

OUT OF THE SHADOW OF HASINA

Confronting the regime of
silence and repression
perpetuated by the
Hasina's war on terror

III CAGE INTERNATIONAL

CAGE International is an independent advocacy organisation that aspires to a just world. We challenge War on Terror inspired state oppression and empower communities to dismantle the discourses and policies of the global War on Terror.

Premier Business Centre
47-49 Park Royal Road
London NW10 7LQ
United Kingdom

Helpline: 03000302243
Office: 020 7377 6700
General email: contact@cage.ngo
Media enquiries: press@cage.ngo

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INTRODUCTION

On 5 August 2024, the people of Bangladesh woke up to a brave new world. Sheikh Hasina, the country's long-time ruler fled to India. What began as a peaceful student-led protest against a proposed law that would favour regime allies for civil service jobs, quickly spread into a nationwide revolt. Bangladeshis were not only angered by the regime's violent response to the student protests, but at the wider corruption of the state and increasing abuses that made life difficult for the ordinary person. During the popular uprising, the regime deployed the military, declared a curfew and shut down access to the internet. Security forces, according to activists at the vanguard, carried out enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings. It is reported that up to 1400 people were killed by security forces with thousands more injured. An estimated 10,000 people were also detained or forcibly disappeared.

The fall of Sheikh Hasina's regime marked the end of a political era defined by authoritarianism, systemic corruption and widespread repression. Under the guise of maintaining stability and combating terrorism, Sheikh Hasina wielded Bangladesh's Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) and Digital Security Act (DSA) as tools of political suppression. These laws granted sweeping powers to the state, criminalising dissent and branding critics as threats to national security. Journalists, opposition leaders, scholars and human rights activists bore the brunt of these policies, with many subjected to arbitrary detention, forced disappearances and, in many cases, extrajudicial killings. At the heart of this machinery of repression was the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) unit, an elite anti-terror force accused of rampant human rights abuses. Funded and trained in part by foreign governments, namely India, the United States and the United Kingdom, the RAB was responsible for carrying out countless enforced disappearances and acts of torture, often targeting individuals deemed as political threats.

Despite international outcry and sanctions imposed by the US government in 2021, the RAB continued to operate with impunity, serving as a critical instrument of Sheikh Hasina's grip on power.

Bangladesh's role in the broader War on Terror also played a significant part in enabling the regime's authoritarian policies. Framing dissent and opposition as extremist threats, Sheikh Hasina skilfully positioned her government as a key ally to global powers, securing international support while escalating domestic repression. Indian intelligence agencies, in particular, maintained a close partnership with Bangladesh's security apparatus, sharing intelligence and training personnel in counter-terrorism operations that disproportionately targeted political opponents. The events of August 2024 did not occur in isolation but were the culmination of years of growing resentment and resistance. As freed prisoners now come forward to share harrowing testimonies of torture and abuse, the full extent of Sheikh Hasina's machinery of oppression is beginning to emerge. This report seeks to document not only the policies and practices that defined her regime but also the complicity of international actors in enabling the repression. Through this lens, the report aims to shed light on the systemic abuses perpetrated against political opponents and the enduring impact on victims and their families, while examining the path to accountability and justice in a post-Hasina Bangladesh.

The fall of Sheikh Hasina's regime on 5 August 2024 marked a pivotal moment in Bangladesh's political trajectory, ending fifteen years of authoritarian rule characterised by systematic repression, institutional decay, and the instrumentalisation of counter-terrorism legislation to silence dissent. As documented in this comprehensive report on political imprisonment and state violence, the period between 2009 and 2024 witnessed the erosion of state institutions, the criminalisation of legitimate political opposition, and the perpetration of grave human rights violations under the guise of national security.

The liberation of political prisoners from secret detention centres, where they endured systematic torture and inhumane conditions, has exposed the full extent of the machinery of oppression that sustained the regime.





This paper provides a substantive framework for political parties contesting future elections in Bangladesh, offering practical guidance on how to redress the wrongs perpetrated under the previous administration and create the conditions for an alternative future characterised by good governance, respect for human rights, and institutional accountability. Drawing upon the extensive documentation of abuses, including the use of the Anti-Terrorism Act, the Digital Security Act, and the operations of the Rapid Action Battalion, this report presents a multi-faceted approach to transitional justice, legal reform, institutional rebuilding, and governance consolidation.

The recommendations contained herein are grounded in the principle that sustainable peace and governance stability cannot be achieved without confronting the legacy of authoritarianism and addressing the structural conditions that enabled systematic repression. As Bangladesh emerges from the shadow of Hasina's regime, the choices made by political parties and the policies they advocate will determine whether the country transitions towards genuine good governance or merely perpetuates cycles of authoritarian control through different means.

SHEIKH HASINA'S ANTI-TERRORISM POLICIES



Under Sheikh Hasina's regime, Bangladesh witnessed a systematic erosion of civil liberties and human rights, justified under the banner of counter-terrorism and national security. The introduction and enforcement of draconian legislation such as the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) and the Digital Security Act (DSA) provided legal cover for a campaign of repression that targeted opposition leaders, journalists, activists and ordinary citizens. Parallel to this, the creation of the Anti-Terrorism Tribunal institutionalised a judicial mechanism that operated with limited accountability, further entrenching the government's authoritarian grip on power.

At the forefront of these policies was the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), an elite paramilitary force originally tasked with combating terrorism but widely implicated in gross human rights abuses, including enforced disappearances, systematic torture and extrajudicial killings. Reports from international and domestic human rights organisations estimate that hundreds of individuals were forcibly disappeared, thousands detained arbitrarily and over 1,200 killed extrajudicially during Sheikh Hasina's tenure. While the regime initially garnered international support for its counter-terrorism efforts, growing evidence of state-sponsored repression led to widespread condemnation. Despite this, complicity from regional and international powers, prioritising political and economic interests, enabled years of unchecked abuses.

The Anti-Terrorism Act, the Digital Security Act & the Anti-Terrorism Tribunal

The Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) was enacted in 2009, marking one of the first significant legislative moves by Sheikh Hasina's government to address alleged concerns about terrorism. The ATA granted law enforcement agencies extensive powers to detain individuals without substantial evidence and critics argued that its application undermined basic civil liberties. Reports from multiple human rights organisations highlighted the systematic targeting of opposition leaders, journalists, activists and scholars under the guise of combating terrorism. While the Act was publicly framed as a measure to counteract "militant extremism" and safeguard national security, its provisions allowed for broad and often ambiguous definitions of "terrorist activities."

A joint report written by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and Odhikar, a prominent Bangladesh-based human rights organisation, criticised the vague definition of "terrorist activities" stipulated in the Act. Moreover, an Amendment Bill added to the ATA in 2013 widened the scope of the definition of terrorism. By maintaining a vague and overly broad definition of "terrorist activities" and reducing terrorism to a criminal offense punishable by death, the Amendment Bill exacerbated the potential for severe abuses under the ATA. Expanding the range of crimes subject to the death penalty significantly increased the risk of irreversible miscarriages of justice. Prior to the addition of the Amendment Bill, the ATA had already been weaponised by the government to target political opponents, journalists and other dissenting voices, further entrenching its misuse.

"When the Anti-Terrorism Ordinance was first promulgated by the military-backed Caretaker Government, we raised concerns regarding its potential for abuse, which proved to be true as we have witnessed a trend of persistent criminalisation of popular dissents and the tendency to reduce complex social, economic, political and cultural

grievances into a purely criminal matter. The Amended Bill as it stands now will be more repressive and by its very nature most likely will turn into a nightmare of abuse and violence jeopardizing social and political stability, instead of strengthening human security." - Adilur Rahman, Secretary General of Odhikar.

The introduction of the Digital Security Act (DSA) in 2018 further cemented Sheikh Hasina's control over dissenting voices. Presented as a tool to curb cybercrime and address the misuse of digital platforms, the law criminalised a wide array of online activities under vague terms such as "defamation," "anti-state activities" and "spreading misinformation." Under the DSA, individuals faced penalties of up to 10 years' imprisonment, with provisions allowing law enforcement to arrest individuals without warrants. Furthermore, life imprisonment was instituted for alleged repeat offenders. By 2024, at least 1,000 individuals, including journalists, academics and social media users, had been detained under this law. Reports indicated that the DSA was disproportionately used against investigative journalists and those who criticised the government online, creating a pervasive climate of fear and self-censorship.

Between 2018 and 2021 [2], the Digital Security Act (DSA) was weaponised to an alarming extent, with over 1,500 cases filed under its provisions during this period. Eight cyber-crimes tribunals handled these cases, demonstrating the scale of repression facilitated by this legislation. Between 1 January 2020, and 31 October 2021, records detail 754 cases involving 1,841 accused individuals, of whom 655 were arrested. Politicians and journalists were disproportionately targeted, constituting 29.5% and 25.6%, respectively, of accused individuals with confirmed professional backgrounds. Arrests reflected similar trends, with politicians and journalists accounting for over 40% of documented cases. A significant majority of those accused (83.6%) and arrested (84.1%) were young adults aged between 18 and 40. Notably, at least 17 minors under 18 were also implicated, 12 of whom were detained.

The DSA's provisions enabled an expansive scope for accusations, allowing even those unconnected to a perceived offense to initiate cases. Of the 418 accusers for whom data are available, 20.8% originated from law enforcement agencies such as the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), while 9.8% were government officials. Together, these government-affiliated parties accounted for over 31% of accusers. Additionally, political affiliation played a pivotal role, with 40.4% of accusers linked to political parties. Among these, 80% were affiliated with the ruling Awami League (AL) or its offshoots, such as youth and student wings. Of the 135 AL-affiliated accusers, 33 held elected positions, including five members of parliament and four mayors. This expansive and targeted use of the DSA underscored its role as a tool of political suppression by the regime and its allies rather than legitimate governance.

In 2010, the government established the Anti-Terrorism Tribunal, tasked with prosecuting cases brought under the ATA. While initially intended to address 'extremist violence', the tribunal's focus soon shifted towards silencing political dissent. Legal observers noted repeated violations of due process, including the use of fabricated evidence and forced confessions obtained through torture. By 2024, hundreds of opposition members had faced trial in the tribunal, many of them under dubious charges. Between 2009 and 2024, more than 2,500 cases were filed under the Anti-Terrorism Act, with 1,300 individuals prosecuted through the tribunals. While a few cases involved acts of political violence, such as the Holey Artisan Bakery attack, a significant number of prosecutions targeted political activists, journalists and human rights defenders.

A breakdown of cases filed reveals troubling trends:

- 35% of cases were against members of opposition parties, particularly the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami, highlighting the politically motivated nature of the tribunals' activities.

- 20% of cases involved journalists, bloggers, and social media users accused of spreading “anti-state propaganda” or “misusing digital platforms” under the overlapping provisions of the Digital Security Act.
- Conviction rates exceeded 70%, with many verdicts relying on confessions extracted under duress or fabricated evidence.
- Numerous human rights organisations condemned the Anti-Terrorism Tribunal for its lack of transparency and due process:
- Reports indicated that 60% of defendants lacked access to legal counsel or faced restricted access during trials.
- Evidence presented in 25% of cases was deemed insufficient or fabricated, according to legal watchdogs like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.
- At least 200 journalists were prosecuted for alleged ties to terrorism, often based on their reporting of government abuses.

Together, the ATA, DSA and the Anti-Terrorism Tribunal provided a legal framework for state-sponsored repression, allowing the government to stifle dissent while maintaining a veneer of legality.

The Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), Forced Disappearances, Arbitrary Detentions & Extrajudicial Killings



crime-fighting unit, became the central instrument of repression under Sheikh Hasina’s regime. While its original mandate focused on combating terrorism, it quickly transformed into a paramilitary force used to silence dissent. By 2024, the RAB was implicated in:

- Over 1,200 extrajudicial killings, often justified as “crossfire” incidents.
- 600 cases of enforced disappearances, with many victims still unaccounted for.
- Systematic torture of detainees, including severe physical and psychological abuse.

The RAB’s actions drew widespread condemnation from domestic and international human rights groups. In addition to U.S. sanctions, the United Nations Working Group on Enforced Disappearances repeatedly called on the Bangladeshi government to investigate and hold the RAB accountable. Despite this, Sheikh Hasina’s administration defended the unit, citing its role in maintaining “law and order.”

The use of enforced disappearances became a hallmark of Sheikh Hasina’s government. According to Human Rights Watch, over 600 individuals were forcibly disappeared between 2009 and 2024, with the majority of cases linked to the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and other security agencies. Victims included opposition leaders, student activists, journalists, and human rights defenders. Families of the disappeared often reported receiving no information about their loved ones’ whereabouts, and many were subjected to intimidation or threats when attempting to seek justice.

When Sheikh Hasina took office in 2009, there were three reported cases of enforced disappearances. By the January 2014 election, this number had risen to over 130. In the year leading up to the December 2018 election, 98 cases were reported. Bangladeshi human rights groups such as Odhikar have documented nearly 600 enforced disappearances by security forces since 2009. While some individuals were later released or produced in court, dozens were found dead and the whereabouts of many remain unknown. Human Rights Watch verified 86 cases over the past decade where the victims’ whereabouts remain unknown.

There was a significant increase in enforced disappearances during election periods. In 2013, 54 cases were reported - a more than 100% increase from the previous year. Extrajudicial killings by security forces also surged ahead of the January 2014 elections, from 70 reported cases in 2012 to 329 in 2013 - a nearly 400% increase. Despite credible evidence, Sheikh Hasina's regime consistently denied the occurrence of enforced disappearances.

Authorities often claim that missing individuals are either hiding to embarrass the government or have been lawfully arrested. The United Nations and various human rights organizations have expressed concern over Bangladesh's failure to address allegations of enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests, and unacknowledged detentions.

The RAB was extensively used by Sheikh Hasina's government as a tool of political repression. Between 2013 and 2021, 600 enforced disappearances and over 1,200 extrajudicial killings were attributed to the RAB. These incidents were often framed as "crossfire" encounters, with security forces claiming victims were killed while attempting to escape or resisting arrest. However, investigations by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International revealed that many of these incidents were premeditated executions. A significant turning point came in 2021, when the United States imposed sanctions on the RAB and seven of its senior officials under the Global Magnitsky Act. The sanctions cited extensive human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. Following these sanctions, reports indicated a noticeable reduction in the frequency of such incidents, though the broader pattern of repression continued.

Detentions under the ATA and DSA further contributed to the government's campaign of fear. By 2023, Bangladesh's prisons housed over 81,000 detainees, despite having an official capacity of just 41,000 (World Prison Brief). Thousands of these prisoners were held without trial, often under fabricated charges. Conditions in detention centres were described as inhumane, with overcrowding, malnutrition, and lack of medical care exacerbating the suffering of detainees. Testimonies from

released prisoners revealed widespread torture, including beatings, electric shocks, and psychological abuse, aimed at extracting false confessions or silencing opposition.

International Involvement & Complicity

International powers played a complex role in enabling Sheikh Hasina's repressive policies. While the United States, United Kingdom and India condemned human rights abuses in later years, their earlier support for the regime, particularly in counter-terrorism cooperation, indirectly facilitated these violations.

The operations of the Anti-Terrorism Tribunal were bolstered by international support with the above-mentioned states providing financial aid and technical assistance under the guise of counterterrorism cooperation:

- The United States allocated over \$50 million between 2010 and 2020 for counterterrorism training, which included support for law enforcement agencies such as the RAB.
- The UK provided advisory support for the drafting of counterterrorism laws, including the ATA, despite knowing its potential for misuse.
- India, a strategic ally of Sheikh Hasina, facilitated intelligence-sharing agreements that enabled cross-border operations targeting political dissidents.

In 2009, WikiLeaks published a series of cables from the US embassy in Dhaka where ambassador James Moriarty expressed strong support for RAB, describing it as "the enforcement organization best positioned to one day become a Bangladeshi version of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation." He argued that the Hasina government should not disband the RAB, noting that while it had been established by the rival Bangladesh Nationalist Party, it had emerged as Bangladesh's premier counter-terrorism force. Despite concerns about the RAB's human rights record, Moriarty announced that "the USG had started human rights training for RAB."

This international complicity shielded the tribunal and the Bangladeshi government from accountability, undermining efforts by local and international activists to challenge human rights violations. India, in particular, maintained close ties with the Awami League government, focusing on joint security operations to combat insurgencies along the Indo-Bangladeshi border. This collaboration strengthened Sheikh Hasina's position domestically, even as her government engaged in systematic repression. The UK and other Western nations often prioritised trade and regional stability over human rights concerns, providing diplomatic cover for the regime.

Although sanctions against the RAB marked a shift in international attitudes, their delayed implementation allowed years of abuses to go unchecked. Advocacy groups, including Amnesty International, have called for greater accountability and transparency regarding the role of international actors in enabling state-sponsored repression.

Societal Impact of oppressive Policies

The widespread use of enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, and repressive legislation left a profound impact on Bangladeshi society. Journalists, activists, and opposition members operated under constant fear of surveillance and arrest. Media freedom suffered significantly, with Bangladesh ranking 162 out of 180 countries in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index. Families of disappeared individuals faced not only the emotional toll of losing loved ones but also threats and harassment from security forces. The culture of impunity surrounding the RAB and other security agencies deepened societal mistrust of the government and its institutions.

The collapse of Sheikh Hasina's regime in August 2024 and the subsequent release of many detainees exposed the scale of abuses carried out under the guise of counter-terrorism. Survivors have since recounted harrowing experiences, highlighting the urgent need for truth, justice, and institutional reform to address the legacy of

repression. The Anti-Terrorism Act, Digital Security Act, and Anti-Terrorism Tribunal served as cornerstones of Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian policies. The Rapid Action Battalion, originally tasked with counter-terrorism, became a central perpetrator of human rights abuses, with over 600 enforced disappearances, 1,200 extrajudicial killings, and countless instances of torture. While international powers condemned these abuses in later years, their earlier complicity enabled the regime's repression.





POLITICAL PRISONERS

The documented cases of political imprisonment under Sheikh Hasina's regime reveal not only systematic state repression but also distinct typologies of victim experience that reflect the multifaceted nature of authoritarian control in Bangladesh. Drawing from the detailed case studies of Maulana Abul Hossain Al-Amin, Muhammad Arafat Tanvir, and Muhammad Masrur Anwar Chowdhury, this analysis identifies and examines the various patterns of experience that emerged among those targeted by the state's repressive apparatus. These typologies illuminate the different mechanisms of control, the varied justifications for targeting, and the diverse consequences for victims and their communities.

CASE 1: Maulana Abul Hossain Al-Amin



On the night of January 30, 2023, at 10:15 PM, a group of four to five men in civilian clothing entered the Madrasa Ibn Masud (RA) Orphanage in Chowrasta Bazar, Gazipur. They identified themselves as members of law enforcement, specifically the Counter Terrorism and Transnational

Crime Unit (CTTC) and Detective Branch (DB). Without presenting an official warrant or a stated reason for his detention, they told Maulana Abul Hossain that they merely had "a few questions" and that he would be returned the next morning.

He never returned. Since that night, there has been no official record of his whereabouts. His family filed a General Diary (GD) report at Joydebpur Police Station (GD No-550), but authorities refused to register a case and discouraged further inquiries. Despite repeated pleas, law enforcement agencies denied knowledge of his detention, and his disappearance was met with official silence and obstruction.

"We kept going back to the police station, pleading for answers, but they dismissed us like we were nothing. When we insisted on filing a case, they just drove us away. It was as if my husband had never existed." – Wife of Maulana Abul Hossain

A key witness, Fakrul Islam, who was detained at the same CTTC facility where Maulana Abul Hossain was reportedly held, testified that he personally witnessed Abul Hossain lose consciousness due to torture during an interrogation session. He was later taken away by security personnel, and no further trace of him has emerged since.

"He was screaming in pain, then suddenly, he went silent. The officers dragged him away, and that was the last time I saw him." – Fakrul Islam, former detainee and eyewitness

Maulana Abul Hossain's wife, now the sole provider for their two young children, describes life marked by financial hardship, isolation and despair. With no extended family to support her, she struggles to provide basic necessities. She describes her battle as a quiet fight for survival, navigating a legal system designed to suppress rather than deliver justice.

The family's attempts to seek legal redress have

been systematically obstructed. Police refused to register formal complaints, and the mere act of filing a General Diary required persistent efforts. Any prospect of a fair investigation or trial was non-existent under the Hasina regime, and even with the transition to a new government, she remains sceptical about the chances of justice.

CASE 2: Muhammad Arafat Tanvir

At just 16 years old, Arafat Tanvir was taken from his home under the guise of an electrical inspection. On an unspecified night in 2018, a group of approximately 50 men stormed his house. Without presenting a warrant, they handcuffed him and searched his home before forcibly taking him away. When he questioned their actions, he was met with aggression and was told he would be shown the warrant later. Inside their vehicle, he was physically assaulted while continuously asking why he was being detained. He received no answer.

"They tied my hands behind my back, and throughout the night, they beat me with sticks. I kept asking what I had done, but they never told me." – Arafat Tanvir

Arafat was taken to a detention facility where he was interrogated about Islam. Officers questioned his beliefs, asking why people followed Islam and how long he had been practicing. His treatment became increasingly violent. During questioning, he was accused of having ties to extremist groups such as Ansar Al-Islam, Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and ISIS, despite having no knowledge of them. When he denied any involvement, interrogators insisted he confess to being a member of Ansar Al-Islam, applying pressure through repeated beatings.

His time in detention was marked by torture and inhumane conditions. He was denied food, told he would receive meals at the police station, but once there, he was refused again under the excuse that there was "no money for food." He was placed in a room known as 'Moil and Nordama', where he was subjected to unusual and degrading forms of abuse.

"They were desperate to make me confess to

something I didn't do. They just needed a name to justify their actions." – Arafat Tanvir

His family did not learn of his whereabouts for two days. Once they found out he had been taken to jail, they were allowed only one visit throughout his seven-month detention. While in jail, Arafat met 17 to 18 other detainees, all accused under Bangladesh's anti-terrorism laws. He observed that these laws were being disproportionately weaponized against practicing Muslims, many of whom had been arrested with little to no evidence.

His father, Muhammad Zakaria, described the far-reaching consequences on their family. Their community ostracized them, and many questioned why Arafat had been arrested, placing the family under immense social pressure.

"Our family members are all Muslims. The authorities seem to have targeted him just because of the content on his phone. This situation has severely affected our entire family." – Md. Zakaria, Arafat's father

After being granted bail through the High Court, Arafat's suffering did not end. Life outside of prison was more difficult than detention itself. He found it impossible to reintegrate into society. He faced employment discrimination, struggled to find opportunities, and remained under constant surveillance. Unknown individuals monitored his movements, listening to his phone calls and demanding to know whom he spoke with and about what.

"Even after my release, they wouldn't leave me alone. They called my phone, followed me, and made sure I knew I was being watched." – Arafat Tanvir

His family continued to face harassment, particularly his father and brothers, who were frequently stopped and questioned in public places like the market. With the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government, Arafat notes a slight improvement in his situation, but those responsible for his suffering remain unpunished and unaccountable.

CASE 3: Muhammad Masrur Anwar Chowdhury

Masrur Anwar Chowdhury's ordeal began not with direct action, but with his words. A vocal critic of the Sheikh Hasina regime, he used social media to speak out against state repression, Islamophobia, and India's growing influence in Bangladesh's affairs. His criticisms of Bangladesh's ruling party, their ties to Narendra Modi's government, and their crackdown on dissent made him a target.

On an evening in Gulshan, Dhaka, roughly two months after joining his new job at Holiday Inn, Masrur was abducted by a group of men in plain clothes while on his way home. A microbus blocked his rickshaw, and before he could react, he was shown an unidentifiable ID card and forcibly taken inside.

"I thought I was going to be killed in a staged crossfire. I had heard these stories, but when it was happening to me, I truly believed it was the end." – Masrur Anwar Chowdhury

His captors blindfolded him and transported him to an unknown location. Throughout the journey, he was questioned about his social media posts, particularly his criticisms of India's role in Bangladesh. As he saw more weapons inside the vehicle, he mentally prepared for martyrdom, reciting the Shahadah in resignation. He later deduced that he had been taken to Narayanganj, where he was placed in a 4x5-foot cell with a toilet.

Masrur's captors were not interested in facts; they were determined to frame him as a terrorist. His interrogations revolved around fabricated accusations:

*"Why do you write against India?"
"What's the problem if India takes over Bangladesh?"
"Are you planning for Gazwatul Hind?" (A reference to an apocalyptic battle in some Islamic traditions)*

His refusal to confess was met with severe beatings. Blindfolded and seated in a chair, he was struck repeatedly with a rod. The smell of blood, sweat and filth in the torture room haunted him

even after his release.

"Even today, whenever I am scared, I smell that room. That rancid, suffocating stench — it's like a permanent scar in my mind." – Masrur Anwar Chowdhury

His captors forced him to listen to Islamic lectures while mocking his beliefs, likely as a psychological tactic to gauge his reaction. He suspected that some of his interrogators were influenced, if not trained, by foreign intelligence services, particularly India's RAW. For nine days, the beatings and questioning intensified. His interrogators made one demand - names. "Give us some names and we'll let you go." When he refused, they increased the violence.

At one point, he was taken to 'Tin-Show Feet' (300 Feet), an infamous execution site where extrajudicial killings were often staged. He braced himself for death, his mind flooded with images of his wife and children. But instead of execution, they transferred him to the RAB headquarters, where he encountered another detainee—a man driven to insanity by relentless torture.

After his detention, authorities charged Masrur under Bangladesh's Anti-Terrorism Act, falsely labelling him as a Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) member. Despite no evidence linking him to the JMB, he was held in jail for 10 months under conditions worse than those of convicted murderers and rapists.

"We saw criminals walk freely in the prison yard while we were kept in isolation. Our families were denied visits. The system treated us as if we were worse than killers." – Masrur Anwar Chowdhury

His friends were also targeted. One of them, an apolitical individual, was abducted solely for being in Masrur's social circle. His captors fabricated an elaborate scene outside the detention centre – officers staged a fake chase and shouted "Catch him!" to justify their case.

Even after Hasina's government fell, Masrur's legal battles continued. The interim government has not cleared his name, and he is still subject to police station visits and travel restrictions. His case, like many others, remains unresolved.

"They still make us report to the police. We still live under surveillance. The new government has not cleared the fabricated cases of the past regime." – Masrur Anwar Chowdhury

His family, once comfortable, fell into financial distress. Once at the peak of his career, earning a six-figure salary, Masrur is now struggling to rebuild his life. His case is a textbook example of state repression under the guise of counterterrorism. His arrest had nothing to do with national security - it was about silencing a Muslim voice critical of the regime and its foreign allies. His story also exposes the influence of external forces, particularly India's involvement in shaping Bangladesh's internal security policies. His interrogation focused more on India's role than on any legitimate security concerns, suggesting that counterterrorism laws were being weaponized to serve foreign interests.

Arrest and Detention Methods

Workplace Targeting

Maulana Abul Hossain Al-Amin's case exemplifies a pattern of targeting individuals based on their institutional affiliation and perceived ideological influence. Arrested from his position as principal of Madrasah Ibn Masud (RA), his detention reflected the state's concern with religious education institutions as potential centres of dissent. The method of arrest, by a small group of four to five men in civilian clothing claiming merely to have "a few questions" represented a calculated approach to minimise public attention while establishing state control. This pattern suggests the systematic surveillance and targeting of institutional leaders, particularly within religious education systems that might challenge state narratives.

Domestic Raids

Muhammad Arafat Tanvir's case, involving a large-scale raid by approximately 50 men on his family home, represents a different typology of state violence. This approach, conducted without warrant and involving physical assault during apprehension, demonstrated the state's willingness

to use overwhelming force against individuals perceived as vulnerable. The targeting of a 16-year-old youth, combined with the explicit denial of basic rights during arrest, revealed a pattern of intimidation that extends beyond the individual to terrorise entire families and communities.

Street Abduction

Muhammad Masrur Anwar Chowdhury's abduction while walking home from work represents a third distinct pattern, targeting individuals based on their public expression of dissent. The use of plainclothes operatives and staged "chase" scenarios to justify the abduction demonstrates the state's sophistication in creating legal pretexts for unlawful detention. This pattern suggests systematic surveillance of professionals who engage in public criticism, with abduction serving both to eliminate the dissident and to send a broader message about the consequences of political speech.

Interrogation Focus and Justification

Institutional Surveillance Focus

Al-Amin's case, while limited in detail, suggests an interrogation approach focused on institutional relationships and potential networks. The questioning likely sought to identify connections within the religious education system and to assess the extent of any organised opposition. This pattern reflects the state's concern with institutional power structures that might challenge its authority, particularly within religious communities.

Religious Extremism Narrative

Tanvir's interrogation represents the systematic use of counter-terrorism narratives to justify repression. His interrogators focused exclusively on Islamic beliefs, questioning his practice of Islam and attempting to force confessions of ties to extremist groups. This pattern demonstrates the state's strategic conflation of religious practice with terrorism, allowing for the criminalisation of ordinary religious observance under the guise of national security. The interrogation methods,

including physical violence and psychological manipulation, reveal the instrumental use of counter-terrorism discourse to eliminate religious figures who challenge secular state narratives.

Political Dissent and Foreign Policy Criticism

Chowdhury's case presents a third interrogation typology, focused on political dissent and criticism of foreign policy, particularly India's role in Bangladesh. His interrogators were not interested in security threats but rather in extracting information about political networks and suppressing criticism of the regime's foreign alliances. This pattern reveals the intersection of domestic repression and foreign policy imperatives, with the state using counter-terrorism mechanisms to silence political dissent that challenges its international alignments.

Torture and Psychological Abuse Methods

Witnessed Violence and Psychological Terror

Al-Amin's case, though second-hand, documents a pattern of torture designed to create psychological terror beyond direct physical harm. The witnessing of another detainee's torture to the point of unconsciousness serves as a method of psychological control that extends to other prisoners and their families. This pattern suggests the intentional use of witnessed violence as a mechanism of control within detention facilities.

Physical Deprivation and Religious Humiliation

Tanvir's experience reveals a pattern of torture combining physical violence with religious humiliation. The denial of food, coupled with interrogation focused on Islamic beliefs, represents a dual strategy of physical weakening and psychological attack on religious identity. This pattern demonstrates the state's use of torture not merely to extract information but to systematically degrade religious identity and practice.

Systematic Physical and Psychological Torture

Chowdhury's case documents the most comprehensive pattern of torture, combining severe physical violence with sophisticated

psychological manipulation. The use of mock execution at "Tin-Show Feet" (300 Feet), an infamous execution site, represents a calculated psychological tactic designed to break resistance through the threat of imminent death. This pattern, involving multiple forms of abuse over an extended period, reveals the systematic nature of torture as both punishment and punishment prevention.

Legal Status and Judicial Processing

Disappearance Without Legal Process

Al-Amin's case represents the most extreme form of legal extrajudicialism, with no formal charges, no judicial process, and no official acknowledgment of detention. This pattern reflects the state's use of enforced disappearance as both a tool of terror and a mechanism of absolute impunity, leaving families without legal recourse and victims without procedural rights.

Extended Pre-Trial Detention

Tanvir's case, involving seven months of pre-trial detention under anti-terrorism charges, reveals a pattern of using legal processes as extensions of detention rather than mechanisms of justice. The systematic denial of bail, limited family access, and prolonged detention without trial demonstrate how the legal system was transformed into an instrument of control rather than justice.

Formal Prosecution with Fabricated Charges

Chowdhury's case, involving formal prosecution under fabricated terrorism charges and 10 months of imprisonment, represents the most "legalised" form of repression. This pattern reveals the systematic use of counter-terrorism legislation to criminalise political dissent, with the legal process serving to legitimate rather than prevent abuse.

Post-Release Experience and Ongoing Repression

Family Economic Devastation

Al-Amin's case demonstrates a pattern of economic devastation extending beyond the individual to destroy family livelihoods. The loss of the primary breadwinner, combined with social isolation and lack of support mechanisms, reveals how the state uses imprisonment to eliminate not just individuals but entire family economic units.

Constant Surveillance and Social Stigmatisation

Tanvir's experience reveals a pattern of continuous surveillance and social stigmatisation following release. The ongoing monitoring of communications, public harassment, and employment discrimination demonstrate that release from prison does not signify the end of state control but rather its transformation into a more insidious form of surveillance and social exclusion.

Ongoing Legal Harassment and Professional Ruin

Chowdhury's case documents a pattern of ongoing legal harassment and professional destruction. The continuation of legal proceedings, travel restrictions, and professional ruin demonstrate how the state uses the legal system to maintain control and punish dissent long after physical detention has ended.

The Architecture of Repressive Control

The typological analysis of these three cases reveals a sophisticated and multifaceted system of political repression in Bangladesh. The distinct patterns of arrest, interrogation, torture, legal processing, and post-release control demonstrate not random acts of state violence but a systematic architecture designed to eliminate dissent through multiple mechanisms. These typologies reveal how the state adapted its repression to target different segments of society — religious leaders, youth, and professionals — using different justifications and methods while maintaining consistent objectives of control and intimidation.

The variation in experiences suggests that political imprisonment under Sheikh Hasina's regime was

not monolithic but represented a complex system of control capable of adapting to different targets while maintaining core objectives of eliminating dissent and terrorising potential opposition. Understanding these typologies is essential for developing effective transitional justice mechanisms and preventing the recurrence of similar patterns of repression in Bangladesh's governance future.



CONCLUSION: UNDERSTANDING THE LEGACY OF AUTHORITARIAN REPRESSION

The Legal Architecture of Repression

The systematic use of anti-terrorism legislation to suppress political opposition represents one of the most insidious aspects of Sheikh Hasina's rule. The Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) of 2009, subsequently amended in 2013 to expand the definition of "terrorist activities" and extend the scope of capital punishment, provided the legal foundation for the criminalisation of dissent. As the report documents, the Act's vague and overly broad provisions allowed for the arbitrary targeting of opposition leaders, journalists, activists, and scholars, with human rights organisations noting that its application consistently undermined basic civil liberties.

The Digital Security Act (DSA) of 2018 further cemented the regime's control over information flows, criminalising a wide array of online activities under ambiguous terms such as "defamation", "anti-state activities", and "spreading misinformation." Between 2018 and 2021, over 1,500 cases were filed under the DSA, disproportionately targeting journalists, academics, and political opponents. The data revealing that politicians and journalists constituted 29.5% and 25.6% of accused individuals, respectively, exposes the systematic nature of political repression through legal means.

The establishment of the Anti-Terrorism Tribunal in 2010 institutionalised a judicial process that consistently violated due process rights. Between 2009 and 2024, more than 2,500 cases were filed under the ATA, with 1,300 individuals prosecuted through these tribunals. The documented pattern of violations — including the use of fabricated evidence, forced confessions obtained through torture, and restricted access to legal counsel — demonstrates how the legal system was transformed into an instrument of political control rather than a mechanism for justice.

The Role of Security Forces in State Violence

The Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), originally established in 2004 to combat crime, emerged as the primary instrument of political violence under Sheikh Hasina's regime. The report's documentation of over 1,200 extrajudicial killings and 600 enforced disappearances attributable to the RAB reveals the extent to which state security forces were deployed to eliminate political opposition rather than maintain public order. The systematic use of "crossfire" incidents as a cover for extrajudicial executions, the practice of enforced disappearances to create climate of fear, and the widespread torture of detainees constitute crimes against humanity that demand comprehensive investigation and accountability.

The testimonies of survivors like Maulana Abul Hossain Al-Amin, Muhammad Arafat Tanvir, and Muhammad Masrur Anwar Chowdhury provide harrowing accounts of arbitrary detention, systematic torture, and the psychological trauma inflicted by state security forces. These individual cases represent thousands of Bangladeshis who suffered similar fates, their lives destroyed by a regime that conflated political opposition with terrorism and dissent with treason.

International Complicity and the Global Context

The report's documentation of international complicity adds another layer of complexity to Bangladesh's transitional challenges. The extensive security cooperation between Bangladesh and global powers, particularly the United States, United Kingdom, and India, provided material and political support for the repressive apparatus. The allocation of over \$50 million by the United States for counter-terrorism training that included support for the RAB, the UK's advisory support for drafting counter-terrorism laws, and India's intelligence-sharing agreements all contributed to enabling systematic human rights violations.

The delayed imposition of sanctions, particularly

the US sanctions on the RAB in 2021 under the Global Magnitsky Act, highlights how geopolitical interests often superseded human rights concerns. This international dimension must be addressed in any comprehensive transitional justice strategy, as the legacy of complicity continues to influence Bangladesh's political landscape and international relations.

Transitional Justice and Accountability

The transition from authoritarian rule to good governance represents one of the most challenging yet essential tasks facing Bangladesh. The comprehensive documentation of systematic repression under Sheikh Hasina's regime provides both a warning about the dangers of unchecked power and a roadmap for addressing the legacy of authoritarianism.

Political parties contesting future elections in Bangladesh have a profound responsibility to articulate a vision for governance that addresses the wrongs of the past while building institutions capable of preventing their recurrence. The path forward will not be easy, as entrenched interests and institutional legacies will resist meaningful change. As evidenced by the experiences of other transitional despotic regimes the prospect of change is not possible without full accountability for past crimes, and without the dismantling of the deep and national security state.

Without accountability, a return to authoritarian rule is likely, whether through direct military intervention or through state institutions subverted from within. The decisions made by political parties and the policies they advocate will determine whether the country can break the cycles of authoritarianism and build a just future worthy of the sacrifices made by those who suffered under systematic repression. The framework presented here offers one pathway towards that just future — a pathway grounded in truth, accountability, reform, and the unwavering commitment to ethical values that alone can ensure Bangladesh's transition to good governance.

While there are many issues relating to the Hasina regime that require change, from governance structures to corruption, CAGE International's concern relates to the embedded nature of the military, security and deep state — one that requires complete overhauling if the country is to ever reckon with its recent violent history. As with the failed projects to work with military and security structures in Egypt, Tunisia and Pakistan, it is time for the Bangladeshi people to determine a future that is not subject to the whims of the security state.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Establishing Truth and Reconciliation Mechanisms

A fundamental prerequisite for the consolidation of good governance in Bangladesh is the establishment of comprehensive transitional justice mechanisms capable of addressing the legacy of systematic repression. The experiences of other post-authoritarian transitions demonstrate that societies cannot move forward without confronting the truth about past abuses and providing meaningful redress to victims.

As political parties enter into the final stages of the election period, there should be a cross-party demand for the establishment of a National Truth and Reconciliation Commission with a mandate to:

- Document all cases of political imprisonment, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and torture between 2009 and 2024
- Conduct thorough investigations into the systemic patterns of abuse and identify perpetrators at all levels
- Provide a platform for victims to share their experiences and receive formal recognition of their suffering
- Recommend measures to prevent recurrence of similar abuses
- Develop comprehensive reparations programmes for victims and their families
- Dismantle all military and intelligence bodies involved in systemic repression

The commission should be established through legislation ensuring its independence and operational autonomy, with powers to subpoena witnesses, access government archives, and conduct public hearings. International technical assistance from experienced truth commissions in South Africa, Chile, Cuba and other transitional governments could provide valuable expertise in establishing effective procedures and avoid the failures of normalising further structural harms.

Legal Accountability for Perpetrators

While truth-telling is essential, it must be accompanied by meaningful legal accountability for those most responsible for grave human rights violations. Political parties should commit to:

- Establishing specialised tribunals with jurisdiction over crimes against humanity, including systematic torture, enforced
- Ensuring that no individual is above the law, regardless of their position or political connections
- Creating witness protection programmes to encourage testimony from perpetrators and witnesses

Developing protocols for international cooperation in investigations and prosecutions

The principle of complementarity should guide approaches to international justice, with domestic tribunals serving as the primary forum while remaining open to international assistance where necessary. The establishment of a special prosecutor's office dedicated to transitional justice cases could ensure consistent and specialised handling of these complex prosecutions.

Reparations and Victim Support

Comprehensive reparations programmes represent an essential component of transitional justice, addressing both the material and psychological harm inflicted upon victims. Political parties should advocate for a multi-faceted approach including:

- Financial compensation for victims of political imprisonment, torture, and loss of family members
- Medical and psychological support services for survivors of torture and trauma
- Educational and employment

opportunities for victims and their families

- Symbolic measures of recognition, including memorials, museums, and official apologies
- Legal assistance for victims seeking to clear their names and restore their reputations

The reparations framework should be developed through inclusive consultation with victim groups and civil society organisations, ensuring that the voices of those most affected inform the design and implementation of support mechanisms.

Legal and Institutional Reforms

Repealing Repressive Legislation

The cornerstone of governance reform in Bangladesh must be the comprehensive review and repeal of legislation that facilitated systematic repression. Political parties should commit to:

- Immediately repealing the Digital Security Act in its entirety and replacing it with legislation that protects freedom of expression while addressing legitimate concerns about cybercrime
- Abolishing the Anti-Terrorism Act to ensure its provisions cannot be used to criminalise legitimate political dissent and to align with international human rights standards
- Abolishing the Anti-Terrorism Tribunal and establishing specialised counter-terrorism courts with due process guarantees
- Reviewing all existing legislation to identify and remove provisions that enable arbitrary detention and restriction of fundamental rights

The reform process should involve extensive consultation with legal experts, human rights organisations, and civil society to ensure that the new legal framework genuinely protects rights while addressing historic abuses.

Security Sector Transformation

The reform of Bangladesh's security apparatus represents one of the most challenging aspects of governance transition. The RAB, in particular, requires fundamental change through:

- Complete dismantling of RAB
- Establishing robust oversight mechanisms, including parliamentary committees and independent monitoring bodies for accountability purposes
- Implementing comprehensive vetting procedures to identify and remove personnel implicated in human rights abuses
- Developing new codes of conduct and training programmes focused on human rights
- Creating mechanisms for civilian control of security forces

The transformation should be guided by the principle that security forces exist to protect citizens and uphold the rule of law, not to serve political interests or suppress dissent.



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