



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

## **Written statement\* submitted by ODHIKAR - Coalition for Human Rights, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[23 August 2023]

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\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



## **Bangladesh: End Crackdown on Political Opposition and Hindrance to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly**

ODHIKAR – Coalition for Human Rights draws the special attention of the Human Rights Council and UN human rights monitoring mechanisms regarding violent crackdowns on political opposition, and infringement of right to freedom of peaceful assembly by the Bangladeshi authorities using excessive force, and lethal weapons. Attacking rallies and meetings of the opposition political parties and dissenting voices, violating the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, and making arbitrary arrests and detentions followed by enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings and torture have become of grave concern in Bangladesh.

The incumbent government continued to crackdown on the opposition parties and dissidents by violating their right to freedom of peaceful assembly. The ruling Awami League is using its party leaders and activists, as well as law enforcement agencies to suppress opposition parties across the country. Acts of repression and harassment by the government on the leaders and activists of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and other opposition political parties, had become widespread while these parties are campaigning for free, fair and inclusive national elections in January 2024.<sup>1</sup> Recently, various opposition parties, including the main opposition BNP, have been protesting simultaneously against the ruling regime of Awami League for holding the next parliamentary elections under a non-partisan, neutral caretaker government. In response to this movement, the government and members of the ruling party are attacking and obstructing these political programmes aimed at the resignation of the Awami League government and the formation of a non-partisan caretaker government for holding the upcoming elections.

On 25 May 2023, when the Awami League attacked a BNP procession in South Keraniganj, Dhaka, at least 50 leaders and activists, including BNP's central leader Nipun Roy Chowdhury, were injured in the clash. However, the police filed a report against more than 500 members of BNP.<sup>2</sup> The police fired rubber bullets and tear gas shells at the main opposition BNP supporters on 29 July 2023, leaving dozens of its supporters injured during anti-government protests. The violence broke out as the opposition party organised sit-in protests at all the entry points to Dhaka.<sup>3</sup> The police and ruling Awami League members attacked road marches organised by BNP in different districts on 20 August 2023, resulting in more than 100 injured people while pressing their demand for party chief Khaleda Zia's release from her house arrest and for her to be taken abroad for treatment.<sup>4</sup>

Election campaigns in Bangladesh are often accompanied by violence, however, the authorities have failed to impartially investigate and prosecute the perpetrators, who have targeted opposition rallies and attacked pro-opposition activists.<sup>5</sup> The previous two parliamentary elections (2014 and 2018) held under the current government are blatant examples of crackdown on political opponents along with massive irregularities, which were widely criticised nationally and internationally. The ruling Awami League is suppressing the opposition in the same way ahead of the next general elections in January 2024, and making arbitrary detentions with numerous fictitious cases against their leaders and activists. After obstructing and attacking rallies and meetings of the opposition parties, the police and the ruling party members filed several reports against the opposition leaders and activists on charges of 'sabotage'. Hundreds of leaders and activists have been accused.<sup>6</sup> Most of the reports filed by the police against opposition party members are alleged to be false and fabricated. One of the characteristics of these reports is that the police accuse a large number of 'unidentified persons', so that anyone can be picked up later and shown as arrested. As a result, thousands of opposition party members are fleeing from their homes across the country to avoid wrongful arrest, harassment, possible torture and incarceration.

The authorities had filed cases against over 1,500 named opposition party members and over 15,000 unnamed people in several districts, including Dhaka, leading up to the BNP rally on 29 July 2023. A few hundred opposition leaders and activists were arrested across the country and sent to jail centring around the anti-government movements.<sup>7</sup> Many of them were shown arrested under Section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898, under which the police can arrest anyone without a warrant.

The rest of the detainees were held under various cases filed with different police stations on allegations of arson attack, vandalism, and obstructing the government from carrying out its duty during the BNP's recent road march programmes.<sup>8</sup>

According to reports, about 112,000 cases have been filed against BNP leaders and activists since Awami League came to power in 2009. In these cases, a total of 3,978,481 members and supporters of BNP have been accused.<sup>9</sup> The number of 'anonymous' accused persons are several times more than this. Charge sheets have been submitted for most of these cases. Meanwhile, leaders of the opposition parties and their lawyers have expressed apprehension that judgment may be pronounced against the activists in these cases and many would be incarcerated, before the upcoming Parliamentary elections.<sup>10</sup> There are allegations that popular leaders of the opposition political parties, who had participated in the previous Parliamentary elections, and potential candidates from around the country are being picked up and pressured by members of the intelligence agencies to participate in the next general elections under the system controlled by the regime.<sup>11</sup> In addition, active opposition leaders who participated in the recent anti-government movements are being harassed in various ways.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the government has taken a 'pick-and-choose theory' to revive and expedite proceedings of old cases against opposition political parties in recent months, in particular potential BNP candidates, for the upcoming general election in order to disqualify them.<sup>13</sup>

International human rights organisations, Bangladesh's development partners and the United Nations have also raised concerns over the recent political violence centring around the anti-government protests. Heightened international scrutiny on Bangladesh's human rights record, including freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and of association, the political situation and pre-election environment must be amplified, considering the widespread abuses during recent protests by the political opponents on the conditions for a free, fair and inclusive election in Bangladesh. Therefore, it is imperative that the government must end the crackdown of political opposition and dissenters, and its law enforcement officials should adhere to the provisions on the use of force under International Law and to make clear that those who violate those rules will be held accountable.

## Recommendations:

Odhikar calls on the UN Human Rights Council to:

1. Pressure the Bangladesh government to end the crackdown on the opposition leaders and supporters and the people's right to freedom of assembly, and allow them to take part in political programmes without any hindrance;
2. Urge the Bangladesh government to follow the United Nations Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials and UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials;
3. Urge the Bangladesh government to allow the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association for a country visit; and
4. Urge the Bangladeshi authorities to continue constructive cooperation with the UN Human Rights Mechanisms to protect and promote human rights.

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2. Dhaka Tribune, 27 May 2023; <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/312189/al-bnp-clash-over-500-bnp-men-including-nipun>

5. Human Rights Watch, 10 October 2022; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/10/bangladesh-crackdown-political-opposition>

6. Daily Star, 2 April 2023; <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/clash-cops-over-800-bnp-men-sued-khulna-3287111>

7. Dhaka Tribune, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/321176/345-bnp-activists-sent-to-jail-on-rally-day>
8. Daily Star, 27 July 2023; <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/politics/news/bnp-moves-rally-friday-so-does-al-3379346>
9. Jugantor, 9 June 2023; <https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/first-page/683822/>
10. Jugantor, 9 June 2023; <https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/first-page/683822/>
11. New Age, 22 June 2023; <https://www.newagebd.net/article/204903/>
12. Daily Star, 23 June 2023; <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/politics/news/intel-agencies-picking-active-bnp-leaders-3353391>
13. New Age, 15 August 2023; <https://www.newagebd.net/article/209427/cases-against-opposition-leaders-move-fast>