

'The Tide Will Turn': Read Arundhati Roy's Letter to Bangladeshi Photographer Shahidul Alam

Saturday 17 November 2018, by [ROY Arundhati](#) (Date first published: 16 November 2018).

"If we can do this to Shahidul Alam, think of what we can do to the rest of you - all you nameless, faceless, ordinary people. Watch. And be afraid."

Each year, PEN International highlights the cases of five persecuted writers – be they imprisoned, facing prosecution or otherwise at risk – that are emblematic of the type of threats and attacks faced by writers and journalists around the world.

This year, PEN International is campaigning for [Dawit Isaak](#) imprisoned in Eritrea, [Miroslava Breach Velducea](#) killed in Mexico, [Oleg Sentsov](#) imprisoned in Russia, [Shahidul Alam](#) detained in Bangladesh and [Wael Abbas](#) imprisoned in Egypt.

Writers David Lagercrantz, Jennifer Clement, Tom Stoppard, Salil Tripathi and Khaled Hosseini are taking part in this year's campaign.

As part of the campaign, Arundhati Roy has written an open letter to Bangladeshi photographer Shahidul Alam, who has been detained since August 5, 2018. The letter has been reproduced in full below.

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To,
Shahidul Alam
Champakali 2/5
Dhaka Central Jail
Keraniganj,
Dhaka
Bangladesh
November 15th 2018
PEN International's Day of the Imprisoned Writer

Dear Shahidul,

It's been more than a hundred days now since they took you away. Times aren't easy in your country or in mine, so when we first heard that unknown men had abducted you from your home, of course we feared the worst. Were you going to be "encountered" (our word in India for extra-judicial murder by security forces) or killed by "non-state actors"? Would your body be found in an alley, or floating in some shallow pond on the outskirts of Dhaka? When your arrest was announced and you surfaced alive in a police station, our first reaction was one of sheer joy.

Am I *really* writing to you? Perhaps not. If I were, I wouldn't need to say very much beyond, "Dearest Shahidul, no matter how lonely your prison cell, know that we have our eyes on you. We are looking out for you."

If I were really writing to you I wouldn't need to tell you how your work, your photographs and your words, has, over decades, inscribed a vivid map of humankind in our part of the world—its pain, its joy, its violence, its sorrow and desolation, its stupidity, its cruelty, its sheer, crazy *complicatedness*—onto our consciousness. Your work is lit up, made luminous, as much by love as it is by a probing, questioning anger born of witnessing at first hand the things that you have witnessed. Those who have imprisoned you have not remotely understood what it is that you do. We can only hope, for their sake, that someday they will.

Also Read: [Why the Bangladesh Government Is Scared of Shahidul Alam](#)

Your arrest is meant to be a warning to your fellow citizens: "If we can do this to Shahidul Alam, think of what we can do to the rest of you—all you nameless, faceless, ordinary people. Watch. And be afraid."

The formal charge against you is that you have criticized your country in your (alleged) Facebook posts. You have been arrested under the Section 57 of Bangladesh's infamous Information and Communications Technology Act (ICT) which authorizes "the prosecution of any person who publishes, in electronic form, material that is fake and obscene; defamatory; tends to deprave and corrupt its audience; causes or may cause deterioration in law and order; prejudices the image of the state or a person; or causes or may cause hurt to religious belief."

What sort of law is this, this absurd, indiscriminate, catch-all, fishing trawler type of law? What place does it have in a country that calls itself a democracy? Who has the right to decide what the correct "image of the state" is, and should be? Is there only one legally approved and acceptable image of Bangladesh? Section 57 potentially criminalizes all forms of speech except blatant sycophancy. It's an attack, not on intellectuals, but on intelligence itself. We hear that over the last five years more than 1200 journalists in Bangladesh have been charged under it, and that 400 trials are already underway.

In India too, this sort of attack on our intelligence is becoming normalized. Our equivalent of Bangladesh's ICT Act is the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act under which hundreds of people including students, activists, lawyers and academics are being arrested in wave after wave. The cases against them, like the one against you, are flimsy and ludicrous. Even the police know that they are likely to be acquitted by higher courts. But the hope is that by then, their spirits will have been broken by years in prison. The process is the punishment.

This is what we are up against, these neat definitions of the perfect nation, the perfect man, the perfect citizen, the perfect Hindu, the perfect Muslim.

So, as I write this letter to you, dear Shahidul, I am tempted to add, dear Sudha, dear Saibaba, dear Surendra, dear Shoma, dear Mahesh, dear Sudhir, dear Rona, dear Arun, dear Vernon, and also, dear Tariq, dear Aijaz, dear Aamir, dear Kopa, dear Kamla, dear Madavi, dear Maase, dear Raju, dear hundreds and hundreds of others.

How is it possible for people to defend themselves against laws like these? It's like having to prove one's innocence before a panel of certified paranoids. Every argument only serves to magnify their paranoia and heighten their delusions.

As both our countries hurtle towards general elections, we know that we can expect more arrests, more lynching, more killing, more bloggers hacked to death, more orchestrated ethnic, religious and caste conflagrations— more false-flag “terrorist” strikes, more assassinations of journalists and writers. Elections, we know, means fire in the ducts.

Your Prime Minister, who claims to be a secular democrat, has announced that she will build 500 mosques with the billion dollars the Government of Saudi Arabia has donated to Bangladesh. These mosques are supposedly meant to disseminate the “correct” kind of Islam.

Here in India, our rulers have dropped all pretense of the secularism and socialism that are enshrined in our constitution. In order to distract attention from the catastrophic failures of governance and deepening popular resentment, as institution after institution—our courts, universities, banks, intelligence agencies—is pushed into crisis, the ruling power, (not the Government, but its holding company, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh,) is alternately cajoling and threatening the Supreme Court to pass an order clearing the decks for the construction of a giant Hindu temple on the site where the Babri Masjid once stood before it was demolished by a rampaging mob. It’s amazing how politicians’ piety peaks and troughs with election cycles.

This is what we are up against, these neat definitions of the perfect nation, the perfect man, the perfect citizen, the perfect Hindu, the perfect Muslim. The postscript to this is the perfect majority and the satanic minority. The people of Europe and the Soviet Union have lived through the devastation that these sorts of ideas caused. They have suffered the matchless terror of *neatness*. Only recently Europe marked the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht—the event that marked the beginning of the Holocaust. There too it all began quite slowly. There too it began with elections. And there too the old murmurs have started up again.

Here we’re going to witness our own scorched-earth elections in the coming days. They will use their fishing-trawler laws, they will jump at shadows to decimate the opposition.

Fortunately, we are an irredeemably untidy people. And hopefully we will stand up to them in our diverse and untidy ways.

Dear Shahidul, I believe the tide will turn. It will. It must. This foolish, shortsighted cruelty will give way to something kinder and more visionary. This particular malaise, this bout of ill-health that has engulfed our planet will pass.

I hope to see you in Dhaka very soon.

With love
Arundhati

Arundhati Roy

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