

On the situation in Bangladesh and in defense of Shahidul Alam: “They Have Been Clinging on by Brute Force”

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Bangladeshi authorities have jailed the internationally renowned photographer Shahidul Alam — the latest move by the nation’s elites to repress those who speak up for social justice and democratic rights.

Contents

- [Political Repression...](#)
- [...And Economic Immiseration](#)
- [“You Cannot Tame An Entire \(...\)”](#)

On August 5, Shahidul Alam, a Bangladeshi activist and photojournalist, was arrested in the capital of Dhaka. His crime: defending the massive student demonstrations that exploded this summer over poor infrastructure and government cronyism. When students and elder residents occupied the streets, chanting “We want justice,” the government responded with indiscriminate violence [[1](#)].



Shahidul Alam in November 2017. Christopher Michel / Flickr

Alam spoke out in favor of the protests on social media and in an interview with Al-Jazeera. Not long after, dozens of plainclothes government security forces raided his home, detained him for “spreading propaganda and false information against the government,” and, according to Alam, tortured him [[2](#)].

Officials have rejected multiple bail petitions from Alam [[3](#)], whose health is rapidly deteriorating (the latest petition was submitted on September 18 and has yet to be heard). The internationally renowned photographer is presently being held in jail for violating Section 57(2) of the Information and Communications Technology Act of 2006, a law that criminalizes online dissent. “It is an open secret,” Rahnuma Ahmed, Shahidul Alam’s partner, observed last November, “that the law is selectively applied — to silence criticism of the government.” [[4](#)] If convicted, Alam faces seven to fourteen years in prison.

Alam’s case is not an isolated one. It is emblematic of the threat that authoritarianism poses in Bangladesh and beyond, with encroachments on civil liberties buttressed by a propaganda machine

oiled by the blood of journalists and independent media outlets. In a climate where the fear of Islamist violence and the refugee bogeyman captures the collective political consciousness of the Global North, the Bangladeshi state has exploited their status as the secular option along with the goodwill earned by taking in Rohingya refugees to veil their domestic tyranny.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, leader of the ruling Awami League (AL) party, is currently on a diplomatic mission in Europe [5] and the United States to discuss issues related to security and migration and to receive the Special Recognition for Outstanding Leadership Award from the Global Hope Coalition. Yet in Bangladesh and elsewhere, critics are pointing out the connection between Hasina's diplomacy and her party's domestic authoritarianism. Protesters gathered in New York City this week to challenge the political and economic woes her party has helped create [6].

The US has provided cover for the AL's repression. A recent US congressional report notes that "the United States has long-standing supportive relations with Bangladesh and views Bangladesh as a moderate voice in the Islamic world." [7] The US has collaborated closely with the AL government in joint "counter-terrorism efforts" that range from training security forces to more systematic attempts to address "the underlying social, demographic, and economic factors that inhibit economic growth and increase vulnerability to extremism."

Countries like the US see Bangladesh as strategically important due to its political status as a nominally democratic state with an impoverished majority-Muslim population and its economic status as a source of cheap labor and textiles. They're willing to back a regime whose secular authoritarianism exemplifies the geopolitical logic of the "war on terror" within global capitalism.

In speaking out against the government, Shahidul Alam is a symbol of resistance to this harrowing state of affairs. Alam is one of many Bangladeshi activists currently seeking to combat the suppression of democracy and basic human rights. Their goal is to revive the progressive ideals on which Bangladesh was founded — and end the cycle of authoritarianism and repression.

Political Repression...

In his interview with Al Jazeera [8], Alam was asked whether the recent protests — which erupted after a bus accident on July 29 left two students dead — were just about road safety, or about something larger. "Very much larger," he responded.

"It's an unelected government, so they did not really have a mandate to rule, but they have been clinging on by brute force. The looting of the banks, the gagging of the media ... the extrajudicial killings, the disappearances, the need to get protection money at all levels, bribery at all levels, corruption in education, it's a never-ending list. It's been huge. So it really is that pent-up energy, emotion, anger, that has been let loose. This particular incident, sad as it is, is really the valve that allowed things to go through."

Alam also called attention to the state's violent crackdown on the protests:

"The police specifically asked for help from these "armed goons" [the Bangladesh Chhatra League and the Jubo League, the student and youth wings of the AL] to combat unarmed students demanding safe roads. I mean, how ridiculous is that? ... There are people with machetes in their hands chasing unarmed students and the police are standing by watching it happen, in some cases they are actually helping it out. This morning there was tear gassing."

The recent protests — and the state's authoritarian response — have to be understood in the context

of Bangladesh's broader political and economic history [9].

In 1971, after the bloody civil war that ushered in Bangladesh's independence — which, according to official estimates, left 3 million people dead — the Awami League ascended to power under the banner of “nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism.” In a gesture to its base, which included strong workers' and students' movements, the AL nationalized many sectors of the economy. But rather than spread material gains to all Bangladeshis, the nationalization program set up a patronage system that enriched AL politicians and their allies. The AL quickly alienated its political supporters and used (often lethal) violence to quell dissent. In 1975, amid growing social turbulence, pro-US right-wing forces murdered AL leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family.

General Ziaur Rahman [10] emerged victorious after the coup, aided by Western governments. He removed the ban on religious-based political parties and relied on Islamist militias and Western security forces to silence criticism of his regime. Rahman accepted loans from the International Monetary Fund, privatized national industries, and opened his country to foreign trade. A coup in 1981 deposed Ziaur, but his successor, General H. M. Ershad, continued Ziaur's precedent, using strongman tactics to crush dissent and relying on foreign aid to develop the economy. After the IMF imposed a “structural adjustment program” in 1986, Bangladeshis had even less control over their country and resources. Increasingly, they were prey to the whims of big capital.

In 1990, demonstrations against Ershad's military regime reached a fever pitch, with mass protests shutting down private enterprises and public spaces across the country. Ershad responded with deadly force. In one incident, an army truck ran over a group of protesting students. But activists were undeterred, and sustained protests forced Ershad's resignation later that year. After fifteen years of military rule, Bangladeshi citizens had won a return to civilian rule.

The years since have seen Bangladesh oscillate between two political parties: the AL (these days, a secular nationalist party led by the prime minister, Sheikh Hasina Wazed) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP, led by the widow of General Ziaur Rahman and closely tied to the military and Jamaat-e-Islami [JI], the largest Islamist party in the country). Both parties have consistently been on the take. Nepotism, bribery, and the looting of public coffers are rampant [11]. Each resorts to violence to destroy their political opponent, and the armed forces are never far offstage.

But increasingly, the BNP is a non-player, and Bangladesh is more like a one-party state. In an attempt to gain legitimacy for their autocratic rule, Hasina and the AL have resorted to political spectacle, such as launching a tribunal to prosecute criminals from the war of independence. The prosecution of religious figures found support particularly due to a public fear of the relatively recent threat of Islamist violence, the worst cases of which included Jamatul Mujahideen Bangladesh's (JMB) nationwide detonation of over four hundred bombs in one day in August 2005. Though the US and other governments around the world have been generally supportive of the AL's “war on terror,” some activists have raised doubts about the fairness of the tribunal, as Hasina has used the proceedings to “eliminate her rivals as well as her critics” in the BNP and JI [12].

As this tribunal unfolded, the government instituted legislation to ban any and all criticism of the government. In 2013, the AL-dominated parliament amended the Information and Communication Technology Act of 2006 to “tighten controls on dissent in the electronic media.” The following year, the AL government created a national broadcast commission tasked with “prohibiting content contrary to the ‘public interest’ that undermines the reputation of the army and law enforcement agencies or harms relations with ‘friendly countries.’” That same year the AL government barred the JI from participating in elections on grounds of anti-secularism. The BNP opted to boycott the contest, and the AL took 280 out of 300 parliamentary seats.

Violence has since become the norm. Opposition parties call on their supporters to protest the government; the AL breaks out the truncheons. Over a thousand people have been killed in political clashes over the last five years. And under the ideological cover of a “war on drugs,” critics of the government have been rounded up en masse [13].

Even the façade of democratic rule has disappeared.

...And Economic Immiseration

Despite their ideological differences, the BNP and the AL have one thing in common: both have advanced an economic agenda that has subordinated Bangladeshis to the incursions of big capital.

After decades of privatization schemes, land grabs, and deforestation, the situation for rural Bangladeshis is especially dire. State-run modernization projects like a coal-based power plant in Rampal, along the southern Sundarbans forest, are implemented at the whim of ruling elites. The resulting environmental degradation and dispossession are dismissed as “collateral damage,” and protesters, such as those participating in the nationwide Save Sundarbans resistance movement, are fair game for repression. As Maha Mirza writes [14],

“the state continues to be obsessed with big development projects and paid experts; coal plants, flyovers and nuclear power plants have become the core development vision of our middle class mindset. Cafes, billboards, ramp models, peri-peri chicken restaurants, and imported hot dogs have become our ultimate emblems of modernization. Farmers, villagers, labourers, and poor communities, in this process, are perceived to be the ‘un-modern’, ‘un-civil’ roadblocks to our unstoppable path towards progress.”

The dialectic of dispossession and repression has unfolded for decades, yielding a landscape where 82 percent of rural Bangladesh households are now “resource poor” and 57 percent are completely without land of their own. Bangladesh is one of the “most climate vulnerable countries in the world [15],” with a strong link between global warming and the rampant riverbank erosion that has displaced thousands [16].

The devastation of the countryside has led to a serious uptick in migration to urban areas, with Dhaka, Bangladesh’s largest city, the major destination. The city’s population has grown exponentially in recent decades, from around 1.5 million at the time of independence to 6.6 million in 1990 to more than 21 million today, making Dhaka the world’s most densely populated mega-city [17]. Most residents live in slums where, due to government neglect, conditions are generally deplorable [18]. Access to healthcare is limited, and educational opportunities are few and far between. A third of the population lacks access to electricity, and most people are forced to use unsanitary water to wash and clean. More than 60 percent of Dhaka residents dump their garbage in the street, only 20 percent have access to sanitary latrines, and nearly 90 percent of homes lack an underground drainage system.

Dhaka’s immiseration must be understood in the context of generalized poverty in Bangladesh. Forty-three percent of Bangladeshis earn less than \$1.25 per day, and 76 percent make less than \$2 per day. The domestic economy relies on remittances from the millions of Bangladeshis currently living abroad, who toil as guest workers or day laborers in conditions that are generally demeaning and dangerous [19]. The workers who remain in Bangladesh are prey to all forms of economic exploitation. Most of this exploitation occurs in the informal sector, which employs 47 percent of the country’s labor force. Lacking legal and social protections, informal workers are precarious in the deepest sense of the term.

One solution to widespread economic vulnerability is “micro-credit,” which international non-profits regularly praise as a way to help the poor lift themselves out of poverty. But micro-credit is better understood as an attempt — administered by global elites in conjunction with the Bangladeshi middle class — to expand capital’s tentacles into the untapped market of the country’s informal economy. Micro-credit’s record when it comes to poverty alleviation is dubious. According to one study [20], 72 percent had to borrow more money from local money lenders to repay their official loans. Many more were forced to sell off assets, even their own organs [21]. In the words of one Bangladeshi activist, Dr Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad, micro-credit is a “death trap” for the poor that creates a “cycle of debt [22].”

In the formal sector, Bangladesh’s economy is driven by the garment industry, which increased its exports from \$116 million in 1985 to more than \$25 billion in 2015. The garment industry — the world’s second largest, after China’s — generates 80 percent of the country’s total export revenue, and employs around 4 million workers, 80 percent of which are young women, many of them rural migrants.

Systematic violence against workers has kept organizing to a minimum. The government has targeted union organizers and deployed the urban police force (instituted in 2010) to quash labor unrest [23]. As a result, only 5 percent of garment workers are unionized. The minimum wage is \$68 per month, but most female workers are paid less, around \$37 per month, a fraction of the wages paid to exploited factory workers in China and India. These workers are also forced to toil in conditions that range from “appalling” to deadly [24]. At least 117 people were killed in the Tazreen Fashion factory fire near Dhaka in 2012. Some months later, more than 1,130 people were killed outside Dhaka when Rana Plaza, a giant garment factory, collapsed.

By and large, these deaths can be attributed to the callous attitudes of capitalists and political elites, who prioritize profits over worker safety. But there is also a more general infrastructure crisis, one that is important to emphasize given that the student protesters’ list of demands focused mostly on road safety and accessibility. A study after the Rana Plaza collapse revealed that, from 2008 to 2013, only six out of twenty thousand buildings constructed in Dhaka have gone through the legally required safety clearance [25]. As Dhaka’s population has ballooned, and the city has experienced a massive construction boom, the government has failed to address the attendant social and infrastructural problems, with the result that thousands of people die each year in shoddily built buildings and roads.

Unwilling to address road safety conditions, or effectively monitor the number of drivers on the road without the proper permits, the government has simply fudged the numbers. In 2013, the government claimed that there were only 3,296 road fatalities [26]; the World Health Organisation says, that, in actuality, as many as 25,000 died that year on the road.

“You Cannot Tame An Entire Nation”

It is important not to exaggerate the scope of the recent protests. Largely student based, the movement suffers from a “relative isolation from other oppressed strata of society.” [27] Yet at the same time, the protesters’ cries of “we want justice” extend far beyond their own social station, to the broader political and economic landscape.

The official youth unemployment rate in Bangladesh is 11 percent — and protesting young people are drawing national and international attention to the dire situation facing Bangladeshi workers as well as the government’s complicity. The dangerous transport situation — Bangladesh has the second most dangerous roads in Asia — is linked to the broader crisis of urbanization in Dhaka, a

crisis intertwined with processes of climate change and dispossession in the countryside that is forcing scores of desperate Bangladeshis to the overcrowded city of Dhaka.

As Vijay Prashad has noted, “protests are a constant feature of life” in Bangladesh, and for decades now, a government with no real legitimacy in the eyes of the people have responded to any and all dissent with sheer force.

In February, Shahidul Alam posted to his website the poem “Apolitical Intellectuals” by Guatemalan revolutionary poet Otto Rene Castillo. The piece concludes with these lines:

“What did you do when the poor suffered, when tenderness and life burned out of them?”

Apolitical intellectuals of my sweet country, you will not be able to answer.

A vulture of silence will eat your gut.

Your own misery will pick at your soul.

And you will be mute in your shame.

Both Alam and his partner, Rahnuma Ahmed, have written about the urgent need to “speak truth to power,” to denounce and demystify “the aging coterie that rules the country, and its army of professional sycophants.” Their activism seeks to clear the deadwood that prevents Bangladeshi society from functioning free of corruption.

But this is not the end of their message. Alam’s recent work on the fate of Bangladeshi migrants abroad [28] reflects his recognition that global capitalism pushes working-class Bangladeshis from frying pan to fire, from the domestic sweatshop to the global precarity of unregulated migrant labor in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. His crusade against domestic authoritarianism is geared toward the promotion of democracy and the protection of working-class people — toward securing the sort of freedoms in civil society that are preconditions for material well-being. And by speaking on the interconnectedness and breadth of the problems in Bangladesh, Alam has gestured towards the kind of structural measures needed to secure positive material change, while reminding us of how elite interests are preventing the achievement of the people’s will.

In recent weeks, there has been a swell of activism in Bangladesh [29] and around the world [30] demanding Alam’s release. In taking Alam as a political prisoner, the government may have only underscored his point that “you cannot tame an entire nation in this manner,” and in order to redeem itself in the eyes of the public, it will need to free Shahidul Alam.

For years now, the ruling government has demonstrated its willingness to criminalize dissent and rule with an iron fist. It will be up to activists to put sustained pressure on the government to release Alam, and all the other political prisoners in Bangladesh. Ending the crusade against dissidents, and making room for critical discourse, is only the first step in attempting to address the endemic political and economic crises in Bangladesh. But absent this step, the government can only attempt to rule over Bangladesh through brute force alone.

Raihan Ahmed & Mark Jay

P.S.

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<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/09/shahidul-alam-jail-sheikh-hasina-united-states>

- Raihan Ahmed is a PhD student at the University of Virginia and the nephew of Shahidul Alam.

Mark Jay is a doctoral candidate in sociology at UC Santa Barbara. He is coauthoring a history of Detroit with Philip Conklin.

Footnotes

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- [18] <http://www.bangladeshsociology.org/BEJS%205.1%20Rapid%20Urban%20Growth%20and%20Poverty%20final.pdf>
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- [20] <https://monthlyreview.org/2015/03/01/bangladesh-a-model-of-neoliberalism/>
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- [25] <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/bangladesh/10041197/Bangladesh-building-collapse-Dhaka-buildings-not-given-final-safety-clearance.html>
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