



# A STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY

A photo journey by Shahidul Alam

September 4: Poster for "Struggle for Democracy" Exhibition at Drik Gallery, hosted to celebrate Drik's anniversary.

PHOTO: SHAHIDUL ALAM/DRIK

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Could we get bird seed for them, Saydia enquires? "amar khabare khaey [It is my food they like to eat]" your gentle voice replies. A mass exhibition starts in the UK, involving 50 galleries and academic institutions displaying your exhibition Struggle for Democracy.

The internationally acclaimed Cuban artist Tania Bruguera hears your story and immediately stages two major interventions for you at London's Tate Modern gallery, Europe's temple to contemporary art. It is a passionate gesture of solidarity from an artist who was herself jailed for her work. She is a force of nature. In the Turbine Hall, one of the world's most coveted art spaces, we show *Crossfire*—your exhibition on extra judicial killings by the Bangladesh government's paramilitary police force Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), and your book *My Journey as a Witness*. Tania says keeping you in prison is unjust.

October 15 - 24 (70-79 days)

You win the Frontline Club Tribute Award, London. A room packed with international journalists hears the story of you and Bangladesh. At Dhaka University campus photographers of Bangladesh stage a protest and we are humbled by their bravery. Meanwhile the Bangladesh art establishment remains silent like a faceless emblem of corporate power. The Documentary Film Festival of Mexico City calls for your release in an event attended by over 200 film makers. They plant masks of you under a tree.

October 25 - November 3 (80-89 days)

Within 10 days you scoop three awards—Photo Kathmandu 2018 Award of Excellence, the National Institute of Design's Prof Satish Bahadur Lifetime Achievement Award for outstanding contribution to Media Education in South Asia, and of course, the Lucie Humanitarian Award (considered the 'Oscar' of photography) which professor Gayatri Spivak of Columbia University



PHOTO: Mahtabuddin Ahmed

November 7: Togor flowers picked by Shahidul from prison grounds for friends and supporters the world over.

receives for you in New York. Your reputation only grows, but Bangladesh's shame only deepens: At your bail hearing the High Court finds inconsistencies between what they allege you say, and what you actually say in your Al-Jazeera and Facebook's live videos. Yet the bench simply drops your case ('out of list'), effectively declining to grant you bail. It seems you are imprisoned at will without trial or charge. Justice has collapsed. In jail, your collars have begun to fray.

November 4 - 12 (90-99 days)

You pick togor flowers from the prison grounds, for colleagues at Drik and Pathshala, family, friends and supporters the world over. The flowers are beautiful but the soil they come from is not. It is rotten soil trodden by bodies imprisoned by colonial laws that have survived twice-independence. Reading the Prisons Act of 1894, I see it includes strange punishment clauses such as "Chapter XI (12) whipping, provided that the number of stripes shall not exceed thirty". In 1898, Oscar Wilde, probably subject to the same Prisons Act, wrote:

*This too I know—and wise it were  
If each could know the same—  
That every prison that men build  
Is built with bricks of shame,  
And bound with bars lest Christ should see  
How men their brothers maim.*

*With bars they blur the gracious moon,  
And blind the goodly sun:  
And they do well to hide their Hell,  
For in it things are done  
That Son of God nor son of Man  
Ever should look upon!*

*The vilest deeds like poison weeds  
Bloom well in prison-air:  
It is only what is good in Man  
That wastes and withers there:  
Pale Anguish keeps the heavy gate,  
And the Warder is Despair*

*For they starve the little frightened child  
Till it weeps both night and day:  
And they scourge the weak, and flog the fool,  
And gibe the old and grey,*

*And some grow mad, and all grow bad,  
And none a word may say.*

*Each narrow cell in which we dwell  
Is foul and dark latrine,  
And the fetid breath of living Death  
Chokes up each grated screen,  
And all, but Lust, is turned to dust  
In Humanity's machine.*

(*The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Oscar Wilde, 1898)

November 13 (100 days)

Today I receive a message: "100th day of Shahidul's arrest, photographers and activists will gather outside Jatiya Jadughor at 4pm to form a human chain in protest. Spread the word. Join us."

I look at a photo you took in 1989 of Sheikh Hasina, presumably just before she fought in the movement for the restoration of democracy that led to the fall of General Hussain Muhammad Ershad.

You always chronicled Bangladesh's history with your camera and I am confident you will do so again.

I ask my daughter what she would paint if she had a magic paintbrush. She says she would paint a bird that would fly to your cell with a key in its foot. Hold on for the key Mama, it will come, hopefully before Amma leaves this earth.

I found a cassette recording of myself aged around two. In it I only sound your name again and again Zahed, Zahed, Zahed... the mantra of our lives.

*Sofia Karim is an architect and visual artist based in London, UK, and a niece of Shahidul Alam.*