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Bangladesh: The Awami League (AL); its leaders; subgroups, including its youth wing; activities; and treatment of AL supporters by the authorities (2004-2006)

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### Background

The Bangladesh Awami League (AL) is a political party that was established in 1949 (*Europa World Year Book 2005* 2005, 717; *Political Parties of the World* Jan. 2005, 48; Factiva 24 Jan. 2006) to "promote Bengali interests" (ibid.). The party was reportedly "a major force" in the country's push for independence from Pakistan, which was achieved in 1971 (*Political Handbook of the World: 2005-2006* Dec. 2005, 87 and 92; *Political Parties of the World* Jan. 2005, 48). Led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman [also called "Sheikh Mujib"] (ibid.; Factiva 24 Jan. 2006), the AL held power from 1971 to 1975 (*Political Parties of the World* Jan. 2005, 48). In 1975, the Bangladesh military overthrew the AL government and killed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (ibid.; see also Factiva 24 Jan. 2006).

The AL returned to power following Bangladesh's June 1996 elections (*Political Handbook of the World: 2005-2006* Dec. 2005, 92; Freedom House 2005); however, the party was defeated during the country's 2001 elections, won by the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) (ibid.; Factiva 24 Jan. 2006). As of June 2006, the AL was the country's main opposition party (BBC 20 June 2006). The country's next elections are expected to take place by the end of January 2007 (ibid.; Dow Jones International News 3 Feb. 2006; see also Reuters 29 Apr. 2006).

According to the *Europa World Year Book 2005*, the AL has a membership of approximately 1,025,000 (2005, 717). It is unclear whether this figure includes the membership of the various subgroups of the political party.

### Leadership

Sheikh Hasina Wajed [also referred to as "Sheikh Hasina"] is the president of the Awami League (*Europa World Year Book 2005* 2005, 717; *Political Parties of the World* Jan. 2005, 48; *Political Handbook of the World: 2005-2006* Dec. 2005, 92) and the leader of the opposition in parliament (UNB 22 June 2006; ibid. 28 Mar. 2006). According to the Awami League Website, Saber Hossain Chowdhury is the political secretary to the AL president (Bangladesh Awami League n.d.). Sources identify the party's general secretary as Abdul Jalil (ibid.; Reuters 29 Apr. 2006; Dow Jones International News 3 Feb. 2006), who is also an AL member of parliament (MP) (LCG Bangladesh n.d.).

For a complete listing of Awami League MPs and their districts, please consult the Local Consultative Groups (LCG) Bangladesh Website at <.

According to a news article by the United News of Bangladesh, a Dhaka-based news service, the political party also has unit leaders in the United Kingdom, including Samsuddin Khan, Abul Hossain, M.A. Gani and Sultan Mahmud Sharif (UNB 28 Mar. 2006).

### **Subgroups**

Among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate, several subgroups of the Awami League were identified.

The Bangladesh Awami Jubo [also spelled "Juba"] League (BAJL) is the youth wing of the Awami League (Bangladesh Awami League 21 May 2006a; BBC 30 Nov. 2005). According to a 30 November 2005 BBC news article, the president of the BAJL is Mohiuddin Ahmed Mohi. Other sources consulted identify Jahangir Kabir Nanak as the chairman of the BAJL (BAJL n.d.; UNB 15 May 2006; BBC 30 Nov. 2005) and Mirza Azam as the youth wing's general secretary (ibid.; BAJL n.d.; Bangladesh Awami League 21 May 2006b). According to the BAJL Website, Dr. Emran Kabir is the organization's secretary of foreign affairs (N.d). Other BAJL leaders identified in a 21 May 2006 Bangladesh Awami League news release include Harunur Rashid, Mujibur Rahman Chowdhury, Mohammad Faruque Hossain, Mahbubur Rahman Hiron, Abdus Sattar Masud, Mamunur Rashid, Manjurul Alam Shaheen, Abul Bashar, Nurunnabi Chodhury Shaon and Mainul Hossain Khan Nikhil (21 May 2006b).

The Mohila [also spelled "Mahila"] Awami League is the women's front of the AL (Bangladesh Awami League 21 Mar. 2006; UNB 8 Mar. 2006). Sources consulted name Ashrafunessa [also "Ashrafunnessa"] Mosharraf and Fazilatunessa [also "Fazilatunnessa"] Indira respectively as president and general secretary of the women's league (ibid.; Bangladesh Awami League 21 Mar. 2006).

The Bangladesh Chhatra League is the student wing of the Awami League (UNB 14 May 2006; ibid. 24 Sept. 2005). Sources consulted identify Liakat Shikdar as the organization's president (ibid.) and Nazrul Islam Babu as its general secretary (ibid.; Bangladesh Awami League 21 Mar. 2006).

Other subgroups of the Awami League referred to less frequently in the sources consulted by the Research Directorate include the following: the Jubo Mohila League, the youth women's league of the AL (AHRC 23 Feb. 2006); the Awami Shechchhasebak League, the volunteer wing of the AL (News From Bangladesh 3 Apr. 2005; *The Daily Star* 17 Apr. 2005); and the Sramik League, the workers' front of the AL (ibid. 8 May 2004).

### **Activities**

Several sources consulted indicate that tensions have existed between the Awami League and the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) (HRW Jan. 2006; BBC 11 Apr. 2006; Factiva 24 Jan. 2006; Freedom House 2005). Sources suggest that the tension has stemmed from "personal animosity" between the parties' leaders rather than differences in ideology (BBC 11 Apr. 2006; Freedom House 2005).

Since the BNP came into power in 2001, the AL has refused to recognize its authority to rule (ibid.; Factiva 24 Jan. 2006) and has staged boycotts of parliament (ibid.; *Global Insight Daily Analysis* 6 Feb. 2006; *Country Reports 2005* 8 Mar. 2006, Sec. 3; Freedom House 2005; BBC 3 Oct. 2001). The AL has also organized

demonstrations and rallies (Freedom House 2005; UNB 16 Sept. 2005; Dow Jones International News 3 Feb. 2006), as well as nation-wide strikes called *hartals* (ibid.; Bangladesh Awami League 4 July 2006; *The Bangladesh Observer* 14 Mar. 2006; *The Daily Star* 19 May 2005; Freedom House 2005), to put pressure on the BNP to step down (Freedom House 2005; Factiva 24 Jan. 2006; UNB 8 Mar. 2006). Demonstrations and/or strikes have sought to protest the killing of AL leaders (*The Daily Star* 19 May 2005; ibid. 29 Jan. 2005a; ibid. 8 May 2004; see also Bangladesh Awami League 4 July 2006), pressure the government to make electoral reforms before the country's next elections (US Fed News 20 Apr. 2006; BBC 20 June 2006; see also Global Insight Daily Analysis 6 Feb. 2006), and protest rising prices (AHRC 23 Feb. 2006).

According to 2005 and 2006 sources, the AL's various subgroups have also participated in *hartals* and demonstrations (*The Bangladesh Observer* 14 Mar. 2006; Bangladesh Awami League 21 Mar. 2006; AHRC 23 Feb. 2006). For example, in February 2006, the Awami Jubo Mohila League participated in an AL-led demonstration to pressure the government to make reforms to the constitution and the electoral system, and to demonstrate against rising prices (ibid.). In March 2006, the Awami Jubo League organized a nationwide *hartal* to protest the killing of one of its leaders (*The Bangladesh Observer* 14 Mar. 2006).

### **Treatment of Awami League Supporters**

Several sources consulted indicate that AL supporters and leaders have been harassed, threatened and/or physically attacked (AHRC 9 May 2006; AI 18 Aug. 2005 HRW Jan. 2006; BBC 20 Feb. 2006; *The Daily Star* 29 Jan 2005b). Other sources report instances of torture and/or killings of AL members (Bangladesh Awami League 4 July 2006; AHRC 9 May 2006; HRW Jan. 2006; *The Daily Star* 29 Jan 2005a; ibid. 29 Jan. 2005b; *Country Reports 2005* 8 Mar. 2006, Sec.1).

*The Daily Star*, a Dhaka-based newspaper that describes itself as "independent" and "non-partisan" (n.d.), reports that in May 2004, Ahsanullah Master, an AL lawmaker, was killed at a rally in Tongi, after being "sprayed with bullets" (8 May 2004; *The Daily Star* 17 Apr. 2005; News From Bangladesh 3 Apr. 2005; AI 12 May 2004). A BNP youth wing leader reportedly organized the attack (*The Daily Star* 17 Apr. 2005). According to *The Daily Star*, a Dhaka court sentenced twenty-two people to death and six others to life imprisonment for their involvement in the killing (17 Apr. 2005).

In August 2004, a grenade attack at an AL rally in Dhaka killed approximately 20 people, including Ivy Rahman, the party's women's affairs secretary (*Country Reports 2005* 8 Mar. 2006, Sec.1; *Political Parties of the World* Jan. 2005, 49; see also Freedom House 2005). The attack was thought to be an assassination attempt on Sheikh Hasina Wajed, who spoke at the rally (HRW 26 Aug. 2004). According to *Political Parties of the World*, "Sheikh Hasina stated that 'hundreds' of AL supporters had been killed or tortured by the BNP-led government since 2001 and that the August 21 attack was a continuation of this policy" (Jan. 2005, 49).

On 27 January 2005, senior AL politician Shah Abu Mohammad Shamsul Kibria was killed in Habiganj in northeastern Bangladesh, along with four other people at an AL rally (AI 2006; *Country Reports 2005* 8 Mar. 2006, Sec.1). Police reportedly filed charges against several BNP leaders allegedly involved in the attack (ibid.).

In February 2006, Sheikh Yunnus Ali, an AL leader who had previously been targeted, lost his hand in a bomb attack in Khulna in southwestern Bangladesh (BBC 20 Feb. 2006).

Multiple sources report police actions against AL supporters. For example, police have allegedly assaulted supporters (AHRC 9 May 2006; ibid. 23 Feb. 2006) and used

tear gas and batons on them at AL demonstrations (BBC 20 June 2006; US Fed News 20 Apr. 2006; *Country Reports 2005* 8 Mar. 2006, Sec.2.b; *The Bangladesh Observer* 14 Mar. 2006). They have also allegedly arrested AL activists at demonstrations (ibid.; *The Daily Star* 19 May 2005; AHRC 9 May 2006), as well as prior to such events (ibid.; BBC 19 Apr. 2006; Dow Jones International News 3 Feb. 2006). According to *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2005*, the police and BNP supporters have also "disrupted the free movement of AL supporters" on their way to a rally (8 Mar. 2006, Sec. 2.b).

Amnesty International (AI) has released a public statement indicating that BNP members attacked and injured hundreds of AL supporters at AL gatherings held on 15 August 2005 (Aug. 2005). The statement further notes that

in an apparently discriminatory move, police have reportedly filed cases against a total of 1500 Awami League supporters, even though they have been the targets of the attacks (AI 18 Aug. 2005).

*Country Reports 2005* indicates that, in July 2004, AL activist Samon Ahmed Majunder was unlawfully killed by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a Bangladesh paramilitary group whose members come from various law enforcement agencies (8 Mar. 2006, Sec.1.a).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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