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Bangladesh: Year since Hasina Fled, Rights Challenges Abound

Positive Steps by Interim Government but Impunity, Abuses Remain Entrenched



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Chief Advisor Muhammad Yunus (3rd L) visits three secret detention facilities known as "Ayna Ghor," which had been used as torture cells during the Awami League government's rule, Dhaka, Bangladesh, February 12, 2025. © 2025 Nayem Shaan/Drik/Getty Images

(New York) – The interim [Bangladesh](#) government of Mohammed Yunus is falling short in implementing its challenging human rights agenda a year since tens of thousands of people took to the street to successfully depose their authoritarian government, Human Rights Watch said today.

Some of the fear and repression that marked Sheikh Hasina’s Awami League Party’s 15-year rule, and abuses such as widespread enforced disappearances, appear to have ended. However, the interim government has used arbitrary detention to target perceived political opponents and has yet to deliver systemic reforms to protect human rights.

“The hope of the thousands who braved lethal violence a year ago when they opposed Sheikh Hasina’s abusive rule to build a rights-respecting democracy remains unfulfilled,” said [Meenakshi Ganguly](#), deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “The interim government appears stuck, juggling an unreformed security sector, sometimes violent religious hardliners, and political groups that seem more focused on extracting vengeance on Hasina’s supporters than protecting Bangladeshis’ rights.”

Eleven reform commissions established in 2024, as well as the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and both Bangladeshi and [international human rights activists](#), have submitted detailed recommendations to the interim government that are still pending.

Meanwhile, the government is facing enormous challenges including an alarming surge in [mob violence](#), [political violence](#), and [harassment of journalists](#) by political parties and other non-state groups, such as religious hardliners [hostile to women's rights](#) and [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people](#). On July 26 and 27, a mob damaged at least 14 homes belonging to members of the Hindu minority [in Rangpur district.](#), and there are [continuing violations](#) against minority communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Hasina fled Bangladesh on August 5, 2024, following five weeks of protests in which security forces killed 1,400 people, [according to the UN](#). The interim government led by Yunus, a Nobel laureate, was established on August 8. But [continuing](#) torture and deaths in custody highlight the urgent need for security sector reform.

On July 16, violence involving security forces and supporters of Hasina's [now banned](#) Awami League killed five people in the town of Gopalganj after the National Citizen Party, formed by students who had participated in last year's popular movement, held a rally there.

In what appears to mirror the partisan actions of the past, police later arbitrarily detained [hundreds](#) of alleged Awami League supporters, and filed ten murder cases against over 8,400 mostly unnamed people. The government [denied](#) carrying out "mass arrests."

Between August 6 and September 25, 2024, police [lodged cases](#) against 92,486 people, most of them related to murder. [Nearly 400 former ministers](#), members of parliament, and other Awami League officials have been named in over 1,170 cases, which also include hundreds of unnamed individuals.

Materials provided to Human Rights Watch show that Mohammad Atiqul Islam, the former mayor of North Dhaka, has been detained since October 2024 in connection with at least 68 separate cases of murder or attempted murder during the 2024 protests. But 36 of these incidents occurred while he was outside the country. As in most other cases, the authorities have not filed charges. Detainees in [other high profile political cases](#) have also cited baseless grounds for arrest, and accused the authorities of denying them medical care and bail.

The first trial, with three defendants including Sheikh Hasina, who will be tried in absentia, is due to begin on August 3, but there is no apparent prospect of trials in many cases, and no evidence has been produced against many of those detained.

Hundreds may have been arrested under the draconian [Special Powers Act](#), which allows preventive detention and was used by the previous government to [suppress dissent](#). In addition, over 8,600 people were [reportedly arrested in a crackdown](#) in February called "[Operation Devil Hunt](#)," many of them allegedly Awami League supporters.

While it is vitally important to hold people accused of serious crimes accountable, many detentions of people allegedly connected to the Awami League appear to be arbitrary and politically motivated, Human Rights Watch said. Meanwhile, the government is prosecuting very few members of the security forces responsible for egregious violations under the Hasina government.

In July, a spokesperson for the Bangladesh Police [told the BBC](#) that only 60 police officers had been arrested for their role in the deadly violence in July and August last year, an operation that involved dozens of police and military units, including the notoriously abusive Rapid Action Battalion.

On August 27, 2024, the interim government formed a commission to investigate enforced disappearances during Hasina's rule, and on August 29, Bangladesh ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. The commission, which has received over 1,800 complaints, has completed two interim reports, with another due in December.

The commissioners told Human Rights Watch that they have collected significant evidence. But they said that security forces members have destroyed evidence, limited their cooperation, and are resisting efforts to hold accountable the alleged abusers, many of whom are still security agency members. Several senior figures implicated in these crimes were able to [flee the country](#) after the interim government came to power.

The Yunus government also established 11 commissions to recommend legal and constitutional reforms in areas including the police, the judiciary, and women's rights. However, the interim government has not adopted them, and efforts to reach political consensus on a significantly reduced reform agenda have been slow.

A crucial outstanding issue is ensuring women's full, equal, meaningful, and safe participation in all decision-making processes, in line with UN Security Council resolution 1325, including through the reformed electoral system.

To help protect human rights beyond its tenure, the interim government should end arbitrary detentions, including by ensuring that pretrial detention is an exception, not the rule. It should end impunity by supporting the prosecution of security force members accused of serious crimes; ensure the independence of the judiciary from the executive; begin security sector reform, including by disbanding the [Rapid Action Battalion](#); and prioritize women's rights and women's full representation.

Foreign governments and the UN should support the interim government, Human Rights Watch said. This should include imposing targeted sanctions on alleged abusers. Other governments should prosecute individuals allegedly implicated in serious abuses who have left Bangladesh, including under the principle of universal jurisdiction. And they should make clear that Bangladeshi participation in UN peace keeping operations is contingent on ensuring accountability for grave violations of international human rights law.

“No one is in any doubt that Yunus's interim government faces enormous challenges, but more needs to be done now to ensure a real and lasting change in Bangladesh's human rights situation,” Ganguly said. “Political parties, whose members have been victims of rights violations in the past, should support reforms to ensure that such crimes can never recur and support rights protections for all.”