



## Joint Statement Against the Undemocratic Electoral Environment in Bangladesh

For Immediate Release  
December 29, 2018

We, the undersigned organizations, as advocates of human rights and democracy, express our concern regarding the restrictive electoral environment surrounding the 11th General Election in Bangladesh, set to be held on December 30, 2018. Ever since the election was announced, the government of Bangladesh has embarked upon a crackdown on civil society, the opposition, and the media, undermining any semblance of a democratic process. This places a severe strain on the waning health of democratic engagement in Bangladesh, and compromises the integrity of the upcoming election.

Electoral violence and intimidation have no place in a truly democratic political process. According to media reports as of December 26, since the allotment of electoral symbols (during the campaign period) on December 10, there have been at least 30 reported attacks on opposition motorcades, 207 incidents of violence took place in 159 constituencies, at least 43 candidates of the Jatiya Oikya Front were attacked and 13 candidates were seriously injured, 17 opposition candidates were arrested, while the High Court Division of the Supreme Court disqualified BNP candidates of 23 constituencies.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, five persons were killed and 2682 were injured in election related violence during this reporting period. Furthermore, reports have surfaced of opposition members being beaten, their party houses being razed to the ground, female candidates being attacked, and opposition campaign rallies being accosted.<sup>2</sup> These attacks are meant to instill fear in the minds of Bangladeshi voters, and thus undermining the prospects of a level electoral playing field.

According to the opposition, as many as 21,000 of their members and activists have been arrested by the Bangladeshi Police since the announcement of the election in early November

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.newagebd.net/article/60084/raids-attacks-mark-end-of-campaign>

<sup>2</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/bangladeshs-deadly-election/>

2018.<sup>3</sup> Several human rights groups have found a dramatic increase in fictitious cases filed against opponents of the ruling party since the beginning of 2018. Among those arrested are prominent leaders of the opposition alliance, Mainul Hosain for criminal defamation, and Dr. Zaffrullah Chowdhury for cases such as treason, extortion, and stealing fish.<sup>4</sup> The sheer number of cases filed against the political opposition indicates an unlevelled playing field, and the ruling party's control over judicial and security institutions, thus placing the entire country in a controlled environment, which goes against the principles of democratic elections.

The credibility of an election is not defined solely on competitiveness and orderliness of the process, but most importantly on the quality of the electoral environment. As the election draws near, independent civil society organizations and media have experienced restrictions on their operations.

As of November 2018, there have been 72 attacks on journalists, 39 arrests related to the Information and Communication Technology Act of 2006, and 9 arrests related to the Digital Security Act.<sup>5</sup> The arrest of photojournalist and activist Shahidul Alam<sup>6</sup> exemplifies the hostile treatment of independent and critical voices by the Bangladeshi government. Freedom and independence of media, together with an unhindered civil society operation, form the backbone of a transparent election. Curtailing such freedoms are indicative of a government that avoids public scrutiny and accountability, which is detrimental especially to the credibility of political processes in Bangladesh.

In addition, Odhikar, a prominent human rights and democracy organization in Bangladesh, has faced smear campaigns, accusing them of “anti-state and anti-government” activities, and “conspiring against the country”. Odhikar was banned by the Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC) from monitoring the polls and deploying election observers, an action that followed the NGO Affairs Bureau's delays in the release of the organization's registration.<sup>7</sup>

Such restrictions are reflected in the sharply decreasing number of election monitors interested in participating in observing the election. It was reported that there were only 34,838 observers who expressed interest to monitor the polls, as of December 19.<sup>8</sup> A BEC official relayed that, of this number, only around 26,000 observers will be granted accreditations.<sup>9</sup> This would mark the second lowest number of election observers in two decades, behind the 2014 election, in which only 8,878 domestic observers and four foreign observers participated.<sup>10</sup> In comparison, there were around 159,000 observers for the 2008 election, and 218,000 in 2001.<sup>11</sup> Such a decrease

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thedailystar.net/bangladesh-national-election-2018/news/us-fair-participatory-polls-bangladesh-1675933>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/12/22/creating-panic/bangladesh-election-crackdown-political-opponents-and-critics>

<sup>5</sup> [http://odhikar.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/human-rights-monitoring-report-November-2018\\_Eng.pdf](http://odhikar.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/human-rights-monitoring-report-November-2018_Eng.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=27022#\\_ftn6](https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=27022#_ftn6)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/media-releases/3638-bangladesh-authorities-must-end-smear-campaign-against-human-rights-group-odhikar-2>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/2018/12/19/11th-general-election-fewer-observers-than-2008-polls>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.jagonews24.com/en/national/news/42949>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/2018/12/19/11th-general-election-fewer-observers-than-2008-polls>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

in the number of election observers indicate a common feeling of discouragement due to a hostile political environment and the presence of hurdles or selective accreditation imposed on the civil society in gaining accreditation.<sup>12</sup>

With the climate of violence perpetrated by the security forces, the weaponization of law and judicial agencies against the opposition, the hostility against civil society, and intimidation of the media, the situation effectively places Bangladesh in a controlled environment that disregards the free will of the people, and is not in line with the principles of democratic elections. As a result of the prevailing conditions in the country, we express our doubts regarding the integrity and credibility of the upcoming election, which cannot be considered a free and fair process under any reasonable yardstick.

### **Endorsing Organizations**

1. Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC)
2. Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL)
3. Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (GNDEM)
4. International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
5. Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV), Sri Lanka
6. Free and Fair Elections Network (FAFEN), Pakistan
7. Komite Independen Pemantau Pemilu (KIPP), Indonesia
8. Malawi Electoral Support Network (MESN), Malawi
9. MARUAH, Singapore
10. National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), the Philippines
11. People's Alliance for Credible Elections (PACE), Myanmar
12. People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL), Sri Lanka
13. Perkumpulan untuk Pemilu dan Demokrasi (PERLUDEM), Indonesia
14. Transparency Maldives (TI-M), the Maldives
15. Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN), Zimbabwe
16. Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL), Cambodia

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<sup>12</sup> <https://anfrel.org/anfrel-statement-on-the-termination-of-its-mission-in-bangladesh/>