

# GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION

*Focus on freedom of expression and association online*



# BANGLADESH

## CAMPAIGNING AGAINST WAR CRIMINALS ONLINE



### VOICE

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### Introduction

Bangladesh attained independence after a nine-month war against Pakistan in 1971, during which local collaborators set up by fundamentalist political parties engaged in genocide. The United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC), in its 1981 report on the occasion of the 33rd anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, stated that the genocide committed in Bangladesh in 1971 was the worst in history. It is widely accepted, both inside and outside of Bangladesh, that a total of three million Bengalis were killed by Pakistani troops and their local allies. The UNHRC report said that even if a lower figure of 1.5 million deaths were accepted, the killings took place at a rate of between 6,000 to 12,000 per day, lasting for 267 days of carnage. This made it the most intense genocide in history.

We achieved our independence through a sacrifice of human lives. We had to undergo tragedies of unprecedented proportions. What finally helped us to drive the occupation forces out of our sacred land were our indomitable spirit, sheer grit and determination more than anything else. At the same time one should also recall with gratitude the support provided by our neighbour India, both militarily and by the Indian people.<sup>1</sup>

The genocide in 1971 was helped by many local fundamentalists, including members of the religious Jamaat-e-Islami party. They formed a militia which allegedly helped identify victims and also took part in the killings. Their leaders were absolved after the war and are now prominent opposition political figures.<sup>2</sup> The government wants to put them on trial, but they claim they are innocent and that this is a political move.

On 25 March 2010, after 39 years of independence, the current government of the Awami League

party formed the International Crimes Tribunal, dedicated to the prosecution of war crimes committed during the 1971 war of independence. The people of Bangladesh have been united since independence to bring all war criminals to justice and punish them for war crimes and crimes against humanity. They are waiting to hear the verdicts against the hated war criminals.

While the peoples' movement against war criminals started at independence, it is now stronger than ever before, largely because of new media. By using the internet, young people have promoted the movement. They have successfully spread its message, not only in Bangladesh but all over the world, by blogging, using social networking sites, and on-line web forums.

### Policy and political background

Bangladesh has a comprehensive information and communications technology (ICT) policy, which was passed in 2002, and a National Telecom Policy, which was passed in 1998. The present government has placed considerable importance on ICT issues and on the digital rights of people. Around 10 million people now use the internet, while in 2008 the number of users was around 4.8 million.

A National ICT Task Force has been formed and a programme called the Support to ICT Task Force (SICT) has been initiated by the government to help with implementation and monitoring. The government has also started a multi-stakeholder e-government forum. This includes several important ministries, academics, NGOs and the private sector.

In 2007, during a military caretaker regime, the country lacked freedom of expression both in print and electronic media. One of the most highly circulated newspapers, *Prothom Alo*, had to suspend the publication of its weekly satire supplement called *Alpin*. Cases were filed against the editor, publisher and cartoonist of the Bangla daily *Prothom Alo*. *Saptahik2000*, a popular magazine supplement, was stopped because of a story where the writer compared Kaaba Shareef (a holy place in Mecca where the prophet Muhammad was buried and where the holy pilgrimage takes place) to a brothel.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [www.thedailystar.net/suppliments/2011/26\\_march/pg2.htm](http://www.thedailystar.net/suppliments/2011/26_march/pg2.htm)

<sup>2</sup> [www.secularvoiceofbangladesh.org/Fotoes/Report%20on%20the%20war%20criminals..%A8%A8/Report%20on%20the%20war%20criminals.htm](http://www.secularvoiceofbangladesh.org/Fotoes/Report%20on%20the%20war%20criminals..%A8%A8/Report%20on%20the%20war%20criminals.htm)

<sup>3</sup> [www.e-bangladesh.org/2007/09/20/attack-against-freedom-of-speech-bangladesh-cartoon-controversy-update](http://www.e-bangladesh.org/2007/09/20/attack-against-freedom-of-speech-bangladesh-cartoon-controversy-update)

The military government also set guidelines for TV talk shows and other programmes.

Before coming to power, the present government always spoke in favour of freedom of the press and freedom of expression – but now that it is in power, the situation has not improved. The electronic and print media are simultaneously being pressurised by the ruling party. Private TV channels have shut down and one channel did not get permission to broadcast, while others have received licences and will be on the air soon. In 2010 Facebook was banned for days because it published a cartoon of the prime minister in a commentary on a religious matter.

Newspapers in Bangladesh are already compelled to self-censor to avoid any form of harassment by the state. Bangladesh has a Right to Information (RTI) Act and a commission has been formed under the Act. The RTI Act is expected to create a more open and democratic society. But this does not seem to have happened yet. Under the established exceptions and for security reasons the government has blocked people's right to know.

### The role of ICTs in citizen mobilisation

ICTs have had a great impact on numerous peoples' movements in the world because of their ability to allow the general public to participate. The role of online social resistance is very important. The internet allows people to communicate, exchange ideas and organise themselves. It also facilitates a kind of political process that is different to the conventional political system. A group of people sharing a common interest and vision collectively have greater capacity and resources to campaign when using the internet.

It has been said that online media allow easy access to information. The internet is a place of free-flowing information where people can express anything anytime. It is a unique place to build people's mobilisation and give them a voice against an unjust and unfair society.

In the case of Bangladesh, the internet can be used to publish photos, videos and documentaries which offer solid evidence of the genocide in 1971. The war left three million people dead, and 200,000 women were assaulted. All these hated activities were perpetrated by local collaborators such as the Rajakar (also spelled Razakar), Al Badar and Al Sham militias.

The online campaign against war criminals is intensifying. Different groups have been created for the cause on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. These groups are very active in distributing messages to their lists. YouTube also helps to

distribute videos. A Facebook group named "50,000 BANGLADESHIS UNITED AGAINST WAR CRIMINALS AND RAJAKARS OF 1971 BANGLADESH" has published an official list of Razakars. Groups called "Trial For War Criminals In Bangladesh" and "Stand Against RAJAKAR" are vigorously pushing policy makers for justice.

Independent writers, bloggers and journalists have formed a pressure group to push for the prosecution of war crimes. For example, War Criminals in Bangladesh<sup>4</sup> is a very strong blog which publishes photos and stories of atrocities committed by Razakars in 1971. Sachalayatan<sup>5</sup> is another very prominent blog in Bangladesh. It focuses on all kinds of injustices in society. It publishes articles and critical perspectives on war criminals in Bangladesh. Sachalayatan is playing a very decisive role in the campaign.

Amar<sup>6</sup> is another blog run by enthusiastic online activists. Recently they established an online research foundation. The main objective of the foundation was to include young people in research on struggles for freedom, and to make this research available online. As part of its campaign, Amar also organises meetings and seminars on online campaigns against war criminals.

The International Crime Strategy Forum (ICSF)<sup>7</sup> is an active and strong online coalition against war criminals in Bangladesh. The ICSF had been formed to promote the cause of justice and at the same time to facilitate the fair trial of the perpetrators of the 1971 war crimes, irrespective of where they now live, their political connections or their status in the society. Through this campaign the ICSF wants to strengthen the movement against war criminals by instilling a sense of justice, independence and freedom in the hearts of future generations. The ICSF has been providing reference resources to the public using the internet. For instance, it has set up the e-Library 71<sup>8</sup> which includes reference materials on the 1971 genocide.

To make the campaign more effective, the ICSF has been running an online media archive.<sup>9</sup> This archive contains recent media reports and blog coverage related to war crime prosecution in Bangladesh. It also has a group blog platform to discuss and analyse current developments related to war crimes and criminals of 1971 generally and prosecution initiatives specifically.

4 warcriminalsinbangladesh.blogspot.com

5 www.sachalayatan.com

6 www.amarblog.com

7 icsforum.org

8 icsforum.org/blog/category/archives/e-library-71

9 icsforum.org/mediarchive

New media are being used to organise protests on the ground. These include demonstrations and the collection of signatures for campaigns. These activities push the government to take action.

### Conclusion

Online campaigns and resistance are stronger than movements on the ground, and have grabbed attention nationally and internationally. The end result is that the government has considered it its moral and political duty to bring war criminals before tribunals. It has started to try war criminals – a move which has been encouraged by people's activism.

### Action steps

- Lobby government for access to the internet.
- Mainstream ICT policy development.
- Online campaigners should include key policy actors when dealing with important national issues.
- Content should be in both local and international languages so that everybody can access it.
- Visual media should be emphasised when seeking to influence public opinion.
- There could be more coordination among online groups and blogs. ■

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**GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH**

2011 Report

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