

Bangladesh government introduces harsh new security laws

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Bangladesh President Shahabuddin Ahmed signed into law a Public Safety (Special Provisions) Bill on February 14 giving sweeping powers to the police. Under the pretext of dealing with criminals and terrorists, Prime Minister Sheik Hasina's government will use the new law to witchhunt the political opponents of the ruling Awami League regime and to suppress social unrest by workers and the poor.

Hasina's regime has already begun to use the law against opposition activists. According to a report on February 18, 300 members of the opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP), including the city mayor, have been charged under the new measures in Rajshahi, southwestern Bangladesh. In the Dhaka metropolitan area nine cases had been registered under the new law by February 17.

The bill was rammed through the parliament with unusual haste—within four days—at the end of January. Not only the BNP-led opposition alliance, but also the media, human right groups and lawyers, denounced it as a “black law.” The government named it as a special bill, similar to a finance bill, so that it would become law automatically within 14 days even if the President did not give his approval.

The bill specifies nine acts of crime: hijacking, extortion, damage to cars and properties, obstruction to free movement of transport, kidnapping for ransom, terrorism through explosion and arson, filing cases on false charges, incitement to commit criminal acts and obstruction to tender process. One-member special tribunals will conduct “speedy trials” on these crimes, with punishments ranging up to 14 years rigorous imprisonment.

Section 16 of the bill deprives those charged of the right to obtain bail during the trial period. If the tribunal finds an accused is not involved with the case it can

grant bail but only after its investigation is completed. This investigation can take 75 days and a trial up to 90 days, and a tribunal can extend both periods.

If a tribunal deems it “fit for justice,” it can consider an accused as a witness. There is also provision for trial in absentia, and for the use of audio and video records and photographs as evidence.

The government has introduced the bill in the midst of growing political instability, aggravated by continuous protest movements organised by the opposition alliance, which is demanding that the government resign and hold a mid-term election. In the urban and rural areas, the masses are in ferment, struggling for survival. Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world—more than 47 percent of its people live below the poverty line. With these laws the government has sent a message that it will not tolerate any opposition.

The bill was initially drafted last April when the government launched a massive crackdown, arresting and branding as terrorists nearly 50,000 people—mostly youth—from the rural areas in the south-east of the country. The purpose of that operation was to round up splinter Maoist groups and to terrorise the rural poor. The government wanted to subject these detainees to a harsh new law but it was forced to withdraw the bill last September in the face of widespread criticism.

The government will undoubtedly use the new bill to launch a fresh wave of repression in the rural areas. Finance Minister Kibria referred directly to last April's mass detentions. He said the government was able to wipe out terrorist groups in south-western districts last year and the new law would help “fight terrorism in the whole country”.

Defending the bill, Home Minister Mohammed Nazim claimed that he had previously been “unable to

nab criminals and punish them quickly with 100-year-old laws.” While promising that the bill would not be used against the government’s political opponents, in the same breath he pointed to the opposition and said “most of them are terrorists and extortionists”.

He also told parliament: “Another purpose of enacting this bill is to stop any conspiracy. The opposition political parties are in a movement and their one point is nothing but to save the killers of Bangabandhu (referring to Sheik Mujibur Rehman, the first leader of Bangladesh) and four other leaders murdered in the jail.” The Awami League blames figures connected to the BNP for the assassination of Sheik Mujibur Rehman in 1975.

The government is already able to use the Special Powers Act, inherited from the days of the first president. But the Home Minister told the parliament that the government wanted to close all the loopholes in the law. Sheik Hasina sought to justify the new laws by blaming the BNP for failing to make previous anti-terrorist laws permanent. “We did not give any time frame to the law as the BNP did to the Anti-Terrorist Act,” she said. (The BNP’s laws were enacted for two years.)

Late last year Sheik Hasina had been trying to reach a compromise with the opposition in order to meet the demands of big business and the Western powers for an end to the political agitation. The continuous strikes were harming business and threatening to trigger wider political unrest. Two days after the new bill passed through parliament, the US Ambassador to Bangladesh, speaking to the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industries on February 1, said: “Political stability, uninterrupted port operation and a development of infrastructure, would be essential for attracting foreign investment.”

There has been widespread opposition to the law, however, which the right-wing BNP-led alliance has sought to exploit for its political advantage. Launching a three-day strike against the law in the third week of February, BNP leader Begum Khalida Zia said she would work to “ensure the black law is not enforced”. She promised to scrap the law if voted into office. Yet in 1992 the BNP regime enacted its own infamous anti-terrorist laws, subjecting political opponents to severe police repression, including deaths in jails.

An editorial on January 28, in the *Daily Star*, a

Bangladesh newspaper, said the government’s decision to “ruthlessly short circuit the process” of parliament to pass the bill within four days “points to dubious political motivation, only to put it politely”. It continued: “Even without this law the government has already set a record of detentions numbering over 5,000 between July 1996 and June 1998.”

Far from ending opposition to the government, the Public Safety Bill is likely to become a focus for further protests and demonstrations demanding its resignation.



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