

Free speech in crisis in Bangladesh

Sunday 20 May 2018, by [CHOWDHURY Ahmedur Rashid](#) (Date first published: 7 April 2018).

Speech by exiled writer Ahmedur Rashid Chowdhury

Esteemed ladies and gentlemen, good evening. Please accept my warmest wishes, love, and gratitude. I fondly remember Bangladesh at this time. The emotions that are inspired by the colours of the dried roses echo in my mind like the melody of a violin.

Ladies and gentlemen, you are probably aware that I have arrived here from Bangladesh. It is a small nation of 56 thousand square miles in South Asia. The world saw the birth of Bangladesh in 1971 after a bloody liberation war against the-then ruling government in Pakistan. We lost 3 million lives and countless women were raped by the Pakistani Army and their collaborators. If you look at world history of the time, you will know that Bangladesh suffered a great genocide. At present, our population exceeds 170 million people. Bangladesh is one of the major textile suppliers to modern developed countries. As proud as we are of this achievement, it has also brought many tragedies. The garments workers do not even receive 5 percent of selling price as their wages. Bangladesh is also famous for its jute and the products made from the crop. I have even noticed these products being sold in Norway. I share this information here to highlight the economic potential of Bangladesh as a country. A country which also has its own language, culture, and social traditions. Furthermore, Bangladesh contributes to the global export of manpower and physical labor. Unfortunately, its political history is marred by upheavals and violence. The founding father of the nation was killed just four years after independence in a military coup. Until 1990, power shifted between two military regimes. This period of military rule irreversibly damaged the commitments to democracy, secularism, socialism, and nationalism made at the birth of the new nation, instead of setting up a path that empowered Islamic fundamentalism. One military dictator freed war criminals and allowed them to set up a religious political party. Another amended the constitution to recognise Islam as the state religion. Friday became a weekly holiday instead of Sunday following the model set up by Saudi Arabia. With the help of Middle Eastern diplomacy and oil money, Islamic fundamentalism gained a powerful platform in politics, economy, and society. As it has been Egypt, Turkey, and Algeria, so it has been in Bangladesh.

Esteemed guests, you know that Bangladesh is a small nation in the economically less-developed third world. You know that Bangladesh suffers from regular natural disasters like flooding and cyclones. Yet, the people of Bangladesh are resilient in their determination to turn things around and dream of a better future. But this is not enough to counter the lack of democratic governance. After decades of military rule, the renewed promise of democracy has been lost in the unilateral autocratic rule of powerful political parties. The people of Bangladesh have been helpless and have had to turn to the power of the military and fundamentalism to tackle political autocracy. Beyond the political scheming and power plays lies another Bangladesh. It is a Bangladesh of many religions peacefully coexisting together. A Bangladesh of vibrant saris and Baul songs. Many poets, writers, artists and singers have been born here. It has a rich tradition of poetry, novels and story-telling. The scarcity of translations has meant many people have not experienced this rich literature. However, there have been glimpses of it on a global stage. Your citizens live in the vicinity of the Nobel Prizes. In 1913, Rabindranath Tagore, a great poet and personality of Bengali literature was

awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. It is one his songs that is now the national anthem of Bangladesh. However, I do not think the Nobel is always a mark of great writing. Perhaps this is why I had the opportunity to read Ibsen's work long before I came to Norway. So when I received ICORN's City of Refuge invitation from Skien while I was still lying injured in hospital – I was still unsure where this unknown haven was. It was soon after that, that my wife Runa did a Google search for Skien and told me that it is Ibsen's city. And all of a sudden, my thoughts on Skien completely changed. It no longer felt unknown. It was an extraordinary coincidence. This is why I think literature of such utmost importance. I firmly believe that literature plays a crucial role in the development and preservation of the world's democracy, secularism, equality and cultural diversity. This is why I did not view my publishing house as a business venture, but rather as a socio-cultural movement.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am sure you can appreciate the great danger in trying to preserve free thought, religious critique and secularism given the circumstances I have outlined for you. You must know of the brutal murders of writers, bloggers and publishers in Bangladesh. I ask you – can you show me any other country where people considered atheists have their names compiled and published in press releases urging readers to murder them? And the democratic government of the land admits they are not able to protect their own citizens. You have heard the name Avijit Roy. I was his publisher on many of his books. He was brutally hacked to death with machetes shortly after attending a book launch at our national book fair, in front of thousands in public. His wife, Bonya Ahmed, was grievously injured but survived, like me. There were hundreds of policemen and security forces near the site of the murder on that day. Yet the assailants were able to escape without any challenge. There has been no judicial proceedings in this case to this day. Another murdered blogger was Niloy Neel. Upon receiving death threats and realising he was being followed, he went to the police for protection. But they paid no heed to his worries. I was more fortunate in this regard. I went to the police station with a journalist friend and filed a general diary. I believe that my complaint was filed on the very same day due to the intervention of my friend. Even then, some of the police officers told me that the best solution was for me to stop publishing books. They told me that Bangladesh was not ready for such writing. Ironically, state officials were trying to censor the freedom speech I was guaranteed by the constitution. Tragically, I would find the strength of such advice over the next few days. One by one, bloggers Babu, Ananto Bijoy, and Niloy Neel were all killed. I had published Ananto's first ever book. He was like a younger brother to me at school. The day he was killed, I began to truly appreciate the value of my breath. I switched off my mobile phone and completely changed my routines at home and at work. In fact, since then I went from being constantly busy with publishing, business ventures, various cultural events and activism, to being completely withdrawn from everything as the only means of safety. I was scared to send my children to school. During this time, I reported some truly worrying incidents to the police but they ignored me. It is impossible to explain the terrifying situation that was gripping the entire country. Amidst such terror, many people fled abroad. One such blogger was Ratan. Despite writing under a pseudonym, he was unable to evade the danger. He and his wife had to leave behind their jobs as a banker and a teacher and move to a cold, unknown country. I wonder, will he ever regain his former happy days? Another was Zahid. Along with their two young children, he and his wife abandoned everything and have spent the past two years wandering without a destination in sight. There are countless others still struggling to survive and escape to other countries. I urgently request international organisations, including ICORN, to come forward and save them.

Ladies and gentlemen, I was unable to thwart the attack on me despite my best efforts. The militants broke into my office and, threatening my employees with revolvers, announced, "We have come to kill the non-believer Tutul." They destroyed my office and attacked me with sharp machetes. When two writer friends tried to intervene to save me, they too were brutally attacked. Then they left, locking us inside and leaving me to bleed to death. Twenty minutes later, the police arrived, broke

down the lock and took us to the hospital. Miraculously, I survived this ordeal. This was the first time that a targeted victim of this terrorist campaign had escaped alive. It was a huge failure in their efforts. It is true that death would have robbed me of the joys of life, the sheer happiness of drawing breath, and the excitement of spending time with my loved ones. And I am extremely grateful to Norway and the dear citizens of Skien for giving me the opportunity to live a secure life now.

Esteemed guests, I am now living a safe and peaceful life in the beautiful city of Skien. But, am I happy? This is a question I often ask myself and can come up with no answer. I know that I have to maintain my physical and mental well-being. Still, when my daughters ask for a slightly bigger room to properly store all their possessions and get a writing desk inside, I find myself unable to respond. Although I consider myself a citizen of the world, I yearn for my homeland. I do not know how far away the possibility of return has become. Truly, artists and poets feel the effects of binary opposition more acutely. This pain is akin to swallowing a potent poison. On the one hand, I am safe; on the other hand, I am not happy. I do not know if I will ever recover from this trauma in my lifetime.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am shocked at the violent fundamentalism that is plaguing my country and I firmly believe it is hurtling towards a new age of neo-colonialism. Bangladesh's unique geopolitics, and its natural resources including oil and gas make it a prime target for the regional and international forces of imperialism that are gripping South Asia. As you may know, Bengal has struggled under the exploitation of several colonial powers for centuries before 1971. I worry that the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis is a sign that Bangladesh is heading down the same path that has afflicted Syria. I do not want to see my beloved home suffer this way.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is the sad reality of the crisis facing free speech in Bangladesh. I hope I have been able to give you a proper background to the predicament facing Bangladeshi bloggers at present. This is the very struggle that has forced so many of us to seek refuge abroad, including to your country. I do not like to talk about my own situation. I used to be a publisher. My publishing house released over 1,000 volumes over the years. Perhaps I became too invested in my conviction to release books that promoted free speech and free thought. My career started years ago as an editor of a little magazine. I write poetry and, occasionally, prose as well. Last January, I started publishing Shuddhashar as an online magazine. Truthfully, I have a deep desire to return home to Bangladesh. But the sad truth is that I have no hope to do so. I want to dedicate my new life to working for the protection of writers, publishers and artists who are facing life-threatening situations in Bangladesh and around the world. I want to work, not live off welfare. I want to revitalise my life of creativity.

I want to sincerely thank the Skien Bibliotek and the Skien Commune for organising tonight's event, and for inviting me to speak. We would greatly appreciate if one of the organisers would stand up and speak in solidarity with the writers, bloggers, and publishers in Bangladesh.

Thank you all for your patience in listening to me.

Ahmedur Rashid Chowdhury

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