

Bangladesh: Urgent Call to Safeguard Human Rights and Democracy Ahead of January Elections

(December 12, 2023) The undersigned organizations express our deep concern about Bangladesh's current human rights situation and closure of civic space as the country heads toward national elections on 7 January 2024.

Since late October 2023, following the rallies and demonstrations co-organized by the political opposition, the ruling party of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the Awami League, has [resorted to violence](#) to suppress protests and political dissent. The crackdown has resulted in 17 people being killed, including a journalist, and [8,249 opposition leaders injured](#). Moreover, [at least 50 people were injured](#) as a result of a clash between police, ruling party and opposition party activists during a human chain organized on the commemoration of the International Human Rights Day in the Sayestanagar area of Habiganj. These cases further emphasize the urgent need for accountability and a thorough and independent investigation into the circumstances leading to the violence and the killings.

The indiscriminate and excessive use of [tear gas, sticks, batons, rubber bullets, and similar instruments](#) by law enforcement authorities raises serious concerns about the escalation of violence. Immediate action is needed to address the abuse of police equipment. The disproportionate use of such tools not only violates the fundamental rights of citizens but also exacerbates tensions, creating an environment that undermines dissent, peaceful assembly and democratic dialogue. Security forces must urgently follow the international human rights standards, including the [United Nations Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials](#) and the [United Nations Human Rights Guidance on Less-Lethal Weapons in Law Enforcement](#).

In addition, since the end of October, the Bangladeshi government has [massively and arbitrarily detained more than 20,000 individuals](#) identified or perceived as the opposition. The arrests are related to 837 fabricated charges cases, where [bail is consistently denied](#) despite valid grounds and [due process guarantees are undermined](#). There have also been consistent and credible reports of [torture](#) and illegal [isolation](#) of detainees in custody. The alleged torture inflicted on persons in custody is not limited to the detentions that occurred over the past month but rather has been [reported in the past](#) and includes "beatings; electric shocks; waterboarding; [deliberately shooting](#) to maim, [including knee-capping](#); [mock executions](#); and forced nudity."

The government is systematically using the judiciary to convict the key opposition leaders [en masse](#), through prosecuting in the [extended hours in the evenings](#) to disqualify the potential opposition candidates ahead of the January 7, 2024, elections, as pre-planned months ago. The large-scale detentions and convictions not only erode the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, freedom, personal integrity, and the right to a fair trial but also leave [countless families in distress](#), as the detained individuals are often the sole income earners of their households.

The extensive use of violence and arbitrary detentions in Bangladesh paints a grim picture of the state of democracy and human rights in the country. These abuses are committed in the context of a social movement in which the people are demanding [free and fair elections](#) next January. Instead of upholding the fundamental principles of democracy, the Bangladeshi government's violent and repressive response ["has created an environment of fear, anxiety and extreme insecurity for citizens"](#).

[United Nations experts](#) shared their concern about this violent crackdown: "As Bangladesh heads towards national elections in early 2024, we are deeply disturbed by the sharp rise in political violence, arrests of senior opposition leaders, mass arbitrary detention of thousands of political activists, use of excessive force by the authorities and internet shutdowns to disrupt protests, and allegations of harassment, intimidation and unlawful detention of family members as a retaliatory measure".

Another concern is the [draft Data Protection Act](#), which allows law enforcement unrestricted authority to access citizens' data "if it is deemed necessary for national security or prevention or detection of an offence". Misuse of such power could lead to widespread surveillance, particularly of political dissenters, and poses a threat to human rights, particularly the right to privacy. The cases in which the collection and access are necessary must be defined clearly and narrowly tailored to the legitimate purposes they aim to accomplish, limited in time and scope, and subject to an independent judicial review.

We stand with the people of Bangladesh as they strive for a fair, democratic, and peaceful society. We strongly urge an immediate halt to the violence, repression, and intimidation targeting political opponents. Hence, we call on the government of Bangladesh to:

1. Immediately cease violence against protesters and ensure that the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly, life, liberty, and personal integrity are respected and protected.
2. Immediately and unconditionally drop all the politically-motivated cases, release all arbitrarily detained activists and opposition members, and ensure fair and transparent judicial processes.
3. Conduct a thorough and impartial investigation into the gross human rights violations, particularly cases involving deaths and torture allegations.
4. Reevaluate and revise the Draft Data Protection Act to ensure it aligns with international standards, protecting the privacy and rights of citizens.

Furthermore, we urge the international community to closely monitor the situation and advocate for the protection of fundamental rights in Bangladesh.

Signed:

1. Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights (RFKHR)
2. Capital Punishment Justice Project (CPJP)
3. The [United Against Torture Consortium](#) (UATC)
4. Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD)
5. Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network (ADPAN)
6. International Coalition Against Enforced Disappearances (ICAED)