



House of Lords

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PRESS RELEASE

Britain's House of Lords debate Bangladesh's election: Prospects for a free and fair election are bleak, Lord Avebury

A debate on Bangladesh's forthcoming election took place at Britain's House of Lords on the 30 Nov 2006 at the initiation of Lord Avebury, Vice Chair of Parliamentary Human Rights Group. Lord Avebury opened the discussion by stating, "In June 2005, the House debated the levels of political and religious violence in Bangladesh, the precarious situation of minorities and the threat to democracy which had been highlighted then by the UN special procedures, international NGOs and the media including the *Economist*, and the donor forum. Seventeen months on, and with the election due in 47 days, the prospects for a free and fair election are bleak".

"The crimes of the past few years, including the brutal assassination of the elder statesman Shah AMS Kibria and the murder of 20 people who were attending a rally addressed by the leader of the opposition in an attempt on the life of Sheikh Hasina herself, have not been properly investigated and remain unsolved. Saber Hossain Chowdhury, the political secretary to the leader of the opposition who was himself beaten unconscious a few weeks ago in a gratuitous attack by the police, spoke about the 800 extra-judicial killings by the paramilitary Rapid Action Battalion, or RAB"

He mentioned Mahfuz Anam, The editor of Dhaka's Daily Star who spoke at a conference recently in London organised by Policy Exchange, referring to the connections between the Jamaat, the Islamist party which was part of the outgoing coalition Government and the violent extremists whose aim is to capture power by force and turn Bangladesh into a Taliban state. The strong democratic culture and tradition may protect Bangladesh against Talibanisation, but not, as one speaker put it, against Pakistanisation, with the Islamists undoing the gains made by the people when they gained independence in 1971.



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On politicisation Lord Avebury, “Unfortunately, over the past four and a half years, 27,000 police have been recruited from the ranks of the BNP and Jamaat activists so that the force consists almost entirely of officers who are loyal to the outgoing Government. That Government cut the basic training of police from a year to six months and promoted 820 officers to the rank of sub-inspector after less than a year in the force in the rush to get them in post in time for the elections. The 64 returning officers and 480 assistant returning officers, who will pick the staff at the 35,000 polling stations, were also political appointees of the outgoing Government. As for the false names, how can individuals or even the political parties look for as many as 20 million names that are incorrectly recorded in a list of 76 million? The grossly flawed register, the systematic politicisation of the police and election machinery, and the appointment of staunch party supporters to the top two posts, constitute election engineering on a grand scale, to make sure that outgoing Government retain power”.

Baroness Uddin, the only Bengali member of the House in her statement said, “The BNP/Jamaat-e-Islami coalition came to power in 2001. Since then, increasing concerns have been raised by international observers and opposition groups about the trends in reported attacks on minority rights, as well as the dramatic rise in the number of violent incidents. Widespread human rights abuses have been documented, as reported by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch... the increase in reported threats to minority communities and the continuous extrajudicial killing by RAB forces”.

She also raised concerned about madrasah’s level status,” I am also concerned about madrassahs, Islamic religious schools, which have now achieved graduate-level status—not that this would worry me on its own, but this combination of issues gives us a great deal to think about”. On election she said, “We should also demand the scrapping of the current voter list and a reversion to the old one. It is vital that we echo the European Parliament’s resolution on Bangladesh”.

Lord Ahmed on the accusation of Pakistanisation of Bangladesh said, “I should say right at the outset, on behalf of Pakistanis, that they have no ambition or wish for Pakistan to impose “Pakistanisation” on Bangladesh. Whoever told the noble Lord, Lord Avebury, otherwise is probably not doing the situation justice, because President Musharraf, in his most recent visit to Bangladesh, apologised to the nation for what happened in 1971. I would do the same, because I have love and affection for the people of Bangladesh”.

Lord Pearson of Rannoch raised the issue of Jamaat and Sayeedi, “the Islamicisation of Bangladesh. First—I put this as a suggestion—do the Government agree that they have perhaps given too privileged a position to Jamaat-e-Islami in their dialogue with that organisation in the past? The second incident of which Her Majesty's Government stand accused is that apparently the Foreign Office recommended that Mr Delwar Hossain Sayeedi should be admitted into the United Kingdom. I trust that in future Her Majesty’s Government will avoid that sort of incident in our common cause.



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Lord Chidgey raised the issue of Islamisation and madrasa as Baroness Uddin. “Political observers note that the rise in influence of Islamist fundamentalism in the political process is becoming a cause for concern. They point out that, under the BNP coalition Government, granting graduate-level status to madrassahs, despite widespread opposition from the political community, could accelerate Islamicisation of the civil service. There are indications that elements of al-Qaeda who fled from Pakistan seek to attempt the Talibanisation of Bangladesh. Clearly, that threatens the standing of Bangladesh as a moderate voice in the Islamic world”.

Lord Avebury in his final remarks said, “I therefore urge the noble Baroness to ensure that in the briefing we give to the delegations, particularly to the European Union in which we will play a prominent part, and perhaps to the Commonwealth delegation as well, we stress that they should look at the preliminaries and not concentrate on the mechanics of the elections”.

Lord Astor of Hever & Baroness Royall of Blaisdon also took part in the debate

End

The details of the debate will be found House of Lords website Hansard dated 30 Nov.