

Bangladesh: UN human rights experts alarmed by violence ahead of election

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GENEVA (20 December 2018) - UN experts have expressed alarm about political violence, restrictions on freedom of expression and the rise of religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh ahead of general elections on 30 December.

“In the run-up to the vote, religious minorities, especially Hindus, fear renewed targeting,” said the experts. “Unfortunately, these fears have a strong basis,” they said, adding that reports indicate that around 380 members of minority groups have been attacked in the first half of 2018.

Security forces have reportedly arrested and intimidated opposition figures and dissenting voices, the experts said. Members and supporters of opposition parties have been arrested, killed and disappeared. Reports state that supporters of the ruling party were involved in some of the incidents. “Even one of the Election Commissioners has expressed the view that he does not believe there is any level playing field at all in this election,” they said.

“Urgent action is needed by Bangladeshi authorities during this turbulent time to ensure the safety of all people, and to create an enabling climate for a much-needed public debate.”

The experts’ concerns were underscored by an attack on the motorcade of opposition politician Dr. Kamal Hossain on 14 December, reportedly resulting in at least 25 persons injured. Between 9-12 December 2018, 47 incidents of violence were reported in which eight people were killed and 560 hurt.

“We urge the authorities to allow for and encourage monitoring of the human rights situation by civil society in the lead up to, during and after the elections,” the experts said.

The UN experts expressed grave concerns about the rise of religious fundamentalism and the negative impact on human rights, including the right to life, the right to participate in cultural life, freedom of expression, and freedom of religion or belief. They were troubled by reports that the two main political parties have sought to appease or cooperate with fundamentalist groups.

“The increasing restrictions on freedom of expression, combined with election-related violence and the rise of fundamentalism have together created a climate of fear in Bangladesh, which needs to be urgently addressed by the authorities,” said the UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights Karima Bennouna, who in a 2017 [report](#) to the Human Rights Council addressed the issue of the impact of fundamentalism on cultural rights.

The experts voiced concerns at the use of surveillance, intimidation, and politically motivated prosecution of key opposition members. “We are particularly concerned at the use of the Digital Security Act to criminalise journalists and anyone using social media freely expressing their views, and at the impact it has on the public’s right to know which is of paramount importance in an

election context,” the experts said.

They voiced their fears that the upcoming general elections in Bangladesh may trigger renewed violence against opposition figures and secularists, and attacks against members of religious minorities, their homes, temples and sources of livelihood. “Taken together, recent developments raise serious concerns about whether the elections can be conducted in a free and fair manner. We call on the authorities to stem the tide of violence as a matter of urgency, and to demonstrate their commitment to human rights and to truly free and fair elections.”

ENDS

Ms. Karima Bennouna, [Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights](#); **Mr. David Kaye**, [Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression](#); **Mr. Ahmed Shaheed**, Special Rapporteur on [freedom of religion or belief](#); **Mr. Michel Forst**, [Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders](#); and **Mr Fernand De Varennes**, [Special Rapporteur on minority issues](#); **Ms. Cecilia Jimenez-Damary**, [Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons](#); **Mr. Clément Nyaletsossi Voulé**, Special Rapporteur on the [rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association](#) and **Ms. Agnes Callemard**, [Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions](#)

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