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Political Assassination Plot Clouds Bangladesh

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It is *Déjà vu*: A New York Court's verdict sending three persons to jail for various terms for plotting to "kidnap" and "harm" Sajid Wazed Joy, son of Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sk. Hasina Wazed. The convicted persons are Rizve Ahmed Caesar, son of Mahmmad Ullah Mamun, head of the BNP's US unit and also vice-president of BNP's cultural wing; FBI special agent Robert Lustyik; and US citizen Johannes Thaler, who worked as a facilitator.

Lustik procured documents on the activities, movements and family members of Joy, who is US based and is also Information and Computer Technology (ICT) Advisor to Prime Minister Sk. Hasina. The New York Court's full verdict said Caesar admitted that he intended to "scare", "kidnap" and "hurt" Joy. The court also stated that Caesar transmitted the information obtained from the FBI files on Joy to a "journalist in Bangladesh: and received in return "approximately US \$ 30,000".

The Bangladeshi journalist turned out to be Mahammudur Rehman, former acting editor of the newspaper *Amar Desh* and advisor to BNP Chief and former Prime Minister (2001-2006) of Bangladesh, Begum Khaleda Zia. The news paper under Rehman was virulently anti-Awami League, the current ruling party and strongly supportive of the BNP-Jamaat-e-Islam led government. Rehman is currently in jail on charges of sedition, and his newspaper closed.

Also arrested in this case is 81 year old journalist and speech writer of Prime Minister Zia, Shafik Rehman who was arrested by the Detective Branch (DB) of the Dhaka police on April 15. The DB claims that they have recovered incriminating documents, probably copies of the FBI documents, from Shafik's Dhaka residence.

Another person the police are looking for is one Milton Bhyian, a friend of Caesar, who carried the document from the US and delivered it to Mohammadur. While pleading for 10 day remand for Mohammadur Rehman before the court the investigation officer in the case claimed that the conspiracy to assassinate Joy started in September 2011, and the conspirators met in the US, UK, Dhaka and elsewhere in the country. Tareque Rehman, the elder son of Begum Zia lives in London on extended bail, on medical grounds. He was the strong man and mover and shaker of the BNP as the party's Joint General Secretary, and controlled the country's intelligence agencies and sections of the army. He was feared and hated by the people. Although not in the government, his fiefdom covered all important sections of the government. Several cases are pending in the country against Tareque.

The Bangladesh government is unable to get Tareque Rehman back as several important western countries who are also donor countries have impressed upon Sk. Hasina not to touch Khaleda's children. Khaleda Zia's other son, Arafat Rehman Koko, died in Malaysia, where he was staying under similar conditions as Tareque.

This is startling news not only for Bangladesh but also those democratic countries which have close relations with Dhaka and quietly intervene in Bangladesh's political, legal and justice process. There is an urgent need for them to review their policies towards Bangladesh. It is understood that the fear is that if the BNP, the strongest opposition party fails then the Awami League may act with unfettered power. True, nobody wants a one party rule. But that does not mean assassination and attempts at assassination should be condoned. This approach is an invitation to chaos. And chaos, as all know, will further strengthen the extremists.

The targeting of Joy is significant. Although not in daily politics, Joy is the likely successor of Sk. Hasina and future head of the Awami League. Politics in the subcontinent has been dynastic but democratic at the same time. It was Sk. Mujibur Rahman who headed the Awami League at the time of liberation, and was the symbol of the creation of Bangladesh. He was assassinated in 1975 in a conspiracy which had the Pakistani stamp. Pakistan's army and the ISI have not forgotten their defeat in the 1971 war, when Bangladesh was born. Over the years, since 1971, Pakistan has created a strong constituency in Bangladesh represented to a large extent by the BNP and the Jamaat. Many of Jamaat's leaders in 1971 had collaborated with the Pakistani occupation army and are being tried by the present Awami League led government for war crimes. This war crimes trial was instituted by Prime Minister Sk. Hasina.

Sk Hasina inherited the mantle of her late father Sk. Mujibur Rahman. She has kept the Awami League together, otherwise the party may have disintegrated without an undisputed leader.

There have been several assassination attempts on Sk. Hasina. The one in 2004 injured her, but twenty two Awami League leaders were killed in that grenade attack. The executor of that attack, Mufti Hannan, the Commander of the Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (HUJI) is in jail now. So are some BNP leaders who were in the frontline in planning the attack. It is alleged some bigger leaders of the BNP and Jamaat gave the go ahead for the plot. Sk Hasina and her government also survived two coup attempts. Such is the political situation in Bangladesh.

The intention behind the assassination attempt on Joy is obvious. But it is unlikely that the plot was the brain child of these three or four people. It is a much bigger conspiracy and required the decision by much more powerful people in the BNP. This action was meticulously planned to identify when Joy would be most vulnerable. The operation also included harming the family of Joy, that is, his wife, if need be. A substantial amount of money would have been spent in travelling to different countries. How much was promised and paid to jailed FBI special agent Robert Lustyik and facilitator Johannes Thaler, is not known. The amount of US \$ 30,000 given to Mahmmudur Rehman would not have covered the costs.

This article cannot name any person in the absense of evidence. But it can be concluded that powerful people with money were involved. The investigations are in the initial stages. But again, if the Bangladeshi government unravels the whole story can they rise above external pressures to reveal all and take action?

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