

Bangladesh Government's attempts to silence free speech continue: Senior journalist Shafik Rehman detained

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BANGLADESH: Senior journalist Shafik Rehman detained as Government repression of journalists grows

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A Joint Statement by the Asian Human Rights Commission, FIDH, and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)

The Bangladesh Government's attempts to silence free speech continue. Several senior journalists and writers are facing trumped up charges and arbitrary detention for having published stories that are critical of the authorities. Mr. Shafik Rehman, an 81-year-old author, anti-death penalty campaigner, TV presenter, and journalist, has become the latest victim of this systematic abuse of the judicial system to repress freedom of expression in Bangladesh.

In the early morning of 16 April 2016, plainclothed police, who did not have any warrant of arrest against Rehman, gained access to his house in Dhaka by falsely claiming to be "journalists" from a private TV channel, and arrested the veteran journalist, a British national of Bangladeshi origin.

After taking Rehman to the Detective Branch Police headquarters, the police showed him to be arrested in relation to a pending criminal case registered in August 2015 for "conspiring to abduct and assassinate" Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's son Sajeeb Wazed Joy, who is an immigrant in the United States and an Information and Technology Adviser to the Prime Minister. A Metropolitan Magistrate of the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court of Dhaka placed Rehman in police remand for five days, where local human rights groups fear he will be tortured.

Rehman's arrest is the latest in a wave of detentions and trumped up charges against journalists and critics of the Government. Several other individuals, including renowned journalists, are currently in detention and face dozens of trumped up and falsified criminal cases.

On 11 April 2013, the Government detained Mr. **Mahmudur Rahman**, Acting Editor of *Daily Amar Desh*, a national daily newspaper, and shut down his newspaper for publishing stories about a corruption scam involving the Prime Minister's son Sajeeb Wazed Joy and her Adviser on Energy and Mineral Resources Affairs. Rahman has now spent over three years in arbitrary detention, and currently faces 72 criminal cases. Over the past years, Rahman has been granted bail by the Courts, but each time the police present a new criminal case against him in order to prevent him from being released.

Mr. **Abdus Salam**, Chairman of Ekushey TV, was arrested on 6 January 2015 on alleged pornography charges, after his private TV channel broadcast a speech of an exiled Senior Vice Chairperson of the BNP [Bangladesh Nationalist Party, the main opposition political party],

Mr. Tareque Rahman. Later, the Government allegedly took active part in helping a pro-government controversial businessman purchase the majority shares in Ekushey TV from Abdus Salam, who is still in detention.

Mr. **Shawkat Mahmud**, Editor of *Weekly Economics Time*, has been arbitrarily detained since 18 August 2015 and now faces 24 fabricated criminal cases. He is associated with the opposition party and is known to be critical of the Government. As with Mahmudur Rahman, whenever the Courts grant Shawkat Mahmud bail, the police present a new case against him to keep him in detention.

Mr. **Mahfuz Anam**, Editor of *The Daily Star*, is facing 79 cases of sedition and defamation for having published reports in 2007 that accused now-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of corruption. These reports were based on uncorroborated information and Mahfuz Anam has since stated that it was a mistake to have published them, but nevertheless faces 17 sedition and 62 defamation cases. On 11 April 2016, the High Court stayed the proceedings of 72 of the cases filed against him, but he still could be sentenced to up to 175 years in prison if he is convicted of the charges he faces.

This abuse of the judicial system to silence and harass journalists is creating a climate of fear and self-censorship in Bangladesh. The trumped up charges and arbitrary detentions of Government critics is a violation of international human rights law, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Bangladesh has ratified. The international community, in particular the Special Procedures of the United Nations Human Rights Council, must engage actively to stop the repression of free expression in Bangladesh. All journalists and individuals detained for exercising their basic right to free expression, including Shafik Rehman, Mahmudur Rahman, Abdus Salam and Shawkat Mahmud, must be immediately and unconditionally released.

P.S.

* <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/ahrc-news/AHRC-STM-050-2016>