



Bangladesh: Conduct a credible investigation into threats of violence and ensure protection of Sultana Kamal

We, several international and regional civil society organisations express deep concern over violent threats received by Sultana Kamal, a prominent lawyer and women human rights defender in Bangladesh. Sultana received these threats from the radical Islamist group Hefazat-e-Islam (Hefazat), a coalition of teachers and students of quami Madrasas¹, after expressing her opinion on a news channel's talk show.

On 28 May 2017, news channel News 24 invited Sultana, together with Awami League Parliament Member Apu Ukil, Garanajagaran Mancha Spokesperson Imran H Sarker, and Hefazat representative Mufti Sakhawat Hossain to discuss the removal of the lady justice sculpture from the Supreme Court premises. Hefazat-e-Islam and other radical Islamist groups had insisted the statue needed to be dismantled on 26 May 2017 arguing that instituting the statue would lead to idol worshipping which is against the tenets of Islam.²

During the talk show, the Hefazat leader remarked that the statue was a religious object and as such should not be placed on Supreme Court premises. Sultana responded with hypothetical argument that if no religious structure is permitted, then no mosques should be on the premises either. Based on this statement, Hefazat demanded her arrest within 24 hours. Hefazat Vice President, Junayed Al-Habib, further stated that *'we will break every bone in [her] body.'*³ Triggered by the threat made by Hefazat, Sultana received various other threats, including on social media. One person posted a photo of Sultana which was edited to make it look like she was being hanged.⁴

The Dhaka Metropolitan Police Ramna Division and the Detective Branch said on 5 June 2017 that they were taking joint measures to ensure the safety of Sultana. So far, efforts to ensure her safety are limited to closely monitoring her neighbourhood.

We are concerned by the threats faced by Sultana. Violence has been used numerous times to stifle freedom of expression and the legitimate and peaceful work of human rights defenders in Bangladesh.

We urge the authorities in Bangladesh to:

- Openly and unequivocally condemn Hefazat's statements and threats against Sultana Kamal and other Bangladeshi civil society, as their silence reinforces a culture of impunity which emboldens extremists to act criminally without fear of prosecution, and affirms extremists

¹ Quami Madrasas are privately owned Madrasas which operate without government oversight

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/26/lady-justice-statue-bangladesh-removed-islamist-objections>

³ <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2017/06/02/hefazat-arrest-sultana-kamal/>

⁴ <pic.twitter.com/e36anWEZex>

views that are counter to Bangladesh's Constitution, Penal Code, and commitments to international human rights standards and SDG 16 on Peace, justice and strong institutions.

- Carry out all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychosocial security of Sultana, her family members, and her fellow human rights defenders;
- Assure Sultana does not face additional gender-based discrimination or violence stemming from her being a woman human rights defender; and
- Ensure an enabling environment for human rights defenders to carry out their peaceful and legitimate activities, including expressing their opinion freely, without any fear of reprisals, harassment or intimidation from state and non-state actors.

We remind the Government of Bangladesh, as a citizen of Bangladesh, Sultana Kamal has the constitutional rights to (i) *'enjoy the protection of the law, and to be treated in accordance with law'*, Article 31 (ii) *the 'protection of right to life and personal liberty'*, Article 32, and (iii) *'the right of every citizen to freedom of speech and expression'*, Article 39.

Signed:

- Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)
- Front Line Defenders
- Amnesty International
- South Asians for Human Rights
- Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development
- Association for Progressive Communications
- International Service for Human Rights