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After the Monsoon Revolution

A Roadmap to Lasting Security Sector Reform
in Bangladesh



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After the Monsoon Revolution

A Roadmap to Lasting Security Sector Reform in Bangladesh

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Summary

Following a massive protest movement in Bangladesh that toppled the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, politicians, civil society, students, diplomats, United Nations rights experts, and others quickly started work with an interim government to bring lasting reforms. Led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, the interim government took office on August 8, 2024, pledging to undo the damage to human rights and democracy during the Hasina administration's 15 years in office. As Chief Advisor Yunus told *Prothom Alo*:

We don't want flimsy reforms. We don't want eye-wash reforms. We want fundamental reforms. We will bring about these reforms in such a manner that they cannot be changed by anyone.

After winning the 2009 election, Sheikh Hasina's Awami League party-led government had gradually consolidated power by silencing critics, harassing activists, and arbitrarily arresting, forcibly disappearing, and killing members of the opposition or civil society who spoke out against her. In January 2024, Sheikh Hasina won a fourth consecutive term in office after her administration again refused to hold credible elections, marking a decade since Bangladeshis had been able to exercise their right to choose their leaders. During her reign, the Hasina-led government effectively captured key institutions that otherwise could offer independent oversight and justice including the election commission, the human rights commission, the police, and the judiciary, ensuring that they instead served to keep the Awami League in office.

On August 5, 2024, Hasina was finally forced to leave office after three weeks of student-led street protests, described by some Bangladeshis as the Monsoon Revolution.

The interim government has committed to holding free and fair elections after repairing the security sector, the justice system, and other core institutions. The interim government has also said that it will bring legislative changes through presidential order, which will later be ratified by an elected parliament.

While embarking upon these critical steps, the interim government is also contending with powerful and politicized security forces that have long benefited from a system of impunity. Due to the deeply ingrained systemic obstacles to accountable governance, a disturbingly familiar pattern of security force abuses and political reprisals has reemerged, this time targeting perceived Awami League supporters. Groups promoting extremist Islam are attacking minorities, particularly those from Hindu and Ahmadiyya communities. Ethnic minorities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts endure continued discrimination and violence by the authorities. While the interim government has introduced a new ordinance to replace an abusive law used to crush freedom of speech under the Awami League, the new legislation unfortunately replicates many of the same harmful provisions.

Student leaders and activists are expressing concern that the interim government is being hemmed in by various political interests at home and abroad. Many are worried that the pace of reforms has slowed down. As one student leader said:

In Bangladesh's history, repeatedly, whoever has been in power, people have had to shed blood to restore democracy. We want this to stop. We would like lasting reforms, strong institutions, and empowered people, so that there is never again scope for authoritarianism. No Bangladeshi should have to sacrifice their life again to win democracy.

Bangladeshis have called for rights respecting governance. This effort, led by a fragile interim government that seeks to remain politically neutral, must be robustly supported by donors, international experts, and civil society. Most significantly, the criminal justice system should uphold international standards on the presumption of innocence and the right to due process as perpetrators of serious human rights violations are identified through investigations.

To ensure effective reforms, the government has sought input from stakeholders. This report draws on over 20 years of Human Rights Watch reporting on abuses in Bangladesh— both under the Hasina administration and by those before her, as well as interviews with human rights activists, members of the interim government, and current and former law enforcement and military officials—to set out the structural reforms needed for lasting change.

The Monsoon Revolution

Violence first erupted on July 15, 2024, when the ruling Awami League party supporters and police attacked students peacefully protesting discriminatory and politicized quotas in government jobs. Students across the country launched protests in response. The Hasina government deployed security forces who used tear gas, stun grenades, and rubber and live bullets, shooting indiscriminately into crowds and directly at students. As one police officer told Human Rights Watch, “I witnessed officers firing at vital organs.... In many cases, I witnessed live ammunition being fired even when officers’ lives were not in danger.” Another described witnessing senior officers in the Dhaka Metropolitan Police Headquarters watch live CCTV footage and direct officers on the ground to shoot protesters like “they were ordering someone to shoot in a video game.”

A July 16 video spread rapidly on social media showing university student Abu Sayed standing, his arms outstretched, as police repeatedly shot at him. After his death, and the deaths of others, outraged students across the country came out in the streets and were later joined by ordinary citizens and opposition supporters. The protests soon expanded to represent opposition to Hasina’s autocratic rule, characterized by security force abuses, widespread repression, and corruption, with slogans calling for her resignation.

As protests spread, the authorities instituted a strict curfew enforced with a “shoot-on-sight” order, imposed a nationwide internet shutdown, and arrested thousands of people. One student, Mohammad Rahat Husain, described to Human Rights Watch being shot at by police when he and his friends were sitting at a teashop during the curfew. Despite hiding inside the shop, police charged inside and told the students to run. But when one of his friends, Tayem, started to run, police shot him from behind.

I tried to drag him away, but the police kept firing, and a rubber bullet hit my leg. Tayem was dying, with his wrists limp and his eyes staring blankly. The last words he said to me were: “Bhai, leave me. I’m dying.” I started running, but they fired at me again. This time, I wasn’t hit. I was screaming for someone to help Tayem. But he died there.

Despite the grave risks, thousands continued to protest.

On August 4, protesters marched towards the prime minister's residence demanding that she resign. Hasina responded by reportedly calling on officials "to curb anarchists with iron hands." But as the streets filled with protesters threatening to overrun government buildings, on August 5, Sheikh Hasina fled the country. Now exiled in India, she has claimed that she left to prevent further bloodshed and has denied any wrongdoing.

The Yunus administration, alongside Students Against Discrimination, the group that had led the protests, continue to update the list of those killed. As of December 2024, they confirmed at least 858 deaths. Another nearly 250 people, including policemen, were killed in retributive violence after Hasina's resignation.

Interim Government

Within weeks of taking power, the Yunus administration released thousands of people who had been detained during the protests and made commitments to pursue accountability for torture, extrajudicial killings, and enforced disappearances, and ensure human rights protections. It has said it will drop police investigations and charges against peaceful critics of Sheikh Hasina, her relatives and associates, and her administration. At least 30 police officials were arrested for their alleged involvement in using unlawful force against protesters during the Monsoon Revolution.

The interim government also invited the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to investigate abuses by government forces during the protests and their root causes.

A commission of inquiry into all enforced disappearances, established on August 27, has made significant progress in identifying secret detention sites and has named some perpetrators, a monumental step after years of denials by the previous government. The interim government has also acceded to the UN Convention on Enforced Disappearances and has invited assistance from the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances.

On September 12, the interim government formed six commissions to recommend reforms to the judiciary, the electoral system, public administration, police, the anti-corruption office, and the constitution. It later established four additional commissions to make policy

recommendations on media, health, labor rights, and women's rights. Students who led the protests have a voice in these commissions.

As of writing, the six main commissions are expected to submit their recommendations by January 15 (January 31 for the judicial reform commission). Then another commission will be formed, comprising the heads of the six commissions, which will be chaired by the chief advisor, Yunus, to forge a consensus around reforms and then to initiate implementation.

Despite these important steps, police have returned to the abusive practices that characterized the previous government, this time targeting supporters—or perceived supporters—of the Awami League government. For instance, in the first two months since the interim government took office, over 1,000 police cases were filed against tens of thousands of people, mainly Awami League members, accusing them of murder, corruption, or other crimes. Over 400 Awami League ministers and leaders are facing investigations. In some of these cases, complainants were not even aware of who was being named as accused. For example, two plaintiffs told Human Rights Watch that local political leaders opposed to the Awami League asked them to sign the police reports, though they were not sure against whom they were filing the cases. Both police and politicians told them that if they wanted the state to recognize their relative's murder and for them to be honored as martyrs of the uprising, including financial compensation and other reparations, then they needed to sign.

Police have also filed mass criminal complaints against unnamed individuals, a common abusive practice in Bangladesh which allows the police to intimidate and threaten virtually anyone with arrest. Mahfuz Anam, editor of the *Daily Star*, noted in his column:

A core criticism of the former government of Sheikh Hasina was the blatant misuse of law to imprison, harass and intimidate political opponents, critics, and members of the independent media. Activities by a section of political opportunists and vested groups may give rise to a perception that we are witnessing a revival of the same.

Activists warn that those who opposed the Awami League are now mirroring its intolerance for criticism. As of November, authorities had filed murder charges against at least 140 journalists in relation to their reporting on the Monsoon Revolution and scrapped more than

150 press accreditations required to attend official events. When questioned about the criminal cases targeting journalists, Yunus said that the charges had been filed “following the old laws and practices,” underscoring the point that without systemic reform, the target of police will change but the abusive practices will remain the same.

The interim government banned the Chhatra League, the Awami League’s student wing whose members had been accused of repeated involvement in violence on behalf of the Awami League government. However, it has not yet acted against other student and youth political groups similarly accused of involvement in extreme violence.

In another worrying indication for freedom of expression, authorities filed charges of sedition against 19 people for desecrating the national flag, and arrested Chinmoy Krishna Das, an official of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). On November 27, his supporters violently protested when he was produced in court, and lawyer Saiful Islam, a Muslim member of the prosecution team, was killed.

Das’s arrest came at a time when there is growing concern over attacks on Hindu minorities. The interim government has confirmed that at least 88 cases of communal violence had been registered between August 5 and October 22, and that 70 persons had been arrested. Hindu groups say that there have been hundreds of incidents of vandalism targeting Hindu businesses, homes, and places of worship.

The government has also decided to use the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), a domestic special court previously used to prosecute crimes against humanity committed during Bangladesh’s 1971 war of independence, to prosecute human rights abuses during the Monsoon Revolution. The ICT has previously been fraught with violations of fair trial standards, and while the interim government invited amendments to the Act that establishes the court to bring it in line with international standards, it still lacks some due process protections, and includes the death penalty, in violation of international human rights law. As of November, prosecutors had filed 80 complaints of crimes against humanity and genocide at the Tribunal, including against Sheikh Hasina and senior members of her cabinet. Many of them have fled the country and will likely be prosecuted in absentia.

The Path to Reform

Over the last 15 years, the Hasina government deployed security forces to repress critics and opposition members through enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, surveillance, and torture. As Hasina consolidated power, she also weakened the institutions that would keep her powers in check and maintain oversight and accountability over security forces, including the judiciary and the national human rights commission.

The violent attacks against protesters during the Monsoon Revolution were unprecedented in scale, but the abusive nature of the response was part of a well-established pattern of violent crackdowns on those who challenged the Hasina government. In July 2018, for example, students had mounted similar protests calling for road safety after two students were killed by a speeding bus. As in 2024, Awami League supporters attacked the protesters with machetes and sticks while police stood by or joined in, later using teargas, rubber bullets, and live ammunition against protesters. Security forces followed the same pattern of excessive force in responding to protests leading up to the 2014, 2018, and 2024 elections.

Systemic security force abuses were enabled by a deeply ingrained culture of impunity, alongside the structural dismantling of institutions that would safeguard against abuses. Without urgent structural reform, the abuses of the past could quickly become a blueprint for Bangladesh's future.

Foreign donors as well as Bangladeshi activists, lawyers, and experts need to examine the failures of the past to protect human rights and address loopholes. Key to this is the separation of powers and building an independent criminal justice system. Donor governments should invest in supporting security sector reform in Bangladesh, including police training, but not without these core structural reforms.

A key concern is to ensure strict political neutrality in the discharge of public duties by restricting and strictly regulating political involvement in personnel-related issues such as recruitment and promotions, including the civil service, police, military, and the judiciary. As the interim government law advisor, Asif Nazrul, recently stated, “the appointment of judges based on political loyalty in the High Court is a major factor behind the collapse of Bangladesh's judiciary. No matter how sensitive or contentious the term ‘reform’ is, we have no alternative to it.” The interim government should also build independent oversight on the

appointment of members and commissioners to all institutions such as the Election Commission, the Anti-Corruption Commission, and the National Human Rights Commission, including through civil society consultations.

To end entrenched impunity, the government should repeal or revise laws that undermine or preclude accountability. For example, the interim government should repeal section 197(1) of the Criminal Procedure Code, which requires government approval to bring criminal charges against public officials—including police officers—if the offense is committed while the officer is acting or purporting to act in their official capacity; and section 132 of the criminal procedure code requiring prosecutors to obtain a prior government “sanction” before lodging any criminal complaint against a state official, permission that is seldom granted. The armed forces, including those seconded to special units like the Rapid Action Battalion, should be prosecuted in civilian courts for gross human rights violations by amending the Army Act, 1952, Air Force Act, 1953, and Navy Ordinance, 1961 that permit military tribunals jurisdiction over such abuses. The “good faith” clause in section 13 of the Armed Police Battalion (Amendment) Act 2003, which provides blanket immunity for security force abuses, should be removed.

The government should introduce standards on the use of force by requiring mandatory reporting and independent review of all use of force by law enforcement, not just for lethal events or cases involving the use of firearms. The police laws regarding use of force should reflect international standards, including the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials, and the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials. These standards require that police apply, as far as possible, nonviolent means before resorting to the use of force, that they use force only in proportion to the seriousness of the offense, and that lethal force is used only when strictly unavoidable to protect life.

To end arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances, the interim government should build systems prohibiting filing cases against unnamed accused and mass arrest warrants, revising laws that allow for vague and overly broad charges to target critics. The interim government should establish independent civilian oversight over law enforcement, including through the national human rights commission, with authority to carry out unannounced inspections of all places of detention.

Immediately, the interim government should ensure that no one is detained arbitrarily or otherwise unlawfully. Every person should be detained according to law, with respect for basic due process including being told the date when the authority for their detention expires. Every person detained, for whatever reason, should be brought swiftly—within 24 hours—before a judge or judicial panel which should rule on the legality and necessity of their detention, and any order for release should be immediately complied with.¹ All detention centers should be made public and open to independent inspection. Courts should act speedily on habeas corpus petitions and ensure judicial review of detentions, insisting that the detainee is safely produced before the judge.

The government should publicly and clearly prohibit extrajudicial killings by enacting laws that will hold perpetrators criminally liable. It should ratify the optional protocol to the torture convention and take steps to properly enforce the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act, including by providing public information on the status of complaints, investigations, prosecutions, and redress. It should repeal sections 54 and 167 of the Criminal Procedure Code, which empower the police to detain people for 15 days without a lawyer, known as remand, a period when authorities frequently carry out torture. It should embark upon urgent prison reforms by enforcing the UN Standard Minimum Rules for Non-custodial Measures (the Tokyo Rules) and the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules).

The interim government has a maximum of one year to bring these reforms before it holds elections. The international community should urgently assist the government with aid and expertise targeted towards implementing these systemic reforms as a priority above security force training support.

The Yunus government should seek assistance by inviting UN and other experts to investigate and provide recommendations. It should, most urgently, back a consensus resolution at the Human Rights Council to ensure continued monitoring and reporting by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to prevent future governments from undermining the reforms.

¹ Article 33 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh requires that any person detained in custody be brought to a magistrate within 24 hours of arrest.

Methodology

This report is based on interviews with 30 victims or their relatives, and eyewitnesses during the protests and after, as well as three officials in the interim government. It also includes interviews with eight members of the security forces who have spoken out since the fall of the Hasina government, although they all requested anonymity, fearing reprisals by their colleagues.

We informed interviewees about how the information gathered would be used and that they could decline the interview or terminate it at any point. No payments were made to interviewees. In many cases, identifying details of witnesses and security force officials have been withheld to protect against potential retribution.

This report does not seek to provide a compressive overview of the events and abuses of July and August.² It provides a summary of events before and during the protests to provide context in which current reforms are taking place and to underscore the importance of accountability and solidifying rights-based reforms to protect Bangladesh's future.

In November, Human Rights Watch wrote to the various commissions established by the Yunus government to share our recommendations.

² The abuses carried out during this period are being investigated by a UN expert Fact-Finding Mission.

I. Security Force Abuses

The Bangladesh student uprising, often called the Monsoon Revolution or the July Uprising, drew international attention not only because of excessive and widespread violence by security forces, but also because thousands of people risked their lives to protest autocratic rule despite the risks of confronting the Hasina government's well-known repressive machine.

Deadly Crackdown on Protesters

When violence broke out on July 15, security forces responded with excessive force, firing live ammunition indiscriminately at unarmed students and in some cases shooting people in the back as they fled.³ A police officer later told Human Rights Watch, "I witnessed officers firing at vital organs.... In many cases, I witnessed live ammunition being fired even when officers' lives were not in danger."⁴

On July 18, the Bangladeshi authorities imposed a nationwide internet shutdown, blocking communications and access to information. However, protesters continued to organize, and the police chased and shot them. Amir Hussain, 18, said he was caught in a crowd as police attacked protesters on July 19. Videos of him attempting to save his life circulated widely on social media.⁵ He said:

As the police were running after me, I tried to escape by climbing an under-construction building. When I reached the fourth floor, the police ordered me to jump down, but I didn't because I knew I would die if I did. I tried to hang on the rod on the fourth floor of the building. One officer fired six rounds at me from third floor as I was hanging, and all of them hit my leg. Then they left. Later, when it was causing me severe pain, I jumped to the

³ Preliminary Analysis of Recent Protests and Unrest in Bangladesh, OHCHR, August 16, 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/preliminary-analysis-recent-protests-and-unrest-bangladesh>, (accessed November 1, 2024).

⁴ Human Rights Watch interview, October 8, 2024, details withheld.

⁵ Mashiq Mizan, "Shot six times, Amir lives to tell his tale," *The Daily Star*, August 19, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/shot-six-times-amir-lives-tell-his-tale-3681371> (accessed January 12, 2025).

third floor which caused my leg to break further. I still don't know why they chased and shot me.⁶

After protesters stormed a jail and set fire to the state broadcaster's offices, the government ordered a curfew enforced with "shoot-on-site" orders on July 20, and arrested thousands of people.⁷ Iman Hossain Tayem, a college student and the son of a police officer, was with two friends at a teashop on July 20 when security forces started shooting. When one of them was hit by a rubber bullet, they decided to hide inside, rolling down the shutters. One of the friends, Mohammad Rahat Husain, said that 10-15 policemen entered the shop.

We were completely shocked when the police lifted the shutters and 10-15 officers pointed their guns at us. They started physically assaulting us with the butts of their guns. Some officers were saying they should shoot us, while others suggested shooting us in the legs. As Tayem and I stood together, the police, using abusive language, told us to run away. Tayem had already taken two or three steps ahead, thinking I would follow, but I didn't move. As he ran, he was shot from behind by two bullets, one went through his waist, entering from one side and exiting from the other, and the second bullet hit his leg. I rushed to him, holding him as he was about to collapse. I tried to drag him away, but the police kept firing, and a rubber bullet hit my leg. Tayem was dying, with his wrists limp and his eyes staring blankly. The last words he said to me were: "Bhai, leave me. I'm dying."⁸ I started running, but they fired at me again. This time, I wasn't hit. I was screaming for someone to help Tayem. But he died there.⁹

⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Amir Hussain, August 12, 2024, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

⁷ Julhas Alam and Sheikh Saaliq, "Bangladesh imposes strict curfew with a 'shoot-on-sight-order' following deadly protests," *AP News*, July 20, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/bangladesh-student-protests-curfew-government-jobs-quota-9af35994b4855ffac9bd962861447cda>, (accessed January 12, 2025); "Bangladesh violent protests leave 105 dead, government set to announce curfew: Here's what happened today," *The Indian Express*, July 20, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/bangladesh-violent-protests-leave-105-dead-curfew-what-happened-today-9464445/>, (accessed January 12, 2025).

⁸ *Bhai* is Bangla for "brother."

⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Mohammad Rahat Husain, August 14, 2024, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Nadim Mizan, 37, a teacher, was killed on July 20 while walking home from a mosque in the Rampura area of the capital, Dhaka. According to witnesses, he fell after the first bullet hit him; he tried to crawl away but then a second bullet struck him in the back, and he lay still on the ground. “I never imagined he would be shot in front of the mosque,” said Mizan’s wife, Tabassum Akhter Niha. “That day, we saw nearly 40 dead bodies lying in the streets.”¹⁰

Attacks on bystanders by security forces appeared to be part of a broader pattern. One police officer later told Human Rights Watch, “The police also shot at onlookers observing the scene from their homes, intending to create fear and send a message that people should not watch what was happening around them.”¹¹ Police officers described receiving both explicit and implicit orders throughout the protests to use lethal force. One officer explained:

Senior officers ordered us to be strict and not to spare any criminals spreading anarchy. They didn't explicitly use the word “fire,” but their instructions were clear: Apply the highest force, do whatever you think is necessary to control the situation, take a hardline approach.¹²

The same officer also described witnessing more explicit directions. He said that senior officers from Dhaka Metropolitan Police Headquarters would watch live CCTV footage and direct officers on the ground to shoot like “they were ordering someone to shoot in a video game.”¹³ He said that as he understood it, the home minister, Asaduzzaman Khan, and the inspector general of police, Chowdhury Abdullah Al-Mamun, gave directions to the Dhaka metropolitan police commissioner, Habibur Rahman, who instructed the deputy commissioners.¹⁴ This hierarchy of command is consistent with Bangladesh’s police structure and reporting lines leading up to the home minister. A video in August showed a police officer in Dhaka defending police actions and telling Khan about the protesters’

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Tabassum Akhter Niha, August 13, 2024, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

¹¹ Human Rights Watch interview, October 10, 2024, all details withheld.

¹² Human Rights Watch interview, October 5, 2024, all details withheld.

¹³ Human Rights Watch interview, all details withheld.

¹⁴ Chowdhury Abdullah Al-Mamun was arrested on September 4, 2024. Habibur Rahman was forced to retire on August 13, 2024. Asaduzzaman Khan is in hiding. All three are facing criminal charges.

persistence: “We shoot one dead, or we wound one, and that is the only one that falls. The rest don't budge, sir.”¹⁵

Multiple police officers indicated that they believed that directives to use excessive force during the uprising came from political leadership. As one officer said, “I believe that during the unrest, the role of the police was determined more by political leaders than by the officers in the field.”¹⁶ Some students reported torture in detention. Student leader, Nurul Haque, for example, was detained on August 1 and held in remand for five days during which he said he was tortured.¹⁷

After the government lifted the curfew and partially restored the internet on July 25, the students called for continued civil disobedience to protest killings, arbitrary arrests, and torture by security forces. On July 26, six coordinators of the student movement were abducted by plain clothes police after they went to a hospital in Dhaka to treat injuries sustained because of excessive force by police or attacks from Awami League supporters. The six were held in incommunicado detention for a week and were “reportedly forced to issue a video statement announcing the end of the protest movement” before they were released on August 1.¹⁸ On August 5, Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled the country.¹⁹

Reprisal Violence

Even as many Bangladeshis rejoiced at the end of Sheikh Hasina’s repressive rule, in some places celebrations turned violent. Mobs targeted those perceived to be supporters of the Hasina government, including religious minorities. They also targeted the police in retaliation for having, as an institution, enforced her repressive rule. Scores of police

¹⁵ Tanim Ahmed, “We Shoot one dead...but the rest don’t budge,” *The Daily Star*, August 13, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/we-shoot-one-dead-the-rest-dont-budge-3676231>, (accessed January 12, 2025).

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch interview, October 8, 2024, all details withheld.

¹⁷ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Report: Preliminary Analysis of Recent Protests and Unrest in Bangladesh, August 16, 2024, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/OHCHR-Preliminary-Analysis-of-Recent-Protests-and-Unrest-in-Bangladesh-16082024_2.pdf (accessed November 8, 2024).

¹⁸ Preliminary Analysis of Recent Protests and Unrest in Bangladesh, OHCHR, August 16, 2024, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/OHCHR-Preliminary-Analysis-of-Recent-Protests-and-Unrest-in-Bangladesh-16082024_2.pdf, (accessed January 12, 2025).

¹⁹ “Bangladesh: Prime Minister Hasina Resigns amid Mass Protests,” Human Rights Watch news release, August 6, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/08/06/bangladesh-prime-minister-hasina-resigns-amid-mass-protests>.

stations were burned down and at least 40 police officers were reportedly killed.²⁰ Many police went into hiding leaving a vacuum in law enforcement and crimes spiked.²¹

In some cases, police also fueled the post-August 5 chaos and violence. For instance, on August 5, in Ashulia, police set fire to vehicles carrying dead and injured protesters. At least one person, according to an eyewitness, was burned alive in handcuffs.²² Razia Begum, 55, who witnessed the events said, “this was the first time in my life that I saw innocent people burned alive this way.”²³ She said that when neighbors saw the flames they ran to put out the fire but police turned on them and began shooting. “The roads were covered with blood,” said Razia. “People were fatally shot directly in their bodies, not in their legs.”²⁴

As demonstrators engaged in reprisals against religious and ethnic minorities, thousands of minority Hindu people gathered at the border, seeking to enter India out of fear of attacks.²⁵ A Hindu businessman in the city of Tangail told Human Rights Watch that “while the crowd was celebrating Hasina’s fall, some crowd members suddenly started attacking the businesses nearby, including my shop.”²⁶ An Awami League politician in Jessore said that “soon after the news spread in my neighborhood that Sheikh Hasina had fled the country, our businesses and houses were targeted by rioters. They were venting their anger by chanting against Sheikh Hasina and Awami League leaders.”²⁷

A district Awami League organizer told Human Rights Watch on August 6: “They are targeting the Awami League supporters and their properties. Both Muslims and Hindus have been attacked. So many of our leaders are hiding.”²⁸ Another Awami League

²⁰ “44 policemen killed during student-mass uprising: Police HQ,” *Prothom Alo English*, August 18, 2024, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/government/r5qrxyo4c5>, (accessed October 22, 2024).

²¹ “The police must get back to work,” *The Daily Star*, August 9, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/editorial/news/the-police-must-get-back-work-3673816>, (accessed November 9, 2024).

²² Human Rights Watch interview with student protester, September 4, 2024, Ashulia.

²³ Human Rights Watch interview with Razia Begum, pseudonym, September 4, 2024, Ashulia.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ “Hundreds of Bangladeshi Hindus gather at Indo-Bangladesh Border to seek refuge in India,” *Economic Times*, August 10, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/hundreds-of-bangladeshi-hindus-gather-at-indo-bangladesh-border-to-seek-refuge-in-india/videoshow/112429571.cms?from=mdr>, (accessed January 12, 2025).

²⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Ronojit Ghosh, August 7, 2024, Tangail.

²⁷ Human Rights Watch interview, name withheld, August 7, 2024, Jessore.

²⁸ Human Rights Watch phone interview, details withheld, August 6, 2024.

supporter said that he was in hiding because “opposition supporters attacked Awami League people with machetes, rods, and bamboo sticks.”²⁹

In many places, Muslim clerics, students, and community leaders came out to protect Hindu temples and Christian churches while political leaders and student protest organizers called for calm.³⁰

Torture, Enforced Disappearances, and Killings

Shortly after Hasina fled the country, three victims of enforced disappearances—Michael Chakma, Mir Ahmad Bin Quasem (Armaan), and Abdullahil Amaan Azmi—were released. In all three cases, authorities had for years denied having them in custody. All of them told journalists that they were held in solitary confinement but could hear others who were held in the same detention centers.

Humam Quader Chowdhury was detained in August 2016, around the same time as Azmi and Armaan. All three are sons of opposition leaders who had been tried and convicted by the International Crimes Tribunal, as collaborators of the Pakistan military during Bangladesh’s war for independence. Humam, the son of Salauddin Quader Chowdhury, was released in March 2017 on the condition that he keep quiet about his unlawful detention. He only agreed to meet Human Rights Watch after the fall of the Hasina government. “I know that there were other cells in that building, and I know that those cells were full. There were other people there,” he said.³¹

On December 14, 2024, a commission of inquiry set up by the interim government to investigate enforced disappearances issued its first report, estimating that over 3,500 enforced disappearances had been carried out under the Sheikh Hasina government.³²

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ “Students, other Muslims protect temples, churches amid Bangladesh arrest,” *Al Jazeera*, August 7, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/7/students-other-muslims-protect-temples-churches-amid-bangladesh-unrest>, (accessed January 12, 2025); “BNP calls for unity, polls at the soonest,” *The Daily Star*, August 8, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/politics/news/bnp-calls-unity-polls-the-soonest-3671856>, (accessed January 12, 2025); “Let no one get the chance of looting: Nahid Islam,” *Prothom Alo*, August 5, 2024, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/wnj4x05yrg>, (accessed January 12, 2025).

³¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Human Quader Chowdhury, September 5, 2024, Bangladesh.

³² Saif Hasnat and Mujib Mashal, “Ex-Bangladeshi Leader Orchestrated Mass Disappearances, Inquiry Finds,” *New York Times*, December 16, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/16/world/asia/bangladesh-disappearances-sheikh-hasina.html>, (accessed December 30, 2024).

According to the report, enforced disappearances were carried out under a “central command structure,” and Hasina, as well as top officials Major General Tarique Ahmed Siddique and Major General Ziaul Ahsan, and senior police officers Monirul Islam and Mohammad Harun-Or-Rashid were involved in overseeing the disappearances. The commission has already received 1,676 complaints and by December, had examined 758 cases, of which around 200 people remain missing. The others were eventually shown as arrested after periods of unlawful secret detention.

Officers involved in enforced disappearances also told Human Rights Watch that Sheikh Hasina or senior members of her government had knowledge of incommunicado detentions and that, in some cases, Hasina directly ordered enforced disappearances or killings.³³

Mir Ahmad Bin Quasem, also known as Armaan, was leading the legal defense team for his father, Mir Quasem Ali, a prominent leader of the opposition Jamaat-e-Islami party who was sentenced and hanged by the International Crimes Tribunal for collaborating with the Pakistan military in committing crimes against humanity during Bangladesh’s 1971 War of Independence. On August 9, 2016, seven or eight officers picked Armaan up from his home in the presence of his wife, sister, and children. As a lawyer, he demanded a warrant for his arrest, but the officers refused and dragged him out of the house, put him in a van, and blindfolded him. When he protested, he says, an officer responded, “Please don't make us be brutal with you.”³⁴

Armaan was freed after eight years, during which authorities denied holding him in custody. He described the facility where he was held as having been “meticulously designed to give the detainees a worse than death experience.”³⁵ He was kept blindfolded and handcuffed 24/7, except to use the washroom or eat.³⁶ He said that he could sometimes hear other detainees being tortured in the cells nearby. “I would hear screams

³³ Under international criminal law, commanders can be criminally liable for crimes committed by their subordinates. “Commanders and other superiors are criminally responsible for war crimes committed by their subordinates if they knew, or had reason to know, that the subordinates were about to commit or were committing such crimes and did not take all necessary and reasonable measures in their power to prevent their commission, or if such crimes had been committed, to punish the persons responsible.” Rule 153. Command Responsibility for Failure to Prevent, Repress or Report War Crimes, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule153>.

³⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Mir Ahmad Bin Quasem, September 6, 2024, Bangladesh.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

and sounds of interrogation. Grown men screaming like little children. It's really difficult to take,” he said.³⁷ At one point he said he asked the officers detaining him to “either kill me or release me. Do something. I just can't take this anymore.” He said they told him it was out of their hands.

“They just give us a name, location, intelligence on the target to pick them, bring them here, and keep them. The orders come in; we follow. We don't choose or we don't have the jurisdiction to decide. It comes from the highest place.” That's what they told me.³⁸

Similarly, the national commission of inquiry found that enforced disappearances were carried out such that tasks were divided across different agencies with abductions, detention, and executions being carried out by different units. According to the report, “as a result, even individuals directly involved in victim elimination teams often lacked knowledge of who they were eliminating or the broader context of the operations.”³⁹

An officer told Armaan that he was sorry for detaining him, but that he feared he would be executed if he disobeyed orders. Another former high-level commanding officer who was also implicated in carrying out disappearances, said about Armaan's case: “This kind of decision is political and is taken at the highest levels.” The officer explained that when he joined his unit, he was told that Armaan, Azmi, and Chowdhury, all three sons of prominent opposition politicians, who had been forcibly disappeared were being held there and that “and that any decision to release them has to be taken by Sheikh Hasina.”⁴⁰

Over the years, Armaan befriended other officers who explained to him that they had received specific training on how to “abduct, torture, and dispose of the bodies.”⁴¹ He said officers told him they were trained, for example, to make sure CCTVs were disabled or broken when they picked someone up. They also allegedly received training on treatment in detention, to keep detainees “handcuffed in an uncomfortable situation, blindfolded,

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ “Enforced disappearances: State-backed system behind it all,” *The Daily Star*, December 16, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/enforced-disappearances-state-backed-system-behind-it-all-3777446>, (accessed December 31, 2024).

⁴⁰ Interview with Bangladeshi activist. All details withheld.

⁴¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Mir Ahmad Bin Quasem, September 6, 2024, Bangladesh.

and deliberately subject them to prolonged suffering and techniques of how to break them as a person.” Finally, he said they were trained to kill detainees through cremation and dump their remains in the river.⁴²

The national commission of inquiry report found that such rivers included the Buriganga River (off the Postogola bridge) and the Shitalkkha River (off the Kanchan bridge) and that the bodies were tied to cement bags to keep them from surfacing. According to the report, “this method was described by military officers who had served in RAB as standard procedure to ensure that the bodies would sink.”⁴³ Bodies of other victims were dismembered by being placed on train tracks.

On August 6, some officers put Armaan in a van and made him lie down on the floor. They switched his blindfold and handcuffs with towels, removing any evidence of state custody. Two officers sat on top of him while they drove for an hour. Unaware of the political developments that had occurred outside his detention cell, Armaan was sure he was being taken to be executed. But then the car stopped, and he was let out, Armaan said.

Then they gave me a push and I found myself in the gutter. I heard a car rushing away. I kept laying there for an hour or so. Then I gathered some strength, and I undid my blindfold and realized I was in the outskirts of Dhaka.⁴⁴

Abdullahil Amaan Azmi, a retired brigadier general, is the son of Ghulam Azam, a former leader of the Jamaat-e-Islami party who was convicted of war crimes and sentenced to death in 2013. Considering his age of 90, the court ruled that Azam would serve a life sentence rather than face execution. He died in prison in October 2014. Azmi was picked up on the evening of August 22, 2016, by about 30 men in civilian clothes who entered his

⁴² Ibid. Other officers have confirmed privately, after the Hasina government toppled, that people detained unlawfully were taken out into Bangladesh’s numerous rivers and shot, and their bodies were tied down and dumped in the water. In one case in 2014, several bodies, dumped by the Rapid Action Battalion in Narayanganj, had floated up. It is the only case that was prosecuted by the Hasina government. Meenakshi Ganguly, “After Narayanganj verdict, Bangladesh should disband RAB,” Human Rights Watch, January 19, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/01/19/after-narayanganj-verdict-bangladesh-should-disband-rab>.

⁴³ “Enforced disappearances: State-backed system behind it all,” *The Daily Star*, December 16, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/enforced-disappearances-state-backed-system-behind-it-all-3777446>, (accessed January 12, 2025).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

apartment building telling staff that they were from the Detective Branch of the police. The authorities denied his arrest. After eight years in unlawful detention, Azmi was released in August 2024.

One army officer claimed that Hasina had direct knowledge of Azmi's detention and failing health in custody.⁴⁵ He said that because Azmi was a fellow military officer, he kept requesting permission from Sheikh Hasina to release him, but each time she refused. At one point, he says, Hasina even suggested that Azmi be killed. "I didn't do that. But I stopped asking about his release."⁴⁶

When Azmi was released after Sheikh Hasina fled the country, he and Humam later corroborated that they believed they had been held in the same detention center. Humam said, comparing the length of his disappearance to that of Azmi and Armaan, "Seven months, I thought was a lifetime. Eight years. I cannot fathom how anybody would survive that."⁴⁷

Michael Chakma, an Indigenous rights activist, disappeared on April 9, 2019. The government ignored inquiries about his case from the High Court, the National Human Rights Commission, and the United Nations Committee against Torture.⁴⁸ On May 21, in response to a writ petition by Michael's sister, the High Court ordered the Home Ministry to submit a report within five weeks.⁴⁹ The Inspector General of Police reportedly stated that they "could not find anybody named Michael Chakma in any prison in Bangladesh."⁵⁰

Chakma said he was picked up at a tea stall on April 9, 2019, by four or five men who said they were from law enforcement. They pulled Chakma into a microbus, blindfolded him,

⁴⁵ All details withheld.

⁴⁶ All details withheld.

⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Humam Qader Chowdhury, September 5, 2024, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

⁴⁸ "HC asks for progress report on probe," *New Age*, May 22, 2019, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/73164/hc-asks-for-progress-report-on-probe>, (accessed October 27, 2024); "NHRC asks home ministry to find out Michael Chakma," *New Age*, May 7, 2019, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/71714/nhrc-asks-home-ministry-to-find-out-michael-chakma>, (accessed October 27, 2024); "Bangladesh in the eyes of UN Committee Against Torture – 1," *Prothom Alo English*, September 22, 2019, <https://en.prothomalo.com/opinion/Bangladesh-in-the-eyes-of-UN-Committee-Against>, (accessed October 27, 2024).

⁴⁹ "HC asks for progress report on probe," *New Age*, May 22, 2024, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/73164/hc-asks-for-progress-report-on-probe>, (accessed October 27, 2024).

⁵⁰ Rumi Kawser, "Michael Chakma's disappearance: Police accused of not filing GD despite HC order," *Dhaka Tribune*, January 16, 2020, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/198886/michael-chakma-s-disappearance-police-accused-of>, (accessed October 27, 2024).

drove him to a detention site, and placed him in a cell. They interrogated him about a protest by Chittagong Hill Tracts activists. During his detention, especially in the early weeks, Chakma said he was subjected to torture. He said that while he was blindfolded, the officers would tie him to a chair with his hands behind his back, making him believe he was being held in an electric chair and threatening to electrocute and kill him if he did not provide them with information. One officer told him, “We can keep you here for 30 years and nobody will ever find you.”⁵¹ Chakma said some officers eventually felt remorse and told him that they knew what they were doing was a violation, but that “they were bound to do this,” telling him that “if we don’t, we will lose our jobs.”⁵²

On August 6, officers moved Chakma to a new location, and early the next day, they put him in a car and held his head down. One officer said, “if you shout, we will shoot you.” They stopped in a forest, and told him to lie down on the ground and wait there for 30 minutes and then run. After they left, he lay on the ground terrified that if he moved and ran, he would be shot in the back. Eventually, he got up and saw that he was in a forest in Baraiyarhat. Someone eventually on the road gave him a ride on their bike to Chittagong, and he was able to reach home.

In addition to those forcibly disappeared, security forces have killed hundreds of people, including opposition members and activists, in “crossfire” incidents or “gunfights,” euphemisms for extrajudicial killings where the authorities falsely claim that the suspect was killed during an armed exchange. In some cases, victims were forcibly disappeared before they were killed; in other cases, officers killed people during raids or after detaining them, claiming that a shootout had broken out, especially after Sheikh Hasina announced a war on drugs in 2018.

In April 2017, Swedish Radio broadcast a secretly recorded interview with a senior officer in the Rapid Action Battalion who admitted that the force routinely picks up people, kills them, and disposes of the bodies.⁵³ These killings became so institutionalized that

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Michael Chakma, September 8, 2024, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ “Exclusive: Officer Exposes Brutal Killings by Bangladeshi Elite Police Unit RAB,” *Swedish Radio*, April 4, 2017, <https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/6665807>, (accessed October 26, 2024).

parliamentarian and others openly called for more “crossfire” killings.⁵⁴ As one officer told Human Rights Watch, “Many people have been killed by RAB, DB (Detective Branch), and DGFI (Directorate General of Forces Intelligence) personnel.” He explained:

In my 10-11 years in the job, I’ve witnessed disappearances and killings by RAB. These things are real. The disappearances and crossfires that RAB engages in are impossible without the approval of police headquarters, the Ministry of Home Affairs, or especially the Home Minister.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ “Bangladesh lawmakers Openly Call for Extrajudicial Executions,” Human Rights Watch commentary, January 21, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/21/bangladesh-lawmakers-openly-call-extrajudicial-executions>.

⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch interview, October 10, 2024, details withheld.

II. New Government, Persisting Abuses

Troublingly, security forces are replicating familiar patterns of abuses from the Hasina administration. These include arbitrarily arresting Awami League officials and supporters as well as journalists seen to have been favorable to the previous government. Another tactic that security forces continue to practice is filing criminal complaints against large numbers of “unknown” people, a common abusive practice in Bangladesh, which in effect “authorizes” the police to arrest almost anyone and repeatedly re-arrest detainees even though they are not named accused in a case. Detainees continue to be remanded to police custody, which is a period where in the past torture frequently occurred.⁵⁶ The Bangladesh High Court has issued directives for interrogation in remand, including that it must take place in a room with glass windows, so that lawyers and relatives can monitor. But these directives are still not routinely followed.

Crackdown on Alleged Pro-Awami League Media

Police have pursued criminal charges against journalists for what was seen as backing the Hasina government in their reporting during the Monsoon Revolution.⁵⁷ While it is critical that those who were involved in commanding, aiding, and abetting the grave crimes committed during the uprising are held to account, mass cases against journalists for not backing the protesters sends a dangerous message for freedom of expression under the interim government.

⁵⁶ Committee against Torture, “Concluding Observations on the initial report of Bangladesh,” CAT/C/BGD/CO/1, August 26, 2019. For instance, in 2018, Shahidul Alam, a prominent activist and journalist, was held under remand for seven days on charges of “spreading propaganda and false information” against the Awami League government, during which he said he was tortured. See Frontline Defenders, “Shahidul Alam Falsely Charged and Tortured,” <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/shahidul-alam-falsely-charged-and-tortured>, (accessed October 26, 2024).

⁵⁶ “Army given magistracy power,” *The Daily Star*, September 18, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/army-given-magistracy-power-3705246>, (accessed January 12, 2025).

⁵⁷ Committee to Protect Journalists, “Journalists supportive of ousted Bangladesh leader targeted with arrest, criminal cases,” September 19, 2024, <https://cpj.org/2024/09/journalists-supportive-of-ousted-bangladesh-leader-targeted-with-arrest-criminal-cases>, (accessed October 26, 2024).

As of November, authorities have filed murder charges against at least 140 journalists in relation to their reporting on the Monsoon Revolution.⁵⁸ For example, police in Chattogram are investigating charges against 28 journalists for having “produced false and fabricated contents concealing the true events during the student protest.”⁵⁹ These charges are filed alongside 50-60 other unnamed individuals. At least 25 journalists are named in a complaint filed at Bangladesh’s International Crimes Tribunal where they face charges of crimes against humanity.⁶⁰

Police have especially targeted journalists from the privately owned, pro-Awami League broadcaster Ekattor TV. On August 21 police detained Farzana Rupa and her husband Shakil Ahmed after they were charged alongside Sheikh Hasina and others in two separate murder cases related to the Monsoon Revolution, and held them in remand for nine days.⁶¹ On September 16, police detained Mozammel Babu, Ekattor’s managing director and editor-in-chief, and Mahbubur Rahman, a senior reporter from the station, as well as Shyamal Dutta, the editor of *Bhorer Kagoj*.⁶² Babu and Dutta were held on a seven-day remand on murder charges.⁶³

⁵⁸ Reporters without Borders, “Bangladesh: RSF welcomes statement by Muhammad Yunus on false accusations against journalists and calls for urgent action on press freedom,” November 21, 2024, <https://rsf.org/en/bangladesh-rsf-welcomes-statement-muhammad-yunus-false-accusations-against-journalists-and-calls>, (accessed December 30, 2024).

⁵⁹ “109 including ex-info minister, 28 journos sued,” *The Daily Star*, September 4, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/109-including-ex-info-minister-28-journos-sued-3694531>, (accessed October 26, 2024).

⁶⁰ Reporters Without Borders, Bangladesh: RSF condemns the outrageous charges of crimes against humanity brought against at least 25 journalists, August 30, 2024, <https://rsf.org/en/bangladesh-rsf-condemns-outrageous-charges-crimes-against-humanity-brought-against-least-25>, (accessed November 10, 2024).

⁶¹ “Journalist couple Shakil, Rupa land in jail after two rounds of questioning,” *BD News 24*, August 31, 2024, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/3do4bf9c7565>, (accessed October 26, 2024).

⁶² “Journalists Mozammel Babu, Shyamal Dutta detained near Bangladesh-India border,” *New Age*, September 16, 2024, <https://www.newagebd.net/post/country/245409/mozammel-babu-shyamal-dutta-held-while-crossing-border-into-india>, (accessed November 8, 2024); “Journalists Mozammel Babu, Shyamal Dutta detained from Mymensingh border,” *The Daily Star*, September 16, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/journalists-mozammel-babu-shyamal-dutta-detained-mymensingh-border-3704336>, (accessed November 8, 2024).

⁶³ “Shahriar Kabir, Mozammel Babu and Syamal Dutta put on 7-day remand,” *Prothom Alo*, September 17, 2024, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/mwlsptfhe5>, (accessed November 8, 2024).

The authorities have also scrapped more than 150 press accreditations required to attend official events.⁶⁴ As of January 5, 2025, the Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit asked banks across the country to provide the financial information of more than 50 journalists.⁶⁵

Arbitrary Arrests and Failure of Due Process

Between August 6 and September 25, police lodged cases against 92,486 people, most of them related to murder.⁶⁶ Nearly 400 former ministers, members of parliament, and other Awami League officials have been named in over 1,170 cases, which include hundreds of unnamed individuals.⁶⁷ Over 200 cases have been filed against Sheikh Hasina.⁶⁸

Human Rights Watch reviewed eight First Information Reports (FIRs) filed in relation to the July and August killings, naming up to 297 individuals each, including Hasina and Awami League ministers and up to 600 unnamed individuals.

In interviews with Human Rights Watch, five plaintiffs in the eight cases said they did not know who was named as the accused when they filed the case. They said the police or local politicians simply told them to sign the papers. The mother of a student protester who was killed in Dhaka's Lakshmibazar area, said, "I went to Dhaka to file the case because I wanted justice for my son who was killed so brutally during the protest."⁶⁹ But she said that when they went to file the case at the magistrate court, police and local political leaders simply told her to sign an FIR that had already been written and named 50 accused as well as 200-300 unnamed accused. Among those named in the FIR that she

⁶⁴ "Press accreditation cards of 30 more journalists scrapped," *Dhaka Tribune*, November 5, 2024, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/364263/press-accreditation-cards-of-30-more-journalists>, (accessed November 9, 2024). "BFIU summons bank account details of 21 more journos," *The Business Standard*, January 5, 2025, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/bfiu-summons-bank-account-details-21-more-journos-1035526> (accessed January 12, 2025).

⁶⁵ "BFIU Summons Bank Accounts Details of 28 Journalists," *The Business Standard*, October 30, 2024, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/bfiu-summons-bank-accounts-details-28-journalists-979761>, (accessed December 8, 2024).

⁶⁶ Mahfuz Anam, "The indiscriminate arrests and murder charges," *The Daily Star*, October 11, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/the-third-view/news/the-indiscriminate-arrests-and-murder-charges-3724986>, (accessed October 29, 2024).

⁶⁷ Mohammad Jamil Khan, "Fall of Hasina regime: Over 92,000 accused, 1,474 cases, 51 days," *The Daily Star*, October 10, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/fall-hasina-regime-over-92000-accused-1474-cases-51-days-3724231> (accessed January 12, 2025).

⁶⁸ Mahmudul Hasan, "Over 7000 arrested across country in one week," *Prothom Alo*, October 8, 2024, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/izq3ufgtso>, (accessed October 29, 2024).

⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview, details withheld, October 28, 2024.

signed were 47 Awami League former ministers, lawmakers, and Awami League student activists, as well as a teacher and two doctors. She said she does not know who some of these people are or how they would be involved in her son's murder.

Two other plaintiffs said that local political leaders opposed to the Awami League asked them to sign the FIR. They were not sure against whom they were filing the cases. Both police and politicians told them that if they wanted the state to recognize their relative's murder and for them to be honored as martyrs of the uprising, including financial compensation and other reparations, then they needed to sign.⁷⁰

Human Rights Watch spoke with two healthcare workers, Amzad Hossain and Nizam Uddin, who had been working at the Chittagong Medical College Hospital during the student protest. They recently discovered that they were accused of killing student protester, Wasim Akram.⁷¹ Nizam Uddin said that when he and Hossain spoke with Akram's relatives after the case was filed to ask why they had been accused, the family was not even aware that they had been named. Both men are now in hiding, fearing arrest. Said Hossain:

On that day [July 16] we were helping the duty doctors with Wasim's body along with three other bodies of people who were also killed during the protest. We even helped the families to get the bodies for last rites. When I found my name was among those listed in the case involving the killing of Wasim, I was shocked. I was at the hospital on that day and was performing double duty [overtime] as so many injured students were brought to the hospital. I was never involved in any of the politics. Now I find my name along with so many Awami League people. I did not dare to contact police. You know the police. If I go to the police station to prove my innocence, they will arrest me immediately before even hearing me.⁷²

Similarly, on October 17, police opened a murder case filed by Mohammad Baker, the father of Ahadul Islam, who was killed on July 19 during the protests. The case was filed against 180 people, including ZI Khan Panna, a senior supreme court lawyer and the

⁷⁰ Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, October 28, 2024.

⁷¹ "Service providers injured in the movement accused!" *CVoice24*, August 27, 2024, <https://www.cvoice24.com/mahanagar/news/73909?sfnsn=wa>, (accessed November 8, 2024).

⁷² Human Rights Watch interview with Amzad Hossain, October 28, 2024, Chittagong.

chairperson of rights organization Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK). Baker later acknowledged that he didn't know who ZI Khan Panna was. Panna received anticipatory bail, and Baker has since signed an appeal to remove Panna from the charge sheet.⁷³ However, the mistake underscores the risks of arbitrary arrest.

After numerous complaints of harassment, Muhammad Talebur Rahman, deputy commissioner at the Dhaka Metropolitan Police, said: "We have said this before and reiterate that no one will be harassed with false cases."⁷⁴ However, many Awami League leaders and supporters have attempted to flee the country or are in hiding, fearing arbitrary arrest. The authorities have failed to protect individuals affiliated with the Awami League from attacks, including inside the courts.⁷⁵

Shuprova Tasneem told Human Rights Watch that her father, Asaduzzaman Noor, a former parliamentarian, was arrested without warrant on September 15, and named in three different murder cases with hundreds of others.⁷⁶ According to Tasneem, Noor's bail appeal was rejected although the 78-year-old suffers from heart disease and other ailments, and he was subjected to "degrading and aggressive behaviour." "While deeply personal to me, this case is not just about my father; it's about breaking the cycle of political retribution and ensuring that no one, regardless of political affiliation, is denied their right to due process," Tasneem wrote to Human Rights Watch.⁷⁷

There are also troubling indications that security forces are obstructing the investigations by the newly formed commission of inquiry into enforced disappearances. The commission

⁷³ "Plaintiff now appeals to drop ZI Khan Panna's name," *Prothom Alo English*, October 21, 2024, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/axga2s2vmz>, (accessed October 26, 2024).

⁷⁴ Kabir Hosen, "Haphazardly filed cases causing concern," *Dhaka Tribune*, October 29, 2024, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/363523/haphazardly-filed-cases-causin-concern>, (accessed October 29, 2024).

⁷⁵ Mohiudding Faruk, "Indiscriminate accusations make cases questionable," *Prothom Alo*, September 3, 2024, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/2btwoua1tl>, (October 29, 2024).

⁷⁶ "Mass protests: Asaduzzaman Noor shown arrested in murder case," *The Daily Star*, September 29, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/mass-protests-asaduzzaman-noor-shown-arrested-murder-case-3715266>, (accessed October 29, 2024).

⁷⁷ Shuprova Tasneem letter on file with Human Rights Watch, October 29, 2024.

members said that while it had located eight new sites of unlawful detention, there were concerned over security forces “attempts to destroy evidence” linked to these secret cells.⁷⁸

On September 30, army officers raided the home of Sanjida Islam, the leader of Maayer Daak (“Mothers’ Call”), an organization representing victims of enforced disappearances and their families. The officers took away her older brother, Saiful Islam Shamol, at gunpoint, without an arrest warrant, and, according to the armed forces press office, held him for over two hours for interrogation at a nearby army camp.⁷⁹ “The army later told me that they made a mistake, but they were asking my brother to sign blank sheets of paper,” Islam told Human Rights Watch. “No one has been prosecuted if there was such a mistake, and we have to believe that this was an attempt to create pressure on victims’ families.”⁸⁰

Mob Attacks and Politically Motivated Violence

Reports of attacks on Hindu minorities since the fall of the Hasina government have led to international concern.⁸¹ Commentators told Human Rights Watch that Hindus and other religious minorities were attacked because they traditionally supported her Awami League party. A journalist from Pabna explained, “Those who have been involved in Awami League politics were targeted. In this area, Hindus are known as Awami League supporters anyway. So the Hindu people were targeted.”⁸² Some reports of such attacks have been exaggerated on social media, often by Hindu extremist groups and supporters of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, causing panic.⁸³ Still, the uptick in violence against the Hindu community is real. Hindu groups say that there have been hundreds of incidents

⁷⁸ “Enforced disappearances: Inquiry commission finds 8 detention centres,” *The Daily Star*, November 6, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/enforced-disappearances-inquiry-commission-finds-8-detention-centres-3745201>, (accessed November 10, 2024).

⁷⁹ “Maayer Daak demands apology from army, interim govt,” *New Age*, October 1, 2024, <https://www.newagebd.net/post/country/246717/maayer-daak-demands-apology-from-army-interim-govt>, (accessed October 26, 2024).

⁸⁰ Human Rights Watch phone interview, October 27, 2024.

⁸¹ “Hindus Across Bangladesh Being Subjected To Death: UK MP In House Of Commons,” *NDTV*, November 29, 2024, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/hindus-across-bangladesh-being-subjected-to-death-uk-mp-in-house-of-commons-7136414>; ‘Total state of chaos’: In Diwali message, Trump condemns violence against Hindus, other minorities in Bangladesh, *Indian Express*, November 1, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/diwali-donald-trump-violence-against-minorities-hindus-bangladesh-9647995>; “India-Bangladesh relations sour as tensions rise over attacks on Hindu minority,” *The Guardian*, December 5, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/05/india-bangladesh-relations-sour-as-tensions-rise-over-attacks-on-hindu-minority>, (accessed December 10, 2024).

⁸² Human Rights Watch interview, details withheld, August 6, 2024.

⁸³ Deutsche Welle, “Worsening situation as thousands try to cross the Bangladesh-India border,” August 22, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1uowYgzofMw>, (accessed December 31, 2024).

of vandalism targeting Hindu businesses, homes and places of worship.⁸⁴ The interim government has confirmed that at least 88 cases of communal violence had been registered between August 5 and October 22, and that 70 people had been arrested.⁸⁵ “Hindus in Bangladesh are facing a twofold problem,” Chakravarty, a 29-year-old pharmacy owner at Dowarabazar market, told Al Jazeera. “On one hand, Indian media spreads disinformation and exaggerates incidents, some of which never even happened. This fuels anti-India sentiment, which, in turn, contributes to a feeling of insecurity among us, the Hindus.”⁸⁶

In December, a group of Muslims in Sunamganj district protested violently, accusing a Hindu of making derogatory remarks about Islam in a Facebook comment. The mob vandalised temples, as well as Hindu homes and businesses.⁸⁷ Said one witness, whose neighbor was allegedly responsible for the Facebook post:

It was a terrifying night. I thought I would have been killed by the mob. There were more than 300 people. I had persuaded my female relatives to move out but decided to remain at home. But when the mob started attacking my house, I also fled. If they had found me, they would have killed me. When an angry mob started gathering outside of the accused’s house, the police came and took him away. Then the mob started to attack his house and the whole neighborhood. More than 50 houses were vandalized. You will not find women in most of the affected houses as they fled for their safety to their relatives.⁸⁸

In an interview in September with Indian news agency Press Trust of India, Yunus agreed that there had been attacks, stating that they are politically motivated. “While beating up

⁸⁴ Mehedi Hasan Marof, “‘Our lives don’t matter’: Bangladeshi Hindus under attack after Hasina exit,” *Al Jazeera*, December 12, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/12/12/our-lives-dont-matter-in-post-hasina-bangladesh-hindus-fear-future>, (accessed January 7, 2025).

⁸⁵ “Bangladesh Confirms 88 Cases Of Violence Against Minorities,” *NDTV*, December 10, 2024, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/bangladesh-confirms-88-cases-of-violence-against-minorities-7218386>, (accessed January 6, 2025).

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ “‘Offensive’ Facebook post: Hindu homes, businesses looted and vandalised in Sunamganj,” *Business Standard*, December 4, 2024, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/crime/offensive-facebook-post-hindu-homes-businesses-looted-and-vandalised-sunamganj>, (accessed December 10, 2024).

⁸⁸ Human Rights Watch phone interview, details withheld, December 10, 2024.

Awami League cadres, they had beaten up Hindus as there is a perception that Hindus in Bangladesh mean Awami League supporters,” Yunus said. “I am not saying what has happened is right, but some people are using it as an excuse to seize property.”⁸⁹

The authorities also arrested Chinmoy Kumar Das, who had recently been expelled from International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), accusing of sedition over allegations that he had disrespected the Bangladeshi flag. A Muslim prosecutor, Saiful Islam, was killed in violent protests outside the Chittagong court after Das was denied bail.⁹⁰ Das does not have legal representation. A Hindu lawyer said, “Lawyers are afraid to represent Chinmoy as there were threats of mob violence. We all have our families to worry about.”⁹¹ The Chittagong Lawyers Association asked its members not to represent Das and other alleged people responsible for Saiful Islam’s death.

⁸⁹ “‘Attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh exaggerated’: Muhammad Yunus questions India,” *Hindustan Times*, September 5, 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/attacks-on-hindus-in-bangladesh-exaggerated-muhammad-yunus-questions-india-101725527725684.html>, (accessed January 6, 2025).

⁹⁰ Anbarasan Ethirajan & Neyaz Farooquee, “India and Bangladesh spar over Hindu monk’s arrest,” BBC, November 27, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwysv79qpeko>, (accessed December 10, 2024).

⁹¹ Human Rights Watch phone interview, details withheld, December 10, 2024.

III. Building a Rights-Respecting Security Force

Though the crackdown on student protesters during the Monsoon Revolution was unprecedented in scale, it was part of a well-established pattern of excessive force by a politicized security force that had long enjoyed a culture of impunity for abuses. A 2019 review by the Committee against Torture described the Bangladesh police as a “state within a state,” asserting that “in general, one got the impression that the police, as well as other law enforcement agencies, were able to operate with impunity and zero accountability.”⁹²

When Sheikh Hasina left, many police stations closed their doors and police went into hiding, fearing retaliation. However, by mid-August, 628 of the 639 police stations in the country had resumed operations.⁹³ With law enforcement returning to their posts, it is critical that the government implement security sector reforms so that they do not return to the same abusive practices.

The interim government has taken some crucial steps to embark upon reforms and to pursue accountability. In addition to establishing a commission of inquiry into all enforced disappearances, it also formed six commissions to recommend reforms to the judiciary, the electoral system, public administration, police, the anti-corruption office, and the constitution. It later established four other commissions to make policy recommendations on media, health, labor rights, and women’s rights. The commissions include civil society activists, student leaders, academics, and former government officials.

The interim government has said that the commissions will submit their recommendations by January 15 (and January 31 for the judicial reform commission).⁹⁴ Another commission, comprising the heads of the six commissions, will develop a consensus around the

⁹² OHCHR, “Committee Against Torture examines the situation in Bangladesh,” July 30, 2019, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2019/07/committee-against-torture-examines-situation-bangladesh>, (accessed January 12, 2025).

⁹³ “628 out of 639 police stations resume operations: Police HQ,” *The Daily Star*, August 12, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/628-out-639-police-stations-resume-operations-police-hq-3675571>, (accessed January 7, 2025).

⁹⁴ “Six reform commissions get extended deadlines,” *New Age*, January 3, 2025, <https://perma.cc/18QJ-E6ZF>, (accessed January 7, 2025).

proposals.⁹⁵ The government will then amend, repeal, or introduce laws to ensure lasting change. It will also make changes to the constitution. While legislative changes can be brought by the interim government through presidential order, they will require political consensus so that they are ratified by parliament after elections.

To avoid a repeat of past abuses, key factors will need to be addressed for security sector reform, including political interference in the police, prosecutor's office, and judiciary, ensuring civilian oversight and accountability, and ending abusive practices. Donor governments should make investment in security sector reform contingent on these core structural reforms. To ensure that a future government does not overturn these reforms, the interim government should seek a resolution at the United Nations Human Rights Council to create a mechanism to assist in implementation and to monitor and report.

End Political Interference

Over the last 15 years, the security forces served as a core component of Sheikh Hasina's repressive apparatus, systematically targeting members of the opposition, critics, journalists, and human rights activists with trumped up cases, torture, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and enforced disappearances. "The police's image among the public has been damaged due to the politicization of the force," one officer told Human Rights Watch.⁹⁶

Politicization of the security forces—police, the military, and the Rapid Action Battalion, a particularly abusive unit made up of seconded police and army personnel—included favored appointments, promotions, or rewards. Human Rights Watch spoke to police officers who described a system in which promotions depended on political sponsorship and bribes. Human Rights Watch has also documented the use of the police awards as an incentive for repression. This systemic political interference led to the understanding that as a security force officer one's duty included crackdowns on political opposition. One officer explained about police abuses that "the driving forces behind these actions are personal gain and self-interest," and that to be promoted and receive the associated

⁹⁵ Nurul Kabir and Monwarul Islam, "No lack of understanding with political parties: Yunus," *New Age*, January 4, 2025, <https://www.newagebd.net/post/politics/254470/no-lack-of-understanding-with-political-parties-yunus>, (accessed January 6, 2025).

⁹⁶ Human Rights Watch interview, October 8, 2024, details withheld.

financial perks, officers would also pay bribes to politicians.⁹⁷ Another officer separately confirmed how political connections were key to professional advancement in the police force under the Hasina government. He said:

Loyalty to the party is often prioritized over merit for lucrative postings, and officials tend to select politically-motivated individuals for their teams. This loyalty has led the police to become increasingly biased, acting more like party cadres over the years. It has tarnished the police's image and reputation, causing a rift between the police and the public.⁹⁸

Such political interference also leaked into the army. In February 2021, Al Jazeera said it had secretly filmed one of the two brothers of the then chief of army staff, Gen. Aziz Ahmed, bragging that he is able to use his family connections to direct the police to carry out their bidding. "Police work as our thugs. Who needs regular thugs?" he said.⁹⁹

In addition to promotions, law enforcement also received awards, in some cases specifically for acts of repression.¹⁰⁰ For example, a month after the December 2018 general election, the government presented 349 awards to police officers, including an officer who, according to the police medal book, received a medal for his role in arresting activist Shahidul Alam for "anti-state propaganda on Al Jazeera TV."¹⁰¹ Fifteen officials were awarded for surveillance and arrests of student leaders who staged protests during the summer of 2018 calling for improved road safety and reform to the same quota system for government jobs that sparked the Monsoon Revolution.¹⁰² Benazir Ahmed, who was placed under sanctions by the US government for human rights violations, received a medal for his work as the head of RAB in the lead-up to the election and during the "war on

⁹⁷ Human Rights Watch interview, October 10, 2024, details withheld.

⁹⁸ Human Rights Watch interview, October 8, 2024, details withheld.

⁹⁹ "All the Prime Minister's Men," *Al Jazeera*, February 1, 2021, <https://network.aljazeera.net/en/pressroom/all-prime-minister%E2%80%99s-men>, (accessed October 26, 2024).

¹⁰⁰ "Bangladesh: Election Abuses Need Independent Probe," Human Rights Watch news release, January 2, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/02/bangladesh-election-abuses-need-independent-probe>.

¹⁰¹ Muktadir Rashid, "Police week awards trigger criticism," *New Age*, February 8, 2019, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/64173/police-week-awards-trigger-criticism>, (accessed January 12, 2025); "Bangladesh: Stop Attacks on Student Protestors, Critics," Human Rights Watch news release, August 6, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/06/bangladesh-stop-attacks-student-protesters-critics>.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

drugs”—a period when there were at least 136 extrajudicial executions and 10 enforced disappearances—after which he was promoted as the head of police.¹⁰³

In repeatedly denying abuses, particularly enforced disappearances, the Hasina government also fostered impunity. Denials and mockery trickled down from the government leadership, through the ranks. Many families whose loved ones had been forcibly disappeared said that when they tried to register a police report the police refused to accept any complaint that included allegations against law enforcement; some families said that they faced threats and harassment. Awami League leaders and security forces claimed that those who had disappeared were voluntarily hiding.¹⁰⁴

Security forces also engaged in extortion. In the Rohingya refugee camps for instance, the Armed Police Battalion (APBn) demanded ransom to release individuals, otherwise threatening to charge them with drug trafficking.¹⁰⁵

The interim government should:

- Take steps to enforce policies to ensure that appointments, assignment training, discipline, and conduct of members of the security forces, police, and civil service conform to the requirements of strict political neutrality in the discharge of duties. These should include:
 - Restricting and strictly regulating political involvement in personnel-related issues or recruitment and holding accountable those who violate such rules.
 - Establishing a transparent promotion and incentive system that removes political influence.
 - Strictly regulating civil servants’ political activities, requiring officers at all levels to abstain from participating in political activities or represent political parties while on duty.
- Structurally reform the home ministry to ensure the political independence of staff overseeing law enforcement.

¹⁰³ Ibid. Human Rights Watch, “*Where No Sun Can Enter*,” April 16, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/08/16/where-no-sun-can-enter/decade-enforced-disappearances-bangladesh>.

¹⁰⁴ Sajeeb Wazed, “Bangladesh: ‘Disappeared’ Reappear All the Time,” *The Diplomat*, May 23, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/bangladesh-disappeared-reappear-all-the-time>, (November 10, 2024).

¹⁰⁵ “Bangladesh: Rampant Police Abuse of Rohingya Refugees,” Human Rights Watch news release, January 17, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/17/bangladesh-rampant-police-abuse-rohingya-refugees>.

- Take steps to ensure that the prosecution and the judiciary are independent of the executive and protected from political control and interference.
- Invite relevant United Nations special procedures—including the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, and the special rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment—to visit Bangladesh to investigate and make appropriate recommendations to ensure justice and accountability, as well as reform of the security forces to act independently and professionally.
- Act on the recommendations from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights based on its inquiry mission.

Ensure Civilian Oversight and Accountability

Core to ensuring adequate oversight and accountability is the reform of the Police Act of 1861. The Police Act, instituted by the British colonial administration to reinforce control, sets up a hierarchical system wherein the police force is designed to enforce state authority instead of serving the public, precluding genuine civilian oversight and accountability.

Currently, there are three main avenues through which victims and their families can seek recourse for police abuses: the Police Internal Oversight (PIO) Unit, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), or the courts. All these mechanisms failed on accountability for security forces.

The Police Internal Oversight Unit, created in 2007, is responsible for responding to, investigating, and adjudicating all complaints against police. The unit, however, operates without transparency, raising serious concerns about its independence. The government has not released statistics on the reported abuses committed by the police and there is no mechanism by which complainants, let alone civil society, can access information about procedures for PIO investigations or the outcome of cases. According to the 2019 US Human Rights Report, of “the few known instances in which the government brought charges, those found guilty generally received only administrative punishment.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ US State Department, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – 2019: Bangladesh,” February 2020, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/Bangladesh>, (accessed March 19, 2021).

The NHRC’s legal framework limits its purview over security forces, in effect exempting them from any independent oversight.¹⁰⁷ Under the National Human Rights Commission Act, 2009, the most that the commission can do regarding investigations into security forces abuses is to request reports from the Ministry of Home Affairs, the same office overseeing security force abuses. The ministry is not obligated to comply, and there are no consequences for failure to do so.

Sometimes the courts do intervene to spur investigations, particularly when a complainant files a *Naraji* petition—arguing that the police investigation was fraudulent, biased, or politically influenced. But invariably, the response is to pass the case from unit to unit, each repeatedly closing the case.

The interim government should:

- Establish a well-resourced, independent, national civilian oversight body to oversee law enforcement, with total operational and hierarchical autonomy, and with full financial and structural independence, which includes independent oversight on the appointment of members and commissioners to all law enforcement institutions including through civil society consultations.¹⁰⁸
- Reform or replace the PIO Unit to ensure it is independent and transparent, including by releasing independently collected statistics on police abuses and provide human rights monitors and complainants access to information about procedures and outcomes of cases handled by the unit.
- Establish clear national guidelines for prosecutors to scrutinize the lawfulness of police activity, including powers of criminal investigation and prosecution independent of police hierarchy, create a nationwide monitoring system and standardized procedure outlining the role of public prosecutor’s offices in this regard.
- Establish a formal and independent complaints mechanism to report police abuse and ensure it is accessible for all, including Rohingya, women, and people with disabilities.

¹⁰⁷ National Human Rights Commission Act, 2009, secs. 12(2), 18.

¹⁰⁸ See: UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “International Independent Expert Mechanism to Advance Racial Justice and Equality in Law Enforcement - Visit to Brazil - Advance unedited version,” September 27, 2024, A/HRC/57/71.

- Implement the draft Police Ordinance created with UN support in 2007 and reviewed in 2013.
- Empower the NHRC to have full purview over security forces and mandate law enforcement to fully and transparently respond to all queries by the commission. Ensure that the commission has unfettered and unannounced access to all places of detention, as well as sufficient powers of investigation.
- Undertake reforms to raise the NHRC’s status to a level A accreditation by the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Commissions, indicating full compliance with the UN Paris Principles Relating to the Status of National Human Rights Institutions.

The law ministry should:

- Establish by law a well-resourced specialized victim-centered independent mechanism designed to support affected individuals and communities, ensuring their meaningful, safe and inclusive participation in the process including its creation, implementation, and assessment.
- Repeal section 197(1) of the Criminal Procedure Code (CPC), which requires government approval to bring criminal charges against public officials—including police officers—if the offense is committed while the officer is acting or purporting to act in their official capacity.
- Repeal section 132 of the CPC requiring prosecutors to obtain a prior government “sanction” before lodging any criminal complaint against a state official, permission that is seldom granted.
- Revise the Army Act, 1952, Air Force Act, 1953, and Navy Ordinance, 1961 such that military tribunals should only have jurisdiction over offenses that are strictly military in nature, and that gross human rights violations by members of the armed force and offenses affecting civilians cannot be considered military offenses.
- Repeal the “good faith” clause in section 13 of the Armed Police Battalion (Amendment) Act 2003, which provides blanket immunity for security force abuses.

Enforce Standards on Use of Force

The excessive force used by police during the Monsoon Revolution was reminiscent of the police response to previous protests, whether road safety and quota reform student

protests in 2018,¹⁰⁹ garment worker strikes,¹¹⁰ or opposition political mobilization,¹¹¹ especially ahead of elections.¹¹² Bangladesh police frequently shot live ammunition into crowds, and deployed water and sound cannons at close range. Police also repeatedly stood by—and at times aided and abetted—members of the Awami League student group, the Chhatra League, in brutally attacking opposition supporters or government critics.

These abuses are facilitated by inadequate procedures to ensure independent oversight and protocols regarding escalating use of force, as well as the lack of a mechanism to allow officers to raise human rights concerns about orders they receive. As one officer told Human Rights Watch, “As a commander, I had no option to refuse my seniors’ orders; this is not how the system works in policing.”¹¹³ However, he did note that as a commander, he had discretion over how to execute those orders.

The interim government should:

- Put in place automatic mandatory reporting and independent review for all use of force by law enforcement, not only for lethal events or cases involving the use of firearms. Establish effective reporting and independent review procedures for this purpose.
- Create an oversight body to record and review incidents of use of force, taking appropriate measures, defined by law, to detect, document and refer incidents for further follow-up and review. The reporting should be done in real time or immediately after the incident. This reporting should preferably be automatically forwarded to an independent civilian body for review. In cases of death or serious injury, the reports should also be automatically referred to the public prosecutor’s office for criminal review and judicial control.
- Recommend a requirement that each incident where ammunition is used is recorded, listing names of officers and members of the government that ordered

¹⁰⁹ “Bangladesh: Stop Attacks on Student Protesters, Critics,” Human Rights Watch news release, August 6, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/06/bangladesh-stop-attacks-student-protesters-critics>.

¹¹⁰ “Bangladesh: Investigate Dismissals of Protesting Workers,” Human Rights Watch news release, March 5, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/03/05/bangladesh-investigate-dismissals-protesting-workers>.

¹¹¹ “Bangladesh: Excessive Force Against Political Protesters,” Human Rights Watch news release, August 2, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/02/bangladesh-excessive-force-against-political-protesters>.

¹¹² Human Rights Watch, “Democracy in the Crossfire: Opposition Violence and Government Abuses in the 2014 Pre- and Post- Election Period in Bangladesh,” April 29, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/04/29/democracy-crossfire/oppositionviolence-and-government-abuses-2014-pre-and-post>.

¹¹³ Human Rights Watch interview, October 10, 2024, details withheld.

the action, and those in position in the line of command above them, to establish command responsibility.

- Establish strict regulations on the acquisition and use of military equipment by law enforcement.
- Take steps towards establishing national mandatory use of body-worn cameras for law enforcement officials. Impose sanctions for those not using them or turning them off. Establish as mandatory the display of identification numbers in uniforms, with adequate monitoring and accountability for non-compliance.
- Create a national systematic data collection system on all law enforcement interactions, made mandatory at all applicable levels of government. This data should be documented, analyzed, and published.
- Consult experts to create a prosecutor's office that is independent of the police hierarchy, has powers to examine evidence and require interviews, and is set up to withstand pressure to decide whether or not to prosecute.
- Reduce and strictly regulate special militarized operations targeting marginalized communities including in the armed conflict in the Chittagong Hills Tracts and in the Rohingya refugee camps.

The prosecutor's office should:

- Initiate ex officio criminal investigations on all killings and serious injury for use of force.
- Prosecute, and seek redress for victims and their families, for excessive use of force by police.

The law ministry should:

- Amend police laws regarding use of force to reflect international standards, including the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials, and the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials. Require that police apply, as far as possible, nonviolent means before resorting to the use of force, use force only in proportion to the seriousness of the offense, and use lethal force only when strictly unavoidable to protect life.
- Adopt a national law on the use of force that complies with international human rights standards, particularly the principles of legality, precaution, necessity, proportionality, accountability and non-discrimination, and the obligation to protect and respect the right to life. Further ensure that these principles apply

uniformly to all law enforcement agencies and all kinds of operations across the country.

End Arbitrary Arrests

Law enforcement officials in Bangladesh frequently used mass arbitrary arrests to go after critics of the Hasina administration. According to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party hundreds of thousands of their leaders and activists were accused in “false and fabricated” cases, and thousands were arrested in the lead up to elections in 2014, 2018, and 2024.¹¹⁴ So broad was the sweep that many cases were in fact filed against opposition members who were either dead, abroad, or hospitalized. In many cases, the complaints filed were against large numbers of “unknown” people, which police used as warrants to raid the homes of political opposition members in what appeared to be overt political harassment and intimidation.

The Awami League is making similar allegations now against the interim government, with mass cases being filed at the ICT and against Awami League supporters or journalists or others who were perceived to be sympathetic to the previous government.

The interim government should:

- Establish guidelines for police that prohibit the filing of cases against unnamed accused and end the practice of mass arrest warrants.

The law ministry should:

- Revise laws that allow for vague and overly broad charges that are misused to target critics.
- Ensure judicial review of all cases of detention.

End Extrajudicial Killings, Fake “Crossfire” or “Gunfights”

In total, human rights monitors estimate that law enforcement carried out nearly 2,000

¹¹⁴ “BNP activists in panic over police raids,” *New Age*, August 6, 2022, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/177749/bnp-activists-in-panic-over-police-raids>, (accessed January 12, 2025).

extrajudicial killings during Sheikh Hasina’s 15-year reign.¹¹⁵ These cases were rarely investigated or officers held to account.

The interim government should:

- Ensure the correct application of all investigative regulations and procedures and, if needed, establish new revised regulations in accordance with the Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death in all investigations.¹¹⁶
- Establish an independent commission with UN expert technical assistance to independently investigate alleged “crossfire” killings.
- Publicly announce that officers engaging in extrajudicial killings will be held criminally liable.

End Enforced Disappearances and Incommunicado Detention

Enforced disappearances were a hallmark of Sheikh Hasina’s rule.¹¹⁷ Yet her government repeatedly denied the allegations.¹¹⁸ So far, over 1,600 cases of enforced disappearance have been recorded by the new commission of inquiry, with the commission estimating that the number could ultimately be over 3,500.¹¹⁹

The interim government should:

- Act on the recommendations of the national commission of inquiry, including to disband the Rapid Action Battalion.
- Instruct security forces to identify secret detention sites, and to not destroy evidence.

¹¹⁵ Mahmudul Hasan, “At least 1,926 killed extrajudicially in 15 years of AL govt,” *Prothom Alo*, November 4, 2024, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/crime-and-law/meet6at73t>, (accessed November 10, 2024).

¹¹⁶ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death (2016), The Revised United Nations Manual on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/MinnesotaProtocol.pdf>, (accessed January 12, 2025).

¹¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, “*Where No Sun Can Enter*,” April 16, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/08/16/where-no-sun-can-enter/decade-enforced-disappearances-bangladesh>.

¹¹⁸ Meenakshi Ganguly, “No, Bangladesh, The Truth is Not a ‘Smear Campaign,’” Human Rights Watch commentary, July 7, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/07/no-bangladesh-truth-not-smear-campaign>.

¹¹⁹ Saif Hasnat and Mujib Mashal, “Ex-Bangladeshi Leader Orchestrated Mass Disappearances, Inquiry Finds,” *New York Times*, December 16, 2024, (accessed January 12, 2025).

- Publish a list of all recognized places of detention and empower the National Human Rights Commission to carry out unfettered and unannounced access, and to speak confidentially with any individual in the facility.
- Ensure that anyone unlawfully detained is immediately released, and order security forces to provide information about those that were killed in custody, including the burial sites.

The law ministry should:

- Prohibit “enforced disappearance” as a distinct crime under Bangladesh law.

End Torture and Ill Treatment

Allegations of torture in Bangladesh are frequent but rarely investigated or prosecuted. Only one case of torture has ever been convicted under Bangladesh’s Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act since it was passed a decade ago.¹²⁰ The Hasina government ignored requests from the UN Committee Against Torture to act on its recommendations.¹²¹

The interim government should:

- Ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and urgently invite the Subcommittee on Prevention to visit Bangladesh and make recommendations.
- Establish an investigation mechanism to handle complaints of torture and ill-treatment that is independent of law enforcement agencies.
- Establish a separate civilian oversight body to monitor the progress of investigations in accordance with the Torture Act. The mechanism should also collect and regularly publish data on the implementation of the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act, including information on complaints, investigations, and prosecutions, punishments, and measures of redress.
- Request from UN experts and donor governments specific training for medical professionals to ensure that medical examinations ordered to assess torture

¹²⁰ Ali Mashraf, “Jonny’s custodial death case: Lessons learned from the verdict,” *The Daily Star*, September 29, 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/law-our-rights/news/jonnys-custodial-death-case-lessons-learned-the-verdict-1969413>, (accessed October 27, 2024).

¹²¹ Committee against Torture, “Concluding Observations on the initial report of Bangladesh,” CAT/C/BGD/CO/1, August 26, 2019.

allegations are carried out in accordance with the Manual on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (the Istanbul Protocol).

- Request from UN experts and donor governments specific training for law enforcement officials in forensic, non-coercive investigation methods.
- Establish protocols that privilege alternatives to detention and reduce pretrial detention in accordance with the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Non-custodial Measures (The Tokyo Rules).
- Ensure all protocols adhere to the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules).

The law ministry should:

- Repeal sections 54 and 167 of the Criminal Procedure Code, which empower the police to detain people for 15 days without a lawyer, known as remand, which has long been criticized as a loophole for torture. This should be adopted by parliament after elections.

Disband the Rapid Action Battalion

The Rapid Action Battalion was established in 2004, when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party was in office. In the years since, successive governments allowed the force to operate with impunity, acting like an in-house death squad. As one officer who had been seconded to RAB told Human Rights Watch, “RAB has a separate team for these disappearances, killings, or crossfire incidents. Most of the work is done by that team.”¹²² He said:

I was shocked when I joined RAB in 2016. I don’t remember the officer’s name, but he came to take a class during our training. There were about 35 inspectors present, and he openly said he had conducted 169 crossfires. I remember telling one of my batchmates that the officer must be crazy to admit to 169 crossfires in front of everyone.¹²³

¹²² Human Rights Watch interview, October 10, 2024, details withheld.

¹²³ Ibid.

But RAB officers could boast about their abuses because they were never held to account for these crimes. Although RAB is officially led by a senior police officer, in practice it is run by military officers, effectively deploying the army in civilian law enforcement duties but without proper training or civilian accountability and oversight.

Political leaders, when they are out of power, agree that RAB should be disbanded.¹²⁴ The US has barred RAB from receiving training under the Leahy Amendment, which limits support to state forces with a history of human rights abuses. Britain stopped training RAB following widespread criticism after Wikileaks cables revealed that the UK government was funding and training the unit. On December 10, 2021, the US government sanctioned RAB, as well as seven of its current and former officers due to serious human rights violations.¹²⁵

In its report issued on December 14, the national commission of inquiry into enforced disappearances recommended disbanding the Rapid Action Battalion. In response to the report's findings, the RAB chief AKM Shahidur Rahman acknowledged the unit's secret detention centers and stated that RAB would accept the decision if the interim government sought to disband the unit.¹²⁶

The interim government should:

- Disband the Rapid Action Battalion to not only deter future abuses, but also to send a strong message that security forces will no longer be a tool for successive governments to carry out repression.
- Request from the UN and donor governments human rights trainings to all officers that have been seconded with RAB to prevent them from transferring abusive practices to other units, but only on the condition that RAB is disbanded.

¹²⁴ "Khaleda calls for disbanding RAB," *BD News 24*, May 11, 2014,

<https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2014/05/11/khaleda-calls-for-disbanding-rab>, (accessed October 27, 2024); "Extra-judicial killing to be stopped: FM," *The Daily Star*, February 5, 2009, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-74491>, (accessed October 27, 2024).

¹²⁵ Treasury Sanctions Perpetrators of Serious Human Rights Abuse on International Human Rights Day, US Department of Treasury, December 10, 2021, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0526>, (accessed January 12, 2025).

¹²⁶ Sm Najmus Sakib, "Early evidence suggests Bangladeshi ex-premier involved in forced disappearances, finds commission," *Anadolu Agency*, December 14, 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/early-evidence-suggests-bangladeshi-ex-premier-involved-in-forced-disappearances-finds-commission/3424872>, (accessed December 31, 2024).

Establish an Effective and Rights-based Justice System

As Sheikh Hasina consolidated power, her government captured the judiciary leading to a biased justice system that protected abusive and corrupt public officials while unfairly targeting government critics.

One pivotal change occurred in 2017, when an Awami League majority parliament re-introduced the 16th amendment to the constitution which would allow for parliament to remove judges. The High Court questioned the constitutionality of the amendment and the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court affirmed this concern, arguing that to allow parliamentary control of judicial appointments would undermine judicial independence.¹²⁷ Justice Surendra Kumar Sinha, the then head of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court, stated that “essential to the rule of law in any country is an independent judiciary.”¹²⁸ However, in response, Parliament passed a resolution to remove the Justice Sinha’s “unconstitutional, objectionable and irrelevant” observations from the verdict.¹²⁹ This marked a turning point for judicial independence in Bangladesh, after which there was a rapid escalation in politically motivated judicial purges.¹³⁰ At the same time, judges were frequently appointed based on political loyalty and faced political pressure under threat of removal to align with the ruling party.

After Hasina’s ouster, the Appellate Division revisited its previous judgement declaring the 16th amendment invalid and on October 20 issued a ruling to overturn the amendment, thus returning the power to remove judges to the Supreme Judicial Council instead of parliament.¹³¹

¹²⁷ See *Government of Bangladesh and others vs. Advocate Asaduzzaman Siddiqui and others* Government of Bangladesh and others vs. Advocate Asaduzzaman Siddiqui and others.

¹²⁸ Civil Appeal No. 06 of 2017, *Government of Bangladesh and others vs. Advocate Asaduzzaman Siddiqui and others*. 2017, 288.

¹²⁹ By October 2017, the government announced that Justice Sinha would go on leave for a month for “health reasons,” after which he left the country and received asylum in Canada. On November 11, 2017, he resigned, a move that Sinha later described in his autobiography as being a result of threats from the military intelligence agency, Directorate General of Forces Intelligence. “CJ under Fire at JS,” *The Daily Star*, September 14, 2017, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/cj-under-fire-js-1461820>, (accessed November 8, 2024); FIDH, “Out of Control: Human Rights and Rule of Law Crises in Bangladesh,” 2021, <https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/bangladesh784ang.pdf>, (accessed November 8, 2024).

¹³⁰ Coppedge, Michael et al. 2022. V-Dem [Country-Year/Country-Date] Dataset V12 “Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds22>.

¹³¹ “Supreme Judicial Council reinstated to remove judges,” *Prothom Alo*, October 20, 2024, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/wtx18yjln9> (accessed January 12, 2025).

The new chief justice, Syed Refaat Ahmed, has urged reforms to restore public confidence in the judiciary, saying that it is “most important to make the judiciary separate from the executive and legislature and make it independent.”¹³² Without these reforms, the judiciary remains vulnerable to political influence. As the interim government’s law advisor, Asif Nazrul, said at an event on December 23, “If judges are appointed based on their allegiance to political slogans like ‘Joy Bangla’ [the Awami League slogan] or ‘Zindabad’ [the Bangladesh Nationalist Party slogan], there can be no hope for justice.”¹³³

The interim government should:

- Carry out an immediate one-time review of existing judicial appointments. Ensure the process is fair, according to clear procedure, and a done as a one-off non-renewable exercise.
- Establish a system to ensure that there is no political interference in appointments, assignments, discipline, and promotion of judges or prosecutors.
- Restructure the role and appointment procedures for public prosecutors such that they are independently appointed and provided with training in criminal law.
- Create an online centralized filing system for court cases and make relevant case information accessible to all parties free of charge.
- Request assistance on education programs from the UN and donor governments to speedily train more judges to fill the national judge deficit.
- Develop and implement strategies to recruit and retain more female prosecutors and judges.
- As recommended by the Chief Justice, create an independent secretariat or Registrar General’s office to provide oversight and checks to ensure that there is no political interference in judicial proceedings and that any minister or official attempting this is held accountable. The body should be independent of the executive, especially with regards to appointment, assignment of judges to cases, discipline, and finance. It should also have authority to order protection for judges from intimidation and threats, whether by the government, security forces, or third parties.

¹³² CJ sends proposal to govt for separate secretariat for judiciary, *Prothom Alo*, October 27, 2024, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/government/lgc6ibh9mi>, (accessed October 30, 2024).

¹³³ “Political appointment of judges destroyed judiciary: Asif Nazrul,” *The Business Standard*, December 23, 2024, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/political-appointment-judges-destroyed-judiciary-asif-nazrul-1025556>, (accessed January 7, 2025).

The law ministry should:

- Hold accountable all public prosecutors and other legal officers requiring bribes in exchange for legal representation or other legal services.
- Immediately suspend and then remove the death penalty. Immediately commute all existing death sentences.

Promote an Active Civil Society

To continue its repressive rule, the Hasina government attempted to crush civil society activists, journalists, and critics who highlighted human rights violations. Hundreds of Bangladeshis, even children, were arrested for peaceful protests or for criticizing the government, including on social media.

Under international pressure to uphold free speech, the government replaced one law with a new one, but each time replicated the abusive provisions. For instance, the Digital Security Act, a vague law passed in 2018 to replace the Information and Communication Technology Act granted law enforcement the powers to arrest anyone accused of posting information that “ruins communal harmony or creates instability or disorder or disturbs or is about to disturb the law and order situation,” including criticizing Sheikh Hasina and her family. The DSA was replaced by the Cyber Security Act (CSA) in 2023, but it replicated several abusive provisions.

The interim government pledged to repeal the CSA and implement rights-respecting legislation. However, on December 24, the interim government approved a new Cyber Protection Ordinance 2024 which, again, appears to replicate many of the same overly vague and broad provisions of its predecessors. Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua, a leading expert on freedom of expression in Bangladesh, said of the draft ordinance: “The traps for the citizens and journalists remain the same in the draft [...]. There are similar provisions [to those in the previous laws] that can be misused against the minorities instead of protecting them.”¹³⁴ Irene Khan, UN special rapporteur of freedom of opinion and expression, expressed concern that the draft ordinance fails to meet international

¹³⁴ “Cyber protection: Freedom of speech, press will be in peril,” *The Daily Star*, January 5, 2025, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/cyber-protection-freedom-speech-press-will-be-peril-3791886>, (accessed January 7, 2025).

standards.¹³⁵ Civil society activists additionally expressed frustration that the new ordinance was drafted without consultation with communities most impacted by the legislation.¹³⁶

The Interim government should:

- Revise the draft ordinance in consultation with civil society experts and activists and replace the CSA with a rights respecting law.
- Overturn the decision to revoke the press credentials of journalists seen as sympathetic to the previous government.
- Investigate and prosecute attacks on media outlets.
- Drop charges against journalists charged with crimes related to their reporting on the Monsoon Revolution if their actions were not directly linked with inciting violence.
- Drop charges against peaceful critics.
- Remove unreasonable restrictions on rights groups to receive foreign funding, while enforcing regulations to prevent corruption.
- End harassment by the NGO Affairs Bureau and ensure its independence.

Seek International Assistance

The interim government has promised to step down after holding elections. However, there are already schisms building up, with serious challenges to law and order. It is crucial that another does not replace one set of bad political actors. To create a participative democracy, the interim government's efforts should be towards building robust, rights-respecting mechanisms. This will take time, and the government should seek international support.

The interim government should:

- Accept the recommendation made by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights after its fact-finding mission to build an expanded presence in Bangladesh.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

- Seek a consensus resolution at the UN Human Rights Council to establish a mechanism for the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to monitor and report on progress.
- Invite UN human rights experts to visit and make recommendations.
- Work with OHCHR to create a transparent and credible process to vet officers before deploying them on UN peacekeeping missions.
- Seek support from foreign donors for security sector reform, including resources to establish independent oversight bodies.
- Seek international support to train prosecutors, including to create an independent prosecutorial office.
- Seek international support to provide appropriate training on human rights standards to judicial officers.
- Seek assistance to design credible and cost-effective assistance programs to reform the justice system.
- Seek appropriate support for independent government commissions investigating human rights violations.

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The recommendations offered in the report are only fathomable because of the immense bravery demonstrated by the thousands of Bangladeshis who risked their lives for the Monsoon Revolution. May their immeasurable sacrifices be honored with the rights-respecting and democratic future they fought to create.



After the Monsoon Revolution A Roadmap to Lasting Security Sector Reform in Bangladesh

On August 5, 2024, the Sheikh Hasina government in Bangladesh was ousted after three weeks of student-led street protests, described by some Bangladeshis as the Monsoon Revolution. Over the last 15 years, the Hasina government deployed security forces to repress critics and opposition members through enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, surveillance, and torture. As Hasina consolidated power, her government also damaged or destroyed the independent institutions that would keep its powers in check and maintain oversight and accountability over security forces.

An interim government led by Nobel peace laureate, Muhammad Yunus, has committed to holding free and fair elections after repairing the security sector and reinforcing an independent justice system. This report draws on over 20 years of Human Rights Watch's research and documentation in Bangladesh as well as recent interviews with human rights activists, members of the interim government, and current and former law enforcement and military officials to set out the structural reforms needed for lasting change.

Foreign donors, Bangladeshi activists, lawyers, and officials should examine the failures of the past to ensure the protection of human rights now and address the loopholes. Key to this is the separation of powers and building an independent justice system. Donor governments should invest in supporting security sector reform in Bangladesh, including judicial and police training, but not without these core structural reforms. Above all, it calls on the Bangladesh government to lead a consensus resolution at the Human Rights Council seeking appropriate technical assistance.

(above) A student paints street art after the fall of the Hasina government in Dhaka, Bangladesh, August 10, 2024. © 2024 Sipa via AP Images

(cover) Bangladeshis mark one month since the ouster of former prime minister Sheikh Hasina and commemorate those who lost their lives during protests calling for an end to her autocratic rule, Dhaka, September 5, 2024.

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