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## ESCALATING ATTACKS ON THE MEDIA MUST STOP

### BANGLADESH

The Bangladeshi authorities have intensified their assault on independent media and journalists in 2020, with an escalation in the use of the draconian Digital Security Act 2018 (DSA) during the COVID-19 pandemic, said Amnesty International on the second anniversary of the law's inception.

Nearly 2000 cases have been filed under the DSA since its enactment on 8 October 2018, according to data from the Bangladeshi government's Cyber Crime Tribunal. This includes more than 800 cases filed in the first nine months of 2020 alone, with many of the country's most prominent editors and senior journalists being increasingly targeted.

"Since its inception, the Digital Security Act has been wielded as a weapon to silence critics and suppress dissent. The Bangladeshi authorities have exploited the law's vague and broad provisions to escalate attacks on independent journalism and media freedom," said Sultan Mohammed Zakaria, Amnesty International's South Asia Researcher.

"The recent crackdown and increased targeting of prominent journalists is clearly a cynical effort by the authorities to use the COVID-19 crisis as a cover to ramp up these efforts. Bangladesh must substantially reform the DSA and bring it into line with the country's constitution and its human rights obligations."

The DSA imposes multiple undue restrictions on the right to freedom of expression, including up to 10 years' imprisonment for "spreading propaganda" against Bangladesh's Liberation War, the national anthem and national flag using digital devices. Repeated offences carry the maximum penalty of life imprisonment.

#### Targeting of editors and senior journalists

In 2020, at least 10 editors of national and regional dailies and online news platforms have faced legal charges under the DSA, following critical reporting on leaders of the ruling Awami League party.

Shafiqul Islam Kajol, the editor of the *Daily Pokkhokal*, was forcibly disappeared on 10 March in Dhaka, a day after Awami League lawmaker Saifuzzaman Shikhor filed a case against Kajol under the DSA for sharing a Facebook post criticizing him. The editor of leading Bangla newspaper *ManabZamin*, Matiur Rahman and 30 people who shared the post on Facebook

are also accused in the same case. Shafiqul Islam Kajol was only seen 53 days later, near the Bangladesh-India border town Benapole, and is currently in pre-trial detention facing two further charges under the DSA.

On 19 April, the Acting Editor of Jagonews24.com, Mahiuddin Sarker, and Editor-in-Chief of bdnews24.com, Toufiqimroz Khalidi were sued by a ruling party leader under the DSA for publishing reports on relief embezzlement. Both men were granted bail from the High Court and are awaiting trial.

On 1 May, news editor of *Dainik Grameen Darpan*, Ramzan Ali Pramanik, staff reporter Shanta Banik and publisher and editor of online news portal *Narsingdi Pratidin*, Khandaker Shahin, were arrested over a news report on a custodial death at Ghorashal police station. Later that month, on 22 May, the editor of *Amar Habiganj*, Shushant Dash Gupta, was arrested by police in a DSA case for publishing a report implicating an Awami League leader in alleged corruption. Then, on 27 June, the editor of Bangla national daily *Inqilab*, AMM Bahauddin was sued under the DSA for publishing a story about an advisor to the prime minister.

“These journalists are being targeted simply for reporting on stories critical of the authorities and holding the powerful to account. The charges against them must be dropped and those detained must be released immediately and unconditionally,” said Sultan Mohammed Zakaria.

## **Background**

In November 2018, Amnesty International released the report [Muzzling Dissent Online](#), an analysis of how the provisions of the DSA empower the Bangladeshi authorities to stifle the right to freedom of expression.