool of international criminal law, carefully designed to investigate and prosecute suspects of war crimes during the 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh. This struggle of 2013 over the appropriate retribution for crimes committed during the 1971 liberation war rapidly sparked nationwide protest, becoming a veritable 'third force', officially called *Gono Jagoron Moncho*, 'People's Movement' (Islam, 2018: 28). The Shahbag Movement's efforts to achieve closure for the traumatising memories of the blood-stained circumstances of the nation's birth in 1971 had such energising effects that within a week, reminiscent of 'Arab Spring' movements, the peaceful protest attracted hundreds of thousands of youngsters, including many women, mobilised by Facebook posts and other online networking. This turned into the largest mass demonstration the country had seen in 20 years.

The article argues that the Shahbag Movement was subsequently stolen from its activist promoters, in three stages. First, Shahbag encountered co-optation from the ruling AL, trying to take leadership of this youth-based movement. Second, this political intervention shifted the ideological frame of the secularist protest movement, embroiling it in the increasing AL–BNP polarisation and making it even more of an AL ally. Third, this exposed Shahbag to smear campaigns and violent attacks from Islamists. This trajectory of analysis is supported by the empirical results of a public opinion survey designed for this study and conducted in August 2017. This involved about 300 movement participants, key movement leaders and critics, the latter interviewed through open-ended questions to enrich the survey data. In addition, news reports published in Bangladeshi and international media outlets were consulted, as well as many papers and blog posts by scholars and movement leaders.

Presenting Shahbag as a case study for the framing tasks theory of social movements, the article applies the model of Gamson (1990). Further below, it becomes clear that this methodological approach overlooks crucial dimensions in assessing Shahbag, emerging as soon as a wider contextual lens of Bangladesh's electoral politics is applied. After some method-related comments, the article examines Shahbag in terms of framing task theory, its framing trajectory and subsequent developments. The fieldwork results are then woven into an analysis, presenting the reasons for the initial success and subsequent decline of Shahbag and the real-world effects of those results in light of participant observations from movement leaders and critics. Survey data, collected

from participants to track the movement's framing trajectory, are used to assess wider public opinions regarding the outcomes and limitations of Shahbag. Based on this fieldwork evidence, the conclusions verify the model of Gamson (1990), but also bring out that wider contextual analysis of events around Shahbag as a 'third force' yields far-reaching deeper insights. This allows hopeful indications of how the electorate of Bangladesh, drawn into the next electoral battlefield before 2018 ends, may respond in a spirit reflecting Shahbag's initial motivations, especially its undercurrents of national healing and wider public interest. Thus, Shahbag may have been stolen by late 2013, but its spirit remains alive in 2018.

Theoretical Concepts, Issues of Framing and Research Methodology

This article's theoretical foundations are drawn from the resource mobilisation school of social movement theory as applied by Zaman (2016). A deciding metric for measuring the impact of a social movement is taken from the work of Gamson (1990), addressing measurement of a movement's success by specifying two dimensions. First, winning acceptance from elites and recognition as a legitimate representative of a given constituency and, second, winning new advantages for a movement constituency (Gamson, 1990: 115). This creates four possible outcomes: basically full response, involving both acceptance and new advantages, collapse as a result of neither acceptance nor advantage, pre-emption through seizing of new advantages without acceptance and co-optation in the form of acceptance without new advantages.

This specific paradigm of resource mobilisation is further strengthened by analysis of the framing tasks theory which, according to Gamson (1990), suggests that the framing of grievances is more important in social movement mobilisation than the existence of these grievances. In other words, political interventions and framing activities may modify the nature of some perceived problem(s) and take on a force of their own. Gamson (1990) identified four relevant methods: frame bridging connects two or more pre-existing grievance frames that are ideologically connected but structurally unconnected. Frame amplification explains the current frame of a movement in a broader fashion to include other frames. Frame extension connects the frame of a movement with other, unconnected frames and urges their support for the broad ideological banner that other groups are assumed to be sympathetic to. Finally, frame transformation implants a new, broader grievance frame to fit in with existing grievances.

This article also tracks the framing tasks of the ideological predecessors of the Shahbag Movement, various groupings of the secularist civil society of Bangladesh, showing their earlier success in frame bridging, frame extension and frame transformation. The resulting strong coalition of secularist organisations had considerable lobbying powers with the post-2008 AL government. The article then shows how Shahbag, originating from secularist youth, with grassroots and civil society support in 2013, soon shifted away from this frame, lost control of its direction and the original agenda and fell under

AL influence. This increased long-running AL-BNP antagonisms, inciting Islamists to mobilise a countermovement under the banner of Hefazat-e-Islam, seeking to re-legitimise Islamism as a political ideology and to re-establish Islamists as an influential interest group in Bangladesh. The article shows how frame bridging between Shahbag and the AL in 2013 created crucial spaces for Islamists, the ideological opposition of secularists, to tout themselves as independent from JIB and seeking to reclaim the moral high ground as the vox populi of Bangladesh, thereby in effect stealing the populist upsurge created by the Shahbag Movement.

The analysis of Shahbag is based on a detailed survey, plus open-ended responses collected from movement participants. The survey data were collected through an online platform. Four research assistants based in Bangladesh were hired by the author to collect the data through SurveyMonkey in August 2017. The initial participants, leaders identified through media mentions, such as interviews, speeches, statements and talk show appearances, were also engaged in open-ended interviews with the author during August 2017 and interview excerpts are used in this article. These leaders were Maruf Rosul, Lucky Akter, Omi Rahman Pial and Faruk Wasif, while Irfanur Rahman Rafin spoke as a general movement participant. These individuals were each asked to refer to three more participants, whom they knew personally and who had been present at the protests. In this way, 300 responses were collected through snowballing. Not all questions were put to all 300 participants due to limitations of the survey platform.

This study of the shifting frames of Shahbag's leadership has several obvious limitations. First, the survey responses for the quantitative research were collected through close-ended questionnaires for convenience of analysis; this could not be a substitute for lengthy qualitative interviews. The snowballing method exposes the data to potential response bias. The survey sample, limited to 300 respondents, was not meant to be analysed through applying advanced quantitative technological devices. The open-ended interviews with movement leaders raise concerns that these respondents, despite their high media presence, were not democratically elected, so their representativeness could be challenged. To tackle this problem, partly, primary documents released by the movement leadership, like speeches, memoranda and statements, were also analysed.

The popular term 'Shahbag Movement' to represent what was officially called *Gono Jagoron Moncho* in Bengali may seem problematic, too. Is this a local uprising, manifestation of international human rights activism or what else? The initial participants of the Shahbag protests in early February 2013 faced various internal discontents throughout the course of the movement. It is unsurprising that young activists from different walks of life, coming together as change-makers, engage in such constant internal debates. In different circumstances, Barylo (2018) insightfully depicts such processes among young Muslims in Europe. In the Shahbag Movement, splinter groups like Shaheed Rumi Squad emerged as a result of such debates (*The Daily Star*, 2013). The present study overlooks these divisions and focuses on analysing the

phenomenon as a whole, seeking to measure its overall consequences, which ultimately led to the theft of the activist energies that powered the movement's initial stages.

The Shahbag Movement, Its Framing and Frame Bridging

Rapidly responding to the initial demand by Shahbag activists, the AL-dominated Bangladesh Parliament passed an amendment to the International Crimes (Tribunals) Act of 1973 on 17 February 2013. This allowed the government, complainant or informant to appeal an order of acquittal or sentencing. Prosecutors then swiftly appealed to the Supreme Court of Bangladesh, asking it to upgrade Abdul Quader Mollah's life sentence to death by hanging (*The Bangladesh Trial Observer*, 2013), the Supreme Court revised the previous decision on 17 September 2013 to a death sentence and Mollah was hanged on 12 December 2013 (*bdnews24.com,* 2013, December 12).

The rapid amendment of the 1973 Act, speedy court action and Mollah's execution were seen to confirm the overwhelming early success of Shahbag by activists and the media (Anam, 2013). However, by the end of its first month, Shahbag was no longer an issue-specific movement focused on death sentences. Due to its own framing tasks, AL co-option and hostile reactions of the BNP–Jamaat alliance, Shahbag was seen as a renewed representation of the secularist movement. This has been at loggerheads with Bangladesh's Islamist movements for decades, replicating the political AL–BNP competition. Subsequent events show that faulty framing tasks and weak mobilisation strategies quickly eroded popular support for Shahbag, which faced labelling as anti-Islamic before the end of its first month (Yuan, 2013). Islamists capitalised on this historical battle, turning fire on Shahbag. An ultraconservative Islamist group based on Qawmi Madrasas in Bangladesh, Hefazat-e-Islam ('Protectors of Islam'), mobilised thousands of activists to gather in Dhaka with demands of hanging the Shahbag leaders, portrayed as atheists (Yuan, 2013). Hefazat also swiftly adopted the so-called 13-point demands, which included arrest of atheist bloggers, removing certain sculptures from public places and making education policies more 'pro-Islamic' (Habib, 2013; Islam, 2018: 28).

Attacks on agnostic, atheist and anti-Islamic writers had been common in Bangladesh since the early 2000s. Initially, radical Islamists threatened writers like Taslima Nasrin with violence (Hasan, 2016), then started turning those threats into reality. Professor Humayun Azad was the first victim in 2004 and many more have been murdered or attacked since then (Hammer, 2015; Hasan, 2011). Hefazat also started demanding legislative action, with one leader suggesting 14 years of imprisonment for writing anything that offends religious sentiments (Hammer, 2015).

As Hefazat gained ground, Shahbag protesters started to leave the intersection, which many Hefazat supporters see as proof of their success. By late 2013, the Shahbag Movement was almost completely demobilised, while Hefazat put massive pressure on the AL, including much violence related to the fraught national elections scheduled for January 2014 (Khan, 2018). Under pressure from Hefazat, many Shahbag participants

were now being jailed, based on blasphemy charges, creating the impression that Hefazat leaders had become major influencers of public policy. The transition of Shahbag from the largest gathering in Bangladesh's recent history to a small group of activists is remarkable. The fieldwork data track this transition, helping to evaluate the movement and to analyse the limitations of Shahbag's framing tasks that caused the movement to be swallowed in controversies.

Among several articles analysing Shahbag's success, failures and difficulties, Sanyal and Murshid (2013) argue that Shahbag was up against the long history of political Islam in Bangladesh. Zaman (2016) seconds this, but argues that while Shahbag was under attack from Hefazat's grand narrative, Hefazat itself was also under attack from Shahbag's stance, leading to framing each other as enemies. Examining the framing strategies in this ideological polarisation, Zaman (2016) shows how both movements, which she names 'pro-Shahbag' and 'pro-Islamist', attempted to protect what they believed should be the basis of Bangladesh's collective identity and ideology.

Sajjad and Härdig (2017) explore how Hefazat's framing tasks succeeded in casting themselves as authentic defenders of Islam, while portraying their secular opponents as atheists (Islam, 2018). Considering the framing tasks of Shahbag, Sajjad and Härdig (2017) identify negative impacts of lack of effective resource management, internal divisions, disagreements about the death penalty and repeated attempts of political co-optation. Observing that the secular Shahbag mobilisation was ultimately derailed by massive counter-mobilisation from Hefazat, they conclude that this had the most devastating impact for Shahbag. It exposed a fundamentally altered discursive opportunity structure and effectively limited the already unsteady ability of the Shahbag mobilisation to evolve into a sustained movement.

However, the empirical evidence of this article shows that while Hefazat's aggressive framing certainly weakened Shahbag, some faults in the framing tasks of Shahbag allowed Hefazat to benefit. This suggests that the countermovement by itself was perhaps not the most devastating factor for Shahbag and that the main weakening of Shahbag's ideological appeal came from its own misdirected framing as well as mobilisation limitations that Sajjad and Härdig (2017) also mention. To explore the faults in Shahbag's framing, the next section first provides an analysis of the framing of Shahbag's ideological predecessor and then contrasts this with the framing tasks of the 2013 movement. This offers a clearer view of where and how Shahbag faltered and what allowed Hefazat to attack Shahbag's frame.

The Secularist Civil Society as Shahbag's Ideological Predecessor

The history of the secularist civil society of Bangladesh is closely connected with negative reactions to various war crimes committed in 1971 (Mukul, 2004). Widespread disgust about such atrocities raised instant demands for the prosecution of war criminals, tracing the roots of the 2013 Shahbag Movement to the beginning of independent Bangladesh. The Mujib government banned JIB in 1971 and made

moves immediately after independence to start prosecuting war crimes perpetrators. Sheikh Mujib promulgated the Special Tribunal Order on 24 January 1972, 14 days after returning from Pakistan. Under this Order, he had 37,000 alleged collaborators arrested (Momen, 2008). However, these early efforts abruptly stopped when Mujib and most of his family were assassinated in August 1975. The subsequent government, led by General Ziaur Rahman, soon released the jailed collaborators and created an official indemnity for Sheikh Mujib's assassins and other political criminals. He then amended the constitution to allow JIB, to the dismay of many Bangladeshis who had survived the liberation struggles, to become one of the Bangladesh's political parties. Over the next two decades, subsequent opportunistic military governments built links with Islamists to consolidate support for their unelected regimes, while such links discouraged efforts to prosecute war criminals. The US foreign policy tilt towards Pakistan further meant that there was little international support for a war crimes tribunal. The BNP, the political party that Ziaur Rahman had meanwhile created, included JIB as its coalition partner in the 2001–6 government, and this provided funding and muscle for their political alliance (Khan, 2014).

The first organised civil society movements of Bangladesh started under this BNP-led government, opposing the BNP–JIB alliance and the direction in which it sought to take the country. In 1992, the Ekattorer Ghatak-Dalal Nirmul Committee (EGDNC), which roughly translates as Committee for Uprooting Collaborators, was formed under the leadership of Jahanara Imam, the mother of a martyred freedom fighter. At a symbolic tribunal arranged in a public park, the EGDNC produced a verdict of death penalty for JIB Chief Ghulam Azam, on 10 specific allegations of war crimes (Ghosh, 1997). The full decision is printed in Mukul (2004: 189–91). The movement carried over into the next decade, with the EGDNC steadily gaining more traction in civil society. The EGDNC became still more prominent when JIB came to power in 2001–6, allied with the BNP (Hasan, 2011: 100).

What the secularist civil society accomplished during this time was truly remarkable. They achieved frame transformation by using the 1992 selection of Ghulam Azam, an identified war criminal, as JIB party leader, to argue that what previously had been unfortunate but tolerable, namely, JIB's existence as a legal political party, had now become totally inexcusable. They went through frame bridging with other civil society organisations to support their cause. They formed a secular alliance with the Sammilita Sangskritik Jote (Combined Cultural Alliance [CCA]), the Sammilita Samajik Andolon (Combined Social Movement [CSM]), the Citizens Voice, Security and Human Rights, the Hindu, Buddhist and Christian Unity Alliance (HBCUA) and other groups to fight for broader causes than prosecuting war criminals, especially protesting about communal violence (Karlekar, 2005; Mukul, 2004; Sen, 2011: 125). As their frame gradually extended, the non-institutional band of civil society leaders emerged as the secularist civil society. It is not implied here that these actors consciously used these framing tasks to meet set organisational goals, but what took place can be explained in retrospect when these events are seen through the lens of framing tasks theory.

The secularist civil society built the organisational structure of a federated union, bringing multiple secularist organisations under its umbrella. Further frame transformations included countering communalism and advancing secularism. These social activist tasks, only in a formal sense apolitical, did not lead to a new political party, however. Rather, the secularist civil society as a strong ideological framework and an early version of a third movement in Bangladesh, protested against the BNP–JIB alliance defining itself as the 'spirit of the liberation war'. The AL, as the major political party behind the liberation war and the political opposition to the BNP–JIB alliance, then bridged their own political frame with the ideological frame of the secularist civil society. In other words, AL sought to co-opt this early third movement. The 2008 AL Election Manifesto (Awami League, 2009) supports this claim. Documented in Bengali, the manifesto recounts: 'The rape of the democratic constitution, rehabilitation of war criminals and religious fanatics, criminalisation of politics and promotion of militancy, the institutionalisation of corruption, and the sway of black money and muscle power overtook the post-Bangabandhu governments'. The manifesto continues with a set of promises for 'Establishment of Good Governance', announcing that '[t]errorism and religious extremism will be controlled with an iron hand. Trial of war criminals will be arranged'.

This solidly framed stance against Islamist politics, appealing to the secular civil society, gave the AL-led coalition a landslide victory in the 2008 elections (Khan, 2018). The AL government immediately started preparations for prosecution of war criminals to fulfil its 2008 election manifesto. It finally established the ICT in 2013, satisfying the secularist social movement's demands, which confirms that the historical legacy of the secularist civil society underpins the Shahbag Movement of 2013. When Shahbag started in 2013 with specific demands related to the ICT, focused on capital punishment for indicted war criminals, it was critiquing the perceived collusion between AL and BNP in relation to the life sentence for a proven war criminal, indicating, at this moment, considerable distance between Shahbag and the AL. Once Quader Mollah was hanged, however, Shahbag did not limit itself to the earlier demands and portrayed itself as the secular 'soul of the nation' (Zaman, 2016). Its other major demands included banning JIB and boycotting its institutions.

This assessment is supported through the responses by movement participants when asked about the importance of the secularist civil society's legacy for their decision to join Shahbag. As Figure 1 shows, 40 of 100 Shahbag Movement participants said that the legacy of the secularist civil society was a very important factor in their decision to join, while 24 even said that it was the most important factor, and another 22 indicated average importance.

Asking who the supporters of the Shahbag movement were and what they wanted, one must recall that Shahbag arose spontaneously, sparked by protesters who sensed some hidden JIB–AL agreement in the Quader Mollah verdict (Sajjad & Härdig, 2017). Bangladeshis have little trust in the legal system and believe that persons with political connections would be pardoned as soon as their party comes to power

Figure 1   **Importance of the Legacy of the Secularist Civil Society (based on 100 Shahbag Movement participants)**
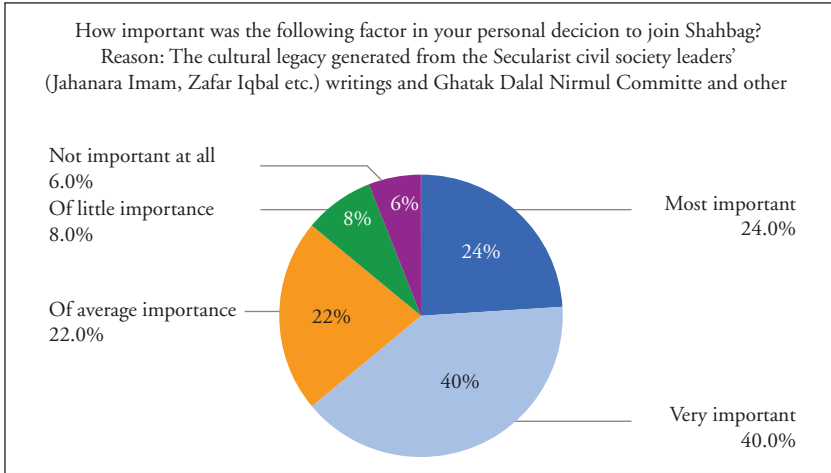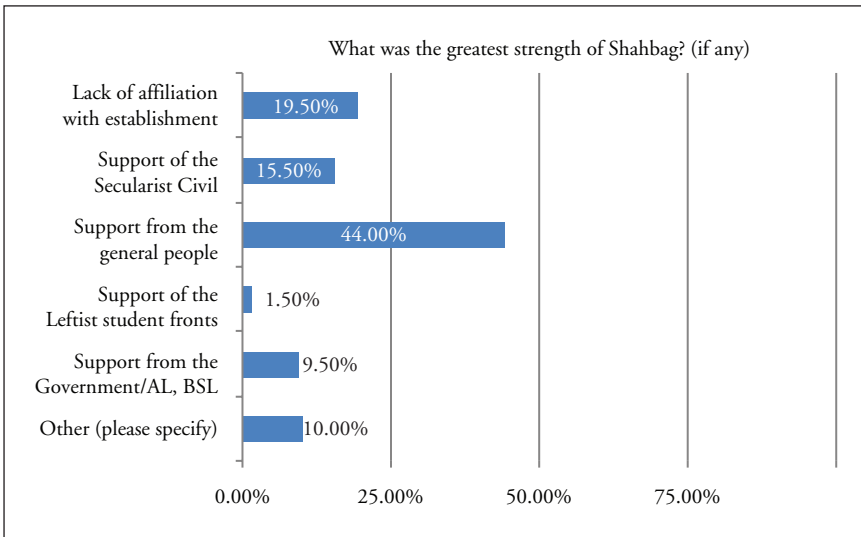

Source: Author's survey.

(Ashrafuzzaman et al., 2015). The public outrage over the life imprisonment verdict as a denial of justice was so strong that student protesters started the Shahbag Movement, rejecting mainstream politics, remembering the 'spirit of the liberation war'. In an act of startling courage, they even denied requests from prominent government representatives and ministers to speak on the stage of the movement (*The Economist*, 2013), reflecting Shahbag's populist, anti-establishment nature.

The Populist Undercurrent of the Shahbag Movement

That many participants were attracted to Shahbag specifically because of this anti-establishment viewpoint indicates Shahbag's position as a populist social movement, which rejected the existing political parties and the legal system as corrupt. Figure 2, based on a survey of 200 Shahbag participants, confirms that it arose as a representation of the people and reclaimed the real 'spirit of the liberation war'. Nearly half (44%) indicated that the movement's support by people from all parts of society was its greatest attraction, followed by its lack of political affiliation, which 19.5 per cent indicated as its greatest strength.

   Furthermore, a random sample of 300 Shahbag participants brought out that 55.3 per cent self-identified as having no political affiliation, while 30.3 per cent indicated AL affiliation, 11.3 per cent claimed another political association and only 3 per cent indicated closeness to BNP. This evidence of Shahbag's composition identifies most participants as independent of existing political parties. While quite a few were

Figure 2   **The Greatest Strength of Shahbag (based on 200 Shahbag Movement participants)**
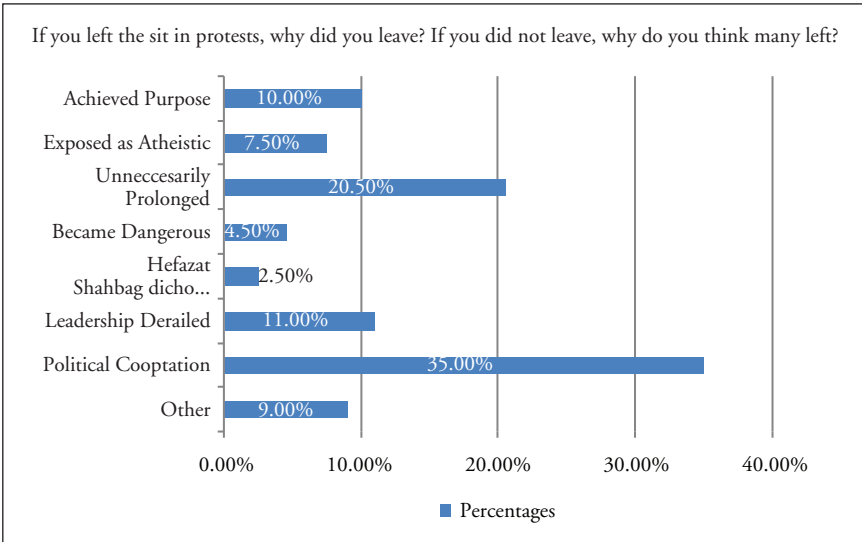

Source: Author's survey.

AL supporters, as noted, Shahbag arose in a critical moment of objection to AL's actions. Indeed, many initial participants were disenchanted AL voters, unimpressed by the party's performance afterwards.

Notably also, Shahbag was led by young people. In a random sample of 100 Shahbag participants in 2017, 66 claimed to be under the age of 29, meaning they were at most 25 years old in 2013. This indicates that Shahbag activists were significantly different from those leading the secularist civil society in the 1990s and 2000s, who were mainly reputed academics, writers and cultural figures, people with charisma and public standing prior to joining the movement. Shahbag's spontaneous character and lack of charismatic leaders reflect a disorganised grouping, without a long-term strategy. Individuals with their respective diffuse agendas joined the movement under a loose leadership, unprepared for instantly arising multiple challenges. While claiming to be a non-political movement, Shahbag was of course not non-political, but it could not defend itself against experienced political actors (Sajjad & Härdig, 2017).

The Rot in the Spirit: The Shahbag Leadership Gets Co-opted

The young student leaders of Shahbag were brought to prominence by the spontaneity of the uprising. Many were online bloggers, with limited contact to mainstream politics. Lack of leadership experience soon became a risk factor for the movement. Figure 3,

Figure 3   **Main Reason Why Participants Left the Movement (according to 200 survey respondents)**
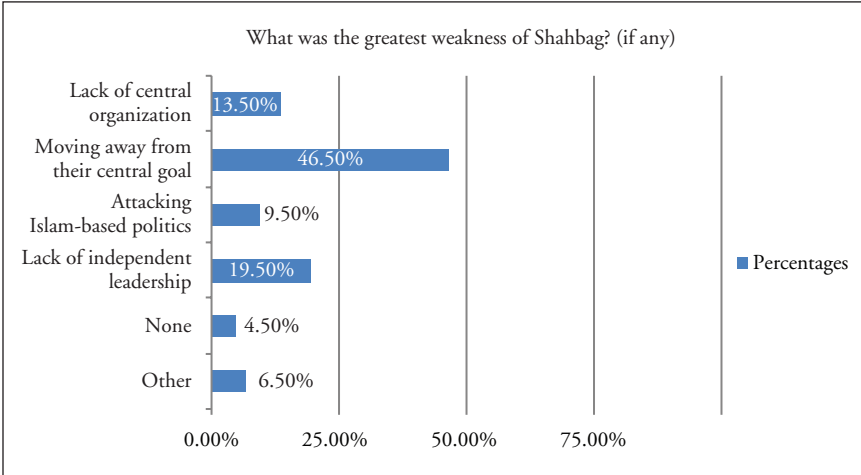

Source: Author's survey.

presenting a sample of 200 participants, shows that 11 per cent identified derailed leadership as the major reason for their departure from Shahbag. Political co-optation and the unnecessary length of the protests put off many more people.

Figure 4 below further shows that 19.5 per cent saw lack of independent leadership as the greatest weakness of Shahbag, while almost half of the respondents indicated that moving away from the central goal, also identifiable as a leadership issue, was perceived as most negative.

Maruf Rosul, a movement participant from the first day who later became a leader, commented in interview in 2017 explicitly about the contrast in leadership between EGDNC and Shahbag:

> EGDNC was a pre-organised movement. Some known figures of the society organised the movement of EGDNC. They had committees consisting of various social, political and cultural activists. But the Shahbag Movement sparked from an instantaneous reaction.... It was initiated by some bloggers who were completely unknown to the people.

Thus, it was easy for experienced politicians to infiltrate the ranks and co-opt the movement. Figure 3 above shows that 35 per cent of 200 movement participants felt the movement was politically co-opted, a major reason to abandon Shahbag. This co-optation was visible to passionate Shahbag leaders, who also saw the potential for spearheading

Figure 4   **The Greatest Weakness of the Shahbag Movement (according to 200 survey respondents)**

What was the greatest weakness of Shahbag? (if any)

Category	Percentage
Lack of central organization	13.50%
Moving away from their central goal	46.50%
Attacking Islam-based politics	9.50%
Lack of independent leadership	19.50%
None	4.50%
Other	6.50%

Source: Author's survey.

a third movement at that time. Omi Rahman Pial, a frequent Shahbag representative in the media and strong believer in Shahbag's success, observed in interview in 2017:

> Many wanted us to take on a political role and even start a new political party.... It is true that a lot of different people wanted to gain political advantage from the group. There were people who printed business cards with the name of the movement on it.

Soon, the movement drifted away from the prosecution of war criminals frame. Calls for capital punishment expanded into demands to ban JIB as a political party and further transformed into calls for banning the political use of religion (Sajjad & Härdig, 2017). This frame transformation was visible to participants and detractors alike. Irfanur Rahman Rafin, a regular Shahbag participant, stated in interview in 2017:

> Banning Jamaat was a central issue from the very beginning of the movement. However, the demand of banning all religion-based politics came later. It is my personal opinion that Leftist Parties like the Communist Party of Bangladesh brought this issue at the centre stage as there is a philosophical contradiction between religion-based politics and Left political theory, which is tough to be resolved peacefully.

His observation is supported by Lucky Akter, a major Shahbag figure at its peak, later president of the Bangladesh Student Union, a leading leftist student organisation. She said in interview in 2017:

> Banning religion-based political parties has long been a leftist issue that a lot of organisations such as the Student Union had been working on....As such, we used to

shout slogans for banning religious politics from the very beginning of the protests. It became more mainstream in later days, when other groups also started adopting our slogans against religion-based politics.

Shahbag's frame changed gradually, but radically, after the initial objections were addressed. The new frame was much more confrontational towards Islamist civil society than pre-Shahbag secularist civil society frames. Broad vilification of all Islamist groups angered Islamists who feared loss of lobbying power. It gave Islamists a convenient avenue to retaliate with smear campaigns, characterising all Shahbag participants as anti-Islamic, rather than anti-Islamist, a familiar damaging strategy, which soon affected Shahbag participants. Figure 3 indicates awareness from 7.5 per cent of the 300 participant sample that Shahbag was exposed as an atheistic movement. This could mean two things, disagreement with this direction, but more likely, fear of becoming victimised. Indeed, as Islamist activists occupied a square in Dhaka's Motijheel area on 6 April 2013 (*The Daily Ittefaq*, 2013, April 5), the gathering in Shahbag grew thinner and violent clashes between Hefazat and AL activists occurred on 5–6 May 2013.

Measuring Shahbag's Success and Decline

Following the metrics of Gamson (1990: 29), the decline of Shahbag after the initial massive gatherings can be measured as a set of outcomes to test acceptance and new advantages. To determine the appropriate category for these outcomes, four key elements are measured: formal recognition, policy changes in favour of constituent interests, policy changes against constituent interests and the overall effect on the group's lobbying power with the government.

Parliamentary addresses, political speeches and public meetings confirm that the AL government acknowledged Shahbag as speaking for secularists. Before the end of Shahbag's first week, on 10 February, the Speaker of Parliament met Shahbag leaders to accept a memorandum of their demands and promised to forward this to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the opposition leader, Khaleda Zia (*bdnews24.com,* 2013, February 10). The very next day, Sheikh Hasina mentioned Shahbag in Parliament, saying that it was the 'perfect leadership to direct Bangladesh in the spirit of the liberation war' (*Jaijaidin,* 2013), while the opposition BNP, on 12 February, generally supported the movement, but warned against its political co-optation (*The Bangladesh Chronicle,* 2013). Government representatives soon began negotiations with Shahbag leaders (*Prothom Alo*, 2013, April 1), confirming these leaders as spokespersons for secular society. Shahbag participants endorsed this conclusion. In a survey of 100 participants in August 2017, 41 identified Shahbag as somewhat formally recognised as speaking for the secularist civil society, while 34 and 11, respectively, saw recognition to a great extent and a fairly great extent. Only 14 said that the movement received very little or no recognition at all.

However, recognition of Shahbag did not necessarily translate into gains for its constituents. While the initial death penalty grievances were met, in the longer run Shahbag did not achieve its subsequent broader goal, banning JIB as a political party and taking legal action against their funding sources. However, initially Shahbag also saw success in attaining smaller goals. In the first month, its leaders demanded the arrest of Mahmudur Rahman, a vocal critic of Shahbag and editor of the pro-Islamist newspaper *Amar Desh*, accusing him of inciting violence against pro-liberation forces (*Prothom Alo,* 2013, February 22). Although Rahman was not arrested within the 24 hour-ultimatum set by Shahbag leaders, he was charged with treason within 2 months (*BBC News,* 2013).

Then, on 20 July 2013, the movement demanded that the state should appeal the verdict against the war criminal and senior leader Ghulam Azam (Rosul, 2015: 192). After this verdict was appealed on 12 August 2013, Shahbag leaders demanded arrest and prosecution of attackers of movement participants, through a memorandum submitting to the State Ministry (Rosul, 2015: 202). The ministry was somewhat responsive, as the murderers of Rajib Haider, an atheist blogger and Shahbag activist, hacked to death during the movement's first month, were arrested and two were sentenced to death (*The Daily Ittefaq,* 2017, May 28). However, the biggest achievement of Shahbag, which most participants still viewed as a success in 2017, remained the amendment in the law that enabled the state to appeal against life imprisonment sentences (Ahmed, 2013), starting with Quader Mollah in 2013. Out of 100 respondents, 17 believed that Shahbag achieved policy changes that met its grievances to a great extent, 39 to a fairly great extent, 21 somewhat, and only 16 and 7, respectively, felt there was very little or no success at all.

However, as the movement lost its traction after the initial focused approach, the government started to become less and less responsive to the pleas of Shahbag leaders and representatives of the secularist society in general. In particular, many violent attacks on Shahbag activists were not prosecuted, including the murder of Jafar Munshi on 14 February 2013, and the more recent high-profile murder on 26 February 2015 of the blogger, writer and atheist intellectual Avijit Roy (*Samakal*, 2017). Numerous attacks on secularist activists and bloggers followed Roy's killing, including the murders of Washiqur Rahman, Ananta Bijoy Das, Niloy Chatterjee and Nazimuddin Samad (Tharoor, 2016). A week after the murder of Nazimuddin Samad on 6 April 2016, the Prime Minister remarked that writing against a religion or hurting someone's religious sentiment was 'perverted' (*bikrito ruchi*), stating that the government will not accept responsibility for any consequences of such indecency (*Prothom Alo*, 2016, April 14). This statement, according to some online activists (*Deutsche Welle*, 2016), essentially gave legitimacy to murdering secularists and atheists in Bangladesh. Most murdered bloggers were leaders or participants of Shahbag, which meant that legitimising their murder was the same as condoning the killing of Shahbag leaders.

The personal dangers that Shahbag brought for secularists and Shahbag leaders, one could argue, meant that the movement had ultimately created a great lobbying

disadvantage for secularist civil society. Before Shahbag, the secularists' strong lobbying power with the ruling AL was visible from the speedy willingness to render full justice in prosecuting war criminals, even if this involved death penalties. However, Shahbag's later frame expansions handed much strategic advantage to Islamists, meaning that the secularists' lobbying power did not increase. In 2017, only 33.7 per cent of the surveyed Shahbag participants that supported the AL agreed that the secularists' lobbying power had increased as a result of Shahbag, while 76.3 per cent saw this power as decreased or the same. The detrimental effects of Shahbag seemed only slightly more visible to the non-AL community, among whom 64.5 per cent saw a decrease or similarity in lobbying power as the outcome of Shahbag. This indicates that Shahbag did ultimately not achieve new advantages for the secularist civil society and might instead have created some disadvantages. While Shahbag soon lost much of its popular support, the Islamists increased their ability to pressurise the AL government, which now started negotiations with Hefazat. Faruk Wasif observed in interview in 2017:

> It is like a hydraulic pump. The lobbying power that Hefazat gained is a direct result of the failure of Shahbag. Hefazat has become a promoted pressure group of the government. Shahbag was also a pressure group but got demoted. That is all that happened and Shahbag is completely responsible for this.

While more atheist bloggers were being murdered, the deeper effect of AL-Hefazat negotiations showed in the AL Election Manifesto of 2014, stating that '[n]o law contradicting the Quran and Sunnah will be passed… Necessary guidelines will be formulated to prevent the abuse of online newspapers and social networks and to ensure that they act responsibly' (Awami League, 2014). This manifesto shows that the AL in 2014 seemed to dance to the tune of Hefazat rather than Shahbag. The post-2014 AL government also arrested several journalists and bloggers who wrote against war criminals and joined or organised the Shahbag Movement. If the government earlier went by the rough list of war criminals published by the Supreme Court in prosecuting them, it now followed Hefazat's list of 84 bloggers to prosecute and harass secular activists. While secularists and the Shahbag Movement still sided with the government, hoping for protection against murderous Islamist extremists, AL sided with the Islamists. Thus, after the fraught 2014 elections (Khan, 2018), it appeared that Islamists held more power over the AL government than secularists.

In the run-up to the 2018 elections, these lobbying efforts seem to have started bearing further fruits, since a massive change in public school textbooks, carried out in 2017, took out writings of authors deemed as anti-Islamic by Hefazat (Barry & Manik, 2017a). The government also recognised Qawmi Madrasa certificates, the Dawah-e-Hadith, as a postgraduate degree, following Hefazat demands, and the Prime Minister received Hefazat leaders in her residence (Mamun, 2017). A statue of Lady Justice, which Hefazat activists deemed anti-Islamic, was removed from the front of the Supreme Court premises and placed at the rear entrance (Barry & Manik, 2017b).

Such symbolic changes and power struggles are highly significant in relation to the unfinished fine-tuning of the secular vision of Bangladesh (Islam, 2018).

When the dwindling band of Shahbag activists, now down to around 30 persons, opposed the statue removal, four leaders were jailed and 140 student leaders were sued (*Bangladesh Pratidin*, 2017). When a prominent secularist intellectual spoke out against this, Hefazat leaders openly threatened to physically attack her in the streets, while the government did not dare to condemn this (Safi, 2017). The official spokesman for Shahbag at the time, Imran H. Sarkar, summoned to court for speaking out against the statue removal, was attacked with rotten eggs by AL activists (*bdnews24.com*, 2017, July 16). Such symbolic violence against Shahbag leaders makes it appear that the populist upsurge initiated by Shahbag in 2013 had lost much ground by late 2017. Taking this as proof of Islamist ascendancy seems a common reaction. In 2017, among 100 respondents, 22 felt that the aggressive responses to Shahbag activism were of decreased benefit to secularists, 29 saw a fairly great negative extent, 31 saw this as somewhat negative, while only 18 respondents felt very little or no negative impact at all. Yet, as discussed further below, drawing such direct correlations remains questionable.

Following the model of Gamson (1990), Shahbag can be characterised as a movement that was largely co-opted. Shahbag participants favoured this diagnosis when presented in 2017 with the Gamson model's four options. While only 16 per cent chose that Shahbag achieved a full response, 35 per cent felt that the movement was co-opted, 22 per cent found the success of the movement pre-empted and 27 per cent saw the level of success as a full collapse. In the light of the above responses, it appears that Shahbag was by 2017 overall perceived as disadvantageous to the secularist civil society. It now had diminished lobbying power with the AL government and had induced a re-legitimisation of Islamist civil society. In brief, the populist upsurge that the Shahbag Movement had spearheaded appeared to have been stolen. However, quite different interpretations are possible.

Concluding Analysis

The resource mobilisation school approach suggests that Shahbag suffered political co-optation because of faulty framing. The survey results show that most movement participants were politically unaffiliated and felt betrayed when Shahbag was co-opted by AL. They probably wanted to be part of a new third force. In response, many politically independent participants left the movement, while political attention seekers took over Shahbag's leadership, significantly transforming the frame of the movement and turning Shahbag into a force against political Islam. Such reframing exposed Shahbag to vilification and attacks as an alleged anti-Islamic movement.

The article traces how Islamists seized strategic opportunities and how a Hefazat-led countermovement benefitted from the broad acceptance of Islamism among the masses and much of the political elite. But it also affected the AL government's policy agenda. In the crucial period prior to the January 2014 elections, AL desperately sought to

demonstrate to the voting public that it, too, does not completely dismiss adherence to Islam, which then de facto criminalises outspoken secularists (Benkin, 2017). Overall, the alleged anti-Islamic, rather than just anti-Islamist reframing of Shahbag provided ample space for Islamists to claim the moral high ground as protectors of Islam and amass public legitimacy by doing so.

However, these ongoing ideological conflicts cannot be fully understood without factoring in the electoral politics in Bangladesh (Khan, 2018). At first sight, as this article showed, this resulted in re-establishing the Islamists in late 2013 as a legitimate, influential interest group within mainstream politics, which now hopes for electoral benefits in late 2018 as a reward for such skilful manipulation of Bangladeshi society. However, this nation's complex history cannot be rescued from the brink of disaster by fleeting moments of activism from either side. Most people of Bangladesh, it seems, want to see a prosperous, peaceful country but watch in some despair, as the spontaneous nature of the Shahbag Movement indicated, how the perennial battle of the two major political parties and their associates ruins such prospects.

The anonymous peer reviewers for this article, looking at the Shahbag phenomenon from a wider perspective, suggested the need for some far-reaching further considerations that questioned the initial findings of this article as too closely based on Gamson (1990). Asking what actually happened in the shadow of the perceived decline of Shahbag, it seemed pertinent to relate the present article directly to the parallel trajectory of electoral politics, and the challenge of improving the still ailing process of democratisation in Bangladesh. Through such a contextualised analysis of Shahbag and its impact on electoral developments, significantly different findings emerge that partly relate to recent work on the caretaker government (CTG) of Bangladesh (Khan, 2018). This was not included in the present article, as the institution of the CTG was perceived as a branch of the formal law rather than an aspect of civil society. What, however, would be the effect of perceiving the CTG as a civil society movement, maybe even a manifestation of the third movement that Shahbag did not manage to become? The CTG can indeed be seen as another civil society strategy invented to manage the perilous electoral politics of Bangladesh. Significantly, the institutional set-up of the CTG involved prominent leader figures, charismatic ex members of the legal, bureaucratic, military and societal establishment, highly respected figures in society, but no longer legal or political office holders. This gave credibility to the CTG edifice, despite many efforts to steal that, too. The CTG structure, however, was abolished by the AL before the critical elections of January 2014 (Khan, 2018).

This article also suggests that Shahbag needs to be seen as a youth-focused social movement in a lineage of grassroots civil society organisations that have sought to influence developments in Bangladesh from outside the heavily polarised battlefield of the two major political parties to secure a more secularist orientation. If the CTG was an attempt at a third force from the top, with contributors from leading civil society organisations, Shahbag arose from the bottom, mobilising inexperienced bloggers, students and common citizens into forming a populist protest movement against the

mistrusted political establishment. The AL and the BNP, their associates and their warring female leaders, remained throughout engaged in the well-known 'Battle of the Begums'. The rationale for many early participants in Shahbag, looking back at Figure 2 above, was clearly the desire to overcome such damaging, highly personalised battles. People wanted progress in the country's record of justice and democratic development by strengthening a social or mass movement, a third force. It is highly significant that in Figure 2, 44 per cent of 200 respondents identified the support from general people as a key attraction of Shahbag. Together with lack of affiliation with the establishment (19.5%) and support of secularism (15.5%), this gives a very clear message. Shahbag as a populist movement was a kind of Bangladeshi Aam Aadmi Party that did not become a separate party, though India's experience in this regard shows that electoral success is not guaranteed in such cases (Kumar, 2017). But the recent example of France, which cannot be pursued here for space reasons, confirms the possibility of a total defeat of formerly warring major political parties and the emergence of a new party under a youthful, highly skilled and charismatic leader. Very recent events in elections in Pakistan confirm the potential for a third force also in South Asian conditions.

The article demonstrated clearly that the lack of such a charismatic independent anti-establishment leader figure has been one major factor holding back Shahbag as a viable third force with sustained electoral impact in Bangladesh. Hence, the country is now back to the duopoly of the two self-serving dynasties (*The Economist*, 2013). Until 2011, the CTG was a neutralising, calming force that allowed fair and free elections. However, the CTG's term of office was limited to the interim period of 90 days. The Shahbag Movement, which arose after the demise of the CTG, was a youth and civil society movement that did not really want to be, nor could become, another political party. Shahbag merely sought to strengthen the voices of reason, justice and national reconciliation as its starting point. This article confirms how quick the AL was in co-opting Shahbag, which then caused severe problems. That the changed framing of Shahbag soon led to the specific troubles analysed in this article is completely unsurprising.

What deeper sense does one make of this? The result of the double predicament of absent charismatic leadership and in-built reluctance to enter formal politics, it seems, is what mainly led to the sidelining and perceived stealing of Shahbag. In reality, it only looks as if the populist upsurge has been cleverly stolen, first by the AL and then by the BNP–JIB alliance. In the jungle of political realism, Shahbag ultimately managed to put more pressure on the AL to convey to a sceptical and partly distrustful electorate that it is necessary to find a reasonable middle path between respect for Islam and avoidance of Islamism. Islamists may want to deny that such a middle path exists. The Shahbag Movement has shown that most people in Bangladesh, while often deeply religious, still favour the multi-faith, tolerant Bangladeshi identity that was the heart of the 1971 liberation movement. They firmly reject the intrusion of religion into politics and strongly resented, as Shahbag proved, how a flawed political and questionable

judicial system persistently made it possible for those accused of war crimes and other serious offences to evade justice. Yet Islamists, by causing terror and fear, constantly push the AL into retaliatory, indeed reactionary, violence, which is then used as evidence that the current government is fascist. A number of recent studies clearly convey that message, evidently with an eye on the ballot boxes of December 2018.

The data of the present article verified Gamson (1990), showing that co-option by the AL had a twofold negative impact. This invited further discussions about the interaction between third force movements and electoral politics in Bangladesh. Once the initial demands relating to death penalty for war criminals had been fulfilled, expanding arguments over the place of religion in Bangladesh re-opened the festering wounds of the memories and realities of violent clashes between AL and BNP adherents. In fact, Shahbag became completely embroiled in the bipolar battle for votes in the impending elections of early 2014. Notably, the rise of Shahbag overlapped with the violent build-up to those crucial elections of January 2014, which are widely seen to lack democratic credibility (Khan, 2018). The co-optation of Shahbag and much strategic acceptance of Islamists' demands enabled the ruling AL to maintain its hold on power as the representative of the people, even when it lacked a full electoral mandate.

Bangladesh is presently approaching the highly dangerous next round of its never-ending battle for votes, fixed for December 2018, significantly again without any agreement between AL and BNP, and without CTG arrangements in place. Khan (2018) has meanwhile shown that a CTG by itself may have ensured fair and free elections, but could not get rid of the basic divide within Bangladeshi society, with a voting public almost equally split between adherents to AL or BNP policies and politics. As Khan (2018) highlights, each election under CTG tutelage resulted in a win for the respective opposition. Without realising this initially, the present article presumed that the CTG was not the right medicine for a Bangladesh still deficient in democratic vitamins. This conclusion thus warns that there is no viable solution to the current electoral politics in Bangladesh unless a strong enough third force prospers, uniting all elements of civil society that wish to see a peaceful Golden Bangladesh and care about the wider public interest. Even if that was the instinctive original aim and frame of Shahbag, it failed to convey that core message, because subsequent reframing and aggressive posturing by new, inexperienced leaders prevented Shahbag from maturing into a correctly balanced third force.

Questions must now be raised about why a strong sense of a shared national vision cannot be framed and appropriated by any one of the two competing major parties. The horrible truth appears to be that this is impossible in the current climate of complete mutual distrust. When the AL, heir of the initial vision of Bangladesh, supports a civil society movement, it gets accused of co-opting, undermining and tainting that movement as well as opposing Islamism, if not Islam itself. Such incredibly garbled, deliberately misrepresented framing further reflects the deep-rooted climate of mistrust. The BNP, on the other hand, seems unwilling to renounce its close alliance to Islamist forces, which allows it, in a Muslim majority country, to claim the moral

high ground. Since two sets of competing self-righteousness over the respective right to rule the country completely dominate the political scenario, there is no breathing space for a third force, or simply a rationalist (rather than secularist) civil society of Bangladesh. That this force is not even allowed to speak freely and independently is brought out by the present article. The sitting AL government, scared of losing the forthcoming ballot, tends to give in to Islamist demands, hoping to be perceived as a credible force for continuation of an Islamic Bangladesh. That this then legitimises, whether unwittingly or by design, the killing of outspoken civil society activists is of course highly alarming. Yet, whom are those seeking power trying to fool? And what does one do if the country is constantly put at risk of falling into chaos, despite having achieved so much economic progress?

While many observers from various positions refuse to see this clearly, both major parties are dominated by Muslims, and there cannot be any question whether Bangladesh is Muslim-dominated or not (Benkin, 2017). The real issue is therefore what kind of Islam should guide the democratic transition and future development of the country, not whether or not 'religion' should or can be closely connected to governance. This finding exposes the battles over secularism as a central part of the unfinished revolution of the country (Islam, 2018), while the form of that secularism remains an open question. The devious strategy of Islamist claims that Islam would be in danger if the AL remained in power is easily demasked as self-serving electoral strategising. As is known from equally fraught battles in Pakistan, claims for protection of Islam are 'music to the ears of pious Muslims' (Benkin, 2017: 93). While the language of searching for 'moderate Islam' (Menski, 2018) is now tainted by its closeness to global Islamophobia and terror-related agenda and discourses, the youth and civil society in Bangladesh seem to search for a model along the lines of the ideal figure of a 'responsible Muslim', which provides more hope, but is not even discussed.

The activists that instinctively reacted in 2013 to perceived injustice by setting up Shahbag appear largely motivated by such religious-cum-patriotic concerns. Why is this hopeful message, intertwining religiosity and patriotism, drowned again and again in the blood of Bangladeshis? In the final analysis, this article cannot fully maintain its initial assertion that Shahbag was stolen by Islamists, or by anyone. The whole country, it seems, is held to ransom by multiple forms of self-righteousness that fail to respect the overall public interest of all the people of Bangladesh. Seen in this light, Shahbag was not stolen, it was simply dragged into the arena of electoral politics, literally cut up and slaughtered like a sacrificial lamb, but its spirit and values are not dead. The people of Bangladesh, one may hope, will see through such politics to elect leaders that can ensure a safe journey for the vision of a Golden Bangladesh. Shahbag as a glimpse of a third force to come, something that many people have long been waiting for, a viable new movement that does not pick and choose between the two civil societies of Bangladesh as the 'true' spirit of the nation, but bridges the frame of both, appears to represent the nuanced values of hope, courage and solidarity that led to the country's

independence. Shahbag gave its lifeblood to convey that message, but risks being maligned for what it did and manifestly still does, namely to exercise lasting impact, now also as memory, of a people's movement, still a nascent third force of hope.

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