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“Creating Panic”

Bangladesh Election Crackdown on Political Opponents and Critics



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Political Opponents and Critics**

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Summary

On the night of August 4, 2018, police surrounded the home of Nusrat Jahan Sonia, a 25-year-old primary school teacher, in a rural area of Patuakhali district, south of Dhaka. They said she had “written something anti-state,” arrested her, and seized her mobile phone and laptop. Seven months pregnant, she was held for nearly two weeks for “spreading rumors” under section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act, simply because she shared a Facebook post that appealed for peace during an ongoing student protest demanding road safety. Her detention was renewed twice before she was eventually released on August 20, 2018. According to a family member, she has been suspended from her job at a government school.

Nusrat Jahan Sonia is not involved in politics, but she is one of thousands of Bangladeshis who have faced detention and legal harassment in recent months for comments deemed critical of the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed, as it prepares for elections scheduled for December 30, 2018. Others, directly linked to opposition parties, say they live in constant fear of arrest, or even enforced disappearance or extrajudicial execution. An opposition party leader told Human Rights Watch the government was intent on “creating panic.”

“They are arresting people from their house, from processions, without any authorization. Nowadays we are not able to stay in our house at night. A friend in the police told my wife I shouldn’t stay at home, although I was already acting on this basis. I usually leave home at 10 p.m. I come back early in the morning. This is how we are running our life.”

As Bangladesh prepares to vote, such arrests and other repressive measures, including widespread surveillance and a crackdown on speech, have contributed to a climate of fear extending from prominent voices in society to ordinary citizens.

Once the election campaign intensified in mid-December, there was a rapid escalation in political violence. Main rival parties blamed each other, but in cases where the victims belonged to the opposition, they alleged that the police and election commission typically

failed to take proper action. Mohammad Asaduzzaman, a candidate for the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), said since his campaign in Jhenaidah was attacked on December 11, 2018, he has repeatedly filed complaints to the commission. “They acknowledge receipt, but take no action,” he said.

According to the *Daily Star*, as of December 17, at least 26 opposition motorcades had been attacked, 13 candidates had been injured, two arrested, and 875 opposition supporters had been injured, some critically. Two opposition supporters reportedly died, after falling from roofs while being chased by the police. In the same period, two ruling Awami League members were killed, some offices were vandalized, and 75 supporters were injured.

While the prime minister has declared that “the atmosphere in the country is certainly fine to hold polls,” the actions of her government tell a different story. Opposition candidates say they are stopped from campaigning by ruling party supporters and with police complicity. Independent observers are being restricted. Groups including Odhikar, a leading human rights organization, were refused permission by the election commission to deploy electoral observers. Journalists are under pressure to self-censor. A well-known newspaper columnist said:

Even I am afraid. I’m not against the government. I’m not for the other party. But I feel suffocated. I’m very scared for my sons who are staying with me. My wife becomes afraid if I’m coming home late at night. Most scary is the activities of the intelligence agencies.

This report, based on more than 50 interviews with political activists, students, and members of civil society, and analysis of court records and secondary sources since October 2018, documents repeated instances of arbitrary security force arrest and detention of protesters and political opposition figures, and acts of violence and intimidation by members of the ruling party’s student and youth wings. Institutions, including the judiciary and the Election Commission of Bangladesh, do not appear to be fully prepared to independently and fairly resolve disputes around campaigns and elections, such as on registration, candidacies, and results.

The report calls on the Bangladesh government to end the ongoing human rights violations, on all parties to refrain from violence, and on influential donors to press for improved conditions, to ensure credible elections can take place.

Escalating Campaign Violence

Electoral violence started as soon as the candidate lists were formally approved on December 10, 2018, and campaigning began in constituencies across the country. Hundreds have been injured during political rallies in clashes between rival party supporters.

On December 11, 2018, two members of the ruling Awami League were killed by alleged BNP supporters in separate incidents in Noakhali and Faridpur. On December 16, the Awami League party's office in Moulvibazar was vandalized. Several BNP members have been arrested for these attacks.

However, much of the campaign violence targeted the opposition BNP and supporters of an opposition coalition effort led by civil society leaders called the Jatiya Oikya Front (National United Front). On December 14, alleged members of the ruling party attacked vehicles carrying Jatiya Oikya Front leader, 81-year-old Kamal Hossain. While he was unharmed, at least 25 people others were injured in the incident. The Chief Election Commissioner, KM Nurul Huda, described the attack as "unfortunate," but did not order additional security.

BNP candidate Abdul Moyeen Khan was attacked while campaigning in the Panchdona bazaar area on December 16, 2018. Another BNP candidate, Romana Mahamud, was injured during clashes between the police and her supporters on December 15. On December 12, Afroza Khanam Rita, a BNP candidate from Manikganj-3, was attacked, allegedly by youth-wing members of the ruling Awami League, while visiting a shrine. In Thakurgaon, the motorcade of BNP secretary general, Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, was attacked on December 11, while he was campaigning. In Chuadanga, vehicles accompanying BNP candidate Sharifuzzaman Sharif were similarly attacked on December 10, 2018. In none of these cases were the assailants held accountable.

In many cases, journalists present at the clashes concluded BNP campaigns had come under attack by members of the Awami League. The ruling party, however, blamed the opposition for most of the violence. Scores of opposition members were arrested. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's political adviser, HT Imam, said: "We are getting news of political violence from different parts of the country... Most of these attacks were carried out against Awami League members." The Awami League's general secretary, Obaidul Quader, claimed that the opposition are attacking themselves.

Targeting Political Opposition

Thousands of cases had been filed in recent months against leaders and supporters of opposition parties. "The police are indiscriminately arresting people," a newspaper columnist told Human Rights Watch. According to a law professor, "They do not bother with legal formalities, these police. They are arresting people just to harass and put pressure on the politicians."

According to the BNP, over 300,000 of its leaders and activists have been implicated in "false and fabricated" cases. The allegations are often broad and vague. Human Rights Watch found that one partial set of 14 cases, filed by just six of Dhaka's 49 police stations in the first week of September, names 519 individuals and an unspecified number of unidentified people, accusing them of a variety of crimes. The allegations specify that all of the accused belong to the BNP. BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir is facing charges in 46 cases. A standing committee member, Mirza Abbas, faces 42 cases. BNP candidate Saiful Alam Nirob, who is running against the home minister, is facing 267 cases.

Numerous cases have come to light in which accused people are either dead, were abroad, or hospitalized at the time the alleged offence took place. On October 17, 2018, Zasim Uddin Chaudhary, a BNP supporter, was charged with throwing petrol bombs in Chittagong, exactly a year to the day since his death. Nasrul Islam, who was indicted on September 5, 2018, died five days earlier. Another, Mintu Kumar Das, a Dhaka BNP leader charged with blocking a road on September 11, 2018, died in 2007. Police chief, Mohammad Javed Patwary, acknowledged numerous such errors had occurred.

The BNP filed a lawsuit challenging these allegations, pointing out that the accusations are frequently identical in numerous cases, with little more than the names, date, and place of the purported incident changed in an otherwise fixed format. According to the BNP's lawsuit, the purpose of these cases is to "keep [the accused] away from the electoral process." Among those targeted are likely candidates or polling agents whose role would be to supervise voting centers on behalf of the party. The court rejected the petition.

Several of those arrested said they had been subjected to abuse in custody. In four of the six recent cases of alleged torture of political detainees investigated by Human Rights Watch, the victims said they were beaten up after they had been produced in court and then remanded back to police custody instead of being sent to jail. In the other two, the abuse occurred before being produced in court. Abuses described to Human Rights Watch include beating with fists, plastic pipes, or sugar canes, crushing body parts against the floor, and partial drowning.

On March 6, 2018, Zakir Hossain Milon, the 38-year-old president of the BNP for the Tejgaon district of Dhaka, was arrested while returning from a protest outside the National Press Club, and later transferred to Shabagh police station. When he was produced in court on March 11, he told relatives that he had been tortured "a lot," and asked them to "take care of my [two] kids, I don't know what's going to happen." He died in jail the following day. According to his family, Zakir's body was covered with black marks and his finger nails had been removed.

Supporters of the Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat), and its student wing Islami Chhatra Shibir, are at severe risk of abuse in police custody. A member of Jamaat's student wing told Human Rights Watch that while in the custody of the Detective Branch of the police earlier this year, he was severely beaten with sticks, including on the leg joints and hands, a stapler was used on his ears, he was subjected to simulated drowning, and he was told that he would be shot. Although Jamaat was disqualified from contesting elections, its party registration cancelled by the Election Commission, it is fielding 22 candidates in coalition with the BNP, as well as others as independents. According to Jamaat, 1858 of its members were arrested between November 1 and December 13, 2018.

Bangladesh has two major intelligence agencies, the military Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) and the civilian National Security Intelligence (NSI), both directly

answerable to the prime minister. Several activists, as well as opposition members, alleged the intelligence agencies and other law enforcement appeared to work in direct support of the ruling Awami League's political interests, and against its electoral opponents.

Student Protests

Earlier in 2018, students took to the streets twice to protest government policies. The first, which reached a climax around June, was against the quota system, then applied, to recruitment to government jobs. The second, in July and August, demanded better road safety after two student pedestrians were killed by a speeding bus.

These protests were apparently perceived by the government as a challenge to its authority and were targeted by security forces as well as members of the ruling Awami League's student wing, the Bangladesh Chhatra League. Protesters were beaten up on the streets. Many students, and family members of students who participated, told Human Rights Watch they are living in fear.

Some protesters who were detained by the authorities were subjected to severe beatings, sometimes while handcuffed and gagged with a towel. One student victim said a senior officer "tortured me the whole day. I became senseless. I was shouting and roaring, 'help me, help me.' They tortured me like a beast."

Another student described how police broke down the door of the house where she was staying, beat her relatives, and slapped and beat her with a hard sugar cane stalk until she was bleeding from the face. The beating continued at the police station where she was interrogated for alleged social media activity. Yet another student described being "beaten like a snake" by student supporters of the ruling party before being handed over to police. Months later he still walks with difficulty.

Denying Freedom of Expression and Association

The pre-election crackdown has been accompanied by suppression of dissent and criticism. As a former election commissioner told Human Rights Watch, "What you are not supposed to do in elections, that is what is being done." Said a leading member of civil

society: “In terms of media space and civil society space, I don’t think we’ve ever had such a bad situation. Even under previous military regimes, people had the right to speak up. They were not subject to disappearance.”

The authorities have used a number of broadly worded laws arbitrarily to constrain journalists, restrict the free speech of ordinary citizens, and target the government’s opponents and critics. The government has ordered several units and agencies to censor the internet, monitor online communications, and detain users accused of “spreading rumors” or “anti-state activity.”

Prior to changes to the law in October, authorities used section 57 of the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Act to jail government critics. Recent targets of section 57 include Shahidul Alam, a prominent photographer and social activist who was arrested on August 5 and spent 107 days in jail, for describing police violence against student protestors on Facebook. He was beaten in police custody. Maidul Islam, a Chittagong University professor, was jailed on September 24 for 37 days, for his Facebook posts expressing solidarity with the student protests.

In October, section 57 of the ICT Act was replaced by the Digital Security Act (DSA), which provides even more broadly drawn restrictions on freedom of expression, and draconian custodial sentences. Bangladesh’s Editors’ Council, an association of newspaper editors, has said the law effectively prohibits investigative journalism. A newspaper editor described how his newspaper is forced to practice extensive self-censorship to survive in the current climate: “The intelligence [services], the police, they are taking full control.”

Human rights defenders and NGOs, which are already constrained by restrictive legislation, are now under severe pressure, often being labelled “anti-state” and “anti-government.” A human rights activist described to Human Rights Watch how his organization is kept under surveillance and has experienced intimidating visits from members of the intelligence agencies. “They want to silence dissenting voices,” he said.

Professors describe a climate of fear, intimidation, and surveillance on university campuses. “My friends and family are fearing there will be more attacks,” a leading civil society figure, who was targeted by members of the Awami League, told Human Rights Watch. “It’s a state of fear. A few people still speak, but I don’t know for how long.”

The DSA also targets online expression by ordinary citizens on platforms such as Facebook. Numerous people have been detained or harassed for writing, sharing, or merely ‘liking’ material on Facebook.

Expressing concern over the escalating violence, the United States has announced it will send election observers, and the House of Representatives has called on political leaders and judicial authorities to ensure the elections are “impartial and inclusive.” The European Union is deploying an election expert mission, the UK is supporting local monitoring, and the Commonwealth are considering a request for observers.

As the election looms, escalating violence and abuses have created a human rights crisis, as well as a crisis of democracy in Bangladesh. Political leaders should call on their followers to campaign peacefully. The police, judiciary, and Election Commission should exercise their powers impartially. Donors and governments with influence, including the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, China and India, need to weigh in urgently to press the government of Sheikh Hasina to ensure credible elections.

Methodology

This report is based on public court documents filed since the beginning of September, and on interviews with more than 50 student activists, university professors, politicians, political activists, lawyers, journalists, cyber security experts, civil society and human rights activists, and the relatives of deceased or imprisoned people, conducted in Bangladesh between October and November 2018.

Most interviews were conducted in person, but several were conducted by phone or email. Most of the interviewees asked to remain anonymous, fearing repercussions from speaking to Human Rights Watch. We have withheld the names and other details of the interviewees to safeguard their identity.

We paid no remuneration or other inducement to victims and witnesses who spoke with us. Most interviews were conducted through Bangla-English interpretation.

Before each interview we informed interviewees of its purpose and asked whether they wanted to participate. We informed them that they could discontinue the interview at any time or decline to answer any specific questions.

The Bangladeshi authorities did not respond to a letter we submitted on December 14, 2018, requesting information about the specific cases documented in this report. For information on the authorities' versions of the cases, we therefore have relied on news accounts giving details of their responses, where such accounts are available.

I. Troubled Elections in Bangladesh

Two parties dominate political life in Bangladesh: the Awami League, currently in power and headed by prime minister Sheikh Hasina, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led by former prime minister Begum Khaleda Zia. The rivalry between the two main parties is longstanding, bitter, personal, and often turns violent.¹ Each party also has active student wings: the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal for BNP and the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) for Awami League, whose members are often implicated in violent attacks and clashes. A third party, Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat), is the largest Islamist political party and an ally of the BNP; its student wing, the Bangladesh Islami Chhatra Shibir, has also been implicated in significant amounts of violence.

With the fractious political parties unwilling to trust each other, successive elections after 1996 were held under caretaker governments.

Military-Backed Caretaker Government

Following widespread protests by political parties, which made it difficult to conduct elections, a military-backed interim government was appointed on January 12, 2007. Backed by emergency powers to maintain public order, the government initially prohibited political demonstrations. However, those powers were soon abused to conduct widespread arrests of political activists, engage in torture, crack down on trade union activities, and impose restrictions on press freedom. Hundreds of senior political leaders, prominent businesspeople, and government officials were arrested, including leaders of both major political parties, Sheikh Hasina, and Khaleda Zia.²

After protests, democracy was eventually restored with the election of Sheikh Hasina as prime minister in January 2009.

¹ Sheikh Hasina Wazed and Begum Khaleda Zia had campaigned together to end the military rule of Gen. Hossain Muhammad Ershad in 1990. First Begum Zia and then Sheikh Hasina Wazed were elected as prime minister in consecutive elections. Their personal dislike of each other, however, had a terrible effect on the parties they led, often fuelling violent brawls. See “The minus-two solution,” *The Economist*, September 6, 2007, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2007/09/06/the-minus-two-solution> (accessed November 28, 2018).

² Human Rights Watch, *Torture of Tasneem Khalil*, February 13, 2008, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/02/13/torture-tasneem-khalil/how-bangladesh-military-abuses-its-power-under-state>.

Opposition Boycott of 2014 Election

The Awami League government and the BNP disagreed on the appropriate mechanism to hold elections in January 2014. As a result, the BNP and other opposition parties staged blockades and demonstrations beginning in October 2013. Their chief demand was the reinstatement of the neutral caretaker government system to oversee elections, which the Awami League had previously supported but then abolished after taking power. Tensions were further heightened after the December 13 execution of a senior leader of Jamaat, for crimes committed during Bangladesh's independence war in 1971. Jamaat, which opposed independence and is the country's largest religious party, was disqualified from participating in the 2014 polls, after the Supreme Court and the Election Commission ruled that its charter violated the constitution.³

Calling for an election boycott, some opposition activists attacked and killed people who refused to honor blockades, as well as security forces and members of the Awami League. The minority Hindu community, long the target of attacks by Islamic extremists and others, was also singled out for attacks.

The government responded by deploying the notorious paramilitary unit, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), as well as the Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) and the police, often under the rubric of “joint forces.” Members of these units individually or in joint operations carried out extra-judicial executions, enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests, and the unlawful destruction of private property. These abuses continued long after election day.⁴

As a result of the opposition boycott, more than half of Bangladesh’s parliamentary seats were uncontested. The Awami League won nearly 80 percent of the seats, leaving the country effectively without a parliamentary opposition. Voter turnout was a record low in Bangladesh’s history because of the boycott and related violence.

³ Human Rights Watch, *Democracy in the Crossfire*, April 29, 2014, https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/04/29/democracy-crossfire/opposition-violence-and-government-abuses-2014-pre-and-post#_ftn1.

⁴ Human Rights Watch, “*We Don’t Have Him*”; *Secret Detentions and Enforced Disappearances in Bangladesh*, July 6, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/07/06/we-dont-have-him/secret-detentions-and-enforced-disappearances-bangladesh> and Human Rights Watch, “*No Right to Live*”; *Kneecapping and Maiming of Detainees by Bangladesh Security Forces*, September 29, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/09/29/no-right-live/kneecapping-and-maiming-detainees-bangladesh-security-forces>.

Legal Framework

Bangladesh is a state party to several of the central international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Bangladesh is thus, among other things, obliged to ensure: that no one is arbitrarily deprived of her or his life; that no one is subjected to torture; and that in the determination of a criminal charge, everyone is entitled to a fair and public hearing by a tribunal established by law, and to be presumed innocent until proven guilty. The ICCPR also provides the right to liberty and security and guarantees against arbitrary arrests and detention.

The ICCPR requires each state party ensure every citizen can vote and be elected at genuine periodic elections under universal and equal suffrage, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors.⁵

The ICCPR states everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference;⁶ the right to freedom of expression includes freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing, or in print, in the form of art or through any other media of their choice.⁷

The UN Human Rights Committee, the independent expert body that monitors state compliance with the ICCPR, in its General Comment no. 34 on the right to freedom of expression, states that restrictions on free expression should be interpreted narrowly and that the restrictions “may not put in jeopardy the right itself.” The government may impose restrictions only if they are prescribed by legislation and meet the standard of being “necessary in a democratic society.”⁸

Under international human rights law, Bangladesh is also obliged to thoroughly and promptly investigate serious violations of human rights, such as the right to life or freedom

⁵International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), entered into force March 23, 1976, art. 25(b).

⁶ ICCPR art. 19(1).

⁷ ICCPR art. 19(2).

⁸ UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment no. 34, art. 19, Freedoms of Opinion and Expression, CCPR/C/GC/34 (2011).

from torture, prosecute those implicated by the evidence and, if their guilt is established following a fair trial, impose proportionate penalties. Implied in this is that all victims shall have the opportunity to assert their rights and receive a fair and effective remedy, that those responsible shall stand trial, and that the victims themselves can obtain reparations.⁹

⁹ ICCPR art. 9 and art. 10.

II. Crackdown on Political Opposition

Since the 2013 protests, the Awami League government has cracked down on the political opposition. Law enforcement authorities have illegally detained scores of opposition activists and held them in secret without producing them before courts, as the law requires. In most cases, those arrested remain in custody for weeks or months, before being formally arrested or released. Torture in police custody, including mutilations such “knee-capping” has been widely practiced. Others have been killed in so-called armed exchanges, and many remain “disappeared.”¹⁰ Many of these cases appear to have been politically motivated, sometimes targeting the relatives of political opponents.¹¹

Especially since the beginning of 2018, as elections approached, the government has turned to jailing its opponents on criminal charges. In February, the former prime minister and leader of the BNP, Khaleda Zia, was convicted on corruption charges.¹² She remains in jail, and still faces several other cases. In October, her sentence was increased from five to ten years.¹³ On November 27, 2018, a High Court ruled anyone sentenced to over two years in jail is ineligible to run in elections, even if they have pending appeals, thus barring Khaleda Zia from running in the 2018 election.¹⁴

Other opponents are facing prosecution for allegedly breaking broadly drawn laws constraining freedom of expression.¹⁵ Frequently these cases do not reach trial, but since

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, “*We Don’t Have Him*”; *Secret Detentions and Enforced Disappearances in Bangladesh*, July 6, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/07/06/we-dont-have-him/secret-detentions-and-enforced-disappearances-bangladesh> and Human Rights Watch, “*No Right to Live*”; *Kneecapping and Maiming of Detainees by Bangladesh Security Forces*, September 29, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/09/29/no-right-live/kneecapping-and-maiming-detainees-bangladesh-security-forces>.

¹¹ “Bangladesh: End Illegal Detentions Immediately,” Human Rights Watch news release, August 13, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/08/13/bangladesh-end-illegal-detentions-immediately>.

¹² Chaitanya Chandra Halder, Tuhin Shubhra Adhikary and Wasim Bin Habib, “Khaleda lands in jail,” *The Daily Star*, February 9, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/khaleda-zia-corruption-verdict-khaleda-lands-jail-1531957> (accessed November 28, 2018).

¹³ AFP, “Khaleda Zia’s Jail Term in Corruption Case Doubled To 10 Years,” *New Delhi Television*, October 30, 2018, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/ex-bangladesh-prime-minister-khaleda-zias-jail-term-in-embezzlement-case-doubled-to-10-years-1939758> (accessed November 24, 2018).

¹⁴ PTI, “Khaleda Zia barred from Bangladesh polls,” *The Telegraph*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/world/khaleda-zia-barred-from-bangladesh-polls/cid/1676868> (accessed November 29, 2018).

¹⁵ “Bangladesh: Wave of Arrests Over Peaceful Dissent,” Human Rights Watch news release, August 15, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/15/bangladesh-wave-arrests-over-peaceful-dissent>.

mere suspicion is all the police require to bring an allegation, those who are targeted can face months or years of harassment or incarceration before a case is dropped, while others refrain from speaking out, fearing persecution.¹⁶

Politically Motivated Cases

Since the beginning of 2018, the authorities have dramatically increased the practice of filing false or fictitious cases against the government’s democratic opponents, primarily from the BNP. Typically, a single case accuses a list of named individuals, sometimes more than 100, of participating in a crime, plus an unspecified number of “unknown” perpetrators. Other people can then be added to the case later, if the police claim that they were among the earlier “unknown accused.”

Abul Khoyer is among those added to a case. On September 8, 2018, Khoyer, a British national, was arrested in Sylhet district and accused of car-jacking and robbery. However, relatives said Khoyer was picked up because he is an active member of the UK branch of the opposition BNP, and that he allegedly participated in a protest in London against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina during her recent visit.¹⁷ Material that was critical of Sheikh Hasina was allegedly uploaded to his Facebook page.

Khoyer’s relatives told Human Rights Watch that at the time of his arrest, supposedly on robbery charges, he was confronted by police with this Facebook material, and police insisted he give them his email and Facebook passwords.¹⁸ Family members allege that Khoyer was beaten in custody, sustaining visible injuries on his upper legs and lower back. His lawyers insist there is no evidence at all to indicate the alleged robbery even took place.¹⁹ In a telephone recording obtained by Human Rights Watch, a voice, apparently of a senior police commander, can be heard explaining Khoyer was arrested for protesting against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in London.²⁰ Although Khoyer was granted bail in the

¹⁶ “Bangladesh: New Law Will Silence Critics,” Human Rights Watch news release, September 24, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/09/24/bangladesh-new-law-will-silence-critics>.

¹⁷ “Protests as Bangladeshi PM visits ODI in Blackfriars Road,” *London SE1 Community Website*, April 17, 2018, <http://www.london-se1.co.uk/news/view/9583> (accessed November 28, 2018).

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, Sylhet, November 2018.

¹⁹ Bail petition in the District and Sessions Court, Sylhet. Criminal Case No. 1050 of 2018. Copy on file with Human Rights Watch.

²⁰ This recording was obtained from journalists. It is believed to be authentic because it is between two known individuals discussing details of the case, verified by court documents and family interviews.

robbery case, he was not released: the police simply “added” him to two existing cases alleging rumor mongering during the student road safety movement, which had occurred when Khoyer was in the UK.

Another British dual national, Shahidul Islam Mamun, was also detained for over two months in Sylhet. He is a leader of the UK branch of the BNP. He was arrested while visiting Bangladesh for the Eid festival, and his name added to an existing murder case.²¹ He later was granted bail and left the country.

Authorities have also arrested two leading figures of the opposition political alliance, the Jatiya Oikya Front. Mainul Hosein, a prominent lawyer, was arrested for criminal defamation on October 22, 2018, and faces a rapidly mounting number of allegations.²² According to media reports, Dr. Zaffrullah Chowdhury, a prominent public health activist, has been accused of crimes including treason,²³ extortion,²⁴ and stealing fish,²⁵ after he made allegations against the army chief on television.

The huge number of false cases filed in recent months makes the practice difficult to track. According to a lawsuit filed on behalf of the BNP, in the first 20 days of September alone, 3,736 cases were filed listing accusations against 313,130 named people, all of whom are associated with the BNP, and an unspecified number of unnamed people.²⁶ The BNP said that over 2,000 of its members were arrested between the announcement of the election schedule on November 8 and December 12.²⁷

²¹ Human Rights Watch interviews, Sylhet, details withheld, November 2018.

²² “Cases against Barrister Mainul pile up,” *Dhaka Tribune*, October 22, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/court/2018/10/22/barrister-mainul-sued-in-bhola-brahmanbaria> (accessed Nov 27, 2018).

²³ “Treason case filed against Zafrullah,” *Dhaka Tribune*, October 16, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/crime/2018/10/16/treason-case-filed-against-zafrullah> (accessed November 20, 2018).

²⁴ Nadim Hossain, “Extortion case filed against Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury in Ashulia,” *Dhaka Tribune*, October 16, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2018/10/16/extortion-case-filed-against-dr-zafrullah-chowdhury-in-ashulia> (November 20, 2018).

²⁵ “Now accused of stealing fish, fruit,” *The Daily Star*, October 26, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/dr-zafrullah-sued-stealing-fish-1651651> (November 20, 2018).

²⁶ Writ petition no. 12028 of 2018. Copy on file with Human Rights Watch.

²⁷ Tapos Kanti Das and Ahammad Foyez, “Arrests, attacks, intimidation continue,” *New Age*, December 13, 2018, <http://www.newagebd.net/article/58761/arrests-attacks-intimidation-continue> (accessed December 12, 2018).

The approach is so indiscriminate that numerous cases have come to light in which accused people are either dead, were abroad, or hospitalized at the time the alleged offence took place. On October 17, 2018, Zasim Uddin Chaudhary, a BNP supporter, was charged with throwing petrol bombs in Chittagong, exactly a year to the day since his death.²⁸ Nasrul Islam, who was indicted on September 5, 2018, died five days earlier. Another, Mintu Kumar Das, a Dhaka BNP leader charged with blocking a road on September 11, died in 2007.²⁹ Amid reports of people who are dead, abroad, or paralyzed by illness, being charged with alleged offences of “planning subversive activities,” the Inspector General of Police, Mohammad Javed Patwary, ordered unit commanders to investigate how these mistakes had been made.³⁰

The accusations made against opposition members are frequently identical in numerous cases, with little more than the names, the date, and place of the purported incident changed in an otherwise fixed format. According to the lawsuit filed by the BNP, the purpose of these cases is to “keep [the accused] away from the electoral process,” and among those targeted are likely polling agents whose role would be to supervise voting centers.³¹

In many cases the allegations seem to relate to incidents that never occurred. Reporters from the *Daily Star* found that an alleged riot on September 30, 2018 in the Mogbazar area of Dhaka, at which explosives were allegedly detonated and for which 48 BNP leaders and supporters were arrested, was not witnessed by any of the “around 100” passers-by and street vendors whom they interviewed.³² A BNP party leader in Chittagong, who is facing eight cases, four of them filed in October alone, told Human Rights Watch, “If there is a thunderclap they file bomb cases. If there is any sound. Even if a tire blows out!”³³

²⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with BNP lawyer, details withheld, Dhaka, October 2018.

²⁹ Odhikar, “Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh, Reporting Period: 1 - 30 September 2018” October 2, 2018, http://odhikar.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/human-rights-monitoring-report-November-2018_Eng.pdf, (accessed November 18, 2018), p.8.

³⁰ “IGP asks cops to scrutinise dubious cases,” *The Daily Star*, 6 October 6, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/igp-asks-cops-scrutinise-dubious-cases-1643302> (accessed Nov 27, 2018).

³¹ Writ petition no. 12028 of 2018. Copy on file with Human Rights Watch.

³² “BNP top brass sued after rally,” *The Daily Star*, October 2, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/politics/mirza-fakhrul-islam-ruhul-kabir-rizvi-other-top-bnp-leaders-sued-1641283> (accessed November 18, 2018).

³³ Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, Chittagong, October 2018.

According to a BNP organizer in Sylhet, who has been accused in two cases in the past two months, “they [the police] are continually filing cases.”³⁴ Another party worker in the city said he was recently arrested while returning from a colleague’s home and added to a case along with five other party workers, who were accused of attacking an auto-rickshaw. According to him, the police were seen instigating a homeless person to vandalize the vehicle, and then arrested five BNP men who were standing nearby, accusing them of vandalism, crimes under the explosives act, and injuring three policemen.³⁵

“The police are indiscriminately arresting people,” a newspaper columnist told Human Rights Watch.³⁶ According to a law professor, “They do not bother with legal formalities, these police. They are arresting people just to harass and put pressure on the politicians.”³⁷

A BNP leader said he and other colleagues were often staying away from their homes because of these arbitrary arrests which they allege are aimed at “creating panic.”

“They are arresting people from their house, from processions, without any authorization. Nowadays, we are not able to stay in our house at night. A friend in the police told my wife I shouldn’t stay at home, although I was already acting on this basis. I usually leave home at 10 p.m. I come back early in the morning. This is how we are running our life.”³⁸

A senior BNP leader in Chittagong said fear of arrest and police harassment was harming the party campaign. He estimated that over 200 people had been arrested in the city of Chittagong in the first two weeks of October. He, himself, is facing charges in over 40 cases and has to present himself in court three times a week.

“It’s very difficult for the BNP to campaign. We need a political environment. People must go door to door for an election. There is no freedom of speech day to day. You face always threats, police harassment,

³⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with BNP leader, details withheld, Sylhet, November 2018.

³⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with BNP activist, details withheld, Sylhet, November 2018.

³⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with political analyst, details withheld, Dhaka, November 2018.

³⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with law professor, details withheld, Dhaka, November 2018.

³⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with BNP leader, details withheld, Sylhet, November 2018.

all the time. The police are under the ruling party. All state organizations are now working for the Awami League. This is a kind of ruling party election. There is no democratic space.”³⁹

Human Rights Watch has collected numerous examples of such cases. In one partial set of 14 cases, filed by just six of Dhaka’s 49 police stations in the first week of September, 519 named people and an unspecified number of unidentified people were accused of a variety of crimes. The allegations specify that all the accused belong to the BNP. In another example, 431 opposition supporters were produced in Dhaka courts on November 7, 2018, a day after the joint opposition alliance, Jatiya Oikya Front, held a large public meeting in the city.⁴⁰

“It is doubtful that the election will be free and fair,” said Jatiya Oikya Front leader, Kamal Hossain. “In the last 50 years of my political life, I have never seen such a situation.” The government denied the allegations. “No workers of BNP have been detained or arrested without an arrest warrant or specific charges,” the home minister, Asaduzzaman Khan told Reuters.⁴¹

Torture and Abuse in Police Custody

Some of those arrested said they had been subjected to abuse in custody. Some of the allegations would appear to amount to torture, i.e., the deliberate infliction of serious physical harm for a purpose, such as punishment. In four of the six cases Human Rights Watch investigated, prisoners were beaten up after they had been produced in court, then remanded by the court to police custody instead of being sent to jail. Methods of torture described to Human Rights Watch include beating with fists, plastic pipes, or sugar canes, crushing body parts against the floor, and partial drowning.⁴²

³⁹ Human Rights Watch interview, Chittagong, details withheld, October 2018.

⁴⁰ “ASK concerned over ‘mass arrest,’” *The Daily Star*, November 8, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/ask-concerned-over-mass-arrest-in-bangladesh-1657816> (accessed Nov 27, 2018). This cascade of allegations has led to a rapid deterioration in already desperate prison conditions. On November 9, the total number of inmates was 93,623, as compared to 84,989 on Sept 6, and an official jail capacity of 28,668. This is despite the government releasing prisoners accused in non-political cases in recent months and the recent opening of new jail buildings.

⁴¹ Serajul Quadir and Zeba Siddiqui, “Bangladeshi opposition pledges to remove media curbs, raise pay, freeze energy prices,” *Reuters*, December 17, 2018, <https://www.euronews.com/2018/12/17/bangladeshi-opposition-pledges-to-remove-media-curbs-raise-pay-freeze-energy-prices> (accessed December 18, 2018).

⁴² Human Rights Watch interviews, details withheld, Dhaka, Sylhet, and Chittagong, October and November 2018.

On March 6, 2018, Zakir Hossain Milon, the 38-year-old president of the BNP for the Tejgaon district of Dhaka, was arrested while returning from a ‘human chain’ protest outside the National Press Club, and later transferred to Shabagh police station. When he was produced in court on March 11, he told relatives that he had been tortured “a lot,” and asked them to “take care of my [two] kids, I don’t know what’s going to happen.”⁴³ He died in jail the following day.⁴⁴ According to his family, Zakir’s body was covered with black marks and his finger nails had been removed.⁴⁵

Supporters of Jamaat, and its student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir, are at severe risk of abuse in police custody because Awami League officials describe them as *razakars*—those that opposed Bangladesh’s secession from Pakistan—and accuse them of being militants.⁴⁶ Even those not born at that time can be accused because of family links.⁴⁷

A member of Jamaat’s student wing, who was arrested in Dhaka in February this year, told Human Rights Watch he was first taken by the police to a building occupied by the BCL, where he was identified as a student supporter of Jamaat. In the following days, while in the custody of the Detective Branch, he was severely beaten with sticks, including on the leg joints and hands, a stapler was used on his ears, he was subjected to simulated drowning, and was told that he would be shot.⁴⁸

Crackdown on Student Protests

Earlier this year, there were two student protest movements. The first, known as the Quota Movement, protested the system of quotas, then in use, for hiring government employees.

⁴³ Human Rights Watch interview with relatives of Zakir Hossain Milon, Dhaka, October 2018.

⁴⁴ “JCD vice president dies in police custody,” *The Daily Star*, March 12, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/jatiyatabadi-chhatra-dal-jcd-vice-president-zakir-hossain-milon-dies-police-custody-at-dhaka-central-jail-1547047> (accessed November 28, 2018).

⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with relatives of Zakir Hossain Milon, Dhaka, October 2018.

⁴⁶ See for instance, “Those who patronised war criminals biggest Razakars: PM,” *UNB*, September 7, 2016, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/news/119879/Raise-voice-for-trial-of-those-who-patronised-war> (accessed November 28, 2018).

⁴⁷ Sometimes government critics who are not associated with Jamaat are falsely accused of links to the party, thus exposing them to greater risk of mistreatment by the security forces or jail authorities. For instance, Maidul Islam, a sociologist whose research interests include Islamic militancy, was branded a Jamaat member by the BCL and by prison authorities while in prison in connection with Facebook posts critical of the government.

⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, Dhaka, October 2018.

The protests were violently suppressed by the police and BCL.⁴⁹ In July and early August, a second set of student protests demanded better road safety, after a speeding bus killed two pedestrians in the capital, Dhaka. These were again violently suppressed by the police and BCL.⁵⁰ Many of the students who were detained after these protests were tortured in police custody.

Students and university professors interviewed by Human Rights Watch emphasized the close co-operation between the security agencies and the BCL. Video footage of the student protests earlier this year, shows purported members of the BCL attacking unarmed protestors while the police look on.⁵¹ According to students who were arrested for their role in the protests, as well as a lawyer with knowledge of the cases, some victims were beaten by members of the BCL before being handed over to the police and detained. “They beat me like a snake,” said one victim.⁵²

Other recently detained students described to Human Rights Watch how, after their arrest, they were either taken by the police to BCL premises for identification, or the police telephoned BCL members to confirm whether those detained were involved in “anti-government” or “anti-state” activities. In other cases, students arrested in Dhaka alleged that their families in the provinces were then targeted for harassment and intimidation by local BCL members. Said one student:

“We are facing threats from the law enforcement agencies, security agencies of the government, and the BCL. We think we’re trapped to the point where anyone can attack us and make it a political issue. We can’t go to our universities. We can’t even do our urgent academic activities, like filling out examination forms and sitting for tests. The students still fear arrest and believe they are under surveillance. We can’t stay in a house

⁴⁹ “Bangladesh disappointed at foreign diplomats’ remarks on attack on quota protesters,” *bdnews24.com*, July 19, 2018, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2018/07/19/bangladesh-disappointed-at-foreign-diplomats-remarks-on-attack-on-quota-protesters> (accessed November 27, 2018).

⁵⁰ “Bangladesh: Stop Attacks on Student Protesters, Critics,” Human Rights Watch news release, August 6, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/06/bangladesh-stop-attacks-student-protesters-critics> (accessed November 28, 2018).

⁵¹ “Students chased, beaten up in Mirpur, Ctg” *The Daily Star*, August 3, 2018 <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/protest-for-safe-roads-in-bangladesh-police-and-bcl-attack-on-students-in-dhaka-mirpur-1614967>; “BCL in its element,” *The Daily Star*, August 5, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/bcl-ruling-party-men-attack-student-protest-road-safety-jigatola-dhanmondi-dhaka-1615828> (accessed November 27, 2018).

⁵² Human Rights Watch, details withheld, Dhaka, October 2018.

more than a single day or night. No one is allowing us to stay in their house, even our relatives. We have no shelter actually.”⁵³

A student told Human Rights Watch he believes the BCL and the police monitor Facebook accounts of protesters and then file complaints about content, demanding that the accounts be blocked. He also said one of their accounts was hacked. “They kidnapped the creator and they forced him to give the password and they took over the account.”⁵⁴ A journalist who specializes in online security policies broadly confirmed these allegations.⁵⁵

On September 5, 2018, at least 38 student protesters were detained in different parts of Dhaka. Twelve of these cases were enforced disappearances, as the authorities refused to acknowledge they were detaining the students for five days, until their parents held a press conference, after which the Detective Branch of the police acknowledged they were in custody and produced them in court.⁵⁶

Some students said that they were subjected to severe beatings, sometimes while handcuffed and gagged with a towel.⁵⁷ The torture was sometimes prolonged over several days. If victims lost consciousness during torture, some said, they were revived and then the torture was resumed. One victim said a senior officer “tortured me the whole day. I became senseless. I was shouting and roaring, ‘help me, help me.’ They tortured me like a beast.”⁵⁸

In interviews with Human Rights Watch, some of the detained students said they were denied access to fresh clothing or the opportunity to wash or brush their teeth for several days, or sometimes a week or more. They were threatened that if they revealed details of their treatment, either in court or after their release, they or their families would be

⁵³ Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, Dhaka, October 2018.

⁵⁴ Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, Dhaka, October 2018.

⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, Dhaka, November 2018.

⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, Dhaka, October 2018. See also Odhikar, “Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh, Reporting Period: 1 - 30 September 2018” October 2, 2018, http://odhikar.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/human-rights-monitoring-report-November-2018_Eng.pdf, p.28. According to Odhikar, 30 people disappeared in state custody in September, of whom 26 were later released, three were later found dead, and one is still missing.

⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch interviews, details withheld, October 2018.

⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, Dhaka, October 2018.

targeted. “Now I am feeling insecure. Not only me, my family is also insecure,” a student said, describing how his home, outside of Dhaka, had been targeted by the BCL.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, Dhaka, October 2018.

III. Freedom of Expression and Association

Human rights defenders and NGOs, already constrained by restrictive legislation, are under severe pressure.⁶⁰ A human rights activist described to Human Rights Watch how his organization is kept under surveillance and has experienced intimidating visits from members of the intelligence agencies.

Professors describe a climate of fear, intimidation, and surveillance on university campuses. “My friends and family are fearing there will be more attacks,” a leading civil society figure, who was targeted by members of the Awami League, told Human Rights Watch, “It’s a state of fear. A few people still speak, but I don’t know for how long.”⁶¹

At 3:30 a.m. on October 24, 2018, two men in civilian clothes detained Mohamad Abul Hassan, a 28-year-old blogger in Sylhet, according to his family members.⁶² He was taken away in a vehicle. Around five minutes later, 15 to 20 policemen, some saying they were members of the Detective Branch, arrived and removed his laptop, PC, mobile phone, and internet router. In the following days, his family visited the city’s police stations and courts trying to discover his whereabouts, but officials denied any knowledge. Abul Hassan vanished for 12 days, until he was produced at a court in Dhaka on November 3. Police filed a case against him under the Digital Security Act (DSA),⁶³ a new law which severely constrains freedom of speech.

Previously, the authorities had used section 57 of the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Act to jail government critics. Recent targets of section 57 include Shahidul Alam, a prominent photographer and social activist who was bailed on November 20, 2018, after 107 days in jail for describing police violence against student protestors on

⁶⁰ “Fresh intimidation continues with fake reporting: Odhikar,” *New Age*, November 17, 2018, <http://www.newagebd.net/article/56322/odhikar-alleges-of-fresh-intimidation-with-fake-reporting> (accessed November 28, 2018).

⁶¹ Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, Dhaka, November 2018.

⁶² Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, Sylhet, November 2018.

⁶³ Ramna Police Station case no. 4(11)18; Digital Security Act, No. 46 of 2018, http://www.parliament.gov.bd/images/pdf/acts_of_10th_parliament/acts_of_22nd_session/12.pdf, section 21, 24, and 26.

Facebook. He said he was beaten in police custody.⁶⁴ Maidul Islam, a Chittagong University professor, was released on bail on October 30. He'd been in jail for 37 days for writing Facebook posts supporting the student protests.⁶⁵

On the night of August 4, 2018, Nusrat Jahan Sonia, a 25-year-old primary school teacher, in a rural area of Patuakhali district, south of Dhaka was arrested under section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act for “spreading rumors.”⁶⁶ Despite being seven months pregnant, two bail petitions were rejected before she was eventually released on August 20. Yet according to a member of her family, “She did not write a single word,” but had shared someone else’s Facebook post, which appealed for peace during an ongoing student protest demanding road safety.⁶⁷ She has been suspended from her job at a government school until her case is completed, which may take years.

On October 8, 2018, the ICT Act was replaced by the DSA, which provides even more broadly drawn restrictions on freedom of expression, and draconian custodial sentences.⁶⁸ Bangladesh’s Editors’ Council, an association of newspaper editors, has said the law effectively prohibits investigative journalism or publishing anything that could “irritate,” “humiliate,” “embarrass,” or “discredit” the subject of reporting.⁶⁹ Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said, “Only those journalists who have piled up false news against us and are

⁶⁴ “Freedom at last,” *The Daily Star*, November 21, 2018 <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/photographer-shahidul-alam-walks-out-jail-1663237> (accessed November 27, 2018).

⁶⁵ “Chittagong University teacher Maidul released on bail,” *bdnews24.com*, October 30, 2018, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2018/10/30/chittagong-university-teacher-maidul-released-on-bail> (accessed November 27, 2018).

⁶⁶ “Spreading rumours: Patuakhali school teacher released after HC bail,” *The Daily Star*, August 20, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/spreading-rumours-on-social-media-movement-for-safe-roads-demand-patuakhali-school-teacher-released-after-high-court-bail-1623601> (accessed November 27, 2018).

⁶⁷ Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, October 2018.

⁶⁸ “Bangladesh: New Law Will Silence Critics,” Human Rights Watch news release, September 24, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/09/24/bangladesh-new-law-will-silence-critics>. The Digital Security Act creates vaguely defined crimes of writing “propaganda” against the “spirit of the liberation war” (section 21), damaging “the image and reputation of the state” (section 25), and “hurting religious values and religious sentiments” (section 28); and it revives the colonial era Official Secrets Act (1923) to prohibit publishing any information the government has not made public (section 32). The law empowers police to enter any premises, search or seize any computer equipment, and arrest anyone, merely on suspicion and without a warrant. Custodial sentences under the law range from one year to life imprisonment although most are in the range of four to seven years. Even if they are finally exonerated, anyone suspected under the law is liable to spend a period in jail because 14 of the 20 offences it creates are non-bailable.

⁶⁹ Sampadak Parishad, “Why Sampadak Parishad opposes the Digital Security Act,” *The Daily Star*, September 29, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/why-sampadak-parishad-opposes-the-digital-security-act-1640269> (accessed November 27, 2018); “PM dismisses discussion on editors’ concern in cabinet,” *New Age*, October 16, 2018, <http://www.newagebd.net/article/53298/pm-dismisses-discussion-on-editors-concern-in-cabinet> (accessed November 28, 2018).

waiting for releasing those one after another after the announcement of the election schedule should be worried about the law.”⁷⁰

A newspaper editor told Human Rights Watch he currently publishes only “10 to 20 percent” of the news at his disposal. “You have a culture of fear, an environment of fear,” he said. “As an editor I have to decide. Why would I publish everything we have? I cannot save my reporters from the intimidation.”⁷¹ Another newspaper editor estimated that around 50 percent of content is self-censored.⁷² A journalist told Human Rights Watch, “There is a blanket of fear spreading over this country and I don’t know when we are going to be freed.”⁷³

Several members of civil society have told Human Rights Watch they believe that a particularly strong red line circumscribing free expression prohibits any criticism of the Prime Minister or her son. Four people who have come under pressure from the authorities for their public statements told Human Rights Watch they believe the reason they have not been detained is that they have been careful to avoid direct criticism of the prime minister or her family members.⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch has previously documented how such direct criticism often leads to arrest.⁷⁵

Television networks will face increased restrictions under the proposed National Broadcast Act 2018.⁷⁶ The law, which was approved by the cabinet on October 15, 2018, sets out 24 new criminal offences, and provides three years imprisonment for acts such as “going against the spirit” of the 1971 Liberation War, or airing “misleading or false” information.

⁷⁰ “No false news, no worries,” *The Daily Star*, October 4, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/politics/digital-security-act-2018-nothing-muzzle-journalist-bangladesh-pm-sheikh-hasina-1642036> (accessed November 27, 2018).

⁷¹ Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, Dhaka, November 2018.

⁷² Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, Dhaka, November 2018.

⁷³ Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, Dhaka, October 2018.

⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch interviews, details withheld, Dhaka, October – November 2018.

⁷⁵ Human Rights Watch, “*No Place for Criticism*”: *Bangladesh Crackdown on Social Media Commentary*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/05/09/no-place-criticism/bangladesh-crackdown-social-media-commentary>.

⁷⁶ “Draft law cleared with jail time for airing lies on talk shows,” *Dhaka Tribune*, October 15, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/government-affairs/2018/10/15/cabinet-clears-draft-broadcast-law-2018> (accessed November 27, 2018).

Internet Surveillance

Social media, especially Facebook, is a major target for the authorities. Bangladesh has around 28 million Facebook users,⁷⁷ and the platform emerged as a key tool to organize student protests in mid-2018.

On October 9, 2018, the government announced it had formed a nine-member monitoring cell to detect rumors on social media.⁷⁸ The cell joins a proliferating number of units and agencies seeking to censor the internet, monitor online communications, and detain users accused of “spreading rumors” or “anti-state activity.” According to reports, “one hundred police teams,” operating under the Cyber-Crimes unit of Police Headquarters, have been deployed around the country and “provided with necessary cyber monitoring tools” to monitor social media.⁷⁹ Especially alarming, is that the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a paramilitary force implicated in serious human rights violations including extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances, has been tasked with monitoring social media for “anti-state propaganda, rumors, fake news, and provocations.”⁸⁰

On November 23, 2018, members of RAB detained a PhD student, Enamul Haque Mony, 31, as he attempted to fly from Dhaka to his university in South Korea. He was accused of spreading false and anti-government news on the internet.⁸¹

Both the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission and the Home Ministry’s National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre are in the midst of separate major procurements to set up “Deep Packet Inspection” facilities, capable of surveilling and blocking any internet activity in the country.⁸² Since 2012, the government has required

⁷⁷ “Internet Usage in Asia,” *Internet World Stats*, June 30, 2018, <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm> (accessed November 27, 2018).

⁷⁸ “Detection cell starts working this month,” *The Daily Star*, October 10, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/detection-cell-starts-working-month-1645048> (accessed November 27, 2018).

⁷⁹ “100 Police Teams Active Nationwide,” *The Daily Star*, October 7, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/two-people-arrested-spreading-anti-state-rumours-on-youtube-channel-1643338> (accessed November 27, 2018).

⁸⁰ Zafar Ahmed, “Bangladesh security agency to watch social media during general elections,” *bdnews24.com*, October 15, 2018, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2018/10/15/bangladesh-to-watch-social-media-during-general-elections> (accessed November 27, 2018).

⁸¹ “PhD student held in city,” *The Daily Star*, November 25, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/phd-student-enamul-haque-moni-goes-missing-just-before-flying-for-south-korea-1664533> (accessed November 27, 2018).

⁸² “Bilateral meeting held with Grameenphone’s Chief Executive on content blocking and filtering,” National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre, November 14, 2018, <https://ntmc.gov.bd/news/134> (accessed November 27, 2018).

internet service providers to provide access for both surveillance of user activity and content blocking.⁸³

On December 10, after 58 news websites were shut down for several hours, Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu called it a “trial run.” “Similar shutdowns will continue against news portals that publish and circulate fake and baseless news reports,” he warned.⁸⁴

A senior employee of an internet service provider told Human Rights Watch that at any given time, the government requires his company to block around 500 sites. The reasons for doing this vary but most often, he says, “somebody says something about some powerful individual, maybe the prime minister, so [they] block it. Primarily it’s anything written against the government.”⁸⁵ Around the coming election he is “expecting a large workload.” The government has already requested service providers to ensure 24-hour staffing to promptly comply with content blocking requests. The free exchange of information related to the election is also threatened by the Election Commission’s announced intention to suspend mobile telephone services on election day.⁸⁶

⁸³ Human Rights Watch interviews, details withheld, Dhaka, November 2018.

⁸⁴ Fazlur Rahman Raju, “Inu: news site shutdown was a trial run” *Dhaka Tribune*, December 10, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/government-affairs/2018/12/10/inu-news-site-shutdown-was-a-trial-run> (accessed December 12, 2018).

⁸⁵ Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, Dhaka, November 2018,

⁸⁶ Ahammad Foyez, “Putting off mobile phone networks on polling day under EC’s plans,” *New Age*, October 15, 2018, <http://www.newagebd.net/article/53217/putting-off-mobile-phone-networks-on-polling-day-under-ecs-plans> (accessed November 27, 2018).

IV. Campaign Violence

The final lists of candidates were confirmed by the Election Commission on December 10, 2018, who then began campaigning. Violence erupted soon after, with scores of people injured during political rallies in clashes between rival party supporters. Numerous incidents have been reported from around the country, in which hundreds have been injured.⁸⁷

On December 11, two members of the ruling Awami League were killed in separate incidents in Noakhali and Faridpur.⁸⁸ On December 16 the party's office in Moulvibazar was vandalized.⁸⁹

However, much of the campaign violence has targeted the opposition BNP and the opposition coalition Oikya Front. While the police promptly launched investigations and made arrests in attacks on the ruling party, it ignored complaints from the opposition.⁹⁰

On December 14, alleged members of the ruling party attacked vehicles carrying the Jatiya Oikya Front leader Kamal Hossain. While he was unharmed, at least 25 people others were injured in the incident.⁹¹ While the Chief Election Commissioner, KM Nurul Huda, described the attack as “unfortunate,” but did not order additional security.⁹² On the same day,

⁸⁷ See for instance “Over 266 injured in election campaign violence across country,” *Dhaka Tribune*, December 13, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/2018/12/13/over-266-injured-in-election-campaign-violence-across-country> (accessed December 13, 2018); “At least 84 injured in nationwide violence,” *Dhaka Tribune*, December 15, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/2018/12/15/at-least-84-injured-in-nationwide-violence> (accessed December 18 2018); “Polls violence: Over 91 injured, offices attacked,” *Dhaka Tribune*, December 18, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/2018/12/18/polls-violence-over-91-injured-offices-attacked> (accessed December 18 2018).

⁸⁸ Serajul Quadir, Zeba Siddiqui, “Two dead, dozens injured in Bangladesh clashes as election nears,” *Reuters*, December 12, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bangladesh-election/two-dead-dozens-injured-in-bangladesh-clashes-as-election-nears-idUSKBN1OBoTT> (accessed December 18, 2018).

⁸⁹ “AL office vandalised in Moulvibazar,” *The Daily Star*, December 16, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/bangladesh-national-election-2018/news/al-office-vandalised-bnp-moulvibazar-1674595> (accessed December 18, 2018).

⁹⁰ See for instance Ranajit Chandra Kuri, “Over 300 BNP-Jamaat men accused of Jubo League leader's murder in Noakhali,” *Dhaka Tribune*, December 13, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2018/12/13/over-300-bnp-jamaat-men-accused-of-jubo-league-leader-s-murder-in-noakhali> (accessed December 18, 2018).

⁹¹ “Motorcade of Dr Kamal attacked,” *The Daily Star*, December 15, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/bangladesh-national-election-2018/news/dr-kamal-hossain-motorcade-attacked-1673584> (accessed December 18, 2018).

⁹² “Attack on Dr Kamal unfortunate: CEC,” *New Age*, December 16, 2018, <http://www.newagebd.net/article/58992/attack-on-dr-kamal-unfortunate-cec> (accessed December 18, 2018).

Subrata Chowdhury, a candidate of Jatiya Oikya Front in Dhaka was also attacked, and two supporters were injured.⁹³

BNP candidate Abdul Moyeen Khan was attacked while campaigning in the Panchdona bazaar area on December 16, 2018.⁹⁴ Another BNP candidate, Romana Mahamud, was injured during clashes between the police and her supporters on December 15.⁹⁵ On December 12, Afroza Khanam Rita, a BNP candidate from Manikganj-3, was attacked, allegedly by youth-wing members of the ruling Awami League, while visiting a shrine. In Chuadanga, vehicles accompanying BNP candidate Sharifuzzaman Sharif were similarly attacked on December 10. The motorcade of BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir was attacked on December 11, while he was campaigning in Thakurgaon.⁹⁶

In many cases, journalists present at the clashes concluded BNP campaigns had come under attack by members of the Awami League.⁹⁷ The ruling party, however, has blamed the opposition for most of the violence. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's political adviser, HT Imam, said, "We are getting news of political violence from different parts of the country... Most of these attacks were carried out against Awami League members."⁹⁸ The Awami League's general secretary, Obaidul Quader, even claimed that the opposition are attacking themselves.⁹⁹

⁹³ Arifur Rahman Rabbi, "Oikya Front candidate Subrata's campaign attacked in Gandaria," *Dhaka Tribune*, December 14, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/2018/12/14/oikya-front-candidate-subrata-s-campaign-attacked-in-gandaria> (December 19, 2018).

⁹⁴ Asaduzzaman Ripon, "BNP candidate Moyeen attacked during campaign in Narsingdi," *Dhaka Tribune*, December 16, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/2018/12/16/bnp-candidate-moin-attacked-during-campaign-in-narsingdi> (accessed December 18, 2018).

⁹⁵ "Attacks on BNP candidates on," *The Daily Star*, December 15, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/over-150-held-across-country-1673908> (accessed December 18, 2018).

⁹⁶ See for example, "BNP candidates attacked while electioneering in Bogura, Chuadanga, Manikganj," *The Daily Star*, December 11, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/bangladesh-national-election-2018/news/chuadanga-bnp-candidates-motorcade-attacked-1672123> (accessed December 13, 2018); "Fakhrul's motorcade attacked in Thakurgaon," *Dhaka Tribune*, December 11, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/2018/12/11/fakhrul-s-motorcade-attacked-in-thakurgaon> (accessed December 11, 2018).

⁹⁷ "More clashes, attacks over electioneering," *The Daily Star*, December 13, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/bangladesh-national-election-2018/bnp-candidate-afroza-abbas-rally-attacked-in-dhaka-1672582> (accessed December 13, 2018).

⁹⁸ "HT Imam: AL, ally members targeted in attacks before polls," *Dhaka Tribune*, December 13, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/2018/12/13/ht-imam-al-ally-members-targeted-in-attacks-before-polls> (accessed December 13, 2018).

⁹⁹ Rafiqul Islam, "Obaidul: Oikya Front carrying out attacks on own men," *Dhaka Tribune*, December 16, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/2018/12/16/obaidul-oikya-front-carrying-out-attacks-on-their-men> (accessed December 18, 2018).

The opposition alleged that in several cases the police or Election Commission declined to take up complaints that their candidates and campaigns had been violently targeted, and even arrested those who had been attacked instead of their attackers.¹⁰⁰ Mohammad Asaduzzaman, BNP's human rights secretary, said that since his campaign in Jhenaidah was attacked on December 11, he has repeatedly filed complaints to the commission. "They acknowledge receipt, but take no action," he said.¹⁰¹

Political Partisanship of Security Agencies

Opposition parties allege that state institutions, including security forces act on behalf of the Awami League. They also alleged that the two major intelligence agencies, the military Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) and the civilian National Security Intelligence (NSI), both directly answerable to the prime minister, as well as other law enforcement, appeared to work in direct support of the ruling Awami League's political interests, and against its electoral opponents.¹⁰²

Several opposition activists said security and intelligence agencies are seeking to covertly intervene or gather information on the opposition parties. For instance, ahead of municipal elections held in several cities earlier in 2018, a senior BNP official said he was threatened by intelligence officers who kept him under constant surveillance by monitoring his phone. He was eventually arrested.

"At the beginning of the campaign, officers from the DGFI and NSI had warned me to co-operate with them or face "serious trouble." I did not cooperate. I evaded arrest for weeks during the campaign, by not sleeping at home, or hiding in the foot well of cars when driving from place to place. I noticed that people I spoke to using my mobile phone were frequently arrested shortly afterwards."¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, "Arrests, attacks, intimidation continue," *New Age*, December 13, 2018, <http://www.newagebd.net/article/58761/arrests-attacks-intimidation-continue> (accessed December 13, 2018).

¹⁰¹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview, details withheld, December 2018.

¹⁰² Human Rights Watch interviews with activists, journalists and opposition members, details withheld, in Dhaka, November 2018.

¹⁰³ Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, November 2018.

After his arrest, he says he was interrogated by local police, members of the DGFI, as well as officials of the police Detective Branch. The security agencies wanted to know about his party's electoral strategy, his political contacts, and the identity of polling agents who would represent the party at polling centers on election day.¹⁰⁴

Another BNP organizer said he was arrested while organizing a campaign rally for the upcoming general election. After he was detained, the police asked him to hand over his mobile phone: "They said 'with this mobile you can organize the meeting.' They asked, 'How many people will attend this meeting? Is there any possibility to fill the grounds tomorrow? Is there any chance people will come from outside the city?'"¹⁰⁵

According to a student who was tortured in police detention by officers investigating the student protests, his interrogators were focused on discovering political connections to the opposition, which he insists do not exist. A senior officer allegedly asked if the BNP or Jamaat had been involved and how the movement was financed.¹⁰⁶

A Jamaat spokesman said hundreds of its activists have been detained "without reason," because security forces are acting like ruling "party activists."¹⁰⁷ Several lawyers and activists emphasized the role of the security and intelligence forces in the government's struggle against its political opponents. This characterization is exemplified by claims in a recent autobiography, *A Broken Dream*, by the previous chief justice, Surendra Kumar Sinha.¹⁰⁸ In it, he alleges crude attempts by DGFI officers to influence the outcome of politically sensitive Supreme Court cases and says he was eventually forced from office in 2017, and into exile by the DGFI on the orders of the prime minister. The DGFI has denied the allegation.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Human Rights Watch Interview, details withheld, November 2018.

¹⁰⁶ Human Rights Watch Interview, details withheld, Dhaka, October 2018.

¹⁰⁷ Human Rights Watch email correspondence, details withheld, November 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Surendra Kumar Sinha, *A Broken Dream: Status of Rule of Law, Human Rights and Democracy* (Lalitmohan-Dhanabati Memorial Foundation), 2018.

¹⁰⁹ "In his book, Justice Sinha says he was 'exiled' by government," *bdnews24.com*, September 19, 2018, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2018/09/19/in-his-book-justice-sinha-says-he-was-exiled-by-government> (accessed November 27, 2018).

According to a retired senior military officer, “This government is totally dependent on the DGFI and NSI.”¹¹⁰ Said a newspaper editor, “The intelligence, the police, they are taking full control.”¹¹¹ A leading civil society figure mourned, “We have become a police state. Through the DSA and other acts we have weaponized the law. With this weapon [the police] are able to anything.”¹¹²

In recent weeks the NSI has been visiting human rights NGOs perceived as critical of the authorities, and asking about foreign donations, the use of which is strictly curtailed by the 2016 Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act. “They want to silence dissenting voices,” said one target of this harassment.¹¹³

Allegations of Election Commission Bias

While Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda has said he wanted to ensure “everyone follows the electoral code of conduct,” opposition parties accuse the commission of backing the ruling party. In its initial consideration of candidate applications, the Commission disqualified only three ruling Awami League candidates compared to 141 BNP candidates.

Opposition leaders have also complained to the election commission about mass arrests. Kamal Hossain called on the commission to exercise its constitutional authority to ensure fair polls. “No opposition candidate is getting any chance for electioneering,” he said.¹¹⁴

On December 17, an election commissioner, Mahbub Talukder, appeared to break ranks from his colleagues and allege that there is unfairness in the way the election is being managed. “I do not think there is any level playing field at all in this election. The phrase level playing field has become meaningless,” he said.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, Dhaka, November 2018.

¹¹¹ Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, Dhaka, November 2018.

¹¹² Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, Dhaka, November 2018.

¹¹³ Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, Dhaka, November 2018.

¹¹⁴ “Not quitting election, even if I die: Dr Kamal,” *UNB*, December 18, 2018, <http://m.thedailynewnation.com/news/199533/not-quitting-election-even-if-i-die-dr-kamal> (accessed December 18, 2018).

¹¹⁵ Bilkis Irani, “Commissioner Mahbub: There is no level playing field”, *Dhaka Tribune*, December 17, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/2018/12/17/ec-mahbub-there-is-no-level-playing-field> (accessed December 18, 2018).

International funders have pulled their financial support for the commission. In 2014, backers of a massive development program, aimed at strengthening democracy in Bangladesh, withdrew its financial assistance to the Election Commission due to concerns over its performance and commitment to a non-partisan role. The program was financed by the UK Department for International development (DFID), and carried out in partnership the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and others.

An evaluation by the UK agency noted, “Since 2013, the ECB [Election Commission of Bangladesh] has struggled to maintain its credibility,” and questioned whether the commission had “a clear agenda and proven will for reform.” The UK agency said the commission had failed to undertake “electoral reforms that would create greater transparency; for example, audits of the voter registry, engagement on campaign financing issues, or improving public knowledge on key election issues.”¹¹⁶

A subsequent US\$20 million project financed by the UK agency is not supporting the Election Commission. Program documents say that DIFD concluded “the current Commissioners have not sustained the public perceptions of independence from political influence.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ “Strengthening Political Participation phase 1 ‘Project Completion Review’,” DFID, <https://devtracker.dfid.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-3-HumanRights-Democracy-andtheRuleofLaw-BD> (accessed December 15, 2018).

¹¹⁷ “Strengthening Political Participation phase 2 ‘Business Case and Summary’,” DFID, <https://devtracker.dfid.gov.uk/projects/GB-1-203487/documents> (accessed December 18, 2018).

V. Recommendations

To the Government of Bangladesh

- Immediately end the mass arrest of opposition members and supporters.
- Ensure all suspects facing charges and trials are promptly released from detention, unless there is strong and clear evidence justifying their detention before trial, such as that the suspects are likely to flee, destroy evidence, or interfere with the investigation, and detention is necessary and proportionate; all detainees should be brought promptly before a judge to review the legality and necessity of their detention.
- Issue clear statements unequivocally upholding the right to free speech, including criticism and dissent. In general, prosecutions should be limited to speech intended to and likely to incite violence, discrimination, or hostility against an individual, or clearly defined group of persons in circumstances in which such violence, discrimination, or hostility is imminent and alternative measures to prevent such conduct are not reasonably available.
- Reinstate election observer status to local groups, including Odhikar.
- Issue clear guidelines to the police and prosecutors that criticism or insult of the government or government policies or state institutions cannot be the basis of arrest or prosecution.
- Commit to repealing or revising the Digital Security Act so that it conforms to international standards for the protection of freedom of expression, as set forth in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and as interpreted by the UN Human Rights Committee and UN mechanisms, such as the UN special rapporteur on the promotion of the right to freedom of opinion and expression.
- Make clear and strong public statements, at the highest political and institutional levels, condemning enforced disappearances, unlawful killings, arbitrary arrests, and other violations by law enforcement agencies, and publicly commit to holding accountable those responsible.
- Investigate allegations of deaths of individuals in so-called crossfire or gunfights after they were already in security force custody and prosecute officers responsible for these deaths.

- Issue public and clear directives to all security forces to abide by the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, and ensure rules and regulations governing the use of force are in strict compliance with the Basic Principles.
- Pending full investigations, immediately suspend and remove from RAB, DB, and other law enforcement facilities, any individual for whom there exists credible evidence of participation in an enforced disappearance, act of torture, or other serious human rights violation.
- Agree to the multiple requests made by UN special mechanisms to visit Bangladesh to conduct investigations and make recommendations.
- Commit to ratifying the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

To Opposition Parties

- Clearly instruct all followers and supporters to refrain from violence.
- In particular, warn party supporters against targeting religious minority communities or other traditional supporters of the ruling Awami League.

To Donors and Key Influential Governments including the US, UK, China, and India, and to the United Nations

- Urgently use public and private diplomacy to press the Bangladesh government to create a suitable electoral environment, and to end threats, intimidation, and spurious legal cases against political opponents, media, and civil society organizations.
- The British government should investigate and intervene to protect the interests of its citizens or any individual whose detention or persecution in Bangladesh is motivated by their exercise of fundamental rights in the territory of the UK.
- The EU should strongly and publicly link Bangladesh’s access to tariff-free Everything But Arms (EBA) trade benefits to its record in fulfilling its human rights commitments, and enforce the recent European Parliament resolution calling upon the government to “address human rights challenges.”

- The UN DPKO should thoroughly vet all Bangladeshi military and police who apply for UN peacekeeping missions to ensure that they, or the unit to which they are attached, have not committed human rights violations.

“Creating Panic”

Bangladesh Election Crackdown on Political Opponents and Critics

Ahead of national elections scheduled for December 30, 2018, Bangladesh is facing a crisis of democracy. Hundreds have been injured in election violence, including in numerous attacks on opposition candidates by ruling Awami League party supporters. While all sides have engaged in violence, security forces stand accused of partisanship, arresting members of the political opposition while overlooking violence by student and youth groups linked to Awami League. The authorities are using increasing surveillance, intimidation, detention, and politically motivated prosecution to restrict free speech and crack down on opponents and critics. The media is under pressure to avoid criticism of the government.

“Creating Panic”— based on over 50 interviews with political activists, students, and members of civil society— documents a multi-pronged attack on basic civil and political rights by the Bangladesh government, with state institutions including the police and election commission under pressure to back the ruling party. The commission has failed to intervene when opposition candidates are targeted. The police have arrested thousands of leaders and supporters of opposition parties, especially the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), under broad and vague allegations, including against some that are dead or were abroad or hospitalized at the time the alleged offence.

This report calls on the Bangladesh government to ensure an environment conducive to credible elections, including an end to arbitrary harassment and prosecution of opposition members. It calls on all parties to refrain from violence. The police, judiciary and election commission should exercise their powers impartially. Donors and governments with influence, including China, the United States, United Kingdom, European Union and India, should weigh in urgently to press for free and fair elections.



Police rush Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) supporters at a protest on February 9, 2018, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

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