



CIVICUS MONITOR WATCHLIST

BANGLADESH

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOMS



INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh's civic space is rated '[repressed](#)' by the CIVICUS Monitor. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League party have been in government since 2009 and have consolidated political power by targeting the opposition, harassing civil society and silencing all forms of dissent, including critics in exile.

In recent years, CIVICUS has [documented](#) the judicial harassment of human rights defenders, journalists and the political opposition, many on trumped up charges. The draconian Digital Security Act has been the weapon of choice, used to silence hundreds of activists, journalists and critics, including those in exile. The police have also cracked down on protests and there have been allegations of torture, ill-treatment and enforced disappearances committed by the security forces, including the Rapid Action Battalion, an elite anti-terrorism unit, as well as supporters of the ruling party. Civil society groups have also been vilified, targeted and silenced, including leading human rights group Odhikar.

Despite concerns raised by the [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#), Volker Turk, in March 2023 about the increasing incidence of political violence and ongoing harassment of human rights defenders and media personnel, ahead of elections scheduled for early 2024, and by [UN experts](#) in July 2023 about the harassment of Odhikar, the repression on civic freedoms has persisted.

The country has been added to the CIVICUS Monitor Watchlist due to the ramping up of attacks against the opposition and critics in recent months. These ongoing restrictions and attacks on civic space are inconsistent with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Bangladesh is a state party.

ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The [CIVICUS Monitor](#), an online platform that tracks threats to civil society in countries across the globe, rates civic space – the space for civil society – in [Bangladesh](#) as "**Repressed**".

The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

CLOSED**REPRESSED****OBSTRUCTED****NARROWED****OPEN**

CRUSHING THE OPPOSITION

With the ruling Awami League party seeking a fourth consecutive term, Sheikh Hasina and her government are cracking down on campaign activities by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and other opposition parties.

In April 2023, around 50 BNP activists were injured and many were arrested as police and ruling Awami League activists [attacked the party's sit-in programmes](#) in several places across the country. In May 2023, police [fired tear gas and arrested members](#) of the BNP who took to Dhaka's streets to protest as their leader, former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, went on trial. About 100 were injured.

On 28th and 29th July, the opposition BNP planned a sit-in protest at various points in Dhaka. In the days leading up to a major demonstration, the [authorities arrested](#) over 800 leaders and activists of the BNP. The police said they had not granted BNP permission for the protest and blockaded entrances to Dhaka. There were multiple reports of [excessive force](#) documented by human rights groups, including police indiscriminately firing rubber bullets, tear gas and water cannon and beating opposition party supporters with batons.

[Human rights groups reported](#) people in civilian clothing - believed to be ruling party supporters - brandishing weapons like hammers, sticks and clubs at the protests, beating up protesters 'side by side' with police personnel. According to the BNP, [600 supporters were injured](#) by police rubber bullets and attacks by the ruling party.

On 21st August, police said they had [arrested](#) 18 BNP leaders and activists and its associate bodies, including six leaders of the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal - the student wing of the BNP - for planning to carry out anti-government activities. On the same day, the police reportedly [filed two cases](#) against about 1,000 leaders and activists of the BNP and its affiliated bodies. In another incident, at least 15 BNP leaders and activists were [injured](#), including two with gunshot wounds, in an attack allegedly carried out by Awami League members in Cumilla on 27th August.

HARASSMENT AND ATTACKS ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Under the Sheikh Hasina government, human rights defenders have been targeted with surveillance, politically motivated charges, and arbitrary detention. Some have also been tortured, attacked and killed.

These actions are exemplified by the harassment of human rights group Odhikar that has been dragged through the courts for over ten years after publishing a fact-finding report on extrajudicial killings in Bangladesh in 2013. Two of Odhikar's leaders, human rights defenders Adilur Rahman Khan and ASM Nasiruddin Elan, were facing trial on allegations of violating Section 57 of the 2006 Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act. In 2023, the government [accelerated hearings](#) against them and on 14th September they were sentenced to two years jail and a fine. According to UN experts, the trial has been marred by due [process](#) violations. Previously in 2022, the authorities [declined to renew](#) the organisation's registration pending since 2015. In addition to this legal process, Odhikar has also faced public smear campaigns from the authorities.

Other recent cases include the killing of Shahidul Islam, a union organiser who dedicated his life to seeking justice for garment factory workers in Bangladesh. Islam, who was president of the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation (BGIWF) Gazipur district committee, was [beaten to death](#) on 25th June 2023 after he visited a factory in Gazipur to secure unpaid wages for the factory's workers. Although six people are being [investigated](#) for the attack, it is believed the mastermind behind the killing has yet to be hauled up.

Academic and human rights defender Maidul Islam is facing [harassment](#) due to his social media posts criticising the authorities and raising concerns over transparency in the upcoming elections. In August 2023 he received a show cause letter from the Chittagong University where he is teaching. He is also facing an online smear campaign from members of the student wing of the ruling party, the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL). In the same month, the Bangladesh Financial Intelli-

gence Unit (BFIU), an intelligence agency operating under the Bangladesh Bank, requested all banks to provide account details of human rights defender Zillur Rahman and the civil society organisation he leads, the Centre for Governance Studies.

Pro-government [media](#) outlets and [pro-ruling party NGO leaders](#) have mobilised a smear campaign against Hong Kong based exiled human rights defender [Mohammad Ashrafuzzaman](#) for [speaking as a panelist](#) at the US Congressional [briefing](#) hosted by the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission on 15th August 2023. Ashrafuzzaman was [accused](#) of being “a CIA covert agent” and “part of a larger scheme to manipulate political landscapes in Asia”.

SILENCING ONLINE CRITICS

The draconian [Digital Security Act](#) (DSA) – a law that contains overbroad and vague provisions granting the authorities extensive powers to police the online space – continues to be used against online critics.

In March 2023, [UN Human Rights Chief Volker Türk](#) called on Bangladesh to suspend immediately its application of the DSA which has been “used across Bangladesh to arrest, harass and intimidate journalists and human rights defenders, and to muzzle critical voices online”.

In May 2023, the United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Olivier De Schutter, after the official country visit to Bangladesh, [said](#) the DSA “has been used to suppress independent thought and voices including on the internet. Human rights defenders, students, activists, journalists, opposition politicians and academics have been harassed, detained and, in some cases, allegedly tortured during custody – resulting in death.”

The gravity of the abuse of the DSA is reflected in the latest acknowledgement by Bangladesh’s Law Minister, Anisul Huq. On 5th June 2023, responding to a question in the parliament, Huq disclosed that [7001 cases were registered under the DSA](#) between 11th October 2018 and 31st January 2023.

In August 2023, it was reported that the government would [replace the draconian Digital Security Act](#) (DSA) with the Cyber Security Act (CSA). However, human rights activists and opposition political leaders have expressed concerns over the draft Cyber Security Act, saying it is as repressive as the existing DSA that it is set to replace. Amnesty International stated that the draft law [retains all but one of the offences](#) contained in the DSA verbatim and the only notable changes were related to sentencing.

Similarly, a [letter from the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression](#) to the government states that the draft Cyber Security Act contains vague and overly broad provisions that criminalise many legitimate forms of expression. The punishments remain disproportionately harsh under the draft Act and law enforcement agencies and the telecommunications regulatory authority enjoy extensive, unfettered power under the draft Act.

TARGETING OF JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA OUTLETS

In Bangladesh, journalists have been targeted for their reporting or for being critical of the authorities. Some have been criminalised under the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA), while others have been attacked and even disappeared. Pro-government entities have also engaged in smear campaigns against journalists, including against those who are based abroad, and primarily for criticising the Sheikh Hasina government.

Bangladesh [ranks 163 in the World Press Freedom Index](#) published in May 2023 by [Reporters Without Borders](#) (RSF), falling behind all the countries of South Asia. As of early May 2023, at least 339 DSA cases had been filed against journalists since its inception in 2018, according to a [tracker](#) operated by the Dhaka-based think tank Centre for Governance Studies.

Rozina Islam, a renowned investigative journalist, is [facing charges](#) for violating the Official Secrets Act of 1923 – an outdated colonial law – for investigating government corruption and mismanagement of the health sector during the pandemic. She was detained in May 2021, and the case against her is ongoing. In February 2023, UN experts urged the government

to [drop the charges](#) against her. On 23th August 2023, the courts denied Islam [access to her passport](#), stopping her from attending a Global Investigative Journalism Conference (GIJC) in Sweden.

In March 2023, a group of unidentified individuals [attacked Mahinur Khan](#), brother of exiled journalist Zulkarnain Saer Khan. Mahinur suffered severe injuries to his legs and arms as the attackers hit him with iron rods. Saer Khan is based in the United Kingdom. He works for the [Al-Jazeera Investigative Unit](#) (AJ-I Unit). In the same month, journalist Shamsuzzaman Shams from *Prothom Alo*, Bangladesh's largest daily, was detained under the [Digital Security Act](#) (DSA) after writing a story highlighting the struggles of low-income people. With reference to the article, on 10th April, Bangladesh prime minister Sheikh Hasina called *Prothom Alo* "an enemy of the Awami League, democracy, and the people of Bangladesh".

Journalist Adhora Yeasmean is facing an [investigation](#) under the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) for her 29th April 2023 video report for RTV on the alleged crimes of the religious organisation, Rajarbagh Darbar Sharif.

In June 2023, two [social media outlets were shut down](#) by the authorities. The Chittagong district administration in south-east Bangladesh sealed the offices of the privately owned social media-based platforms CplusTV and C Vision and confiscated their equipment. It is believed that the local authorities acted under the direct orders of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and that the outlets were being selectively targeted ahead of the national election due to their critical coverage of politics and human rights in Chittagong.

FAILURE TO ADDRESS ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

Human rights groups have systematically reported on enforced disappearances by law enforcement agencies. In August 2023, civil society organisations issued a [joint statement](#) over the continued commission of enforced disappearances and the denial of access to justice for the victims. According to the statement, government agencies have continued to subject members of opposition parties and dissidents to enforced disappearance for the past decade and a half. Citing statistics from Odhikar, from January to June 2023, at least 16 persons were subjected to enforced disappearance.

Among the disappeared victims, some persons were released after being kept incommunicado at undisclosed facilities and many were handed over to the police or produced before a court after being implicated in cases of terrorism or arson. Family members of the victims of enforced disappearances have also been subjected to intimidation and harassment by members of law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure that all those canvassing ahead of the elections are assured a safe and peaceful environment that respects and promotes political plurality and the expression of diverse views, in full respect for fundamental rights and freedoms.
- End the judicial harassment of human rights group Odhikar, quash the convictions of human rights defenders Adilur Rahman Khan and ASM Nasiruddin Elan and halt the smear campaign against them.
- Immediately and unconditionally drop all charges and release all human rights defenders, journalists and critics detained for exercising their fundamental rights to freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression, and review their cases to prevent further harassment.
- Halt the use of the Digital Security Act 2018 to criminalise online dissent and review the draft Cyber Security Act in order to bring it in line with the ICCPR and other international law and standards in the area of freedom of expression.
- Ensure that journalists and writers may work freely and without fear of retribution for expressing critical opinions or covering topics that the government may deem sensitive.
- Adopt best practices on freedom of peaceful assembly, as put forward by the 2012 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association and by General Comment No. 37 on the right to peaceful assembly adopted by the UN Human Rights Committee in 2020.
- Unconditionally and immediately release all protesters who have been detained for exercising their right to freedom of peaceful assembly and review their cases to prevent further harassment. Immediately and impartially investigate all instances of excessive force committed by security forces in the context of protests.
- End and criminalise the practice of enforced disappearances and ensure truth, justice and reparations for the victims and their families. Bangladesh should ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and accept the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances' request to conduct an official visit to Bangladesh.