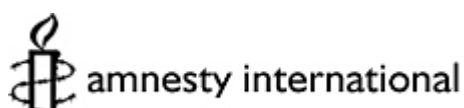


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Amnesty International Report 2009 - Bangladesh

Head of state: Iajuddin Ahmed
Head of government: Fakhruddin Ahmed
Death penalty: retentionist
Population: 161.3 million
Life expectancy: 63.1 years
Under-5 mortality (m/f): 68/67 per 1,000
Adult literacy: 47.5 per cent

In the first national parliamentary elections in seven years, the Awami League won a landslide victory in predominantly peaceful polls held on 29 December. Before the election, despite the relaxing of emergency measures and institutional reform, restrictions on freedom of assembly and association remained and tens of thousands of political activists reportedly attempting to gather peacefully in their party offices were detained throughout the country. Police used excessive force to disperse peaceful rallies, injuring participants. At least 54 people were estimated to have died in suspected extrajudicial executions by police and the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) in the first half of the year alone. No one was held accountable for the deaths. At least 185 people were sentenced to death, and five men were executed. Throughout the year the caretaker government strengthened institutional reforms. In September, the ordinance establishing a national Human Rights Commission came into effect. The Right to Information Ordinance was enacted in October, under which citizens can request access to information held by public bodies. However, eight security agencies were exempt from the ordinance unless the information requested related to corruption and human rights violations.

Background

The year began with the caretaker government backed by the military, continuing the enforcement of restrictions under the state of emergency imposed on 11 January 2007. It ended with elections that delivered an overwhelming majority to the Awami League only weeks after the state of emergency was lifted on 17 December.

Uncertainties about the military authorities' commitment to allow the democratic process to resume were dispelled when parliamentary elections were held on 29

December. Two political alliances – one led by Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League and another by Begum Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party – contested the elections. It remained to be seen if the new government would use this unique opportunity to make good its election pledges and strengthen human rights protection.

Women continued to be discriminated against in law and in practice, and violence against women including beatings, acid attacks and dowry deaths, were reported. In March, the government announced amendments to the National Women Development Policy in order to further promote equality for women. However, the amendments were not implemented after the announcement met with fierce resistance from Islamist groups who rallied in protest saying the amendments defied the Islamic law of inheritance.

Bengali settlers continued to seize land from Jumma Indigenous inhabitants of Chittagong Hill Tracts. Three UN Special Rapporteurs – on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people, on adequate housing and on the right to food – expressed concern that there may be a systematic campaign to support the relocation of non-Indigenous peoples to the Chittagong Hill Tracts in order to outnumber the local Indigenous community.

Thousands of slum dwellers were forcibly evicted in Dhaka and other major cities. Their homes were demolished without any provision for compensation or alternative accommodation. Court orders were usually issued to evict people from land allocated to property development projects.

The Anti-Terrorism Ordinance came into effect. Its broadly formulated definition of acts of terror further eroded safeguards against arbitrary arrest and detention.

Fair trial standards continued to be undermined and were further exacerbated by emergency regulations as defendants' access to due process of law was limited.

The government continued to use the army, alongside the police, the RAB and other security forces to maintain law and order. The army, which had been deployed to maintain law and order since January 2007, was temporarily withdrawn in early November but redeployed on 18 December until after the elections.

Freedom of expression, assembly and association

Restrictions on freedom of expression were not strictly enforced and were eventually lifted in November. Although some restrictions on freedom of assembly and association were lifted in May and November, many restrictions remained under the state of emergency until it was lifted on 17 December.

The ban on indoor political meetings was lifted in May but some 30,000 political activists from various parties were arrested reportedly as they gathered in their party offices soon after the announcement. Police detained them for between several days and two months before releasing them, either without charge or on bail after charging them with apparently unrelated criminal offences.

On 3 November, the government announced the partial withdrawal of the ban on political rallies but this was not implemented until 12 December.

Excessive use of force

Police used excessive force against peaceful demonstrations on several occasions. On 6 July, police attacked several hundred Bangladesh Nationalist Party activists who had gathered peacefully on the premises of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University hospital to see a detained party leader being taken from hospital to a court hearing on

corruption charges. At least 15 people were injured including a photojournalist who was covering the event.

On 11 November, police used sticks and rifle butts to disperse thousands of Jamaat-e-Islami activists at Baitul Mukarram Mosque in Dhaka. Despite the government announcement on 3 November that the ban on election-related political rallies was lifted, police told rally organizers that the lifting of the ban had not yet taken effect and forcibly dispersed the peaceful rally, injuring at least 30 demonstrators.

Extrajudicial executions and impunity

Police and RAB carried out at least 54 suspected extrajudicial executions during the first half of the year with scores more believed to have taken place in the second half of the year. No police or RAB personnel were prosecuted. According to the government, mandatory judicial inquiries were carried out into all fatal shootings by police and RAB, and found them to be justified. The number of judicial inquiries conducted and the findings of such inquiries were not made public.

- On 27 July, police announced the death of Dr Mizanur Rahman Tulul, leader of the outlawed Purbo Banglar Communist Party (Red Flag Faction) in a so-called "crossfire" incident – a term often used to describe extrajudicial executions. Dr Tulul's mother had reported his arrest to journalists on 26 July and publicly appealed to the authorities for his safety.

Past human rights abuses

In April, Foreign Adviser Iftekhkar Ahmed Chowdhury discussed with the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, the possibility of UN involvement in ending impunity for the 1971 violations. However, as in the past, no official Commission of Enquiry was established to investigate the war crimes, crimes against humanity and other serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law as a first step towards establishing truth, justice and full and effective reparations for victims. No concrete action was taken by the government to implement the 1973 International Crimes (tribunals) Act.

Death penalty

At least 185 people were sentenced to death, bringing the estimated number of prisoners on death row to at least 1,085. Five men convicted of murder were executed, one in June and four in December.

In December, Bangladesh voted against a UN General Assembly resolution calling for a worldwide moratorium on executions.

Amnesty International visits

In January, Amnesty International's Secretary General Irene Khan visited Bangladesh and met with victims of human rights violations, civil society groups and political party officials.

Amnesty International reports

- Bangladesh: Memorandum to the Caretaker Government of Bangladesh and political parties (10 January 2008)
- Bangladesh: Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review – Fourth session of the UPR Working Group of the Human Rights Council, February 2009 (1 September 2008)
- Bangladesh: Elections present risks and opportunities for human rights (23 December 2008)

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