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Asia - Bangladesh

Dangerous law

Concern about reinforced online censorship law

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Reporters Without Borders calls for the complete repeal of the 2006 Information and Communication Technology Act (ICT Act), which has been rendered even more draconian by amendments adopted in August.

"This law, under which four bloggers and a human rights defender have been arrested and charged this year, is a tool for harassing netizens that violates the 2009 Freedom of Information Act," Reporters Without Borders said. "The recent amendments permit even more arbitrary behaviour by the police and judicial authorities towards news providers."

Section 57 of the ICT law, as passed in 2006, criminalizes "publishing fake, obscene or defaming information in electronic form." The amendments adopted in August allow the authorities to carry out arrests without a court warrant, prevent release on bail and raise the maximum sentence from 10 to 14 years in prison. The minimum remains at seven years.

The amendments were adopted by presidential decree on 23 August as parliament was not sitting at the time. Although they are already in effect, the government is now seeking parliamentary approval.

Reporters Without Borders added: "This repressive law enables the government to gag netizens and to arrest and detain them without legitimate grounds. It thereby helps to maintain a climate of fear among news providers."

Four bloggers – [Asif Mohiuddin](#), [Subrata Adhikari Shuvo](#), [Moshiur Rahman Biplob](#) and [Rasel Parvez](#) – were taken into custody in two separate cases during the first three days of April for allegedly "blogging blasphemous articles against Islam and its Prophet Mohammed."

They were indicted earlier this month for "inflammatory write-ups and hurting religious sentiment" under Section 57. This makes them the first victims of the ICT Act since its amendment. Their trial is scheduled to start on 6 November.

Also held under this act is **Adilur Rahman Khan**, the secretary of the Bangladeshi human rights organization Odhikar. He was arrested on 10 August and was transferred to Kashimpur prison three days later.

Requests for his release on bail have been rejected three times – on 11 August, 9 September and 25 September. The next hearing is set for 21 October. A warrant for the arrest of the head of Odhikar, **Nasiruddin Elan**, was issued in the same case on 11 September.

Khan and Elan are accused of publishing false information and doctored photos in a report released by Odhikar in May, and of thereby disrupting public order. According to the report, 61 people were killed during a police crackdown on protests by the Islamist group Hifazat-e Islam on 5 and 6 May in Dhaka, whereas the authorities claim that only 16 people were killed.

The report was sent to organizations such as HRW, Special Rapporteur, Amnesty International and the Asian Human Rights Commission, but Odhikar refused to release the list of victims in Bangladesh out of concern for the families and because it wanted to be sure that a neutral

commission of enquiry would be set up.

Many organizations have condemned Khan's detention and demanded his immediate release.

Bangladesh is ranked 144th out of 179 countries in the 2013 [Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).
