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21 September 2023 GMT 00:00

Bangladesh added to human rights watchlist as crackdown escalates ahead of January elections

- Political opposition targeted
- Fabricated charges used to imprison activists and critics of the government
- Excessive force, including live ammunition used at protests

The [CIVICUS Monitor](#) has added Bangladesh to its Watchlist of countries experiencing rapid declines in civic freedoms following the imprisonment and targeting of government critics.

With elections scheduled for January, the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina appears willing to do whatever it takes to crush dissent, including targeting supporters of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and attempting to silence activists and journalists through legal and other means.

“Bangladesh is going down a dangerous path,” said Josef Benedict, Asia Pacific researcher for CIVICUS. “We have seen the authorities ramp up its repression of the opposition, activists and critics with impunity. To ensure credible elections in January, the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina must respect fundamental freedoms, including the right to protest and speak freely and ensure a safe and peaceful environment for all political parties to operate.”

The CIVICUS Monitor Watchlist, released to coincide with the 54th Session of the UN Human Rights Council (11 September - 13 October), highlights five countries at risk of a sharp downturn in civic rights and freedoms. The determination is based on data compiled by the CIVICUS Monitor, which tracks the state of civic freedoms in 197 countries and territories using input from research partners based around the globe. In addition to Bangladesh, the latest Watchlist includes Bosnia & Herzegovina, Ecuador, Senegal and the United Arab Emirates.

“The harassment of human rights defenders and journalists and the repressive environment has created a chilling effect in Bangladesh, with many fearful of speaking up,” said Benedict. “The international community must step up efforts to stand in solidarity with civil society, call out these abuses and push for the opening up of civic and democratic space.”

So far this year, authorities have carried out mass arrests of BNP supporters undertaking protests and filed thousands of fabricated cases against them. Police and mobs of alleged ruling Awami League party supporters have attacked BNP protesters with sticks, tear gas, rubber bullets and live ammunition. Numerous BNP activists have been forcibly disappeared, too.

Hasina's government has also escalated harassment of human rights defenders. This month, a Dhaka court jailed activists Adilur Rahman Khan and Nasiruddin Elan for a ten year-old report investigating extrajudicial killings.

Authorities have attempted to silence the media too by shutting down critical news outlets, prosecuting journalists under the draconian Digital Security Act, and harassing and arbitrarily detaining journalists as well as the families of journalists in exile. A new bill to replace the digital security law is as repressive as the current law.

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.

"Every month seems to bring a new attack on civic space in Bangladesh," said Benedict. "We urge the government to release immediately and unconditionally the two human rights defenders from Odhikar, halt its harassment of activists and journalists and ensure all restrictive laws are revised - including the draft Cyber Security Act - in accordance with international laws and standards."

Notes to the editor:

The [CIVICUS Monitor](#) collaborates with and uses data from research partners based around the globe. The research platform provides civic space ratings for 197 countries and territories which are based on up-to-date information on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. In addition to Bangladesh, the latest Watchlist includes Bosnia & Herzegovina, Ecuador, Senegal and the United Arab Emirates.

CIVICUS is a global alliance of civil society organisations and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society worldwide. CIVICUS has over 15,000 members in 175 countries

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