



PHOTO: STAR FILE

YOU ARE YOUR FACEBOOK PROFILE

ZYMA ISLAM

On public fronts, ministers delivered implicit and tactful statements to the public asking them to wrap up their banners and slogans and go home. Out of the public eye, hundreds of individuals were detained in police stations across the country or attacked by individuals allegedly from the ruling-party's student wing, while teachers were threatened to withdraw support from their students. Now, anybody can be picked up for anything, because what constitutes as an offence under section 57 is a blurry zone. To add fuel to fire, Facebook is strewn with 'wanted' posters of protestors who were active on Facebook. The posters urge the general public to provide the whereabouts of these people to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the police. Several sources inside the CID said that while they are not publicly circulating any such list,



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

they have been collecting information from people about the Facebook activities of the general public. Their Facebook page says as much: "We too demand safer roads, but we appeal to citizens to help us by providing us with

the Facebook posts and addresses of those who are spreading rumours and destabilising the society." However, Supreme Court lawyer Barrister Tanjib-ul-Alam, argues, "If the CID is collecting this information on

their initiative, we need to ask whether a case was filed first? They can only conduct investigations after cases are filed. They can only investigate into these people once cases are filed by the police." Yet, certain citizens have definitely taken CID's call to heart. In a much-circulated Facebook video, a central committee member of the youth group opposing the protest claimed that they collected a list of 700 'post'-ers that they will "hand over to the ICT Ministry". Dhaka University Fazlul Haque Hall's BCL unit also did their part. Tariqul Islam of Mathematics, Mashur Rahman Sadik of Information and Communication Technology and Zobaiddul Haque Rony of Physics departments were beaten up and handed over to the police. "They started beating up Rony in the guest room from 2:30am till 6am. The door was locked, and I was outside in the balcony. I heard the noises. When he was dragged outside I saw that his mouth was bleeding. The police came and the administration handed him over," an eyewitness claims.

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YOU ARE YOUR FACEBOOK PROFILE

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"People are frustrated so they take to Facebook to express their opinions," says Supreme Court lawyer, Jyotirmoy Barua, "The space for independent freedom of expression in this country is shrinking as it is. While we must fact-check what is being shared on Facebook, the use of social media is the sign of a healthy society." Crowd-sourcing such information seems to be reaping fruit. For example, on Tuesday night, while this correspondent was waiting at the Detective Branch's (DB) office in Minto Road, the distraught family of businessman M. Ahmed* rushed inside. "He was picked up from our Lalmatia house by the DB police around 8:30 pm, for writing in support of Shahidul Alam on Facebook," claims his wife. A senior DB officer present on spot was overheard saying this to Ahmed's elderly mother: "It is not our job to teach your son what is right and what is wrong, but when your son 'likes' and 'shares' this and that on Facebook, we have to step in. Couldn't you teach your son the difference between right and wrong?" Just out of curiosity, we went to his Facebook profile to verify what the police were talking about. M. Ahmed's profile is extremely tame compared to



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

many of the supporters of the movement—he had shared a few news articles all relating to the arrest of Shahidul Alam and a few statuses authored by other people. He himself had authored no posts providing analysis of the movement or criticising the government's handling of it. Ahmed was released the next day after 17 hours of detention. On the same night, three more by the name of Touhidul Islam Tushar, Mohammed Waliullah, and 18-year-old

Mohammed Ihsanuddin Ifaz were arrested by cops for "writing inciteful things on social media", as per a statement circulated by the police. Three nights earlier on August 8, 2018, three others were picked up from their homes and shown arrested, again, for "inciting the deterioration of law and order" which is a cyber crime. Ironically, one of those arrested runs a Facebook group for fighting *graver* cyber crimes like online sexual harassment—and now he is charged

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A DAY IN THE POLICE STATION

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id you see my son Sadman? Please take a look at this photo. Did you see him being taken to the police station? Is he in this police station?" A woman, in her early fifties, was desperately appealing to the sentries stationed at the gate of Shahbagh police station at 1pm on August 6, 2018. Standing behind the locked heavy iron grill gate, the sentries, contentedly smoking cigarettes, didn't pay any heed to the appeal of Rita Hasan, Sadman's mother. The two sentries were staring at a crowd of no less than 50 people with sheer indifference. They were the guardians or relatives of students of different schools, colleges and universities, who had allegedly been picked up by the law enforcement agencies during and after the students' protest demanding better enforcement of traffic safety laws. Failing to get any answer from the sentries, the woman started to ask everybody standing in front of the gate about her son, showing his photo on her mobile phone. However, nobody could console the weeping mother desperately looking for her son, Sadman, a student of Engineering University School and College, who didn't return home after going out to play cricket at 4pm on August 5. Instead, a group of policemen started to blow whistles and shouted at the waiting family members to clear the gate. To their horror, the nervous family members saw hundreds of policemen wearing bullet-proof vests and helmets, wielding shields, batons and tear gas guns, were marching towards the gate. As the relatives quickly stepped aside, the detachment of riot police took position at Shahbagh intersection as they were informed that a procession of agitated students was coming to block the Shahbagh intersection. Seeing Rita's desperation, a fire-service crew, who was also stationed at Shahbagh area, advised her to talk to an officer who was amongst the riot police. She rushed to the police position and tracked the officer who reluctantly looked at her, quickly glanced at her mobile phone and told her that he could not recognise the face. One of his men instructed her to go to Ramna police station. Rita hired a rickshaw and rushed to Ramna police station. Just half an hour later, the other parents waiting in front of Shahbagh police station got a first-hand experience of how police arbitrarily detain students when charged at a demonstration brought out by the students of Dhaka University. The police detained at least nine students from the spot. Some of them were fortunate enough to convince the police to allow them to call their relatives. Some students were not that fortunate. All of their cell phones were confiscated immediately after detention, and those who could not make the call by that time had to wait in



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

complete uncertainty about their fate. At the duty officer's chamber of Shahbagh police station, three female students were detained who were at Shahbagh during the demonstration. Two of them informed *Star Weekend* that they were not allowed to call their guardian even three hours after the detention. And, for the third student, police called her guardian as she fell seriously ill after inhaling excessive amount of tear gas lobbed at the demonstration. Rita finally found her son in Ramna police station. There, too, a crowd of parents and relatives waited outside for their family members—none of whom had been informed by the police after their family members were detained. Like Rita, all of them had to move from one police station to another in search of their loved ones. The families were frustrated and upset about the difficulty, and even impossibility, of obtaining information from the police—information which, under the law, families have the right to know. Such mass detention of students, during and after the students' demonstration, which was much appreciated by all quarters including the government ministers and leaders of the ruling party for its just cause, raised questions. In many cases, the detentions were arbitrary and led

to violations of their legal rights in police custody. For instance, around nine people were detained on August 5 and taken to Dhanmondi police station. Eight of them were students and one of them was an architect. Although the police could not find any criminal evidence against the detainees even after 24 hours, they were not released. Like in Shahbagh police station, relatives of the detainees, in this case having been informed by the police, started to gather in front of the police station from the early morning of August 6. It turned out to be a long wait for them. "My nephew lived in a dormitory at Jhigatola. He is a student of University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh. He was not involved with any demonstration. In the afternoon of August 5, he just went out to see what was happening outside. Police nabbed him from the footpath and half an hour ago I heard that they were filing a case against my nephew for attacking the Awami League party office. This is absolutely absurd," said Rakibul Hasan who was called by the police to come to Dhanmondi police station for his nephew at 9am. Rakib was finally allowed to enter into the police station at 2pm to give him some food. What he saw inside police custody shocked him to the core. He narrated, "I saw four students lying on the floor in pain.

under the same law as the internet stalkers he fights. When 37 students of Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology were detained in the Tejgaon Industrial Police Station on August 6—and then let go subsequently 19 hours later—it also gave them a strong warning, not to get involved in the movement again. This correspondent spoke to 15 of their families who all claimed that their children were picked up because they tried to join the protests. Tonmoy*, an arrested male student, was asked whether he will go to the protests again. He has no straight answer. "Whatever we do will be useless if no one else comes forward. We can't do anything alone," he says. When Tonmoy and the 36 others were released, their university's registrar Mohammed Abdul Gaffar was called in. "I had to address the students and instruct them not to get involved in all this again. What can I do? It was my responsibility to get the students released," he said to *Star Weekend*. "The concept of treason has changed. Government and state are not interchangeable," concludes Jyotirmoy Barua, "It is the citizen's constitutional right to criticise the government they elected—and that should not amount to treason." Names have been changed or abbreviated to protect their identities.

My nephew was also hurt. His pain was so acute that he could not even talk to me properly. He could only drink a bottle of water." Rakib's meeting with his nephew was very short. While his nephew was drinking water, a sentry instructed him to get out without any further conversation with the detainee. When Rakib shared what he saw in the police station with the waiting relatives, his accounts created panic among them. They started to request the sentries to take them to the officer-in-charge of the police station; their brief reply to all of their requests was "Not possible. He is not in the station." However, police officers of Dhanmondi station denied accusations of arbitrary arrest and torture in custody. The OC said, "We didn't arrest or detain anybody. All these people were caught by the pedestrians and they brought them to the police station. The pedestrians claimed that they were vandalising Awami League party office and that's why they flogged them. We didn't touch any of them." He also added, "None of the detainees could produce their student ID cards. We have seized their cell phones and are examining their social media contacts and inboxes. If we find any clue of their involvement with subversive activities and vandalism, we shall produce them before the court." Similar comments were echoed by the officers of Shahbagh and Ramna police stations. Despite scanning their phones for hours for evidence, police officers could hardly find any evidence against the detained students. All the students detained at Shahbagh and Dhanmondi police stations were released by 12am on August 7. At around 3pm on August 7, BCL handed three students of Dhaka University over to Shahbagh police station, in front of this correspondent. They were dragging the students, who seemed badly beaten up. BCL's objection against the students was that they were defaming BCL, "an organisation which was founded and run personally by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman." Those students were also released after an hour. Ten of the 13 detained students were released from Ramna police station after 10pm on August 6 and were handed over to their guardians. Three students were sent to the court but the OC refused to comment on their crimes before the investigation was complete. Similarly, 37 students were freed from Tejgaon industrial police station as the police couldn't find any criminal evidence against them. However, all these students had to spend at least 12 hours, and in many cases more than 24 hours, in the police station without adequate food and water, and under enormous psychological pressure. Some of them were allegedly tortured before being detained by the police. And, their guardians had to go through unbearable mental and physical ordeal before getting their loved ones back. Disclaimer: All the names of the students and their families have been changed to protect their identities. The writer can be contacted at shahnawaz.khan@thedailystar.net