



THREE-MONTH HUMAN RIGHTS MONITORING REPORT ON BANGLADESH

Reporting Period: January – March 2021

Prepared by Odhikar
Date of Release: 8 April 2021

Foreword

Since its inception in 1994, Odhikar has been relentlessly struggling to protect the civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights of the people. Odhikar, as an organisation of human rights defenders, has always sought to raise awareness of all human rights violations committed by the state and campaign for internationally recognized civil and political rights, to protest and prevent the state from violating human rights. Odhikar unconditionally stands by the victims of human rights violations and works to ensure the safety of the victims and establish justice.

Odhikar has been facing extreme state repression and harassment since 2013 while working to protect human rights. Despite this adverse situation, Odhikar has prepared a human rights report for the first three months of 2021 based on the reports sent by the human rights defenders associated with it and with the help of data published in various media.

To see the previous human rights reports of *Odhikar*, please visit www.odhikar.org;
Facebook: [Odhikar.HumanRights](https://www.facebook.com/Odhikar.HumanRights); Twitter: @odhikar_bd

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Executive Summary

1. This report has been prepared based on the human rights situation of Bangladesh in the first three months of 2021 (January-March), where it focuses on issues such as democracy and the deprivation of freedom of expression and the right to life.
2. In the first three months of this year, the right to freedom of assembly of the opposition and dissidents has been seriously violated. There have been incidents of obstruction and attacks on the rallies of opposition political parties and organisations protesting with various demands to the government. During this period, members of the law enforcement agencies were accused of detaining and torturing opposition leaders and activists. As per reports, at least 19 people were killed and more than 100 injured in police firing during protests and strikes organised against the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bangladesh.
3. In the first three months of 2021, freedom of expression has been severely violated in the country. Dissidents, opposition leaders-activists and ordinary citizens have been arrested and imprisoned under the repressive Digital Security Act, 2018, for posting on social media, criticizing high-ranking members of the ruling party, their family members, ruling party Ministers, MPs and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Writer Mushtaq Ahmed, who was detained in jail for 10 months under the Digital Security Act, 2018, died while incarcerated, after failing to get bail. There are allegations that Mushtaq Ahmed was taken to an unknown location after his arrest and tortured.
4. During this reporting period, there were allegations of various misconducts, against the Awami League, Chhatra League and Juba League leaders and activists across the country- including attacks on opposition leaders and activists, atrocities on students and ordinary citizens, attempts to use law enforcement personnel to entangle a human rights activist in a bomb blast; and the embezzlement of rice from food-friendly programmes for the poor. Furthermore, leaders and activists of Awami League, Chhatra League and Juba League were embroiled in internal clashes due to conflicts of interest.
5. Human rights violations in the first three months of 2021 are a continuation of human rights violations that have been going on for the last twelve years. The Awami League government has been in power since 2009. During this period, the government has used all state institutions, including the National Human Rights Commission, the Election Commission and the Anti-Corruption Commission, to implement its political agenda. There are even allegations that the government is controlling the Judiciary.¹ The highly controversial parliamentary elections held in 2014² and 2018³ under the Election

¹ In 2017, the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs published a gazette of the Judicial Service (Disciplinary) Rules for the employment of judges of lower courts and Magistrates. The Service Rules states that matters relating to the discipline of subordinate judicial officers shall be regulated by the appropriate authority. Disciplinary Rules for the employment of judges of the lower courts were made by keeping the control of the lower judiciary in the hands of the government.

² The Caretaker Government system was incorporated in the Constitution through the 13th amendment to the Constitution, as a result of people's movement led by the then Opposition Awami League and its alliance between 1994 and 1996 due to

Commission have completely shattered the electoral system of Bangladesh. In this situation, the local level elections held in the first three months of 2021 were conducted with various irregularities, including unilateral control of the leaders and activists of the ruling party, 'capturing' of polling stations and expulsion of polling agents belonging to the opposition.

6. Citizens have been subjected to various human rights violations in 2021, including enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings and torture, due to the lack of accountability of a government, which came to power without people's mandate, absence of rule of law, a dysfunctional justice system and impunity for the perpetrators.
7. A large number of convicts have been sentenced to death in the first three months of 2021 due to the existence of death penalty provisions in the criminal laws of Bangladesh.
8. Incidents of public lynching are nothing new. The tendency for ordinary people to take the law into their own hands is increasing due to lack of confidence in state institutions - and this has resulted in deaths due to public lynching.
9. Between January and March 2021, there were far more inmates in the prisons than the official capacity. It is alleged that some of the prisoners died due to inadequacy of doctors and medical facilities in prisons.
10. In the first three months of 2021, many women and girls became victims of various forms of violence. There are allegations of various forms of oppression and violence against women, against the leaders and activists of the ruling party. Apart from rape, sexual violence has also increased and despite the fact that taking dowry is illegal, oppression and killing of women for dowry has become a subculture.
11. In the first three months of this year, workers in both the formal and informal sectors have been subjected to various human rights violations. Workers in various occupations were killed and readymade garment workers were attacked by police while protesting for payment of their arrears.
12. During this reporting period, criminals vandalised and looted the houses and places of worship of the citizens belonging to the minority Hindu community. Leaders and activists of the ruling Awami League have been accused of being involved in such incidents. The government has also planned to evict citizens

the continuation of enmity, mistrust and violence between the two main political parties (BNP and Awami League). Later this system received a huge public support. However, in 2011 the caretaker government system were removed unilaterally by the Awami League government through the 15th amendment to the Constitution, without any referendum and ignoring the protests from various sectors; and a provision was made that elections were now to be held under the incumbent government. As a result, the farcical 10th Parliamentary elections were held on 5 January 2014, despite the boycotting of this election by a large majority of political parties. The election was farcical and out of 300 constituencies, 153 MP's were declared elected uncontested even before the polling commenced.

³ During the 11th Parliamentary elections on 30 December 2018, incidents of various irregularities, such as stuffing ballot boxes in most of the polling stations in the night before polling day; casting fake votes; voters being forced or coerced to vote openly for the ruling party candidates; 'capturing' polling centres; arrests and forcibly ousting of polling agents of the opposition party-nominated candidates; and intimidation of voters by supporters of the ruling Awami League-nominated candidates, election officials and members of law enforcement agencies, occurred. As a result, most of the people could not vote. <https://www.ti-bangladesh.org/beta3/index.php/en/highlights/5749-2019-01-15-07-24-53>

belonging to ethnic minorities from their land by claiming the latter are 'reserved forest occupiers'.

13. India's dominance over Bangladesh continues. In the first three months of 2021, Bangladeshi nationals were killed by members of the Indian Border Security Force (BSF). Indian Foreign Minister S. Jayashankar claimed that all these killings at the border were being carried out due to criminal activities perpetrated by Bangladeshi nationals; and the Bangladesh government did not protest.
14. Two international courts are investigating various forms of atrocities and violence, including killings, enforced disappearances, gang rapes, and arson perpetrated against the Rohingya population. On 1 February 2021, Aung San Suu Kyi's government was overthrown in a military coup in Myanmar.⁴ Since then, the military has been pushing for a National Verification Card (NVC) to enroll the remaining Rohingyas in Myanmar as foreign nationals. In this situation, the ongoing repatriation process may become ineffective and the Rohingyas might be displaced again.
15. The government has always tried to gag the voice of Odhikar. The government's crackdown on Odhikar, which began in 2013, continued in 2021. The case filed against Odhikar's Secretary and Director under the Information and Communication Technology Act 2006 (amended 2009) is still pending. On 14 February 2021, the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court rejected the petition for dismissing the case filed against Odhikar's Secretary and Director and ordered that the case proceed at the Cyber Crimes Tribunal. In 2014, Odhikar applied to the NGO Affairs Bureau under the Prime Minister's Office, for renewal of its registration⁵. It is yet to be renewed.

⁴ Myanmar coup: Aung San Suu Kyi detained as military seizes control, BBC (1 February 2021);

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55882489> ; The daily Prothom Alo, 2 February 2021;

<https://epaper.prothomalo.com/?pagedate=2021-2-2&edcode=71&subcode=71&mod=1&pgnum=1&type=a>

⁵ On 13 May 2019, *Odhikar* filed a Writ Petition (numbered 5402/2019) to the High Court Division of the Supreme Court; the court issued a Rule upon the NGO Affairs Bureau as to why the inaction of the Respondent to grant renewal of registration, pursuant to application made by the Petitioner dated 25.09.2014, shall not be declared to be without lawful authority and of no legal effect; and why the Respondent shall not be directed to renew registration of the Petitioner from 2015 onwards in accordance with law. The Rule was made returnable within 2 (two) weeks. The NGO Affairs Bureau has not taken any step regarding renewal of *Odhikar's* registration.

Statistics: Human Rights violations (January-March) 2021

| Statistics: January-March 2021* | | | | | |
|---|-----------------------------|------------|-----------|------------|------------|
| Type of Human Rights Violation | | January | February | March | Total |
| Extrajudicial killings | Crossfire | 2 | 7 | 3 | 12 |
| | Tortured to death | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| | Shot to death | 0 | 0 | 21 | 21 |
| Total | | 3 | 7 | 24 | 34 |
| Enforced Disappearances | | 1 | 0 | 10 | 11 |
| Death in Jail | | 3 | 4 | 3 | 10 |
| Death Penalty (sentenced to death) | | 40 | 56 | 56 | 152 |
| Human rights violations by Indian BSF | Bangladeshis Killed | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| | Bangladeshis Injured | 2 | 2 | 0 | 4 |
| | Total | 3 | 2 | 1 | 6 |
| Attack on journalists | Killed | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| | Injured | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| | Assaulted | 6 | 3 | 2 | 11 |
| | Attacked | 0 | 6 | 6 | 12 |
| | Threatened | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| | Total | 6 | 11 | 12 | 29 |
| Political violence | Killed | 10 | 9 | 11 | 30 |
| | Injured | 719 | 600 | 826 | 2145 |
| Dowry related violence against women | | 9 | 12 | 19 | 40 |
| Rape | Girl under the age of 18 | 67 | 46 | 71 | 184 |
| | Women | 41 | 45 | 40 | 126 |
| | Age could not be determined | 2 | 5 | 0 | 7 |
| | Total | 110 | 96 | 111 | 317 |
| Sexual harassment /Stalking of females | | 11 | 8 | 8 | 27 |
| Acid violence | | 4 | 1 | 4 | 9 |
| Public lynching | | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Arrest under the Digital Security Act, 2018** | | 2 | 3 | 10 | 15 |

* Odhikar documentation

** The cases of arrests under the Digital Security Act 2018 that are documented here are those that show how this law is being misused, for example, where the presentations/statements in question are being considered critical against the Prime Minister and high officials of the government, etc. It must be noted here that criticizing a public official on the manner in which he carries out his official activities or how he behaves in an official capacity; and criticizing a question of public interest, are not considered defamation/criminal offence in the Penal Code of Bangladesh.

Violation of Freedom of Assembly and Political Repression

1. Due to the usurpation of power through controversial and unacceptable elections, by blocking the path of free and fair elections in the country, the democratic environment and the system of accountability have been destroyed and an authoritarian system of government has been introduced. Reports show that the criminalisation and violence of the leaders and activists of the ruling party has reached a large scale. At the same time, the authoritarian system has decimated the right to freedom of assembly of citizens through repression.

Hindrance to and attacks on freedom of assembly and arrest of protestors

2. Since the beginning of 2021, the government has cracked down on the opposition and dissidents by curtailing their right to freedom of assembly. During this period, the government used members of the law enforcement agencies to threaten political parties and dissidents not to hold meetings and rallies. On 14 March 2021, Monirul Islam, Acting Commissioner of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police, told a news conference that political parties should not be allowed to hold programmes during the Golden Jubilee of Bangladesh's independence and the birth centenary of former President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from 16 - 27 March. He said that if any political party did not listen to him, they would be considered traitors. He further said that the police would take strict legal action against those who are or will be holding anti-Modi rallies ahead of the arrival of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Bangladesh.⁶
3. The government and leaders and activists of the ruling party have obstructed and attacked peaceful rallies of the opposition political parties and various protesting organisations. Opposition leaders and activists were detained and tortured for attending rallies. Police and BGB⁷ shot dead 19 people and over a hundred were injured during protests and the hartal called against Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of Bangladesh's Independence.
4. On 3 January 2021, when the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal⁸ brought out a procession on the occasion of its founding anniversary in Kasba under Brahmanbaria District, the police opened fire on the procession. Twelve people were injured in the incident.⁹
5. On 7 February 2021, police attacked the students of Polytechnic Institute who blocked the road at Shahbagh for their four-point demands. Police also arrested five students.¹⁰
6. Leftist student organisations brought out a torch procession from the Raju sculpture area at Dhaka University, in protest of the death of writer Mushtaq

⁶ Dhaka Tribune, 14 March 2021; <https://bangla.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2021/03/14/32756>

⁷ Border Guard Bangladesh

⁸ Student wing of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)

⁹ The daily Naya Dignata, 4 January 2021; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/more-news/553437/>

¹⁰ The daily Naya Dignata, 8 February 2021; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/last-page/561250/>

Ahmed in prison. Police stopped the procession at the Shahbagh intersection and charged at the students with batons and fired tear gas shells. Police also arrested five students from the procession.¹¹

7. The Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal¹² organised a rally in front of the National Press Club in Dhaka on 28 February 2021, to protest the death of writer Mushtaq Ahmed in prison and the proposal to revoke former President Ziaur Rahman's gallantry title of "Bir Uttam" for his contribution to the Liberation War. The rally was disrupted when the police suddenly attacked it. Many Chhatra Dal leaders and activists were injured when police charged with batons, fired blank shots and tear gas shells during the attack.¹³ Shahbagh Police Station's SI Palash Saha filed a case on 1 March 2021, accusing 47 Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leaders, including BNP leader Habib-un-Nabi Khan and Juba Dal¹⁴ Central General Secretary Sultan Salahuddin, and 200-250 unidentified people.¹⁵ Police arrested 13 leaders and activists of Chhatra Dal in this incident. The arrested were Ahsan Habib Bhuiyan, Kabir Hossain, Manjurul Alam, Monwar Islam, Ariful Haque, Anisur Rahman, Ataur Rahman, Masud Rana, Atif Morshed, Ramzan Ahmed, Shafiqul Islam, Mohammad Shahiraj and Abu Hayat Zulfiqar Jisan. Police sought a 10-day remand for interrogation. The court granted the remand of 12 of the arrested for five days and one for two days.¹⁶ It has been alleged that the police tortured Chhatra Dal leaders and activists during remand.¹⁷ Jamal Uddin, father of Abu Hayat Mohammad Zulfiqar Jisan, the organising secretary of Dhaka University's Sir F Rahman Hall unit Chhatra Dal, alleged that on 28 February 2021, his son was picked up from the TSC area of Dhaka University by plain clothed members of a law enforcement agency. He was later shown as arrested and tortured in custody by the police during remand.¹⁸ Furthermore, three brothers of Sajib Raihan, Joint Convener of Savar Thana unit Chhatra Dal, Masud Parvez alias Jewel, Shahidul Islam and Sohel Rana, were picked up by plainclothed policemen from their house in Savar, Dhaka on 1 March 2021 and detained at Savar Police Station after police failed to arrest Sajib Raihan. The next day, on 2 March, the three brothers were released into the custody of their mother Anwara Begum.¹⁹

¹¹ The daily Manabzamin, 26 February 2021; <https://mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=264215>

¹² Student wing of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)

¹³ The daily Prothom Alo, 1 March 2021; <https://epaper.prothomalo.com/?pagedate=2021-3-1&edcode=71&subcode=71&mod=1&pgnum=1&type=a>

¹⁴ Youth wing of BNP

¹⁵ The daily Prothom Alo, 2 March 2021;

<https://epaper.prothomalo.com/?mod=1&pgnum=4&edcode=71&pagedate=2021-3-2>

¹⁶ The daily Prothom Alo, 1 March 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/capital/ছাত্রদলের-১৩-নেতাকর্মী-বিমান্ডে>

¹⁷ The daily Jugantor, 2 March 2021; <https://www.jugantor.com/politics/398065/>

¹⁸ Information gathered by Odhikar

¹⁹ The daily Prothom Alo, 2 March 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/ছাত্রদল-নেতাকে-বা-গেয়ে-আটক-তিন-ভাইকে-ছেড়ে-দিয়েছে-পুলিশ>



Police dispersed the leaders and workers of Chhatra Dal by beating them with sticks while they were organising a rally in front of the National Press Club. Police fired tear gas shells and blank shots to disperse them. Photo: Prothom Alo, 1 March 2021

8. On 23 March 2021, the Awami League-backed Chhatra League attacked a programme by Progotishil Chhatra Jote (Progressive Student Alliance) that had been organised to protest the hosting of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of Independence. 25 leaders and activists of Chhatra Jote were injured in the attack.²⁰



Progotishil Chhatra Jote (Progressive Student Alliance) was attacked by Chhatra League when it went to burn the effigy of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Dhaka University. Prothom Alo, 24 March 2021

9. On 25 March 2021, police attacked a protest rally in Motijheel organised by Jubo Odhikar Parishad (Youth Rights Council), led by former DUCSU²¹ Vice-President Nurul Haque Nuru, against the arrival of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Dhaka. About 50 people were injured in the incident.²²

²⁰ The daily Prothom Alo, 24 March 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/capital/প্রগতিশীল-ছাত্রজোটের-কর্মসূচিতে-ছাত্রলীগের-হামলা>

²¹ Dhaka University Central Students' Union

²² The daily Naya Dignata, 26 March 2021; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/first-page/571648/>

10. On 26 March 2021, police barred a rally that was brought out by leaders, activists and supporters of Hefazat-e-Islam, several Islamist political organisations and some people, after Friday prayers, from the area adjacent to Baitul Mokarram Mosque. The rally was a protest against the arrival of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. As a result, a clash took place between the police and the people in the rally. At that time, leaders and activists of Chhatra League²³, Juba League²⁴ and Swechchhasebak League²⁵, who were already outside the mosque, joined the police in the attack.²⁶ The police fired 1137 rounds of bullets (827 rubber bullets and 310 lead bullets) and threw 93 tear gas shells at protesters.²⁷ 55 people were injured in the attack and taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital.²⁸



Several Islamist groups, including Hefazat-e-Islam, clashed with police at the north gate of the Dhaka's Baitul Mukarram Mosque, in protest of the arrival of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. At that time, activists of Juba League and Chhatra League also joined the police. Photo: Manabzamin, 26 March 2021

11. Later that day, madrasa students in Hathazari of Chittagong District brought out a rally in protest of the attack at Dhaka's Baitul Mukarram area and for protesting against Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh. When the rally reached the Hathazari Police Station, police barred them from proceeding any

²³ Student wing of Awami League

²⁴ Youth wing of Awami League

²⁵ Volunteer wing of Awami League

²⁶ The daily Manabzamin 26 March 2021; <https://mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=267771>

²⁷ The daily Prothom Alo, 28 March 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/capital/বায়তুল-মোকাররম-এলাকায়-পুলিশের-১১০০-গুলি-৯৩-কাঁদানে-গ্যাসের-শেল>

²⁸ The daily Manabzamin 26 March 2021; <https://mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=267783&cat=1/>

further. At that time a clash took place between students and police. The students threw brickbats at the Police Station, breaking its windows and door. At that time, police opened fire and six students were shot²⁹. Among them three Madrassa students- Nasir Ullah (22), Rabiul Islam (22), Kazi Mirazul Islam (22), and another person- a tailor named Wahidul Islam (18)- were killed.³⁰ Students of different madrassas in Brahmanbaria staged protests in different parts of the city over the clashes that took place in Dhaka and Hathazari. Five government institutions including Brahmanbaria Railway Station and two vehicles were vandalised and set on fire.³¹ A man named Mohammad Ashiq (20) was also shot dead by the police.³²



Police shot at madrassa students in Hathazari of Chittagong during a protest rally against India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh. Injured students are being taken to hospital. Photo: Manabzamin, 26 March 2021

Human rights violations during hartal

12. Hefazat-e-Islam called for a nationwide dawn to dusk hartal³³ on 28 March 2021 to protest the attack on its activists and supporters at the Baitul Mukarram Mosque area in Dhaka and the killing of its leaders-activists and ordinary citizens by law enforcement officials in Chittagong and Brahmanbaria. On the eve of the hartal, Hefazat-e-Islam activists brought out a procession in support of the hartal on 27 March in the Nandanpur area of Brahmanbaria. The locals joined the procession with them. When the police obstructed the procession, clashes broke out. Members of Border Guard

²⁹ The daily Naya Diganta, 26 March 2021; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/chattagram/571811>

³⁰ The daily Prothom Alo, 6 April 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/সরকারি-হিসাবে-নিহত-১৭-জন-বেশিব-ভাগই-সাধারণ-মানুষ>

³¹ The daily Prothom Alo, 27 March 2021; <https://epaper.prothomalo.com/?pagedate=2021-3-27&edcode=71&subcode=71&mod=1&pgnum=1&type=a>

³² The daily Naya Diganta, 26 March 2021; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/chattagram/571875/>

³³ General strike

Bangladesh (BGB) also joined the police. Seven people were shot dead and several others were injured in the incident. The deceased have been identified as CNG-auto-rickshaw driver Zahirul Islam (40), Hafez Kausar Ahmed (20), worker Badal Mia (28), madrassa student Hussain Ahmed (22), raw material tradesman Kauser (30), Mohammad Moshahid Mia (18) and an employee of tailor's shop Mohammad Foysal (17).³⁴ Meanwhile, leaders and activists of the ruling Awami League and its affiliated organisations Juba League and Chhatra League, staged an 'anti-militant' rally in the city on the same day. As the rally crossed TA Road, these protesters hurled stones and crude bombs at students of Jamia Islamia Younusia Madrassa in Kandipara, sparking clashes between the two sides. A madrassa student named Hafez Mohammad Jubayer (14) was killed in the clash.³⁵ Police and BGB members opened fire at the procession of Hefazat-e-Islam activists at Budhol area of Sadar Upazila, injuring several demonstrators. The injured were admitted to Brahmanbaria General Hospital.³⁶

13. On the day of the hartal, clashes occurred between Hefazat-e-Islam activists on one side and members of law enforcement agencies, the ruling party leaders and activists on the other, across the country. During the clashes, hartal supporters attacked a police station and police outposts, various government offices, the press club and Awami League office; and loosened the nuts and bolts of the railway tracks and vandalised and set fire to vehicles. Six persons named Mohammad Al Amin (19) who was a former student of Pathan Para Hafizia Madrassa, rickshaw puller Liton (30), worker Kamal Mia (32), Kalon Mia (40), retrenched worker Ashiqul Islam (32) and clothes store employee Abdullah Ratim (22) were shot dead by the police and BGB during the clashes at different places in Brahmanbaria.³⁷ Riazuddin Zamir, President of the Brahmanbaria Press Club and staff reporter of the pro-government newspaper daily Janakantha, was attacked by hartal supporters and was admitted to the Brahmanbaria General Hospital with injuries.³⁸ Meanwhile, Manik Bhuiyan, district correspondent of Asian TV; Mizanur Rahman, district correspondent of Ekattar TV; Yakub Nabi Emon, district correspondent of Bangla TV, and cameraman Monir Hossain were injured when hartal supporters attacked the office of the Noakhali TV Journalists Forum at Choumuhani in Noakhali District.³⁹
14. A carpenter named Shakil (25) was shot dead during a clash between the police-BGB and Hefazat-e-Islam leaders and activists at the Signboard area on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway. He was admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital.⁴⁰ Police and ruling party supporters blocked a procession of hartal supporters in Sirajdikhan under Munshiganj District. At that time, clashes

³⁴ The daily Prothom Alo, 8 April 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/নিহতের-সংখ্যা-কত-১৩-১৫-না-১৬>

³⁵ The daily Prothom Alo, 28 March 2021; <https://epaper.prothomalo.com/?pagedate=2021-3-28&edcode=71&subcode=71&mod=1&pgnum=1&type=a>

³⁶ The daily Naya Diganta, 28 March 2021; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/chattagram/572256/>

³⁷ The daily Prothom Alo, 8 April 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/নিহতের-সংখ্যা-কত-১৩-১৫-না-১৬>

³⁸ The daily Jugantor, 28 March 2021; <https://www.jugantor.com/country-news/406432/>

³⁹ The daily Inqilab, 28 March 2021; <https://www.dailyinqilab.com/article/369064/>

⁴⁰ Report sent by local human rights defender associated with Odhikar in Narayanganj.

occurred between the two and the police opened fire on Hefazat activists. Hefazat-e-Islam's central leader Allama Abdul Hamid Pir Madhupur was shot. When the news spread that Abdul Hamid Pir had been shot, an angry mob vandalised the houses of local Awami League leaders Biplob and Alamgir.⁴¹ Police fired rubber bullets at a rally brought out by Hefazat-e-Islam leaders and activists in support of the hartal in Churkhai area of Mymensingh Sadar Upazila, leaving three people seriously injured. At least seven people were injured when Awami League leaders and activists attacked madrassa students in Maskanda area of the city.⁴² When local Awami League leaders and activists marched in the Mahajanpatti area in protest of the hartal in Sylhet, an unknown person threw stones at the procession. Awami League leaders and activists became enraged and attacked the workers of various business establishments in the area and stabbed a rice shop worker. When the workers got angry, Awami League leaders and activists attacked them and labeled them as supporters of the hartal.⁴³ Furthermore, several members of law enforcement agencies were injured in clashes with hartal supporters in different parts of the country.⁴⁴



In support of the hartal, Hefazat-e-Islami supporters and Police-BGB clash in the Signboard area of the Dhaka-Chittagong highway. Photo: Manabzamin, 28 March 2021

15. A total of 19 cases have been filed including two cases with Paltan Police Station and two with Jatrabari Police Station in Dhaka; six cases filed with Siddhirganj Police Station in Narayanganj District and one case with Kishoreganj Sadar Police Station till 30 March; and six cases have been filed

⁴¹ The daily Inqilab, 29 March 2021; <https://www.dailyinqilab.com/article/369199/>

⁴² The daily Inqilab, 28 March 2021; <https://www.dailyinqilab.com/article/369085/>

⁴³ The daily Prothom Alo, 28 March 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/সিলেটে-আলীগের-মিছিলে-টিল-ককটেল-বিস্ফোরণ-আটক-৫>

⁴⁴ The daily Jugantor, 28 March 2021; <https://www.jugantor.com/country-news/406436/>

with Brahmanbaria Sadar Police Station and two cases with Ashuganj Police Station till 31 March. 10,000 people, many of them 'unknown', have been accused in these cases. The accused were all leaders and activists of BNP, Jamaat and Hefazat-e-Islam. Police arrested six people in Kishoreganj and 21 people in Brahmanbaria. Ali Hossain Pradhan, Convener of Siddhirganj Upazila unit BNP had been named as an accused in both the cases filed with Siddhirganj Police Station. However, Ali Hossain Pradhan had died in prison long before the incident.⁴⁵

Criminalisation and violence by the ruling party

16. In the last three months, there were allegations against Awami League, Chhatra League and Juba League leaders and activists across the country, of various misconducts, including attacks on opposition leaders and activists; atrocities on students and ordinary citizen; attempts to use law enforcement personnel to embroil a environmental rights activist in a bomb blast and the embezzlement of rice from food-distribution programmes for the poor. During this period, leaders and activists of Awami League, Chhatra League and Juba League were also engaged in internal clashes due to conflicts of interest and used firearms against each other. In most cases, the accused were not brought to justice.
17. **From January to March 2021, at least 30 people were killed and 2145 injured in political violence. Furthermore, 137 incidents of internal violence in the Awami League and five incidents of internal violence in the BNP were recorded during this period. 19 persons were killed and 980 were injured in internal conflicts within the Awami League while 26 persons were injured in internal conflicts within the BNP.**
18. Sheikh Saifullah, a member of the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA) network under Keshabpur Upazila of Jessore District, filed a Writ Petition in the High Court Division of the Supreme Court in collaboration with BELA against an illegally constructed brickfield in his area. The court ordered the brickfield to be closed. Fakrul Islam, a local businessman who owns the brickfield, became enraged with the petitioner. Fakrul Islam was acquainted with Shahin Chakladar, General Secretary of Jashore District unit Awami League and MP of Jashore-6 constituency. Shahin Chakladar introduced himself as a Member of the Parliamentary Committee of the Ministry of Environment and Forest and called Jasim Uddin, the Officer-in-Charge (OC) of Keshabpur Police Station and instructed him to bomb the police station at night and then file a case against Saifullah. Later he instructed the OC to send the police in plainclothes and file a case alleging that the brickfield was bombed and attacked with the intention of robbery. He told the OC that he had to file a case.⁴⁶ However, it was not possible to file a

⁴⁵ The daily Prothom Alo, 31 March 2021; <https://epaper.prothomalo.com/?pagedate=2021-3-31&edcode=71&subcode=71&mod=1&pgnum=1&type=a>

⁴⁶ The daily Prothom Alo, 30 January 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/অন্যকে-ফাঁসাতে-থানায়-বোমা-মারতে-বললেন-সাংসদ>

case against Sheikh Saifullah after the recorded conversation between the OC and the Member of Parliament spread through social media.

19. On 14 January 2021, ASM Ali Imam Sheetal, a student of Dhaka Medical College's Shahid Dr. Fazle Rabbi (residential) Hall, was beaten with iron rods by college unit Chhatra League and Intern Doctor's Council leaders, leaving him severely injured.⁴⁷
20. On 9 March 2021, clashes occurred between supporters of Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader's younger brother and Basurhat Municipality Mayor Quader Mirza on one side; and Companiganj Upazila unit Awami League Organising Secretary Mizanur Rahman on the other, during a meeting to protest the attack on Companiganj Upazila Awami League President Khizir Hayat Khan at Rupali Chattar in Basurhat Municipality under Noakhali District. During the clashes, gunshots were fired and hand grenades exploded. One person named Alauddin (32) was killed and 50 people were injured in this incident.⁴⁸ Emdad Hossain, younger brother of the deceased Alauddin, went to the Companiganj Police Station to file a case but the Officer-in-Charge of the Police Station refused to take up the case as Quader Mirza was named in the complaint.⁴⁹ It is to be noted that there had been sporadic clashes between the two rival groups of Awami League in Companiganj for a long time.

Freedom of Expression, Repressive Laws and Interference on Media

21. Citizens' freedom of expression continued to be curtailed in the first three months of 2021. Most of the media in Bangladesh is controlled by the government or government-backed individuals. As there is no opportunity to express one's opinion freely, people exchange various news/information using alternative media including Facebook. However, the government stopped mobile 3G and 4G services in Bangladesh on 26 March 2021 till 30 March 2021. As a result, people in this country could not use Facebook and its Messenger app. It is strongly believed that Facebook and Messenger were shut down to quell protests against Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, Posts and Telecommunications Minister Mustafa Jabbar said that his Ministry had not shut down Facebook; it had been done by the law enforcement agencies for national security reasons.⁵¹

Repressive Digital Security Act, 2018

22. The government has created an atmosphere of fear in the country by imposing various repressive laws, including the Digital Security Act (DSA), 2018. As a result, freedom of expression of the citizens is being severely

⁴⁷ The daily Jugantor, 6 February 2021; <https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/first-page/390896/>

⁴⁸ The daily Prothom Alo, 10 March 2021; <https://epaper.prothomalo.com/?pagedate=2021-3-10&edcode=71&subcode=71&mod=1&pgnum=1&type=a>

⁴⁹ The daily Bangladesh Pratidin, 13 March 2021; <https://www.bd-pratidin.com/first-page/2021/03/13/627836>

⁵⁰ The daily Manabzamin, 28 March 2021; <https://mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=268012>

⁵¹ The Daily Star, 29 March 2021; <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/mobile-3g-4g-services-shutdown-places-2068425>

hampered. Many cases have been filed and ordinary citizens have been arrested under the repressive Digital Security Act, 2018 as a result of publishing criticisms against high-ranking individuals of the government and leaders of the ruling party and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. On 4 May 2020, writer Mushtaq Ahmed was arrested under the Digital Security Act, 2018. He died on 25 February 2021 after nine-months in jail.⁵² On 2 May 2020, cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore was abducted from his home by a group of 16/17 men in plainclothes. He was shown as arrested on 6 May 2020 under the DSA. After spending almost 10 months in jail, Kishore was granted bail by the High Court Division of the Supreme Court on 3 March 2021. After his release, Kishore said that he was detained in an unknown place for 69 hours after being picked up and tortured there in the name of interrogation. During this period Kishore was disappeared. Article 2 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance states: "*enforced disappearance*" is considered to be the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law." Kishore said that during the interrogation, he was asked why he had made a cartoon about the chairman of a private bank. He was kept in the RAB office after being tortured.⁵³ Due to torture, one of Kishore's eardrums was perforated and now he is deaf in that ear.⁵⁴ After he was taken to the RAB office, he met Mushtaq Ahmed. Mushtaq told him that he had been tortured with electric shocks.⁵⁵ At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, both men had criticised the government's failures and other issues on Facebook and drew satirical cartoons about it. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet issued a statement on 1 March, expressing concern over the death of writer Mushtaq Ahmed. In the statement, UN High Commissioner called for a prompt, transparent and independent investigation into the death of Mushtaq Ahmed, a review of the Digital Security Act, 2018, and suspension of its application; and immediate release of all those detained under this Act for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and opinion.⁵⁶

- 23. In the three months of January-March 2021, 15 people have been arrested under the Digital Security Act, 2018, for critical posting/commenting against Prime Minister, high-ranking persons of the government and/or their family members and India's Prime Minister Norendra Modi.**

⁵² The Daily Star, 26 February 2021; <https://www.thedailystar.net/bangladesh/news/writer-mushtaq-ahmed-no-more-2051177>

⁵³ The daily Prothom Alo, 5 March 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/অজ্ঞাত-স্থানে-৬৯-ঘণ্টা-বেথে-কাট্টন-নিষে-প্রশ্ন-মারধর>

⁵⁴ The daily Manabzamin, 3 March 2021; <https://mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=264752>

⁵⁵ The daily Prothom Alo, 5 March 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/অজ্ঞাত-স্থানে-৬৯-ঘণ্টা-বেথে-কাট্টন-নিষে-প্রশ্ন-মারধর>

⁵⁶ UN News, 1 March 2021; <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1086002>

24. Ruhul Amin, Coordinator of the Shramik-Krishak-Chhatra-Janata Oikya Parishad (Workers-Peasants-Students-People's Unity Council)⁵⁷, was picked up from his home in Khulna on 26 February 2021 by some members of a law enforcement agency in plainclothes, for posting on Facebook, criticising the government over the death of Mushtaq Ahmed.⁵⁸ Later, a case was filed against him under the Digital Security Act, 2018 with Khalishpur Police Station in Khulna. The case alleged that he was spreading propaganda on Facebook in order to cause confusion and tarnish the image of the state and the government's reputation; to try to create animosity, instability and chaos among the people and to disrupt law and order. The court granted him two-day remand in police custody for interrogation.⁵⁹ It is to be noted that there are widespread allegations of torture by members of law enforcement agencies in the name of interrogation during remand.
25. Police arrested Rajibul Alam, a teacher of Political Science at Pakshi Railway College in Ishwardi, under the Digital Security Act, 2018 on 3 March 2021, for posting on Facebook about Awami League central Joint-General Secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif and his cousin Kushtia Sadar Upazila Chairman and Awami League leader Aatur Rahman Ata. The Magistrate appeared in court and sought remand for 5 days. The court granted 1-day remand. It is to be mentioned that on 4 December 2020, miscreants broke the mural of former President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Kushtia City. When Rajibul Alam posted about the incident on Facebook, Kushtia Sadar Upazila unit Juba League President Mizanur Rahman Mizu filed a case against him under the Digital Security Act, 2018 with Kushtia Model Police Station.⁶⁰
26. Humayun Kabir, a college student in Thakurgaon, was arrested on 19 March 2021 in connection with a case filed by Sub-Inspector Dalim Kumar Roy of Thakurgaon Police Station under the Digital Security Act, 2018, for allegedly posting a video criticising Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh on Facebook.⁶¹
27. On 28 March 2021, police arrested a man named Mustakim Billah (37) in Shariatpur under the Digital Security Act, 2018, for posting an offensive post on Facebook about the arrival of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the Golden Jubilee of Independence in Bangladesh. He was sent to jail by the court the next morning.

Freedom of the media

28. Freedom of the media is being hampered by the government and government-affiliated individuals by the imposition of repressive laws on journalists, including the Digital Security Act, 2018. In this situation, journalists are imposing self-censorship on themselves. The media is now completely under the control of the government. Editors of some newspapers

⁵⁷ A left-leaning organisation of workers, peasants, students and people

⁵⁸ The daily Manabzamin, 27 February 2021; <https://mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=264296>

⁵⁹ The daily Prothom Alo, 28 February 2021; <https://epaper.prothomalo.com/?pagedate=2021-2-28&edcode=71&subcode=71&mod=1&pgnum=1&type=a>

⁶⁰ The daily Jugantor, 5 March 2021; <https://www.jugantor.com/country-news/399133/>

⁶¹ Report sent by local human rights defender associated with Odhikar in Thakurgaon.

are being harassed through the filing of cases against them, for publishing reports against the delinquencies of the government. In such a situation, local level journalists are working at the highest risk. During this period, journalists were attacked by the leaders, activists and influential people of the ruling party while performing their professional duties. A journalist was also killed.

29. **Between January and March 2021, one journalist was killed, three were injured, 11 were assaulted, 12 were attacked and two were threatened while carrying out their professional duty. Furthermore, 11 journalists were insulted in various ways.**
30. On 8 February 2021, Mahfuzur Rahman Rubel, cameraman of Masranga TV and Rafiqul Islam, cameraman of Dipta TV, were attacked and injured by supporters of Awami League rebel candidate and incumbent mayor Muktar Ali when they were taking pictures of the election campaign in Arani Municipality under Bagha Upazila in Rajshahi District.⁶²
31. On 19 February 2021, clashes broke out between supporters of Awami League Central Committee's General Secretary Obaidul Quader's younger brother and Basurhat Municipality Mayor Quader Mirza on one side and supporters of Companiganj Upazila unit Awami League Organising Secretary Mizanur Rahman Badal on the other, at Chaprashirhat Vegetable Market in Charfokira union under Companiganj Upazila in Noakhali District. Companiganj Upazila correspondent of the Daily Somachar Burhan Uddin Mujakkir was shot while trying to gather news of the clash. On 20 February 2021, Mujakkir succumbed to his injuries at Dhaka Medical College Hospital.⁶³
32. Hefazat-e-Islam and its activists and supporters and other Islamist groups tried to stage a protest rally from Baitul Mukarram Mosque in Dhaka after Jumma prayers, against the participation of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the celebrations of the Golden Jubilee of Independence in Bangladesh on 26 March. Photojournalists of Prothom Alo Hasan Raja and Ashraful Alam; Emran Hossain and Prabir Das of the Daily Star; Harun-Ar-Rashid of Desh Rupantar; Joyeeta Roy of Bangladesh Pratidin; Abdullah Apu of New Age; Mahmuduzzaman of the BdNews; Riaz Ahmed of the Daily Sun; and Habibur Rahman of Sarabangla.net were attacked and injured by ruling party leaders and activists when they were taking pictures of the rally and ensuing clashes.
33. Senior reporter of BanglaVision, Dipan Dewan and Sheikh Jahangir of Banglanews were injured in the police firing during the clash at the Baitul Mukarram area. At that time, ruling party leaders and activists allegedly snatched the camera away from Desh Rupantar's Harun-Ar-Rashid and forced other journalists to delete photos and videos.⁶⁴

⁶² The daily Prothom Alo, 8 January 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/মেম্বর-প্রার্থীর-সমর্থকদের-বিরুদ্ধে-দুই-সাংবাদিককে-নাশ্তিত-করার-অভিযোগ>

⁶³ The daily Naya Diganta, 23 February 2021; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/chattagram/564759/>

⁶⁴ The daily Prothom Alo, 27 March 2021; <https://epaper.prothomalo.com/?pagedate=2021-3-27&edcode=71&subcode=71&mod=1&pgnum=1&type=a>

Constitutional and State Institutions

34. As in the past, in 2021, the Awami League government is using various important state institutions to implement its political agenda by making them subservient institutions through politicisation. Various institutions including Election Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission, and National Human Rights Commission have thus become dysfunctional.

Election Commission and Electoral system

35. The role of the Election Commission has become questionable. The process of destroying the electoral system in Bangladesh began with the controversial and farcical 10th Parliamentary Elections held on 5 January 2014 during the previous Election Commission headed by Kazi Rakib Uddin. Following this, the Eleventh Parliamentary Elections held on 30 December 2018 under the present Election Commission was also a farce and the electoral system of Bangladesh completely collapsed. Such elections have deprived the people from their right to vote, which has also created mistrust in the government and the Election Commission.
36. The Election Commission decided to hold Municipality elections in five phases across the country in 2020. Of these, elections for 25 Municipalities were held on 28 December 2020 in the first phase. Then the second phase of Municipality elections were held on 16 January 2021, the third phase on 30 January, the fourth phase on 14 February and the fifth phase of elections were held on 28 February.
37. Chittagong City Corporation elections were held on 27 January 2021. These elections were one-sided and government-controlled. After the announcement of the election schedule, the ruling Awami League started implementing its plan of holding unilateral elections by cornering the opposition candidates. Opposition and independent candidates were unable to campaign due to threats and intimidation by the ruling party leaders and activists.
38. Prior to the elections, Awami League leaders publicly spoke⁶⁵ about various irregularities, including 'capturing' polling stations, intimidating voters and attacked campaign-related rallies of the opposition candidates.⁶⁶
39. Municipality unit Awami League President Delwar Hossain was present at a workers' rally on 9 February, organised in support of Awami League nominated mayoral candidate Hasan Qadir Gonu in the Alamdanga Municipality election in Chuadanga District. There, he said that there are many techniques for voting. Votes must be cast before polling. He added that there will be no voting in the polling center. Addressing the leaders and activists, he further stated that the night before the polling, they had to go into

⁶⁵ The daily Manabzamin, 13 February 2021; <https://mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=262628&cat=1/>

⁶⁶ The daily Prothom Alo, 7 January; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/সাভারে-নির্বাচনী-প্রচারণায়-বিএনপির-কর্মী-ও-সমর্থকদের-ওপর-হামলা> and 12 January 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/টাঙ্গাইলে-বিএনপির-মেম্বর-প্রার্থীর-নির্বাচনী-সভায়-হামলা-ভাঙচুর>

candidates did not allow any other party leaders, activists or supporters, except their confirmed voters, to come to the polls on the polling day. Though it was the municipal vote, the ruling party candidates brought people from different unions and cast fake votes with them in different places.⁷⁸ On Election Day, voters had limited opportunity to vote for the candidate of their choice for the post of Commissioners and in most polling centers they were forced to vote publicly for the ruling party's mayor candidate on electoral symbol 'boat'.⁷⁹ Supporters of Awami League also insulted and humiliated women voters for not voting for the ruling party candidate.⁸⁰ The candidates of the ruling party also won unopposed. Awami League nominated candidate ABM Fazle Karim Chowdhury was elected unopposed as a Member of Parliament from Raozan constituency of Chittagong District in the controversial and farcical 10th Parliamentary Elections on 5 January 2014. From then on, the ruling party candidates began to win uncontested in different levels of local government elections in Raozan.⁸¹ Some of the voters who lost interest in the elections went to the polls to cast their votes on the assurances of the government and the Election Commission, but they saw a recurrence of the previous elections. As a result of such unilateral elections, results of most municipal elections were incredible and unacceptable⁸². However, the government's subservient Election Commission has claimed that such elections were fair. After the second phase of elections, Mohammad Alamgir, Senior Secretary of the Election Commission Secretariat, told reporters on 16 January 2021, that the municipality polls were held in a beautiful and peaceful manner.⁸³ However, Mahbub Talukder, the only dissident Commissioner of the Election Commission, said in a discussion meeting on the occasion of National Voters' Day on 2 March 2021 that a model of irregularities had been created in the local government elections.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ The daily Prothom Alo, 16 January 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/000000-0000-000000-0000-000000-0000-0000-0000-0000>

⁷⁹ The daily Prothom Alo, 16 January 2021 <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/00000000-00000000-0000000000-00000000-00000000-00000000-00000000>

⁸⁰ The daily Jugantor, 31 January 2021; <https://www.jugantor.com/country-news/389487/>

⁸¹ The daily Prothom Alo, 11 February 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/00000000-000000-0000-00000000-000000000000>

⁸² The daily Prothom Alo, 30 January 2021; <https://epaper.prothomalo.com/?pagedate=2021-1-30&edcode=71&subcode=71&mod=1&pgnum=1&type=a>

⁸³ The daily Prothom Alo, 17 January 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/000000-00000000-0000-00000000>

⁸⁴ The daily Prothom Alo, 3 March 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/00000000-000000000000-00000000-000000-000000-000000>



In Kishoreganj's Kotiadi Municipality election, a group of youths came to Chariakona Government Primary School polling centre and snatched away ballot papers from all the booths. Clashes broke out between supporters of Councilor candidates Ranbir Singh and Abul Qasim. At one stage, supporters of one side were present with sticks. Photo: Prothom Alo, 31 January 2021



Two persons were present with a voter while the voters was casting their vote, in a secret booth at Tarabo Government Primary School polling centre in Rupganj, Narayanganj. Photo: Prothom Alo, 17 January 2021



Clashes broke out between supporters of two Councilor candidates at Tariyakona Government Primary School polling centre in Ward 4 of Kotiadi Municipality in Kishoreganj. Photo: Prothom Alo, 30 January 2021

44. Elections in Chittagong City Corporation were held on 27 January 2021 amidst various irregularities, fraud and violence. Bombs exploded one after another in about 10 areas before the polls began. There are allegations that

bombs were exploded to prevent voters from going to the polling centers out of fear. Although EVMs were used to cast ballots, supporters of the ruling party Awami League nominated mayoral candidate were present in the secret polling booths of the polling centers and forced voters to vote for the ‘boat’ symbol. A man named Mohammad Alauddin was shot dead in a clash between supporters of two Councilor candidates in Pahartali at the beginning of the polls. When the polling agents of the BNP nominated Councilor candidate protested against the Awami League nominated Councilor candidate for rigging the EVM by ‘capturing’ the polling center in Patharghata ward No. 34, the police beat them up and forced them out. As a result, a clash took place between the police, Awami League and BNP. Police arrested BNP-backed Councilor candidate Ismail Hossain Bali instead of taking action against vote rigging.⁸⁵



Polling officer watches voters in a secret booth at Ekhlachur Rahman Government Primary School polling centre in Bohaddarhat, Chittagong. Photo: Prothom Alo, 27 January 2021



Two persons in a secret booth at the Bakalia Teachers Training College polling centre in Chittagong. The Officer-in-Charge was next door. Photo: Prothom Alo, 27 January 2021

45. In the second phase of the Municipality elections on 16 January 2021, allegations were made that polling agents of non-Awami League candidates were expelled from the Bhobaniganj Government Primary School polling

⁸⁵ The daily Manabzamin, 28 January 2021; <https://mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=260565>

center in Bhoaniganj Municipality under Bagmara Upazila in Rajshahi district and voters were prevented from coming to the polling center.⁸⁶ Voters in two polling centers of Swarnakali Adarsh Vidyalaya in Savar Municipality under Dhaka District voted by EVM in a secret booth for the post of Councilors and reserved (female) Councilor, but they were forced to vote publicly for the post of mayor using an EVM that had been kept outside the secret booth of the polling centers.⁸⁷

46. In the third phase of the Municipality elections held on 30 January 2021, hundreds of youth wearing 'green hats' and Awami League election symbol 'boat' badges, in different polling centers of Shibganj Municipality in Bogura District, evicted voters waiting in queue from the polling centre and entered the polling booths and stamped on 'boat' symbol, after snatching the ballots away from voters. Awami League supporters forcibly snatched a thousand ballots from the Presiding Officer and stamped the boat symbol on them in RUT High School polling centre in Sarishabari of Jamalpur.⁸⁸



A polling agent was openly voting by snatching ballots from voters in Shabdaldighi Government Primary School polling center Shibganj Municipality in Bogura. Photo: Prothom Alo, 30 January 2021

47. On 14 February 2021, outraged voters brought out a protest rally in allegation of vote rigging at Debgram Mah Sultan Government Primary School polling centre in Akhaura Municipality, under Brahmanbaria District, in the fourth phase of elections. A voter named Kohinoor complained that when she went to the polling center, she learnt that her vote had already been cast.⁸⁹ 10-12 Chhatra League leaders and activists, including Munshiganj District unit

⁸⁶ The daily Prothom Alo, 16 January 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□□>

⁸⁷ The daily Prothom Alo, 16 January 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□□>

⁸⁸ The daily Prothom Alo, 31 January 2021; <https://epaper.prothomalo.com/?pagedate=2021-1-31&edcode=71&subcode=71&mod=1&pgnum=1&type=a>

⁸⁹ The daily Prothom Alo, 14 February 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□□>

Chhatra League Organising Secretary Chistia Bepary, snatched away the camera, cell phone and identity card of the staff reporter of local news portal 'Amar Bikrampur' Sihab Ahmed, when he was taking video footage of the presence of outsiders in Enayetnagar High School polling centre of Mirkadim Municipality in Munshiganj.⁹⁰

48. In the fifth phase of elections, on 28 February 2021, despite the crowd of voters and activities of members of law enforcement agencies at the Madhupur Government Primary School polling centre, in Raipura Municipality under Laxmipur District, supporters of the Awami League mayoral candidate forced voters to vote for the 'boat' symbol via EVMs in a secret booth. Similar situation prevailed in other polling centres in Raipura. In some polling centres, voters were forced to vote for 'boat' symbol in public.⁹¹



ABM Yusuf Jalal Kismat, Chairman of Sonapur Union and Organising Secretary of Raipura Upazila unit Awami League, was in the women's booth of Madhupur Government Primary School polling centre during Raipura Municipality election in Laxmipur. Photo: Prothom Alo, 28 February 2021

Anti Corruption Commission

49. In the absence of an accountable government, corruption is rampant in the country. There are allegations of various forms of corruption against the ruling party leaders and supporters and government employees, including looting in the name of development, illegal trade and tender bidding, extortion and embezzlement of relief meant for the poor. All this illegally earned money is allegedly being laundered abroad.⁹² On 28 January 2021, Berlin-based Transparency International (TI), published the Global Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2020 where it said that Bangladesh has seen a two-step decline in the Index. Bangladesh ranks 12th out of 180 countries in terms of lowest score.⁹³

⁹⁰ The daily Prothom Alo, 14 February 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□□>

⁹¹ The daily Prothom Alo, 28 February 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/□□□□□-□□□□□-□□□□□-□□□□□>

⁹² The daily Jugantor, 5 March 2020; <https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/editorial/285382>

⁹³ The daily Manabzamin, 29 January 2021; <https://mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=260586>, TIB, <https://www.ti-bangladesh.org/beta3/index.php/en/articles-op-eds/6247-2021-01-30-04-57-44>

that on 22 September 2020, Maruf Sikder was arrested by Inspector Abdul Malek of the Narcotics Control Department. However, the incident of torture on Maruf was not known at that time. Since the video has now been spread, the issue of taking confession from the accused through torture has come clearly to the fore.

59. Ibrahim Khalil, a Supreme Court lawyer and an elected member of the Executive Committee for 2019-2020 (Media Affairs Secretary of the BNP-backed Bangladesh Nationalist Lawyers Forum) of the Dhaka District Bar, was allegedly abducted and tortured by RAB members and a case was filed against him. Ibrahim Khalil told Odhikar that on 11 March 2021, when he reached the 'Doel Chattar' after leaving the Supreme Court, 10/12 people in plainclothes forcibly picked him up in a micro-bus. The men then blindfolded him and took him into an alley in the Chawkbazar area of old Dhaka. After removing his blindfold, Ibrahim Khalil called the emergency number 999 from his cell phone and asked for the help of the police. When the police arrived, the men identified themselves as RAB members and beat him with sticks in front of the police. After learning the identity of the men, the police left. Later he was taken to Lalbagh RAB Camp CPC-3 by a car. He was also tortured by RAB members at the camp. He was then taken to Babubazar Bridge at midnight through different routes and was taken back to the RAB Camp again after being threatened and told he would be thrown into the water from the top of the bridge. On 12 March, RAB members handed Ibrahim over to Chawkbazar Police Station and filed a case against him under Sections 186¹⁰⁰ and 353¹⁰¹ of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898.¹⁰² Later the Chawkbazar police produced him before the court and the court sent him to jail. On 14 March, Ibrahim Khalil was released on bail from Keraniganj Central Jail and was admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital after falling seriously ill due to the torture.¹⁰³

Enforced disappearances

60. There are allegations that the government is using enforced disappearance as a tool to suppress political movement. Although there are evidences of state security forces being involved in the disappearances¹⁰⁴, the government has

¹⁰⁰ Power to issue summons or warrant for offence committed beyond local jurisdiction. <http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/act-75/section-20971.html>

¹⁰¹ Evidence to be taken in presence of accused. <http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/act-75/section-21464.html>

¹⁰² Available at: <http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/act-details-75.html>

¹⁰³ Information gathered by Odhikar

¹⁰⁴ On 2 March 2017, disappeared victim Mokhesur Rahman Jony's wife Jasmine Nahar Reshma filed a writ petition (No. 2833/2017) before the High Court Division of the Supreme Court. Based on this petition, on 16 May 2017 a High Court Division Bench consisting of Justice Kazi Reza-ul Huq and Justice Mohammad Ullah asked the Chief Judicial Magistrate of Satkhira to submit an inquiry report to the High Court Division by 3 July 2017 regarding the disappearance of homeopathy physician Mokhesur Rahman Jony. A Senior Judicial Magistrate of Satkhira, Habibullah Mahmud, submitted an inquiry report to the High Court Division on 4 July 2017 that found the Superintendent of Police Mohammad Altaf Hossain and former Satkhira Sadar Police Station officer-in-charge Emdadul Huq Sheikh, former Sub-Inspector Himel Hossain, were involved in the arrest of Sheikh Mokhesur Rahman Jony and his subsequent disappearance. It was mentioned in the probe report that OC Emdadul Huq Sheikh and SI Himel Hossain, were directly involved. (<http://www.newagebd.net/article/19321/>) In another case, Narayanganj District and Sessions Judge Syed Enayet Hossain on 16 January 2017 gave a verdict on the killing of seven persons subsequent to their disappearance. 26 accused, including

repeatedly denied such allegations. It has been reported that persons belonging to the opposition political parties and dissidents, have become victims of enforced disappearance. Some of them have been released and many have been handed over to police or produced before the court after being disappeared. Bodies of some have been found after the disappearance. However, many still remain traceless.

61. **From January to March 2021, a total of 11 persons were allegedly disappeared¹⁰⁵ after being picked up by men claiming to be or dress as members of law enforcement agencies. Among them, six disappeared persons were produced before the court, and five were freed after a few days of disappearance.**
62. The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) reviewed the situation of disappearances in Bangladesh at a meeting of the Human Rights Council and said in its observation that it is concerned about the continuing allegations of disappearances in Bangladesh for several years. The Working Group has been receiving complaints regularly about such disappearances. Many of these allegations are related to members of the opposition political parties. The Working Group expressed concern about the practice of apparent impunity for disappearances. Since 2013, the WGEID has repeatedly requested the Bangladeshi government for permission to visit Bangladesh. The WGEID did not receive any response from the government even after sending a request to visit Bangladesh in April last year.¹⁰⁶
63. On 14 March at around 12:30 am, Mir Moazzem Hossain Saifi, Khatib¹⁰⁷ of Dhaka Baitur Mamur Jame Mosque, along with his driver Faisal and two others – Emon and Mahadi Hassan – were picked up by a team of RAB-14 for questioning, while they were on the way to Rangpur after a religious meeting (Awz Mahfil) at Dulla Jamia Islami Madrassa in Muktagachha under Mymensingh District. After interrogation, when RAB-14 members released them at 4:00 am on 17 March, the four of them came to Muktagachha Police Station and informed the police about the incident. Mir Moazzem Hossain Saifi's relative Junaid Hasan said that police handed them over to their families on 17 March.¹⁰⁸
64. In the night of 11 March, four men named Imtiaz Hossain Sabbir (24), Farhad bin Newaz (26), Borhan (40) and Masud Hossain (36) went missing from different areas of Chittagong City. On the same day, Sabbir's father Sahab Mia filed a General Diary (GD) with the Chandgaon Police Station about Sabbir's disappearance. The family members of the other three filed General Diaries on 12 March with Panchlais and Chandgaon Police Stations. On 14 March,

16 RAB officers and commanding officer RAB-11, Lt. Col. (Retrd) Tareq Sayeed were sentenced to death. (<https://www.jugantor.com/news-archive/today-print-edition/first-page/2017/01/17/93821>)

¹⁰⁵ *Odhikar* only documents allegation of enforced disappearance where the family members or witnesses claim that the victim was taken away by people in law enforcement uniform or by those who said they were from law enforcement agencies.

¹⁰⁶ Report of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, 8 December 2020; Available at: <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/WGEID/122/1>

¹⁰⁷ In Islam, a Khatib is a person who delivers the sermon during the Friday prayer and Eid prayers.

¹⁰⁸ Bangla Tribune, 17 March 2021; <https://www.banglatribune.com/671755/>

Sabbir's family learned from the GD's investigating officer that Sabbir had been detained by members of the Detective Branch (DB) of Police and taken to Dhaka. Later, the families of the four disappeared persons came to know that a case has been filed against them under the Digital Security Act, 2018 with Paltan Police Station in Dhaka. They were later sent to jail through the court.¹⁰⁹

Human rights violations in prisons

65. There are reported allegations that many citizens have been imprisoned without any evidence due to the dysfunctional justice system in Bangladesh. Many of them were tortured in remand or illegal detention. After being sent to jail, they fell ill due to torture but were deprived from medical treatment. Many of them died. There is always a crisis of doctors in the prisons. For example, there are allegations that writer Mushtaq Ahmed, who died in prison, did not receive proper treatment there.¹¹⁰
66. Almost all the officials and employees of the prisons in the country have been accused of various kinds of irregularities and corruption, including torture. During this reporting period, there were allegations of torturing detainees with electric shocks inside the prison. On 4 March 2021, an inmate named Rupam Kanti Nath was allegedly given electric shocks and a poisonous injection in Chittagong Central Jail. Rupam Kanti Nath's wife Jharna Rani Debnath filed a case with the Chittagong Metropolitan Sessions Judge Sheikh Ashfaqur Rahman under Section 7(1) of the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act, 2013 on the allegation of torture. Jail Superintendent, Jailor, a physician of the jail hospital and a person named Ratan Bhattacharya have all been accused in the case. The facts of the case allege that Rupam Kanti Nath had been detained in jail since 15 December 2020 in a money transaction-related case. He was admitted to Chittagong Medical College Hospital due to torture. He had bruises on his face and scrotum.¹¹¹
67. The total capacity of prisons across the country is 42,450 inmates. The official capacity provides space for 40,521 male prisoners and 1,929 female prisoners. However, until 31 March 2021, there were 83,837 inmates in the prisons across the country. Of this number, 63,841 were male under-trial prisoners, 2,640 were female under-trial prisoners, 16,730 were male convicted prisoners, and 626 were female convicted prisoners.¹¹²
68. **In the first three month of 2021, 10 persons reportedly died in prisons. Among them, eight persons died due to 'illness', one died due to torture and one inmate was killed by another inmate.**

¹⁰⁹ The Business Standard, 22 March 2021; <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/crime/3-days-after-missing-4-ctg-men-charged-under-dsa-dhaka-220582>

¹¹⁰ The daily Prothom Alo, 5 March 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/□□□□□□-□□□□□□-□□□□□□-□□□□□□-□□□□□□-□□□□□□-□□□□□□-□□□□□□-□□□□□□-□□□□□□-□□□□□□>

¹¹¹ The daily Prothom Alo, 4 March 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/crime/□□□□□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□□□□□□>

¹¹² Bangladesh Jail, Available at: <https://prison.com.bd/>

Death penalty

69. The provision of the death penalty remains in various criminal laws of Bangladesh. Under the dysfunctional criminal justice system in Bangladesh, if the death penalty is the maximum punishment for a crime, the government can use the judiciary to give the death penalty to any person it dislikes. A person imprisoned in a condemned cell has to undergo a lot of mental stress and anxiety, never knowing when the execution will take place. Every year a large number of accused are sentenced to death in the lower courts. Death reference cases from different districts of the country are constantly being submitted to the High Court Division of the Supreme Court. The settlement rate is very low compared to the accumulated death reference cases. As a result, many accused have been on death row in condemned cells across the country for several years. A total of 786 death reference cases were pending in the High Court Division of the Supreme Court from 2015 to 2020. In addition to the death reference, regular jail appeals made by those sentenced to death are also pending. Appeals of 28 death reference cases have been awaiting disposal in the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court.¹¹³
70. **As per Odhikar's documentation, 152 accused persons were sentenced to death in the lower courts from January to March 2021.**
71. On 23 March 2021, Judge Abu Jafar Mohammad Kamruzzaman of Dhaka's Speedy Trial Tribunal-1 sentenced 14 people of Harkat-ul-Jihad to death for conspiracy to assassinate Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and for sedition. The Tribunal ordered that the accused be executed "publicly" by the firing squad. It is to be mentioned that on 20 July 2000, two bombs weighing 76 kg and 40 kg were planted near the meeting place and helipad of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at Kotalipara in Gopalganj district.¹¹⁴

Public lynching

72. The ruling Awami League party has created an environment of unaccountability and impunity in the country by depriving the people of their right to vote. As a result social instability has increased. People's confidence in the state and constitutional institutions, which are subservient to those in power, has diminished and a culture of impunity is being observed in the country due to the crisis of people's trust in the dysfunctional justice system. As a result, there has been a tendency among the ordinary people to take the law into their own hands and people have been killed in public lynching. This has also created a tendency to kill people by mob beatings for personal gain.
73. **In the first three months of 2021, four persons were killed in public lynching.**
74. On 15 January 2021, a man named Rabiullah (28) was beaten by a mob on suspicion of being a thief in Chandina under Cumilla District. He succumbed to his injuries on 22 January at a hospital in Dhaka. Rabiullah's sister Mahmuda said that her brother had returned from Oman a year ago. He then

¹¹³ The daily Shomoyer Alo, 30 January 2021; <https://www.shomoyeralo.com/details.php?id=131398>

¹¹⁴ The daily Star, 24 March 2021; <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/attempting-kill-hasina-2000-14-huji-men-get-death-penalty-2065629>

made a living by driving an auto rickshaw. She invited her brother to a party in their area on 15 January. On his way home after the programme a group of people led by Harun Member beat her brother to death.¹¹⁵

Violence against Women

75. Violence against women continues. Women are being subjected to various forms of discrimination and violence due to the prevailing patriarchal social system in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the leaders and activists of the ruling party are continuing various forms of oppression and violence against women due to the culture of impunity. The number of trials and convictions of all these incidents is negligible compared to the number of incidents of violence against women.

Rape

76. A review of rape cases in the first three months of 2021 shows that incidents of child rape have increased alarmingly. According to a survey, 64 percent of rape victims in Chittagong are children and adolescents.¹¹⁶ Moreover, women with disabilities have also been raped. There are widespread allegations of blackmailing victims by threatening to release the video of the rape on social media.

77. A total of 317 women and children became victims of rape in the last three months. Among them, 126 were women, 184 were girls below the age of 18 while the age of seven female individuals were unknown. Of the number of women who were raped, 27 were victims of gang rape and four were killed after being raped. Out of the 184 girls, 28 were victims of gang rape, five were killed after being raped, and four committed suicide. Furthermore, 64 women and girls were also victims of attempted rape during this period.

78. Mohammad Harun Aur Rashid, Chairman of Baraid Union Parishad in Satoria of Manikganj District and Joint Secretary of the union unit Awami League, held a housewife hostage and raped her; and Ashikur Rahman, nephew of the Chairman, filmed the rape scene. Later, Ashikur extorted thousands of taka from the housewife by threatening to spread the video of the rape on social media and raped her at different times. The housewife filed a case against five people, including Chairman Harun Aur Rashid, under the Digital Security Act, 2018 at the Dhaka Cyber Crime Tribunal.¹¹⁷

Sexual harassment/stalking

79. The prevalence of sexual harassment continued in the first three months of 2021. Allegations of sexual harassment against women have been leveled mostly against ruling party leaders and activists during this period.

¹¹⁵ The daily Naya Diganta, 22 January 2021; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/chattagram/557645/>

¹¹⁶ The daily Prothom Alo, 12 January 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/crime/□□□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□-□□□□-□□□□□□>

¹¹⁷ The daily Jugantor, 19 January 2021; <https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/news/385405/>

80. **Between January and March 2021, a total of 27 females were victims of sexual violence. Of them, two committed suicide, one was killed, two were assaulted, one was abducted, and 21 were victimised in different ways due to stalking/sexual harassment. Furthermore, eight men were injured while protesting incidents of sexual harassment, one man was killed by stalkers and three women who are the relatives of victims were attacked and injured by stalkers while protesting the sexual harassment.**
81. On 6 January 2021, the wife of an expatriate in Abhaynagar of Jashore, was returning to her husband's house from her father's house with her child. On the way, Emadul Haque, President of Shuvarara Union unit Juba League under Abhaynagar Upazila, forcibly took the woman to a house in Nawapara railway slum after threatening to kill her son. He then stripped the woman naked and recorded a video of her on his cell phone. Emadul later threatened to spread the video on social media (Facebook). Police arrested Emadul Haque on 11 January after the victim lodged a case with Abhaynagar Police Station.¹¹⁸
82. On 20 January 2021, Mohammad Sohag Howlader, Organising Secretary of Barishal City's Ward No. 1 unit Awami League, was harassing women workers of Fortune Shoe Company in the BSCIC industrial area in Barishal. When the factory authorities informed the police and RAB about the matter, the police arrested Sohag Howlader from the spot and took him to Kaunia Police Station. Upon receiving this news, Awami League leaders and activists surrounded Kaunia Police Station and protested against the arrest of Sohag Howlader. Workers blocked the Dhaka-Barishal highway demanding the trial of Sohag Howlader.¹¹⁹

Dowry-related violence

83. Although the giving and taking of dowry is a punishable offense under the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1980 and the Prevention of Repression of Women and Children Act, 2000 (amended in 2003), such practice is still widespread in Bangladeshi society and most of the victims are deprived from justice due to the absence of rule of law. There is widespread violence against women over dowry demands. Due to non receipt of dowry, inhumane incidents against women such as burning, beating, choking and stabbing to death are taking place.
84. **A total of 40 women were subjected to dowry violence in the first three months of 2021. Among them, 15 were killed, 24 were physically abused, and one, who was below the age of 18 and thus a child-bride, committed suicide due to dowry demands.**
85. On 17 February 2021, a housewife named Lima Khatun was beaten to death by her husband Sabuj Ali and his relatives in Ullapara of Sirajganj district for not giving her gold (jewelry) as dowry.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ The daily Jugantor, 12 January 2021; <https://www.jugantor.com/country-news/383274>

¹¹⁹ The daily Manabzamin, 20 January 2021; <https://mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=259523&cat=1/>

¹²⁰ The daily Jugantor, 19 February 2021 <https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/news/394652/>

86. On 1 March 2021, a housewife named Runa Begum was beaten to death by her husband Rasel for continued dowry demands even after taking an initial dowry of one hundred thousand taka, in Char Uria Village of Charklak Union under Subarnachar Upazila in Noakhali District. Police arrested Rasel.¹²¹

Acid violence

87. Acid violence continues in the country. During this reporting period acid was thrown at children and elderly men and women.
88. **Between January and March 2021, it was reported that nine persons became victims of acid violence. Of them, six were women, two were girls, and one was a man. Among the nine victims of acid violence, one woman was victimized for dowry demands, three persons over family disputes, one woman was victimized over a land related dispute, one woman for refusing love proposals, one woman was injured for leaving her husband and one child and one woman became victims of acid violence for reasons that were unreported.**
89. On 8 January 2021, a woman named Shamsunnahar poured acid on a six-month-old baby named Afia Akter Meem in Kapasia under Gazipur District, burning various parts of Afia's body, including her ears. The injured child was taken to the Upazila Health Complex for first aid and later to Dhaka for better treatment. Police arrested Shamsunnahar. The child's family could not say why Shamsunnahar threw acid on the child.¹²²
90. On 14 January 2021, auto rickshaw driver Nure Alam beat his elderly father Borhan Uddin and mother Parveen Akhter and threw acid on them during a quarrel in Faridganj under Chandpur District.¹²³

Labour Rights

91. In the first three months of this year, workers in both the formal and informal sectors have been subjected to various human rights violations.

Situation of RMG factory and other formal sector workers

92. Between January and March 2021, incidents of factories being shut down without informing the workers; workers laid off and wages not being paid on time, all led to dissatisfaction among the workers in the ready-made garment industry and other formal sectors. In many factories, workers are deprived from trade union rights and women workers are subjected to various forms of deprivations and physical and mental oppression in factories.
93. On 9 January 2021, members of the police and Ansar¹²⁴ chased and dispersed workers of a garment factory called Kuntang Apparels Limited in Adamji EPZ area under Narayanganj District when they staged a protest in front of

¹²¹ The daily Naya Diganta, 2 March 2021 <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/bangla-diganta/566256/>

¹²² The daily Jugantor, 12 January 2021; <https://www.jugantor.com/country-news/383324/>

¹²³ The daily Jugantor, 15 January 2021; <https://www.jugantor.com/country-news/384243/>

¹²⁴ The Bangladesh Ansars is a paramilitary auxiliary force responsible for the preservation of internal security and law enforcement in Bangladesh.

the factory demanding payment of arrears of allowance and to reopen the factory. Later, workers got together and blocked the Dhaka-Demra road. At that time a clash took place between workers and the police. At least 10 workers were injured when police baton charged and threw tear gas at the workers.¹²⁵



Police baton charged at garment workers in Adamji EPZ area in Narayanganj. Photo: Prothom Alo, 10 January 2021

94. On 9 January 2021, workers of Bata Shoe Company formed a human chain in Dhamrai under Dhaka district demanding reinstatement of jobs. A worker named Mahbubur Rahman said that after 13 years of service the authorities forced him to sign an application for voluntary retirement in September last year. After being laid off, he and his family are struggling to make ends meet.¹²⁶
95. On 25 February 2021, police attacked workers of Al-Amin Garment Factory when they blocked the road in the Oxygen area in Chittagong City, demanding payment of their four-month arrear salaries. This led to clashes between the two groups. Several workers were injured in the incident.¹²⁷

Workers in the informal sector

96. Workers in the informal sector are being discriminated in various ways and their human rights are being violated. In this case, most of the workers have been engaged in hazardous work. Workers are often being killed because they are not provided with the necessary safety equipment such as gloves, masks and helmets.

¹²⁵ The daily Prothom Alo, 10 January 2021 ;

<https://epaper.prothomalo.com/?mod=1&pgnum=6&edcode=71&pagedate=2021-1-10>

¹²⁶ The daily Prothom Alo, 10 January 2021;

<https://epaper.prothomalo.com/?mod=1&pgnum=6&edcode=71&pagedate=2021-1-10>

¹²⁷ The daily Naya Diganta, 26 February 2021; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/more-news/565365/>

101. A young man named Jhumon Das of Noagaon Village under Shalla Upazila in Sunamganj District had allegedly posted something on Facebook insulting Maulana Mamunul Haque, a central leader of Hefazat-e-Islam. Upon the creation of this allegation, Ward No. 9 unit Jubo League President of Saramangal Union under Dirai Upazila and Union Parishad member Shahidul Islam Swadhin and Pokkon Mia, provoked the locals into a frenzy by announcing the news through a megaphone on 16 March. In this situation, the Hindu-dominated Noagaon villagers handed Jhumon Das over to the police. But on 17 March, miscreants led by Juba League leader Shahidul Islam Swadhin and Pokkon Mia attacked the houses of the Hindu community in Noagaon Village, vandalised their houses, temples and idols and looted their valuables.¹³¹ Fearing such an attack, villagers informed the police in advance. Police then assured the people that there would be no attack. Victims complained that the attack could have been prevented if the police and administration had been sincere.¹³² Locals said that the attack on the Hindus, vandalism and looting had nothing to do with the Facebook status about Mamunul Haque. Shahidul Islam Swadhin was the lessee of Kuchakhai Lake on Boram wetlands. Some people from Noagaon Village, including Jhumon Das, who had been arrested, were having a dispute with Swadhin over jalmahal¹³³ of the lake. Haripada Das and Jagadish Chandra Das of Noagaon Village complained to the Upazila Nirbahi Officer against Shahidul Islam Swadhin and the crisis of irrigation water (needed for agriculture) due to illegal fishing and the drying up of water in the jalmahal. In light of this allegation, on 8 January, Upazila Nirbahi Officer Al Moktadir Hossain inspected the Kuchakhai Lake, confiscated various fishing equipment and illegal shallow pump machines and released water into the jalmahal. Jhumon Das posted the video of the breaking of the illegal dam and releasing of water on Facebook. Shahidul Islam Swadhin threatened the people of the Hindu community of Noagaon Village and attacked them by provoking locals to post abusive posts on Facebook about Hefazat leader Mawlana Mamunul Haque.¹³⁴ A case was filed with Shalla Police Station on 18 March against 700 people, citing the names of 70 people only.¹³⁵ On 19 March 2021, the Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI) of Sylhet arrested Shahidul Islam Swadhin.¹³⁶

¹³¹ The daily Jugantor, 19 March 2021; <https://www.jugantor.com/country-news/403576/>

¹³² The daily Prothom Alo, 20 March 2021; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/□□□□□-□□□-□□□□-□□□□□-□□□□□□□□□-□□□□□-□□□□□>

¹³³ Jalmahal – a water sharing policy that has statutory approval.

¹³⁴ The daily Manabzamin, 20 March 2021; <https://mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=266927>

¹³⁵ The daily Prothom Alo, 19 March 2021; [https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□-□□□□□-৭০০](https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□-□□□□□□-□□□□□-৭০০)

¹³⁶ The daily Jugantor, 20 March 2021; <https://www.jugantor.com/country-news/403803/>



Vandalism and looting of the Hindu houses in Shalla Upazila of Sunamganj. Photo: Jugantar, 19 March 2021



Arrested Jubo League leader and UP member Shahidul Islam Swadhin. Photo: Jugantar, 20 March 2021

102. On 28 March 2021, during the hartal called by Hefazat-e-Islam, a group of miscreants attacked Sri Sri Anandamoyi Kali Temple in Brahmanbaria and vandalised the idols of Lord Krishna and goddess Kali.¹³⁷

Bangladesh and its Neighbouring States

India's interference with Bangladesh

103. In the first three months of this year, human rights violations against Bangladeshi nationals by members of the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) continued. During this period, BSF members killed, abducted and tortured Bangladeshi nationals at the border areas and obstructed the reconstruction of a mosque along the Bangladesh-India border.
104. Indian Foreign Minister S. Jayashankar, during his visit to Bangladesh, told reporters on 4 March 2021 that in fact deaths at the border occurred inside India. He said he agreed that every death was tragic, but that we had to ask ourselves, what the root cause of the problem was. He said the reason was criminal activity. "No crime, no death on the border", said the Indian Foreign

¹³⁷ Information gathered by Odhikar

March states that thousands of refugees were trapped due to barbed wire fences around Rohingya refugee camps and could not get out quickly when the massive fire spread.¹⁵⁵



A fire broke out at Rohingya Refugee Camp No. 8 in Balukhali, Ukhia of Cox's Bazar. Photo: Prothom Alo, 22 March 2021



A scene after the fire at the Balukhali Rohingya Camp in Ukhia of Cox's Bazar after the blaze. Photo: Prothom Alo 24 March 2021

Human rights violations by Myanmar border guards and Navy

113. In addition to persecuting Rohingyas and pushing them across the border to Bangladesh, the Myanmar Border Guard Police (BGP) and the Navy are violating human rights of Bangladeshi citizens along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. On 16 January 2021, a Bangladeshi fisherman named Mohammad Islam was shot dead by Myanmar BGP while some Bangladeshi fishermen were fishing in the Naf River.¹⁵⁶ On 20 January, the Myanmar Navy captured 20 Bangladeshi fishermen and four fishing boats when they were fishing in the Bay of Bengal near St. Martin's Island in Teknaf under Cox's

¹⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch, 25 March 2021; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/25/bangladesh-refugee-camp-fencing-cost-lives-blaze>

¹⁵⁶ The daily Naya Dignata, 17 January 2021; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/chattagram/556503/>

Bazar District. The Bangladeshi fishermen were allegedly tortured by members of the Myanmar Navy.¹⁵⁷

Hindrance to Human Rights Activities

114. The crackdown on Odhikar that began in 2013 has not changed in 2021. The case filed against Odhikar's Secretary and Director in 2013 under the Information and Communication Technology Act 2006 (amended 2009) is still pending. On 14 February 2021, the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court rejected the petition for dismissing the said case filed against Odhikar's Secretary and Director and ordered that the case proceed with the Cyber Crimes Tribunal. Odhikar also applied to the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) under the Prime Minister's Office for the renewal¹⁵⁸ of its registration in 2014, but the registration has not been renewed till March 2021. Human rights defenders associated with Odhikar are under surveillance for being vocal against human rights violations. Odhikar has also been forced to resort to self-censorship during the writing and publishing of its reports due to various obstacles and hindrances to freedom of expression placed by the government.

¹⁵⁷ The daily Prothom Alo, 20 January 2021 ; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/□□□□□-□□□□□□-□□-□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□□□□-□□□□□□□□□□>

¹⁵⁸ On 13 May 2019, *Odhikar* filed a Writ Petition (numbered 5402/2019) to the High Court Division of the Supreme Court; the court issued a Rule upon the NGO Affairs Bureau as to why the inaction of the Respondent to grant renewal of registration, pursuant to application made by the Petitioner dated 25.09.2014, shall not be declared to be without lawful authority and of no legal effect; and why the Respondent shall not be directed to renew registration of the Petitioner from 2015 onwards in accordance with law. The Bureau of NGO Affairs was asked to respond to the Rule within two weeks, but the NGOAB did not take any action to renew its registration.

Recommendations

1. The international community including the United Nations must urgently cooperate in restoring transparent, fair, and participatory electoral democracy in Bangladesh.
2. The government must stop political interference on the constitutional and state institutions. The government must also refrain from activities in relation to controlling the Judiciary.
3. Citizen's right to freedom of peaceful assembly must be protected and ensured. Attacks on and harassment of opposition political parties and dissidents must be stopped. The government must refrain from repressive, unconstitutional and undemocratic activities.
4. Interference on freedoms of expression and the media must be stopped. All false cases filed against journalists and human rights defenders should be withdrawn and incidents of attacks on them must be properly investigated and the responsible persons be brought to justice. The ban on the publication of the daily Amar Desh and on the broadcasting of Diganta TV, Islamic TV and Channel 1 must be removed.
5. All repressive and abusive laws, including the Special Powers Act, 1974, the Information and Communication Technology Act, 2006 (amendment 2009 and 2013), the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2009 (amended 2012 and 2013) and the Digital Security Act, 2018 and its Rules 2020 should be repealed immediately. Cases filed under these laws should be withdrawn and those arrested should be released. Surveillance of internet-based communication, including social media should also be stopped.
6. Members of the law enforcement and intelligence agencies who are involved in extreme human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, torture and enforced disappearance and those aiding and abetting them, must be brought to justice and punished as per law. The law enforcement agencies must follow international guidelines, namely the "Basic Principles on the use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials" and the "UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials".
7. The government must accede to the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture; and effectively implement the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act, 2013 and the High Court and Appellate Division directives contained in the matter of *BLAST and Others vs. Bangladesh and Others*.
8. Persons who are disappeared must be retrieved and returned to their families. The government must accede to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and criminalise enforced disappearance by bringing it under domestic law. Persons involved in acts of enforced disappearance must be brought to justice.
9. The government must ensure proper implementation of laws to stop violence against women and children and the offenders must be effectively punished under prevalent laws. Shelter homes must be created in all districts for victims of domestic violence. Section 10 of the Suppression of Repression against Women and Children Act, 2000 (amended 2003) must be amended to

include the definition of sexual harassment and stalking as given by court directives in the matter of *BNWLA vs. Bangladesh (2010)*.

10. An enabling environment will have to be created for workers in the readymade garment industry and other industries, including the paying of adequate wages. Factories will have to be designed with proper infrastructure and adequate facilities and security measures. Workers' rights must be implemented in accordance with the ILO Conventions, ensuring the right to form trade unions in all factories, including ready-made garment factories. Workers in informal sectors, including the construction industry, need to be able to create a working environment that is conducive to their employment, and also fair policies for their work must be in place, including for the prevention of discrimination.
11. Citizens belonging to the minority communities, be they language, ethnic or religious communities, must be protected and the state and government must take special measures to ensure their full rights in the exercise of their language, religion and culture. The government must bring all persons guilty of persecution of such groups under trial.
12. The Indian Border Security Force (BSF) must stop all human rights violations, including killing and torturing of Bangladeshi citizens along the border areas. The Indian government must stop its interference with and aggressive attitude towards Bangladesh.
13. The safe and dignified repatriation of the Rohingya people to their homeland, must be ensured along with the restoration of their citizenship. The human rights of the Rohingya community need to be established by ensuring justice for the crimes committed against them. Relocation of Rohingya refugees to Bhasanchar must be stopped. The barbed wire fence around the Rohingya refugee camps must be removed immediately and the results of the investigation into the fire must be made public.
14. The ongoing repression on Odhikar and on human rights defenders associated with Odhikar must stop. The case filed against Odhikar's Secretary and its Director under the Information and Communication Technology Act, 2006 (amended in 2009) must be withdrawn. The NGO Affairs Bureau must renew Odhikar's registration.

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Notes:

1. *Odhikar* seeks to uphold the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of the people.
2. *Odhikar* documents and records violations of human rights and receives information from its network of human rights defenders and monitors media reports.
3. *Odhikar* conducts detailed fact-finding investigations into some of the most significant violations, with assistance from trained local human rights defenders.
4. *Odhikar* is consistent in its human rights reporting and is committed to remain.