

**Acts of Killing: How Asia Still Struggles with Histories of Genocide**  
**By Ishaan Tharoor**  
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On Monday, a controversial special tribunal in [Bangladesh](#) deemed a 90-year-old man a war criminal. Ghulam Azam, the spiritual head of Bangladesh's far-right Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami party, was found guilty of "crimes against humanity" for the part he played in inciting and organizing death squads that allegedly slaughtered thousands in the final bloody months of Bangladesh's 1971 war for independence. Rather than give Azam the death sentence — as it had already ruled for a number of others connected to him — the court sentenced the frail nonagenarian to 90 years in jail. A Bangladeshi state official who hoped for Azam's execution [voiced his disappointment](#): "Some kind of justice is done but we are not happy."

The unhappiness runs both ways. [Jamaat supporters clashed](#) with security forces and rival political activists in cities across Bangladesh this week, leaving at least four dead. The Islamists say that the current [war crimes](#) tribunal is a cudgel the country's sitting government is using to beat its political opponents. Bangladesh, formerly East [Pakistan](#), split from Islamabad four decades ago in an orgy of blood-letting, most of which was carried out by the occupying Pakistani army and allied loyalist militias, including those allegedly commanded by leading members of the Jamaat. Depending on whose account you believe, between 500,000 and 3 million people were killed.



*Ghulam Azam in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on July 15, 2013. (Nashirul Islam/Demotix/Corbis)*

(MORE: [Keeping Dhaka's ghosts alive.](#))

That it's taken so long for authorities to investigate and prosecute the crimes surrounding Bangladesh's traumatic birth is in large part due to the country's tortuous post-independence politics. (I have written more about that and the Bangladeshi genocide [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).) The push for a tribunal started in 2009 after the landslide electoral victory of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, daughter of the country's founder, Mujib-ur-Rahman. But when the moment for justice finally came, it proved altogether imperfect—critics feared the trials would become a forum for Hasina to target longstanding foes. The International Crimes Tribunal, the name of the court established in Dhaka in 2010 to try accused 1971 war criminals, has since found little backing from the international community. The U.N. and Amnesty International [have both](#) raised questions over its procedural fairness. Human Rights Watch issued [a statement](#) describing the trials as "deeply problematic," and so poorly executed that perpetrators of heinous crimes "could end up appearing to be victims of a miscarriage of justice."

But as hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis who gathered this year in [Dhaka's Shahbagh Square](#) would attest, there is a real national hunger for an inquest into the gruesome massacres of 1971 and punishment for culprits who for years have lived with impunity in the country. The central message seems to be what one activist told me a year before the tribunal was established: "Without justice for the past, we cannot have a future."

(MORE: [Young Bangladeshis find their voice at Shahbagh.](#))

Ali Ahsan Mojaheed, a senior Jamaat figure and former government minister, disagrees. Five years ago, he told me at his party's Dhaka headquarters that the matter of 1971 "was a dead issue" and "could not be raised." On Wednesday, two days after the Azam ruling, Mojaheed was [sentenced to death by hanging](#) for his role at the head of an anti-independence death squad which rounded up and exterminated Bengali intellectuals and university students.

The recent verdicts may satisfy a vast majority of Bangladeshis who want retribution for sins that were buried far too long. But, as protests and strikes hit the country's cities, it's difficult to see how reconciliation and unity can emerge. Rather than a rallying point for national consensus, the legacy of 1971 remains divisive—many, including Hasina, invoke it as cause to expunge the radical Islamists in their midst, a group which in turn considers itself persecuted in what is still one of the more pluralist societies in the Islamic world.

Ernest Renan, the 19th century theorist of European nationhood, wrote that a nation at its most elemental level was a community of fellow "sufferers," bound together by foundational myths of shared hardship and sacrifice. "Where national memories are concerned," [said Renan](#), "griefs are of more value than triumphs." Unfortunately for Bangladesh, it can't seem to even agree on what to mourn.

(MORE: [Bangladesh finally looks to past to face its future.](#))

In Asia, home to some of the 20th century's most violent and unreconciled upheavals, every country lives with its own ghosts. I thought of Bangladesh's when watching a new, remarkable documentary on Indonesia. The Act of Killing, which is winning great acclaim at film festivals around the world, is a harrowing look inside the minds of self-identified mass murderers who have never faced justice for their crimes. American director Joshua Oppenheimer—with the eventual backing of executive producers Werner Herzog and Erroll Morris—followed prominent senior "gangsters" in the Sumatran city of Medan who participated in the 1965-66 massacres of suspected Communists that preceded over 30 years of entrenched, authoritarian rule.

Here's an excerpt on the killings from [TIME's 1966 cover story](#) on Suharto, the general who would become Indonesia's three-decade dictator:

Amok is a Javanese word, and it describes what happened at the collapse of [an attempted Communist takeover]. In a national explosion of pent-up hatred, Indonesia embarked on an orgy of slaughter that took more lives than the U.S. has lost in all wars in this century. The army was responsible for much of the killing, but Nationalist and Moslem mobs took the greatest toll. The slaughter began on Oct. 15, [1965 in Java]... and did not end until [the following June] in the rubber plantations of the Sumatran rain forest. During the eight months the terror lasted, to be a known Communist was usually to become a dead Communist.

Between 400,000 and 1 million people were killed, whole villages were razed and city neighborhoods emptied. The Act of Killing centers on a former death squad leader, Anwar Congo, who exults in these massacres—not from behind bars, but in broad daylight. Since they were abetting a regime whose legacy still permeates Indonesian political life, Anwar and his accomplices were never touched by reprisals and live free, even prosperous lives, often with the respect and support of powerful patrons in government and business. As one of Anwar's colleagues states bluntly, war crimes are defined by those who win wars, and they very much won. Indonesia is now a democracy, but it's unlikely to experience any time soon the sort of changing of political currents that led to the war crimes tribunal in Bangladesh. For good reason, the Indonesian filmmakers who collaborated with Oppenheimer on the project (and were likely essential to its success) are all listed as "anonymous" in the credits.

(MORE: [Movies, books force Indonesia to confront its bloody past.](#))

Amazingly, these filmmakers managed to get Anwar and his compatriots to dramatize their own actions—in effect, making a film within a film. The result is a surreal tableau of garish make-up and outlandish costumes set in kitschy film noir scenes or against stunning Sumatran backdrops. The former murderers fuss over each other, brag about their torture techniques and cluck about the stylish Western clothes they donned — in emulation of Hollywood tough guys — when going about their bloody business. Call it the vanity of evil. They weren't just cruel, Anwar observes, but sadistic. Standing on a Medan rooftop where he says he killed scores of victims by strangling them with wire, Anwar grins, commenting disapprovingly about the authenticity of the moment: "I would have never worn white pants then."

It all may seem a far cry from the courtrooms of Dhaka, where defeated politicians like Ghulam Azam are made to confront a past they would rather forget—and still dispute. But *The Act of Killing* shows that, while Anwar and his fellow killers may remain protected by Indonesian politics, he still pays a price. His sleep is troubled; he sees his victims as monstrous apparitions haunting him. On a return visit to the rooftop where he slaughtered so many, he cuts a different figure. It's nighttime and the space is empty and utterly unremarkable. Like many of the abattoirs of the Bangladesh genocide—water pumping stations and wells where bodies were simply flushed toward the sea—there is now no trace of the horrors that took place. But Anwar, when made to speak of it, is suddenly wracked by physical convulsions and a devastating fit of coughing. He can't continue. The dead are gone, and may never be redeemed, but their killers will always have to remember.

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