

War crimes in Bangladesh

# Justice delayed

A first conviction for war crimes sparks controversy

Jan 26th 2013 | From the print edition

Like 163 Tweet 7

MORE than 41 years after the deaths of as many as 3m people in Bangladesh's war of secession from Pakistan, a Bangladeshi war crimes tribunal has given its first verdict. On January 21st it sentenced Abul Kalam Azad to death *in absentia* for genocide and murder committed during the nine-month war in 1971. The verdict is being seen as a victory for Sheikh Hasina, the prime minister, and her Awami League party, who have made the tribunal an important part of her term in office.

Bangladeshis have waited decades for justice and the aims of the tribunal are broadly popular, but critics say the process has been politicised to target allies of Sheikh Hasina's main opponent, former prime minister Khaleda Zia, head of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). There have also been questions raised about its impartiality. In December *The Economist* reported on contacts by e-mail and Skype between the presiding judge in one of the tribunals and a lawyer in Belgium who was not an official part of the court. The judge eventually resigned and was replaced. The verdict on Mr Azad came from a second tribunal.

In the judgment Mr Azad is described as a former leader of the youth wing of Jamaat-e-Islami, a party in then East Pakistan and still Bangladesh's biggest Islamic party today. Its youth wing was the main source of paramilitaries supporting Pakistan in its efforts to prevent East Pakistan's independence. Its members are alleged to have abducted and murdered dozens of civilians. Mr Azad himself was accused of killing at least 12 Hindus and of rape. He then became a well-connected political figure in Bangladesh and a presenter of popular Islamic television programmes. He fled the country last year and is believed to be in Pakistan.

Mrs Zia has found it impossible to distance her party from Jamaat-e-Islami, an ally whose support the BNP needs if it is to win the election, likely to take place this year. Among the ten other senior figures to be tried are two leading party officials, both former ministers in Mrs Zia's 2001-2006 government. It may be that almost the entire leadership of Jamaat will be hanged before the polls. So, too, may two members of Mrs Zia's party, including one of her close advisers. Sheikh Hasina will hope that the taint of 1971 will make the BNP-Jamaat alliance so toxic to voters that she will be returned to power.

From the print edition: Asia

In this section

Show your hand

Justice delayed

No Jokowi

Is Thanh the man?

No let-up

On the edge

Reprints

Related topics

Hasina Wajed

Begum Khaleda Zia

War crimes

War and conflict

Bangladesh

Comment (34)

Print

E-mail

Reprints & permissions

Advertisement



Recent Activity

facebook

Login

You need to be logged into Facebook to see your friends' recent activity.



Dance it or hate it

1,232 people recommended this.



Is Thanh the man?

238 people recommended this.



Who's a dinosaur?

699 people recommended this.



The Stone Raft?

343 people recommended this.

Facebook social plugin

Latest blog posts - All times are GMT



Presidential power: When is a recess really a recess?

Democracy in America - Jan 26th, 01:30



Recommended economics writing: Link exchange

Free exchange - Jan 25th, 22:05



Women in combat: See Jane shoot

Democracy in America - Jan 25th, 20:22



Prosecuting the financial crisis: Just who should we be blaming anyway?

Free exchange - Jan 25th, 19:00



Israel's election: By the skin of his teeth

Pomegranate - Jan 25th, 18:10



Interpretation: We speak your language

Johnson - Jan 25th, 17:44

Recommend 17 Like 163 Tweet 7

reddit Share +1 0

View all comments (34)

Add your comment