BRING UP THE BODIES
As Bangladesh tries and sentences the war criminals of 1971, two contrasting ideas of nationalism come into conflict.

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On 20 February, 15 days after protestors flooded into Shahbag junction in central Dhaka to demand the death penalty for Abdul Qader Molla, young Bangladeshis began talking to the dead. That afternoon, after we returned from Shahbag to the suburb of Dhanmondi, two of my cousins and two of their friends piled onto a bed to write a letter to those killed in Bangladesh's liberation war.

"Dear Martyrs," my 27-year-old cousin, Auni, wrote. “Our hearts overflow with love for you. How are you? Can you see us? We will not sleep until your slaughter is brought to justice.”

By the time they reached the end of the page, emotions were soaring and their eyes were moist. My 25-year-old cousin, Joyita, ended the letter with “Joy Bangla”, the mantra of Bengali nationalism. After signing it, they climbed up onto the roof of their building and tied the letter to a few balloons. At exactly 4.13 pm, the time that the West Pakistani army surrendered to Indian troops on 16 December 1971, they dispatched their letter into the heavens from the heart of middle-class Dhaka, in sync with thousands of other letters being released skyward from Shahbag.

Across Bangladesh, two conflicting national narratives with deep historical roots are currently coming to a head as the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), set up in 2010, tries and sentences some of the criminals responsible for the atrocities committed during 1971. Over the course of 16 days of continuous peaceful protest, while the young blogger-organisers of Shahbag orchestrated highly structured rituals to remember the war dead, the youth wing of Jamaat-e-Islami, the largest religion-based political party in the country, unleashed violence on Hindus, police, journalists and activists as they wielded symbols of Islamic nationalism. At the heart of the continuing ideological battle between the Shahbag protesters and Jamaat is a struggle over how to memorialise nine months of trauma that accompanied the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan.

The ICT sentenced Molla, a senior Jamaat-e-Islami leader, to life imprisonment on 5 February, having found him guilty of murder, rape and complicity in the massacre of the Bengali civilian population with the aid of organisations such as Jamaat-e-Islami, Muslim League and Nezam-e-Islam—local collaborators, committed to the idea of a united Islamic nation of Pakistan. The official estimate in Bangladesh is that the nine-month war killed 3 million people and that 500,000 women were raped. The actions of the Pakistani military in 1971 constitutes one of the most significant blind spots of Pakistani national history today, and in Bangladeshi national consciousness, the chilling figure of all remains the Bengali collaborator, living unpunished among the citizenry.

Since January, the ICT has been delivering its first verdicts to a nation that has long awaited justice, and this has rendered the figure of the collaborator hyper-visible in the public sphere. Although the first court to try Bangladeshi war crimes was established by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his ruling Awami League in 1972, the process was overturned when Rahman and most of his family were massacred in 1975, and the league’s government was brought to an abrupt end. With the Awami League’s return to power under the premiership of Rahman’s daughter, Sheik Hasina Wajed, the ICT was set up in 2010. On 21 January 2013, the tribunal handed down its first sentence. Finding Abul Kalam Azad, former member of Jamaat-e-Islami, guilty of murder, rape, torture and setting homes ablaze in the town of Faridpur during 1971, the ICT sentenced him, in absentia, to “hanging until death”, and symbolically ended 42 years of impunity for war criminals.

The Shahbag protests erupted in early February at a moment of crisis when it became apparent to many Bangladeshis that despite rendering collaborators and their crimes visible, the proceedings of the ICT would not necessarily spell the end of impunity for war criminals. The ICT sentenced Molla, a senior Jamaat-e-Islami leader, to life imprisonment on 5 February, having found him guilty of murder, rape and complicity in the massacre of the residents of Alubdi village. Perceived publicly as a soft sentence, the decision, to many, reeked of an election-year deal between the Awami League and Jamaat-e-Islami. In particular, the victorious “V” sign that Molla flashed to television cameras as he was exiting the courtroom stirred deep fears amongst Bangladeshis that he will be released if there is a change in government.

A handful of young protestors gathered at Shahbag on the evening of Molla’s verdict. Over the next few days, the number of demonstrators grew exponentially, as text messages, Facebook posts, blog posts and tweets marked #Shahbag helped turn the intersection into the birthplace of a new, many-headed body of seething Bangladeshis, fed up with the corruption that pervades the legal system and party politics. Police barricades and ricksha-wallahs marked the peripheries of the largely middle-class protest space, which at times swelled to 500,000 people. The participation and leadership of young, educated women was one of the striking features of this event, which transformed Dhaka. While the common cause uniting angry, non-partisan protestors was the demand to hang the collaborators and enact the strictest possible punishment for war criminals under Bangladeshi law, Shahbag was an extended festival of memorialisation, with participants holding silent candlelight vigils for the war dead, signing petitions for justice—and releasing letters into the sky. Participating in these public
acts of communication with the dead, young people who had not personally seen the atrocities committed in 1971 began to grieve as if they had. At the centre of Shahbag intersection, protestors raised a portrait of the Bengali activist, mother of a war martyr and figurehead of an earlier moment of emotional memorialisation, Jahanara Imam. During 1971, living in Dhanmondi, Imam kept a meticulous record of the war, including the murder of her 18-year-old son, Rumi, by the Pakistani army. Upon its publication in 1982, her diary, Ekkatuer Dinguli (The Days of ’71), became an instant bestseller in Bangladesh. Imam’s first-hand account played a central role in the transfer of the lived memories of an older generation, who saw the events of 1971, to the social memory of a new generation who had not. As my cousin Auni explained, “When you read Jahanara Imam’s diary, Rumi becomes your brother.”

This inter-generational handover of responsibility to remember the massacres of 1971 was one key to the rise of Bengali nationalism. As Imam once again emerged as a figurehead—now of the renewed Bengali nationalism centred around Shahbag—the ICT placed on trial the intellectual, political and spiritual leaders of a contrasting form of nationalism that has its roots in the ideology of a united Islamic nation of Pakistan and is articulated in Bangladesh today by Jamaat-e-Islami and their youth wing, Shibir, who hit the streets in defence of their political forebears. The Shahbag protests enjoyed police protection, and, by extension, the support of the Awami League government, for whom the movement represented a potential electoral advantage. While the government never quite managed to co-opt the protests, its response demonstrated its support for the Bengali nationalism of Shahbag over Jamaat’s vision.

At the heart of Shibir’s tactics was the use of a set of supernatural symbols to deflect attention from the atrocities committed by the Jamaat leadership in 1971. After the ICT found Delawar Hossain Sayeedi, the vice-president of Jamaat-e-Islami, guilty of murder, looting, arson and genocide, and sentenced him to death on 28 February this year, a curious apparition accompanied the violence that Shibir unleashed across Bangladesh. On Friday, 2 March, a photoshopped image of Sayeedi’s face, transposed on the moon, appeared on a Jamaat-Shibir Facebook page, ‘Basherkella’, accompanied by a statement that people from “Bangladesh to Saudi Arabia” sighted Sayeedi’s face on the lunar surface. Embedded in a claim that it was a divine omen proving his innocence, news of the Sayeedi-moon sighting circulated through text messages and social media, and was broadcast by loudspeakers at mosques in the rural areas of Chittagong, Rajshahi and Bogra. Within a week of Sayeedi’s verdict, inciting people to rise up against the trial process underway at the ICT, vicious Shibir-led attacks across rural Bangladesh on police officers, Hindu homes, peasant villages and Awami League activists claimed around 100 lives.

Apparitions on the moon have been part of the political vocabulary of Muslim South Asia since the late 19th century. They belong to a system of prophetic testimony and divine truth that has a fundamentally different world view from the processes of juridical justice underway at the ICT. Syed Abul A’la Maududi, the founding architect of Jamaat philosophy, was one of many religious leaders to use sightings on the moon for political gain and Jamaat-Shibir’s recent use of this tactic drew wide condemnation from Islamic leaders across Bangladesh. In diametric opposition to the attempt of Bengali nationalism to make visible the war dead, Jamaat sought to render invisible war crimes committed by Muslims on fellow Muslims, which constitute a moment of deep crisis for pan-Islamic nationalism. While Shahbag activists mostly from a literate, privileged section of Bangladeshi society used memoirs and letters to recall this past crisis, Jamaat-Shibir deployed a universally accessible visual symbol, the moon, to recruit a much wider section of the population to a renewed Islamic nationalism.

As the ideological battle about how to see the past comes to a head, the fear that Bangladesh is inching towards civil war preoccupies an older generation haunted by the memories of 1971. At 4.13 pm on 16 December 1971, with the departure of the Pakistani army, millions of corpses sank into the earth and drifted to the beds of the Padma, Meghna, Jamuna and their tributaries. Four decades later, as the trial process stirs to life the war dead, renders visible the collaborators, and memorialises the killing fields that Bangladesh is built upon, a generation of young people are poised to wage a cultural war between Islamic nationalism and Bengali nationalism that is likely to rage throughout their lifetimes. At 4.13 pm on 20 February 2013, at least one letter amongst many that floated to the heavens, attached to pink balloons, assured the millions of war dead: “Today we have woken. We the young will finish the war that you started. Stay with us.”

Shahbag protesters called for the death penalty for the 1971 war criminals, even as Islamic nationalist groups like Shibir sought to deify perpetrators.