Bangladesh's Awami League government intensifies anti-democratic attacks on its critics

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An online seminar last month in Bangladesh involving several human rights organisations and prominent activists has revealed increasing state repression of anti-government critics through the Digital Security Act (DSA) and using COVID-19 as a political cover.

The DSA, which was passed in October 2018, replacing the previous Information Communication and Technology Act, is part of Prime Minister Sheik Hasina's moves towards authoritarian forms of rule.

According to *Newagebd.net*, Article 19, a British human rights organisation, told the seminar that there have been 1,929 violations of freedom of expression and rights to information targeting 2,613 people in Bangladesh this year.

Since COVID-19 hit the country there have been 51 attacks on media workers and 76 journalists have reported harassment. Between March and June, 73 people were arrested over cases filed under the DSA. Many have been detained without bail.

Faruq Faisel, the South Asia regional director of Article 19, criticised the government for hampering the flow of information about the virus. On April 7, the government stopped journalists asking questions at its daily COVID-19 press conference, and on August 12 ended all public briefings on the pandemic.

The *Business Standard's* deputy executive editor Shakhawat Liton said that journalists and other commentators had become highly cautious when writing or voicing their opinions.

Mizanur Rahman Khan, a joint editor of *Prothom Alo*, told the seminar that media owners and officials had failed to lodge any strong protests against the anti-democratic DSA, and other repressive laws, because they had close relations with the ruling elite.

In May, the police charged Didarul Bhuiyan, an organiser of Rastrachintam, a civil rights formation, for allegedly criticising the government over its lack of assistance to the most marginalised and oppressed layers of society. His findings, shared on his social media account, were later republished by *Front Line Defenders*, an Irish-based human rights organisation. Bhuiyan was not released on bail by the High Court until September 14, following the rejection of earlier bail petitions.

Along with Bhuiyan, Dhaka Stock Exchange director Minhaz Mannan Emon, writer Mushtaq Ahmed and cartoonist Ahammed Kabir Kishore were arrested by the notorious Rapid Action Battalion after being charged with DSA violations. Mushtaq Ahmed and cartoonist Kabir Kishore were still in jail, according to a *New Age* report on September 14.

In June, two journalists and two educators were detained for writing critical remarks about the official response to the pandemic. Sirajum Munira, a female teacher from Begum Rokeya University Rangpur, and Kazi Zahidur Rahman, assistant professor from Rajshahi University, were arrested for allegedly defaming on social media the deceased former Health Minister Mohammad Nasim. Both had exposed irregularities in the health sector under Nasim. Rahman was not bailed until August 27 and Munira on August 5.

In July, two teachers from Farakkabad College campus and a teacher from Farakkabad Madrasa were also arrested for their alleged "derogatory Facebook posts against the education minister, and other officials."

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Shafiqul Alam Kajol, a photojournalist and editor, was victimised under the DSA earlier this year for exposing the crimes of Shamima Noor Papiam, a former general secretary of the Awami League's youth women's front in the Narsingdi district. Papiam and her husband were arrested in February over sex trade and arms selling rackets as they tried to flee the country.

Saifuzzaman Shikhor, an Awami League parliamentarian, filed a case against Kajol and another 30 media workers in March for allegedly sharing an article about Papiam on social media. Two DSA cases were filed against photojournalist Kajol in the same month. He was detained by law enforcement agencies that refused to provide any information about his whereabouts for 53 days. Kajol's bail petition on bad health grounds was rejected by a Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court of Dhaka on August 24.

Human Rights Watch wrote to Prime Minister Hasina on August 11 voicing its concerns over his treatment, including his disappearance and frame-up charges, and calling on her to personally intervene to ensure his safety and immediate release. They also advocated the repeal of the DSA. On October 1, the Committee to Protect Journalists wrote to Hasina demanding Kajol's release.

Hasina, who continues to insist that her government has brought COVID-19 "under control," thanked her party politicians, the health ministry and the Directorate General of Health Services at an October 4 meeting of her party's executive.

Contrary to her claims, more than 370,132 people have been infected in Bangladesh with the death toll rising to 5,375 yesterday according to official reports. The real extent of the impact of COVID-19, however, is being suppressed by the government and its escalating efforts to silence journalists.

Under the government's homicidal policy of "herd immunity," the economy was reopened, exposing thousands more people to the coronavirus. Along with those infected with the deadly virus, tens of thousands of workers have been dismissed from their jobs or suffered substantial pay cuts and cannot afford to buy essential items.

According to a recent World Bank survey, 68 percent of workers have lost their jobs in Dhaka and Chittagong during the pandemic. Job losses in slum areas in these cities were as high as 76 percent and 61 percent in the non-slum areas.

The survey also found that median wages for salaried and daily workers declined by about 37 percent compared to usual earnings immediately before the pandemic struck, with Dhaka experiencing a 42 percent decline and Chittagong a 33 percent fall.

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