



25 Years of Resilience: Statement from Odhikar on its 25th Anniversary

Dhaka, 09 October 2019: Odhikar was established on 10 October 1994, as an organisation of human rights defenders, by some activists who participated in the struggle against the autocratic regime of Lieutenant General Hussein Mohammad Ershad. Bangladesh gained independence after huge sacrifices and equality, human dignity and social justice were mentioned in the Proclamation of Independence. The goal of the Liberation War in 1971 was to create a democratic state based on these principles. Nevertheless, due to the fact that the Constitution was not drafted based on these principles, human rights violations have occurred during the period of successive governments, weakening human dignity and undermining social justice since the beginning of Bangladesh. This has continued throughout the last 48 years.

The main aims of Odhikar are to protest against all human rights violations committed by the state, to be vigilant towards preventing the state from violating human rights, to bring accountability of the state in conformity with the respect, protection and fulfillment of human rights, to assist the victims; and above all to make people aware of their rights.

Odhikar is part of the international human rights movement and a member of various international human rights organisations. It has actively been involved in the struggle for the implementation of internationally recognised civil and political; economic, social and cultural rights of the people of Bangladesh. While working on human rights activities Odhikar focuses on enforced disappearances; extrajudicial killings; torture; freedom of expression and the media; freedom of assembly and association; violence against women; and human rights violations of religious, ethnic and linguistic minority communities. Odhikar has been engaged in campaigns to raise awareness about human rights violations in various ways, including information gathering, fact-finding, and documentation and reporting. Furthermore, Odhikar has also been monitoring political violence regularly since 2000 and documenting information on it. Odhikar also acts as an election watchdog organisation and it trains potential human rights defenders.

Odhikar has been vocal against various forms of Indian interference on internal matters of Bangladesh, including the killing, torturing, kidnapping of Bangladeshi citizens by Indian Border Security Force (BSF) along the Indo-Bangladesh border, constantly violating the human rights of the people of Bangladesh. Moreover, Odhikar has been monitoring and documenting the situation of the Rohingya people who fled genocide in the Rakhine (Arakan) State of Myanmar and took refuge in Bangladesh. It also submitted information and reports to an Independent International Fact-finding Mission on Myanmar and the International Criminal Court. In addition to protesting against human rights violations, Odhikar has been engaged in advocacy at the policy level for a prolonged time. As a result of Odhikar's constant campaign, Bangladesh signed the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) on 23 March 2010. Furthermore,

Odhikar, being a recipient organisation with Special Consultative status of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, actively participates in various forums, including the UN Human Rights Council, in order to improve the country's human rights situation.

For its activism, Odhikar has been harassed and oppressed under successive governments. Odhikar was vocal and played significant role against human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings and torture in the name of 'Operation Clean Heart' during the BNP-led Alliance government, which came to power in 2001. As a result, the BNP government obstructed the fund clearance of Odhikar for campaigning for the ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court; and put objection on Odhikar for monitoring the Chittagong City Corporation elections in 2005. Soon after the military-backed caretaker government came to power in 2007, Odhikar published various reports on human rights violations during their rule under the State of Emergency. At that time, Odhikar's Director was picked up from the office by members of the naval intelligence agency, for publishing reports on extrajudicial killing; and human rights defenders associated with it faced various threats and harassment. Repression on Odhikar continued unabated when the Awami League-led Alliance assumed power after winning the Jatiya Sangsad (National Parliament) elections held under the military-backed caretaker government in 2009. This repression escalated in 2013. Extra-judicial killings took place on 5 and 6 May in 2013, centering around a rally organised by Hefazate Islam. Odhikar carried out a fact-finding mission into that incident and uploaded its report on its website. On 10 August 2013 at around 10:00 pm, Odhikar's Secretary Adilur Rahman Khan was picked up by members of the Detective Branch (DB) of Police without a warrant of arrest. Later Adilur Rahman Khan and Odhikar's Director ASM Nasiruddin Elan were charged under the repressive Information and Communication Technology Act 2006 (Amendment 2009) for that report. They were released on bail after being detained for 62 and 25 days in jail, respectively. In addition, on 11 August 2013, members of the DB police raided the Odhikar office and confiscated laptops and desktops, and documents where sensitive information about victims, including the victims of violence against women and their families were stored. Till date, those computers and documents have not been returned to Odhikar. The government has not approved fund clearance of any project of Odhikar since 2014. Bank accounts of Odhikar at the Standard Chartered Bank have been dormant since 2014. Odhikar applied to the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) for renewal of its registration in September 2014, but registration has not been renewed till date and the NGOAB has stopped fund clearance of its human rights activities. Furthermore, smear campaigns and false and fabricated propaganda against Odhikar have been spread through various media supported by the Awami League government since 10 August 2013. During that period, the government used the state institutions, the Anti-Corruption Commission and the Election Commission, to harass Odhikar and suppress activists. Meanwhile, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) investigated allegations of the 'corruption' against Odhikar, but did not find any irregularities against it and thus resolved the matter after closing the file. Meanwhile, the Election Commission had abruptly canceled the registration of Odhikar as an election monitor, without following the rules and regulations, so that it could not observe the eleventh Parliamentary elections held on 30 December 2018. On 12 December 2018, Odhikar filed a Writ Petition at the High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh. The Court suspended the effectiveness of the letter given by the Election Commission for two months regarding the cancelation of the Odhikar's registration and issued a rule to the concerned authority asking as to why it would not be illegal to cancel the registration. On 18 December, the Appellate Division of

the Supreme Court upheld the order of the High Court Division. Although Odhikar received the verdict from the highest court of the country to observe the election, however, it could not do so due to the shortage of time to prepare for election observation.

Human rights defenders associated with Odhikar have been attacked, harassed and intimidated in different ways and at various times due to speaking out against human rights violations. Notable among them, are Abdullah Al Farooq who was killed by unknown persons in Dhaka in 2000. Human rights defender Afzal Hossain from Bhola District, was critically injured in police firing while gathering information on election violence during the local government polls in 2016; and in February 2017, Abdul Hakim Shimul, from Sirajganj, was shot dead by the ruling Awami League party leader while collecting information on political violence. Human rights defenders Hassan Ali and Aslam Ali from Kushtia; and Sheikh Mohammed Ratan from Munshiganj had been accused under the Information and Communication Technology Act of 2006 (amended in 2009 & 2013) and detained in jail in 2017, for playing an active role against human rights violations at the local level. In 2019, Abdul Kaium from Mymensingh was arrested under the Digital Security Act of 2018 and detained in jail. Staff and activists of Odhikar are constantly being subjected to intelligence surveillance, harassment and intimidation. During the crackdown on Odhikar in 2013, members of the intelligence agencies and government-backed miscreants harassed and intimidated women human rights defenders trained by Odhikar in different districts of the country. As a result, many of them turned away from human rights activities due to lack of security.

In any democratic state, human rights organisations can protest human rights violations without any hindrance and assist the government to curb human rights abuses. Independent human rights organisations are stopped from functioning and human rights activists are subjected to torture and persecution only in an oppressive state system. Odhikar is a victim of such a situation in Bangladesh. For the last six years, even under the most repressive conditions, human rights defenders of Odhikar are still working because of their strong commitment to protect human rights. Odhikar believes that the people of Bangladesh will be exempted from extreme human rights violations only if a democratic state can be formed on the basis of equality, human dignity and social justice.

Odhikar on its 25th founding anniversary pays tribute to the victims of human rights violations around the world. Odhikar would like to express heartfelt gratitude to all the human rights defenders, international organisations, local networks, supporters and well-wishers who have stood by the organisation for the last 25 years; that have expressed solidarity with it and campaigned against the persecution it faces. On the occasion of its 25th anniversary, Odhikar urges the people of Bangladesh to take part in the struggle for establishing human rights and at the same time expresses solidarity with the people who are engaged in the fight against autocracy and for the struggle for right to self-determination in various countries of the world. Odhikar will continue to fight against repression, to uphold justice and for the establishment of democracy and human rights.

In solidarity,
The Odhikar Team