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Release Facebook user who criticised Prime Minister

Bangladesh

The Bangladeshi authorities must immediately release a 22-year-old student activist detained for two Facebook posts criticising the country's Prime Minister, Amnesty International said today.

Dilip Roy, a student activist at Rajshahi University in western Bangladesh, will be appearing at a bail hearing on 4 September. "Bangladesh's authorities should immediately drop this case. By invoking draconian laws to hound critics for Facebook posts, they are not just cracking down on peaceful dissent but courting embarrassment," said Champa Patel, Amnesty International's Director for South Asia. Dilip Roy could face up to 14 years in prison after a student body linked to the government filed a case against him under the country's Information and Communications Technology Act (ICT) for allegedly making "derogatory remarks" about Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajid and her ruling Awami League.

Since his arrest on 28 August, Dilip Roy has been detained and was denied bail by the Rajshahi Magistrate Court this week. His alleged offence was to write two Facebook posts critical of the Prime Minister's support for a controversial coal power plant. Section 57 of the ICT Act is vaguely formulated and has for years been used by the authorities to target and imprison critics. Anyone found guilty of "publishing fake, obscene or defaming information in electronic form" can be jailed for a minimum of seven years.

Amnesty International calls on the Bangladeshi authorities to repeal Section 57 of the ICT Act and all other legal provisions that sweepingly and arbitrarily restrict freedom of expression, in violation of Bangladesh's obligations under international human rights law. "No country should have such vaguely worded and repressive laws on its books. Bangladesh's authorities should repeal Section 57 immediately, and stop using it to harass and threaten people who peacefully express views they don't like," said Champa Patel.

BACKGROUND

Dilip Roy posted the following two posts on Facebook:

- "Prime minister, is your lantern ready? What if it [the lantern allocated for the PM] gets stolen, then you will despair and say (insert her father's dialogue)."
- "Prime Minister Hasina, maybe you want to see another Phulbari — I congratulate you for that! [As far as] I know, [the people of the country] will happily help you to gain this experience."

The ICT Act – first passed in 2006 and amended in 2013 – has for years been used by the authorities in Bangladesh to choke freedom of expression. According to the human rights organisation Odhikar, at least 59 people were arrested under the ICT Act between January 2014 and July 2016. Those targeted often include real or perceived online critics of the Prime Minister, her family or the ruling party.