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March 24, 2021 9:28AM EDT | Dispatches

Bangladesh Police Arrest Children for Facebook Posts

Stop Using Vague Law to Silence Criticism of Prime Minister

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Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina meets with officials in Tokyo, May 29, 2019. © 2019 Kyodo via AP Images

Displaying absolute intolerance for peaceful criticism, Bangladesh authorities have arrested hundreds of people, including journalists, for criticizing or satirizing the country's ruling party and its leaders. Even children have not been spared for

posting anything to social media that could be interpreted as criticism of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed.

On March 20, authorities [arrested a child](#) for posting a video online “defaming” Sheikh Hasina and her foreign minister, as well as Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

One day earlier, [police arrested an 18-year-old](#) for posting a caricature of the prime minister on social media. Last year, [authorities arrested a child](#) for “defaming” the prime minister after a local ruling party politician said the boy had “badmouthed...our mother-like leader” on Facebook.

These arrests have all come under the [highly problematic](#) Digital Security Act (DSA), a vague law passed in 2018 granting law enforcement the power to arrest anyone accused of posting information online which, for example, “ruins communal harmony,” “causes confusion,” or “injures religious feelings.”

Those arrested have been held in pre-trial detention for long periods, even facing physical abuse as punishment. Cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore, released on bail after months in jail, [told the media](#) he was beaten so badly during interrogation, his ear drum burst. Security forces showed him his drawings on a projector and asked him, “Who did you draw? Did you draw the prime minister?” he said.

Mushtaq Ahmed, a dissident writer, was arrested in May 2020 for posting on Facebook that healthcare workers needed more personal protective equipment. He died in custody after he had been held in pretrial detention for nine months, during which it has been [credibly alleged he was tortured](#).

These abuses violate the fundamental right to free expression, and flout [public health guidance](#) to cease arrests and release all children in detention due to the pandemic. Prime Minister Hasina should bring an end to this now and publicly direct the police to stop punishing children — or anyone else — for criticizing her or other government officials.

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