

Odhikar's deregistration: Unacceptable rationale



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WHEN Bangladesh needs to show that it has been listening to the concerns about respecting human rights and upholding the rule of law, it has done quite the opposite. The reactions coming from the United Nations' human rights body, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and other international rights groups to the deregistration of Odhikar, a leading human rights organisation in Bangladesh, make it clear that no one believes this action to be anything other than a punishment for the work it does. The refusal to renew Odhikar's operating licence follows a letter sent to the OHCHR on May 12, in which the government accused the organisation of "disproportionate bias and prejudice against Bangladesh, in particular the ruling party Awami League" and argued that the UN human rights mechanism should disqualify and shun it as a source of information.

The letter was written as an official response to a joint urgent appeal issued by the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, the special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, the special rapporteur on the rights of peaceful assembly and association, the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, the special rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment, and the special rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees on non-recurrence on

February 21, 2022.

The joint appeal raised issues related to the alleged cases of enforced disappearances, the role of Rab, ensuring justice for the victims, and making alleged human rights violators accountable. The joint appeal also urged to stop intimidation and harassment



of relatives of the disappeared persons, human rights defenders, and civil society organisations. The appeal specifically raised their concerns about allegations of reprisals against Odhikar. The government response on all those issues raised in the joint appeal was typical repetition of denials of any violations whatsoever, justification of Rab actions, and glorification of internal investigation mechanism of the law enforcement agencies, which has been rejected by most rights groups and experts as hardly credible due to a lack of independence of such procedure.

In relation to the alleged reprisals against Odhikar, the government response argued, "Odhikar is widely known for its disproportionate bias and prejudice against Bangladesh, in particular the ruling Awami League, which is evident in its various reports." It added, "Besides, one of the top members of Odhikar was earlier appointed by the BNP-Jamaat government as the deputy attorney general, which should provide

disqualification for the UN human rights mechanism to accept it as an objective and neutral organisation..."

The refusal to renew Odhikar's licence, which has come within less than a month of the government's flimsy argument against the group of having political bias, only proves that the apprehension of the UN experts was justified. Hence, OHCHR spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani says, "Reprisals against Odhikar have been documented since as far back as 2013, and appear to have intensified, with accusations levelled against the organisation for 'anti-state' and 'anti-government' activities." More worryingly, she says, "this decision will have a chilling effect on the ability of civil society organisations to report serious human rights violations to UN human rights mechanisms."

Similar observations have been made by leading global human rights groups, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the International Coalition Against Enforced Disappearances (ICAED). Eleven organisations in a joint statement said this decision demonstrated "the (Bangladesh) government's determination to stifle human rights work in the country." According to them, "It is the authorities' failure to ensure accountability for human rights violations, rather than Odhikar's exposure of those violations that has tarnished Bangladesh's reputation." Furthermore, these groups have described the process of deregistration as "politically motivated persecution of human rights defenders and critics," and called for allowing human rights groups to do their work without fear and ensure accountability for human rights violations.

Odhikar, founded in 1994, has been documenting violations of human rights by state and non-state actors in Bangladesh since its inception. But it has drawn the ire of the ruling party and the government after its controversial report and alleged death count during the

violent crackdown on Hefazat-e-Islam's notorious Dhaka siege programme on May 5, 2013. The apparent anomaly in casualty figures between the official one and Odhikar's count landed its director in prison. The irony is that the government and the ruling party apparently made up with Hefazat long ago, but Odhikar and its executives are still being haunted for the alleged miscounting of victims in their voluntary role of monitoring human rights.

No wonder that Odhikar's application for the renewal of its operating licence remained pending since 2014. Since then, it has also been unable to access any funds from foreign donors as the regulatory authority, the NGO Affairs Bureau, has kept a lid on such resources. Despite such constraints, it managed to keep working and continue monthly and annual reports on all kinds of rights violations, including enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings and border killings. It sought the Supreme Court's intervention in getting the licence renewed but, ahead of the conclusion of the court's hearing, the government rejected its renewal application. Media reports quoted the NGO Affairs Bureau chief saying that the disposal of the application would end the cause of the legal proceeding.

A strategic move, indeed! But keeping Odhikar's application pending for eight years and refusing the renewal on the grounds that it failed to fulfil requirements of a law enacted two years after the submission of the petition shows that the way has been made to operate against the organisation. And, it comes amid global concern of persecuting it for reporting "serious human rights violations to UN human rights mechanisms," and is bound to be perceived as a reprisal. Appearing vindictive against human rights defenders is not what Bangladesh needs following the imposition of sanctions against an entire unit of its law enforcement agencies by the world's most powerful nation.

VISUAL: STAR

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Interfaith harmony is crucial for India



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THE foreign policy crisis that has arisen in India due to inflammatory statements will hopefully pass sooner rather than later. For a short while, voluntary restraint on giving many more examples of such harmful, injurious statements may be advisable as a part of damage control. However, the biggest lesson that we must take from this crisis should be to strengthen the firm belief that interfaith harmony is a basic precept of Indian society, on which consensus should be created with many-sided efforts. The task ahead for the ruling regime is not just to "tone down the polarisation discourse" as is being argued in some places – that would be grossly understating a new agenda even before it has been rolled out. The task ahead is to firmly establish that interfaith harmony again becomes a basic precept of policy and society in India. Nothing less than this would be acceptable; nothing less than this should be attempted. The authorities should be sincere, and if they are, everyone should cooperate.

In this great task of re-establishing interfaith harmony as a basic precept, we can learn much from history. Among all the great spiritual leaders of recent centuries, in a country known for many great spiritual movements, those who gave the message of peace and non-violence had the most durable impact on people, to the extent that the highest respect by countless followers even 2,700 years later is for such a legacy of Gautam Buddha and Mahavira Jain. As we move further in history, millions of followers still seek solace in the hugely inspiring, path-illuminating messages of Guru Nanak and Sant Kabir, who ask people to rise above narrow divides to open themselves to the path of true spirituality and ethics.

During the freedom movement, the greatest following was attracted by those leaders who, despite other differences, were completely united – very firmly too – on the basic precept of interfaith harmony. This can certainly be said of the greatest leaders such as Bhagat Singh, Subhash Chandra Bose, Mahatma Gandhi, Badshah Khan, Jawaharlal Nehru, and

Maulana Azad. It is these leaders, with their common ground of a firm faith in interfaith harmony, who received the greatest affection of the Indian people of all faiths.

As for those with a narrow sectarian agenda, they could get a hearing among people only when the real leaders named above were imprisoned or in exile or had achieved martyrdom, and the colonial rulers then used this as an opportunity to support and push ahead divisive leaders who suited their divide-and-rule agenda. In the post-independence period, it is well-known that Jawaharlal Nehru, who was India's prime minister for 17 years and won three general elections in a multi-party democracy with over 45 percent vote, accorded the highest importance to interfaith harmony, and this was reflected in policy, enabling free India to recover from the wounds of partition and walk the noble path of interfaith harmony, protection of minorities and secularism, setting a great example for the world, even as Pakistan got well-deserved criticism for its path of sectarianism.

Equality of all religions was established firmly by the Indian Constitution. The tallest opposition leaders of post-independence India, Jayaprakash Narain and Ram Manohar Lohia, were also very firm in their commitment to interfaith harmony. We must draw on this legacy and build further on this. Even those who in the past were not favourably inclined towards this basic idea of India should realise from recent experiences the importance of interfaith harmony. This gets worldwide respect and admiration, while ideologies based on sectarianism or minority-bashing are condemned worldwide – at times even leading to crisis situations in foreign relations.

However, it is problematic to say that all that has to be done is to tone down communal polarisation. Will it be considered all right if the bigger leaders avoid communally charged statements, but the street-level talk of the cadre remains the same? No, it will not. Cadres become leaders later, and what is in the mind all the time comes out sooner or later in statements, actions and policies.

What we need is nothing less than getting rid of the devil of communal disharmony, communalism and sectarianism from the hearts and minds of all people. The aim of creating a society based on interfaith harmony and equality of all faiths should be accepted as a basic precept; once this aim is well-established, then ways to best achieve this can be

discussed in detail subsequently.

The emphasis in the coming days should be on widespread, broad-based steps to promote interfaith harmony, while also putting checks on those forces and organisations which have been spreading disharmony and hatred in India. It should be made very clear to such

forces and individuals that any activities relating to disharmony and hatred as well as violence will be dealt with very strictly from now onwards.

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Local Government Engineering Department
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Upazila : Sadar, District: Narsingdi
www.lged.gov.bd

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Invitation for Tender (Works)
e-Tender Notice No : 07/2021-2022 (Re-Tender)

e-Tender is invited in the National e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the Procurement of following Works, Details are Given Below.

Sl No	Package No	Name of Work	Tender Last Selling (Date & Time)	Tender Closing (Date & Time)	Tender Opening (Date & Time)	Tender ID No
1.	e-Tender/PEDP4/NAR/SAD/2021-22/W1-03094	Construction of additional class room MOHSIN ZZAMAN GPS under PEDP4 in Narsingdi Sadar.	27-Jun-2022 17:00	28-Jun-2022 13:00	28-Jun-2022 13:00	701250
2.	e-Tender/PEDP4/NAR/SAD/2021-22/W1-04038	Construction of additional class room VATIR CHAR GPS under PEDP4 in Narsingdi Sadar.	27-Jun-2022 17:00	28-Jun-2022 13:00	28-Jun-2022 13:00	701251
3.	e-Tender/PEDP4/NRD/SAD/2020-21/W9.185	Repair and Renovation of NARSINGDI SADAR UEO under Sadar Upazila, District- Narsingdi.	27-Jun-2022 17:00	28-Jun-2022 13:00	28-Jun-2022 13:00	701252

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Further Information and Guidelines are available in the National e-GP System Portal and from e-GP Help Desk (helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd).

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