

Bangladesh SC upholds death sentence for 1971 war collaborator

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Dhaka: Bangladesh's Supreme Court on Tuesday upheld the death sentence for a top leader of an Islamist party for war crimes and crimes against humanity during the country's independence war against Pakistan in 1971.

A four-member panel headed by the country's Chief Justice S.K. Sinha dismissed the appeal by Jamaat-e-Islami party's Secretary General Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed against a 2013 verdict sentencing him to death.

Mojaheed was convicted of five charges including murder, abduction and torture in 2013. The same year, the country's High Court upheld the death sentence and Mojaheed then went to the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court.

The 65-year-old will be hanged if the case is not reviewed by the same court or if he doesn't get a presidential clemency.

Attorney General Mahbubey Alam said he was pleased with Tuesday's verdict but defense counsel Khandaker Mahbub Hossain said Mojaheed did not get proper justice. Hossain said they would still seek a review of the decision.

Bangladesh blames Pakistani soldiers and local collaborators for the deaths of 3 million people during the nine-month war of independence from Pakistan. An estimated 200,000 women were raped and about 10 million people fled to refugee camps in neighboring India, which helped Bangladesh with training, arms and other support to fight.

In the previous verdicts, Mojaheed was found guilty of "superior responsibility" and "criminal liability" in the 1971 atrocities. The original verdicts said Mojaheed was personally involved in systematic persecution of Hindus and that he led a systematic campaign to kill Bangladeshi intellectuals, including teachers and journalists.

Mojaheed, who was a Cabinet member in the government of former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia in 2001-2006, had fled the country after Bangladesh won independence, but later he returned to the country after then President and independence leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated along with most of his family members in a military coup in 1975.

The initial trials that followed Bangladesh's independence four decades ago were halted after Rahman's assassination. Hasina revived the process, making good on a pledge she made before 2008 elections.

Jamaat-e-Islami has criticized the trial, saying it was meant to eliminate Islamist political opponents. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has dismissed the allegation and said it was for ensuring justice. Jamaat-e-Islami is the main political ally of Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

Hasina, the eldest daughter of Rahman, has vowed to continue the trials despite pressure from abroad and the opposition at home.

Jamaat-e-Islami party, which garners about 2 percent to 3 percent of popular vote, has been weakened significantly as most of its senior leaders have already been convicted. Two top leaders of the Islamist party have been hanged already for similar crimes.

The Bangladeshi government said the trial met the proper standards with the defendant receiving the opportunity to challenge the prosecution's case in open court and appeal the verdict all the way up to the Supreme Court.