



Odhikar: 22 years of defending human rights – despite persecution

Statement from Odhikar

Dhaka, October 10, 2016 – Odhikar was established on the 10th of October 1994 with the vision of a society based on the rights and responsibilities of State and citizen. Having rights and being able to freely enjoy them, as inscribed and protected by a democratic constitution, is an obvious expectation, but the people of Bangladesh have been deprived from such protection for too long. Odhikar’s strategic campaign has, therefore, always been to reclaim the social, cultural, religious and political unity that was expressed in three principles of the Bangladesh Liberation War; and inscribed in the ‘Proclamation of Independence’: equality, human dignity and social justice.

Odhikar is striving to achieve this goal through human rights activities, based on the foundations established by principles of justice and rule of law, international declarations, conventions and treaties. The Organisation has thrived for the last 22 years, on protecting and promoting civil and political rights through awareness building, documentation, monitoring, research and advocacy. Odhikar campaigns for the rights to freedom of speech and expression, of peaceful assembly and of association – and for the right to vote. It is relentless in its fight against all forms of violence perpetrated on minority communities and against women. It also campaigns for an effective pro-people justice delivery system in Bangladesh where ‘rule of law’ could meaningfully operate, without violating the human rights of any accused; and never be used as an instrument of coercion and repression. In this regard, Odhikar relentlessly campaigns to put an end to degrading treatment, torture, extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. It highlights trends in political violence and criminalisation of politics; reported on the various governments’ interference with institutions which are, on paper, independent; and criticised repressive laws which violate people’s fundamental rights. The Organisation has earned the reputation as a steadfast watchdog of people’s rights. Its vocal activism and persistence; and its refusal to bow to government repression, has gradually made the working conditions of Odhikar more challenging.

Odhikar has come under government ire during various regimes. Such anger turned to serious repression by the present government after the second Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council on Bangladesh in April 2013; and it cracked down on the Organisation and Odhikar’s members and staff were put under surveillance by the intelligence agencies. Surveillance on its Secretary had gradually increased. He was targeted by the current government for speaking out against human rights violations in the print and electronic media and, notably, at the UN Human Rights Council. On August 10, 2013 late at night, Odhikar’s Secretary was picked up from in front of his home, by persons with no warrant and claiming to be from the Detective Branch (DB) of Police, for publishing a fact finding report on extrajudicial killings during a rally organised by the religious group Hefazate Islam on May 5-6, 2013. This seemed to be the opportunity the government was looking for, to shut Odhikar down. Both Odhikar’s Secretary and Director were later charged under section 57(1) of the notorious Information and Communication Technology Act, 2006 (Amended 2009). They were released on bail after spending 62 and 25 days detained in prison respectively.

Since the above arrests, Odhikar is continuously under watch and its staff and local human rights defenders harassed by various intelligence agencies, as their activities and movement are

monitored and often hindered. The cell phones of many of its members and staff are tapped. The constant visibility of men from law enforcement agencies, watching the Odhikar office is, under the present circumstances, tantamount to intimidation; and hampers regular organisational activities. Local human rights defenders associated with Odhikar have been barred from organizing human chains; they have been threatened by law enforcement agencies; human rights meetings are monitored; and one human rights defender who is also a television journalist, was shot in the leg by a policeman after taping an act of vote rigging by local government party men in March 2016¹. Furthermore, the Election Commission (EC), did not allow Odhikar to formally observe the Municipality Elections of 2015, despite the Organisation being registered with the Commission. Its application was ignored by the EC. Regardless, Odhikar sought to collect information from human rights defenders affiliated to Odhikar, who work for different media houses.

It is clear to see that the harassment and intimidation faced by Odhikar and those associated with it, does not only come from law enforcement agencies and the lower courts. As an attempt to gag human rights activism, the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB), which is under the Prime Minister's Office, has barred the release of all project related funds of Odhikar, since August 2013, in order to stop its human rights activities. Human rights activism as a whole has come under threat. On October 5, 2016 the Parliament passed "The Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Bill 2016. This Law contravenes international human rights law by imposing serious barriers on the work of civil society organisations. This also contradicts the people's democratic rights. Under the new law, making 'inimical' and 'derogatory' remarks against the Constitution and constitutional bodies by any foreign-funded NGO, will amount to a criminal offence.

Despite being persecuted and under surveillance and its lack of staff² and funds, Odhikar regularly publishes its monthly human rights monitoring reports on recorded human rights abuses perpetrated in Bangladesh. As a human rights organisation, it is Odhikar's duty to highlight violations, with no discrimination whatsoever; and make appropriate recommendations and create awareness to prevent future violations. Odhikar is, first and foremost, a human rights activist organisation. It is run on the energy of the staff, members, and the volunteer services of grassroots level human rights defenders, who dedicate time towards doing what they can to continue to work for the betterment of human rights.

On the occasion of its 22nd founding anniversary, Odhikar, its staff, members and grassroots level human rights defenders, who are associated with it, would like to express heartfelt gratitude to all the human rights defenders, organisations, networks, supporters and well-wishers who have stood by the Organisation for the last 22 years, that have expressed solidarity with it and that have vocally, actively and continuously campaigned against the persecution it faces. Odhikar will continue to fight against State repression and will continue its struggle until democratic rights and fundamental freedoms are fully ensured in Bangladesh. Your support and solidarity gives Odhikar the strength to continue its mission.

In Solidarity,
The Odhikar Team

¹Mohammad Afzal Hossain, a reported of the private channel NTV. See www.odhikar.org for more information.

²Between September 2013 and September 2016, nine members of staff have left Odhikar due to security and financial reasons.