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Responses to Information Requests

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24 January 2014

BGD104759.E

Bangladesh: Gonojagoron Moncho, including origin, purpose, structure, membership, areas of operation and activities (April 2013-January 2014)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Definition

Gonojagoron Moncho (also spelled Ganajagaran Mancha, Gano Jagaran Mancha, Gono Jagaron Moncho) reportedly means "platform for popular uprising" (*Frontline* 6 Mar. 2013) or "mass awakening platform" (*The Hindu* 16 Feb. 2013). The term is also used to refer to the Shahbag mass protest and social movement in Bangladesh that began in February 2013 at Shahbag (also spelled Shabagh, Shahbagh) Square in Dhaka (ibid.; Professorial Lecturer 18 Jan. 2014), and is "one and the same" as Shahbag (ibid.). The Shahbag movement calls for the death penalty for those found guilty of war crimes committed in the Bangladesh war of independence from Pakistan in 1971, and also calls for resistance to the politics of the Jamaat-e-Islami party, deemed as "fundamentalist Islamist" by protesters (*The Hindu* 16 Feb. 2013). *The New Nation* referred to Gonojagoron Moncho as the physical "make-shift stage" set up by protesters as a roadblock at Shahbag Square; the roadblock was in place between early February and May 2013 (7 May 2013). It may also refer to the team of "coordinators" of the Shahbag uprising (*Frontline*, 6 Mar. 2013), or activists or protesters that participate in the Shahbag movement (*Daily Star* 5 Apr. 2013; *The Independent* 19 Sept. 2013).

In written correspondence with the Research Directorate, a professorial lecturer at American University in Washington who specializes in transitional justice, human rights, post-conflict reconstruction and South Asia, stated that in her understanding, following the dismantling of the platform in May, the Gonojagoron Moncho and Shahbag movement experienced internal differences as well as external threats from "extremist forces" such as Jamaat, and as a result the group has become less "politically active" than the "widespread mobilization" seen during February to March-April 2013 (18 Jan. 2014). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2. Origin

2.1 War Crimes Tribunals and Shahbag Demonstrations

Jamaat-e-Islami is Bangladesh's largest Islamic party, which reportedly opposed Bangladeshi independence in 1971, according to CNN (8 Apr. 2013). The national war crimes tribunals initiated by the Awami League government in 2010 indicted and arrested several key members of the Jamaat-e-Islami party for their role in atrocities committed in the 1971 war for independence (Freedom House 2013; *The Guardian* 13 Feb. 2013). On 5 February 2013, Jamaat-e-Islami leader Abdul Quader Mollah was found guilty of war crimes he allegedly committed and was sentenced to life imprisonment (*The Hindu* 16 Feb. 2013; Reuters 6 Feb. 2013). Demonstrators made up of youth, bloggers, and online activists called for demonstrations at Shahbag Square in Dhaka in response to the sentencing, which they viewed as too lenient, and called instead

for the death penalty (bdnews24.com 7 Sept. 2013; *Dhaka Tribune* 7 Sept. 2013). According to the professorial lecturer, the spontaneous movement initially aimed to non-violently build "popular support" for a harsher sentence for Mollah in accordance with the penal code, and that the Shahbag has focused on nationalism and patriotism (18 Jan. 2014). The Shahbag demonstrations were called "the biggest mass mobilisation in recent memory" in Bangladesh by the *Hindu* newspaper (16 Feb. 2013). Sources report that the Shahbag demonstrations in early February 2013 were described as "peaceful" (*Frontline* 6 Mar., 2013; Professorial Lecturer 18 Jan. 2014) and included "candle-light vigils, large-scale gatherings, theatre, poetry recitations, national songs [and] nationalistic speeches" (ibid. 18 Jan. 2014).

2.2 Jamaat-e-Islami, Hefazet-e-Islam and Shahbag

Sources report that in the wake of the Shahbag protests, the governing Awami League appealed the life sentence given to Mollah (*The Independent* 19 Sept. 2013; Human Rights Watch 2013, 11) and the Supreme Court overturned the life sentence and ordered that he be put to death (*The Independent* 19 Sept. 2013). Sources report that opposition critics argue that the current government is using the tribunals as a political weapon (ibid.; Reuters 6 Feb. 2013) against the two main opposition parties, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami (ibid.). Human rights bodies have also been critical of the trial process (Kashmir Images 30 July 2013; Reuters 6 Feb. 2013).

In protest to the trials, Human Rights Watch reports that members of the opposition that are part of Jamaat, Shibir, and supporters of the BNP have been involved in numerous "serious acts of violence" against ordinary citizens and security forces (Human Rights Watch 17 Dec. 2013). According to Human Rights Watch, Hefazet-e-Islam is a religious organization campaigning for strict adherence to Islam and has ties to opposition parties BNP and Jamaat (2013, 21). Hefazet-e-Islam is reportedly supported by Jamaat (bdnews24.com 4 Apr. 2013; CNN 8 Apr. 2013) and opposes the Shahbag marchers and bloggers which they claim are "atheists" and should be brought to justice for blasphemy (ibid.). Human Rights Watch reports that Hefazet has launched a campaign in the wake of Shahbag protests, and has accused its organizers of insulting Islam (Human Rights Watch 2013, 21). Similarly, the professorial lecturer stated that Hefazet is an "extreme counter-mobilization" that has emerged and opposes the movement's bloggers (18 Jan. 2014). Human Rights Watch reported that following the 28 February guilty verdict and death sentence of the Jamaat party vice-president, Jamaat protesters held demonstrations that led to clashes with Shahbag supporters (Human Rights Watch 15 Apr. 2013). The unrest resulted in the deaths of protesters, bystanders, and police officers, numbering in the dozens, according to Human Rights Watch (ibid. 2013, 12).

3. Purpose

In a speech on 8 February 2013, the spokesman of the Gonojagoron Moncho "conducted" an "oath" to the crowds of protesters at the Shahbag, which stated objectives related to the continuation of the movement for capital punishment for those on trial for crimes against humanity committed in 1971 (*Daily Star* 9 Feb. 2013). Sources report the objectives of the Gonojagoron Moncho also include:

- Commitment to a democratic Bangladesh, where religion is considered a private matter (*Frontline* 6 Mar. 2013)
- Ban on the Jamaat-e-Islami party (*Express Tribune* 28 Feb. 2013; bdnews24.com 7 Sept. 2013). Ban on Islami Chhatra Shibir, the student wing of Jamaat (*New Age* 16 Apr. 2013).
- Boycotting of businesses, banks, media outlets, social and cultural entities connected to Jamaat (*The Hindu* 16 Feb. 2013; *Daily Star* 9 Feb. 2013). Calls for an investigation into the sources of funding of Jamaat and associated institutions and businesses (*Frontline* 6 Mar. 2013).
- Ban on the politics of "religious fundamentalists" (*Express Tribune* 28 Feb. 2013) or the politics of Jamaat-Shibir (*Daily Star* 9 Feb. 2013).
- Achieving their goals without violence (*Daily Sun* n.d.; *Financial Express* 21 Dec. 2013).

According to the professorial lecturer, the group's demands more broadly promote "accountable governance" and it has "opened up the space" for debate in society (Professorial Lecturer 18 Jan. 2014). The same source notes that Gonojagoron Moncho obtained support from all sectors and classes of society initially, and the movement "exposed internal tensions and debates" about secularism and religion in politics, the "culture of impunity" that is part of the political process in Bangladesh, as well as the meaning of "communal harmony" in society and "tensions between Bengali nationalism and Muslim identity" (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. Structure and Membership

Sources report that the Bloggers and Online Activists Network (BOAN) is the group in Bangladesh that initiated Shahbag protests through online networking and social media (*Express Tribune* 28 Feb. 2013; *The Independent* 21 Feb. 2013). According to several sources, the spokesman for the Gonojagoron Moncho is Imran H. Sarkar (bdnews24.com 8 Mar. 2013; *The New Nation* 15 July 2013). He is also reportedly a "main organizer" of BOAN (*Express Tribune* 28 Feb. 2013; *Daily Star* 9 Feb. 2013). Gonojagoron Moncho has been referred to as an "umbrella platform" of "apolitical" organizations (Kashmir Images 30 July 2013). The professorial lecturer stated that the group is not an "organized political party" or grouping in "any traditional sense" but rather that at its height, the movement was a "coalition of loose networks, associations, and individual actors" though there are "core networks" (18 Jan. 2014).

Participants in the initial Shahbag protests reportedly numbered between 100,000 and 500,000 (*The Guardian* 13 Feb. 2013) or "hundreds of thousands" (Human Rights Watch 2013, 11). *The Hindu* described the movement as initiated by youth, with "hundreds of thousands" of supporters including men, women, boys, and girls from "all walks of life" and citizens "irrespective of age and faith" (16 Feb. 2013). Priyo News reports that youth and people from various professions including university teachers, students, cultural and political activists, journalists and bloggers joined the Shahbag protests (11 Feb. 2013). A noted aspect of the Shahbag movement has been the participation of "large numbers of women" (*Frontline* 6 Mar. 2013; *The Guardian* 13 Feb. 2013).

5. Areas of Operation

Shahbag Square in Dhaka is described as the centre of the movement (Kashmir Images 30 July 2013; *The Guardian* 13 Feb. 2013). Support for the movement has reportedly spread across the country (*The New Nation* 15 July 2013; bdnews24.com 8 Mar. 2013). *The Independent* reports that the Shahbag-associated "massive protests" have occurred in Dhaka and other cities (19 Sept. 2013). Bdnews24.com reports that the Gonojagoron Moncho has been "replicated" in other districts and divisions (bdnews24.com 8 Mar. 2013). Protest rallies aligned with Shahbag have also occurred in Chittagong in the southeast and Sylhet in the northeast, according to Reuters (6 Feb. 2013). Sources report that the movement uses social networking to organize support (*The Guardian* 13 Feb. 2013; *The Hindu* 16 Feb. 2013).

6. Politicization

According to the *Express Tribune*, Shahbag protestors state that the movement has no ties to the government (28 Feb. 2013). Sources report that organizers of Shahbag have refused to allow the participation of any political parties in the speeches or activities of the movement (Professorial Lecturer 18 Jan. 2014; *The Guardian* 13 Feb. 2013). A prominent Gonojagoron speaker stated publicly at a rally that "'this movement does not belong to any political party'" and invited members of the opposition to join the movement (qtd in bdnews24.com 8 Mar. 2013). In contrast, Jamaat supporters perceive that the movement is "blessed" by the current government, according to *Frontline* (6 Mar. 2013). *Express Tribune* reports that Jamaat has accused the governing Awami League party of using the protests to potentially gain electoral support from Shahbag supporters and to increase nationalist sentiments (28 Feb. 2013). Human Rights Watch reports that the government of the Awami League "supported the aim" of the Shahbag protests and did not attempt to break them up (2013, 2). According to the professorial lecturer, the Gonojagoron Moncho / Shahbag does not have "opponents" and "allies" in the traditional sense of the terms, indicating that in the early days of the movement both Awami League and BNP members attended Shahbag, and the lack of official response could be seen as "support" for the movement, however politicization, allegations of manipulation of the movement by Awami, criticism from BNP, and the targeting of Gonojagoron Moncho by Jamaat, which is associated with BNP, have caused political parties to embrace, manipulate, exploit, and reject the movement (Professorial Lecturer 18 Jan. 2014). The same source expressed the opinion that the government's apparent "non-interference" could also be seen as a demonstration of a form of "democratic maturity" (ibid.).

7. Activities

7.1 April 2013

Sources report on a range of activities involving the Gonojagoron Moncho in April 2013. On 5 April, *New Age* newspaper reported a five-member delegation led by Imran H Sarkar organized a protest march to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) to deliver a memorandum with the movement's demands which included the arrest of Jamaat-Shibir activists and banning of the Jamaat party (5 Apr. 2013).

In early April, Hefazet-e-Islam staged a large protest rally in Dhaka reportedly supported by the Bangladesh National Party and Jamaat, calling for the government to enact 13 demands made by Hefazet (*The Financial Express* 9 Apr. 2013). Hefazet demands included the arrest of "atheist leaders" of Shahbag, as well as bloggers and other "anti-Islamists" (*The Hindu* 7 Apr. 2013). In response, Gonojagoron Mancha protestors staged a counter-protest in Dhaka against the Hefazet demands and called for a day-long nationwide blockade

of roads, railways, and waterways to coincide with a Hefazet march (*The Financial Express* 9 Apr. 2013; *New Age* 5 Apr. 2013; *bdnews24.com* 4 Apr. 2013). Sources report that supporters of the Gonojagoron Moncho built five "manchas" [podiums] at five entry points in Dhaka (*Daily Sun* N.d.; *Daily Star* 5 Apr. 2013) and held sit-ins at 20 points in the city for the day-long strike (*ibid.*). After a rally in Dhaka in early April 2013, Hefazet activists clashed with Shahbag youths, resulting in one person being injured (*Global Post* 4 Apr. 2013; *The New Nation* 7 Apr. 2013).

Gonojagoron Moncho called for the arrest of a pro-opposition editor for allegedly portraying the group as anti-Islamic; the editor was eventually arrested by the government in mid-April on charges of sedition and inciting religious tension (*Press Trust of India* 12 Apr. 2013; *Deutsche Welle* 15 Apr. 2013). In addition, the government also arrested four bloggers for online posts allegedly derogatory to Islam and the government (*New Age* 16 Apr. 2013; Human Rights Watch 2013, 35), indicating that these "known atheists" had been charged with instigating "negative elements against Islam" (*ibid.*). According to *New Age* newspaper, the Gonojagoron launched a campaign across the country between 20 April and 4 May to mobilize support, which involved a mass sit-in on 29 April 2013 at the law ministry, a worker's rally for International Labour Day on 1 May 2013, and a "human chain" in front of Sangsad Bhaban parliament building (16 Apr. 2013).

7.2 May 2013

According to Human Rights Watch, in early May 2013, Hefazet led large demonstrations in Dhaka, some of which were peaceful and some of which resulted in violence, including in a few cases the deaths of police officers beaten by Hefazet protesters, and in many cases, the use of excessive force by security forces resulting in the killing of at least 58 opposition protesters (2013 1, 6). During this Hefazet demonstration, two sources report that several hundred Hefazet protesters attempted to march toward the Gonojagoron Moncho at the Shahbag intersection, resulting in scuffles with police (*Daily Star* 6 May 2013; *Financial Express* 6 May 2013). The Gonojagoron Moncho stage was dismantled by the police and government in May 2013 (*New Nation* 7 May 2013; Professorial Lecturer 18 Jan. 2014). Human Rights Watch reports that between February and May 2013, 150 people were killed and 2,000 people were injured in street violence resulting from the cycle of demonstrations and counter-demonstrations during that time (2013, 1).

7.3 July-September 2013

The New Nation newspaper reports that the movement involves sit-ins and a program to occupy Shahbag before the verdicts for those on trial for war crimes, including a sit-in related to the verdict of the 90-year old Jamaat leader Ghulam Azam in July 2013 (15 July 2013; *bdnews24.com* 15 July 2013). According to *New Nation*, on 17 July both Jamaat and Gonojagoron Mancha called simultaneous *hartals* [day-long strikes] which reportedly led to 4 deaths and 100 injuries in July 2013, (*New Nation* 17 July 2013). In mid-August 2013, Gonojagoron Moncho conducted a procession march and rally to protest a hartal held by Jamaat and to pay tribute to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (*ibid.* 14 Aug. 2013). Further information on these events could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

In September 2013, a leading Gonojagoron activist was stabbed and attacks against bloggers were reported (*bdnews24.com* 7 Sept. 2013; *Dhaka Tribune* 11 Sept. 2013).

7.4 December 2013

The Associated Press reports that Jamaat leader Abdullah Quader Mollah was executed on 12 December 2013 (12 Dec. 2013). On 10 December 2013, United News of Bangladesh (UNB) reported that Gonojagoron Moncho activists held a procession in Dhaka to demand that Abdul Quader Mollah not be "buried on the soil of Bangladesh" following his execution (10 Dec. 2013). On 18 December 2013, Gonojagoron Mancha activists marched toward the Pakistan High Commission in Dhaka holding up anti-Pakistan placards, throwing stones, and defying police barricades after Pakistan's government passed resolutions that expressed "concern" over Mollah's hanging (*The New Nation* 18 Dec. 2013). The protest involved hundreds of demonstrators, eight Gonojagoron activists were arrested and several were injured, including the spokesman, Imran Sarker (*Press Trust of India* 19 Dec. 2013). In December 2013, the group also launched a week long boycott campaign of Pakistani goods, according to the *Financial Express* (21 Dec. 2013). They then requested that the government of Bangladesh sever diplomatic ties with Pakistan (*Press Trust of India* 19 Dec. 2013; *Financial Express* 23 Dec. 2013) until Pakistan issues an apology for what the protesters called "interference" in Bangladesh's internal affairs (*ibid.*). A Gonojagoron procession in Bogra in late December was attacked by crude bombs (*The New Nation* 22 Dec. 2013; *Financial Express* 22 Dec. 2013;) injuring 9 people participating in a "human chain" (*ibid.*).

7.5 Elections of 5 January 2014

The Gonojagoron Moncho launched a road march in Jessore's Maloparha in early January 2014 to protest against attacks on Hindus and religious minorities that occurred in the wake of 5 January 2014 national elections (bdnews24.com 10 Jan. 2014; *Financial Express* 11 Jan. 2014) and reportedly intends to set up a national network of "resistance committees" to stop "communal violence," meeting with Hindu communities to discuss this (ibid.). *The Dhaka Tribune* reports that the delegation led by Imran Sarker also distributed relief supplies to Hindu families affected by the recent violence (11 Jan. 2013; bdnews24.com 10 Jan. 2014).

Human Rights Watch reported that more than 100 people have been killed, with hundred more injured, between mid-October and mid-December 2013 due to cycles of violence mainly between government security forces and militant opposition supporters (17 Dec. 2013).

8. Murders of Gonojagoron Activists

Dhaka Tribune reported that as of September 2013, three Gonojagoron Moncho activists have been killed in different regions across Bangladesh (*Dhaka Tribune* 11 Sept. 2013):

- Prominent blogger Rajib Ahmed Haider was attacked and killed in February 2013 (*Frontline* 6 Mar. 2013; bdnews24.com 7 Sept. 2013).
- An activist who organized the Sylhet district Gonojagoron Moncho was killed in an attack allegedly by Jamaat-Shibir activists in March 2013 (bdnews24.com 7 Mar. 2013).
- A student involved in the Gonojagoron Moncho was attacked in his dorm room and killed on 9 April 2013 (*Dhaka Tribune* 2 July 2013).

Imran Sarker reportedly stated that Gonojagoron activists have been attacked in different areas of the country and that the group believed that the government was not progressing in the investigation of attacks on activists and leaders of Gonojagoron Moncho; they marched and delivered a memo to the Home Minister on the issue in September 2013 (*New Age* 11 Sept. 2013; *Dhaka Tribune* 11 Sept. 2013). Sarker accused law enforcement of failing to do enough to prevent attacks, although 5 Jamaat-linked suspects in Rajib Haider's murder had been arrested (ibid.). In response, without providing details, sources indicate that the Minister of Home Affairs stated that the government had taken action against the Jamaat-Shibir linked activists involved in the attacks (ibid.; *New Age* 11 Sept. 2013). Further information about government security measures for Gonojagoron Moncho could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. In December 2013, a college professor and Shahbag activist was attacked and killed in Bogra (*The New Nation* 11 Dec. 2013; *Daily Star* 11 Dec. 2013).

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 sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact the Gonojagoron Moncho were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response. A professor at the London School of Economics was not able to provide information for this Response.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International; Al Jazeera; Asian Human Rights Commission; Ecol.net; Factiva; FIDH; gonojagoronmoncho.com; International Crisis Group; Odhikar; Shahbag.info; UK – Home Office; US – Department of State; UN – Integrated Regional Information Networks; Refworld.

[Tips on how to use this search engine.](#)

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