

Bangladesh: Digital Security Bill legitimises suppression of freedom of expression and the press

(Bangkok/Kathmandu, 20 September 2018) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM ASIA) strongly denounces the passage of the controversial Digital Security Bill yesterday by the Bangladesh Parliament. Several sections of this Bill fall short of international human rights standards and pose serious threats to the freedom of expression and the press. The new law carries up to 14 years of imprisonment for recording government officials or conducts that amount to spreading ‘negative propaganda.’ Furthermore, section 43 allows police to search and arrest anyone without a court warrant, which violates the core principle of the criminal justice system.

The Bangladesh Parliament passed the Bill despite protests and resistance from local journalists and civil society, who have urged for amendments of sections that muzzle free speech and dissent critical of the Government. The law enables the creation of a new agency that can use electronic media to monitor if the media contents ‘carry out propaganda,’ ‘hurt religious sentiments’ or ‘create enmity and disturb law and order.’ Such contents constitute violations, and could lead to severe punishments including life imprisonment.

Ranked 146 in the 2018 Global Press Freedom Index, the right to free speech and press freedom in Bangladesh has been deteriorating with the increasing violence and death threats against journalists and media. The culture of impunity has further aggravated the situation. In 2017, at least 25 journalists and several hundred bloggers and Facebook users were prosecuted under the Information and Communication Technology Act, which penalises defamatory and blasphemous contents.¹ According to Odhikar, a FORUM-ASIA member organisation in Bangladesh, 128 people have been arrested since 2014 under section 57 of the same Act. Suppressing people's constitutional right to free speech and threatening journalists reporting on issues such as corruption and government irregularities, the Bill will further legitimise the suppression of dissent and media freedom, which FORUM-ASIA strongly condemns.

FORUM-ASIA strongly urges the Parliament of Bangladesh to drop the Digital Security Bill and create a conducive environment for media freedom and freedom of expression in general.

¹<https://rsf.org/en/bangladesh>

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 58 member organisations in 19 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratisation.

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