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Another casualty in the war on free speech

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Last week, banker and secular Bangladeshi writer, Ananta Bijoy Das, was hacked to death by men with machetes as he left his home Tuesday morning to go to work. This was third murder of a secular writer in Bangladesh in four months. Police said that a little-known extremist group called Ansar al-Islam Bangladesh claimed

responsibility for the attack.

Das wrote on science and the evolution of the Soviet Union. While Das sometimes wrote against religious fundamentalism, he mostly focused his writings on championing science. He also wrote for Mukto-Mona (Bengali for "Free Mind"), a website that was started by Avijit Roy, a Ph.D-trained software engineer, writer and naturalized American who lived with his family in Atlanta.

Roy returned to Bangladesh in February with his wife, also a writer, for a brief visit to visit his elderly mother. Roy's "mistake" was that he attended the 2015 Ekushey Book Fair in Dhaka, the Bangladeshi capital, and signed autographs. As Roy was leaving the book fair, he too was hacked to death, and his wife was critically injured. The machete-wielding assailants in Roy's murder are believed to belong to Ansarullah Bangla Team, an extremist group.

In March, another secular writer, Washikur Rahman, an admirer of Roy's, who protested Roy's killing on social media, was also hacked to death, 50 feet from his home in Dhaka as he was on his way to work.

The shrieking loud message is eerily similar to that of the murderers of French journalists at Paris' Charlie Hebdo: If you write what we don't like, you will die at our hands. And that death will be gruesome, painful and public.

Formally known as the People's Republic of Bangladesh, the country is bordered by India and Burma, and is the world's eighth most-populous country with over 165 million inhabitants. After its independence from India in 1971, there was a series of military coups followed by military-backed rule until democratic elections in 1991 occurred. But it has hardly been smooth sailing politically there since.

In mid-2004, three people were killed when militants belonging to banned extremist group Harkut-ul-Jihad al-Islami, set off a grenade attack on the British High Commissioner in Bangladesh. In 2005, another extremist group, Jamaat-ul-Mujahedeen, conducted a nationwide bombing campaign, which led to a growing intolerance against secular forces.

Although there was relative calm in Bangladesh in the year prior to Roy's murder, it set off a not unexpected round of activist protests on the streets of Dhaka to re-emphasize world attention on its fledgling freedom of speech.

Officially, Bangladesh has a long tradition of secularism, which principle was embodied in its 1971 constitution (though nullified between 1979 and 2010). Activists blame the murders on ultraconservative Islamists who have gained standing in Bangladesh where 90 percent of the population are Muslim. While Bangladesh's legal system is in part based on Islamic law, it is governed by a parliamentary democracy. Roy's murder has exacerbated the divisions between the secular incumbents, the Awami League, and its rightwing opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its

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Islamist ally, Jamaat-e-Islami. Muslim and religious conservatism is a rising response to the political turmoil. No doubt Das' brutal hacking murder will increase these already heightened tensions.

Of the three men hacked to death for their thoughts, ideas and words, Roy's voice was by the far the most prolific. He wrote several books, and formed Mukto-Mona (which started as a small, closed Yahoo group but became an open website in 2001). In 2005 the site had been banned in the United Arab Emirates. In a 2007 interview, Roy defined its mission as one where, "Our aim is to build a society which will not be bound by the dictates of arbitrary authority, comfortable superstition, stifling tradition, or suffocating orthodoxy but would rather be based on reason, compassion, humanity, equality and science."

Although born a Hindu, as Roy matured, he became a pronounced atheist, apparently further angering extremist groups. Since the Mukto-Mona's inception Roy regularly received hate mail, but the death threats started in 2010. In February 2013, Dhaka-based atheist blogger, Ahmed Rajib Haider, was dragged from his home and hacked to death by machete-wielding assailants.

Following Haider's death, political Islamist leaders issued a list containing 84 atheist writers the religious leaders considered religious defamers. The death threats continued and Roy took the death threats seriously, and was careful. But not apparently, careful enough.

The rise of the extreme form of violent Islam resulting in this vicious cycle of murdering those of differing opinions coupled with the resulting government void in Bangladesh makes it's difficult to even imagine a political solution that could create an end in sight for these killings.

Nevertheless, the struggle for freedom of speech must continue. The alternative is simply too painful to bear. Before he was killed Rahman wrote in part:

"The Mullah has freedom, extremists have freedom, Muslims

have freedom, the corrupt have freedom, religious leaders have freedom...

Not free: the farmers and labours

Not free: indigenous people and minorities

Not free: freethinkers

Not free: all the people who just want to be human..."

If any religion, which ever it may be, Christian, Jewish or Muslim, wishes respect for it and its followers, it must also show respect for the religions of others, even when that religion is the choice not to have any religion at all.

Haider has been silenced, Roy has been silenced, Rahman has been silenced, and now Das too has been silenced. However, that silence may in fact be so loudly deafening to those who remain who also believe in the absolute necessity of the freedom of speech for which these four so tragically gave their lives, that those remaining may be fortified to continue the struggle for those very freedoms in the face of ever-daunting odds.

Following Roy's death, his daughter, a student at Johns Hopkins University said, "To say that I'm furious or heartbroken would be an understatement. But as f---d up as the world is, there's never a reason to stop fighting to make it better...."

And therein lies the gospel truth.

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