



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

RECLAIMING HUMAN RIGHTS AS EVERYDAY ESSENTIALS

Human rights are "everyday essentials" for a functioning society -- the pillars of security, justice, and expression that people rely upon daily. However, recent data serve as a reminder that these essentials are being eroded in Bangladesh, and highlight persistent vulnerabilities that continue to challenge the rule of law and public safety. The most critical essential--the right to security--remains fragile. Sustained political instability has resulted in about 200 deaths and thousands of injuries between January and November, driven largely by internal factionalism and targeted attacks on activists, according to data compiled by rights organisation Ain O Salish Kendra. This violence is further compounded by 29 extrajudicial killings this year -- a recurring disruption to the fundamental guarantee of safety that every citizen requires. Equally concerning is the rise of vigilante violence, with 184 lives lost to mob beatings in the January-November period. This climate of impunity has also impacted religious minorities. Furthermore, the right to expression--essential for accountability--remains under pressure. Journalists, often the guardians of these everyday rights, have faced physical assault and legal harassment.

Extrajudicial killings, custodial deaths still stalk Bangladesh

ASK reports 29 deaths in 10 months till October this year

MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN

When former prime minister Sheikh Hasina was deposed in the mass uprising last year, hopes ran high that the dark days of extrajudicial killings and custodial deaths would finally be over.

But over the past year, such deaths have continued across Bangladesh, with the interim government failing to take meaningful action to curb these grave rights violations.

Human rights campaigners say the persistence of such deaths and abuses reflects a long-standing culture of impunity, where those responsible are rarely held accountable.

The death of 30 year-old Hazrat Ali, an expatriate from Brahmanbaria, serves as a stark reminder of this.

On December 6 last year, Ali was detained during a joint force operation in Banchampur upazila. His bruised body was handed over to his family the following day.

At that time, Morshedul Alam, the then officer-in-charge of Banchampur Police Station, could not provide any explanation. He only said joint forces conducted the drive, and that Ali was wanted in several robbery cases.

When contacted on Saturday, Pias Basak, additional superintendent of police of the Nabinagar Circle in Brahmanbaria, said he heard of the incident but didn't follow up on it.

Another incident, involving Md Abdullah from Brahmanbaria's Salimganj union, adds to a troubling pattern of custodial abuse.

Suspected of theft, Abdullah was detained and tortured by locals on September 23. Later, he was handed over to police. His ordeal continued in police custody, where he died of his injuries five days later.

Sub Inspector Md Mohim Uddin was arrested over allegations of torturing Abdullah in custody.

Human rights activists say his death was one of many cases that point to systemic failures to prevent custodial torture.

According to Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), 29 people fell victim to

extrajudicial killings and deaths due to torture in custody from January to October this year. During the period, 28 convicts and 55 undertrial prisoners died in jail.

Last year, that number was 20. Besides, 23 convicts and 42 undertrial prisoners died in jail, shows ASK data.

Asked about deaths in prison, Jannat Ul Forhad, assistant inspector general of the Prisons Directorate, said 90 prisoners died of illness over the past 11 months.

He also claimed that no prisoner was subjected to torture.

When contacted, AHM Sahadat Hossain, assistant inspector general (AIG) at the police headquarters, said deaths by suicide and some incidents of mob beatings that led to fatalities were shown as custodial deaths in

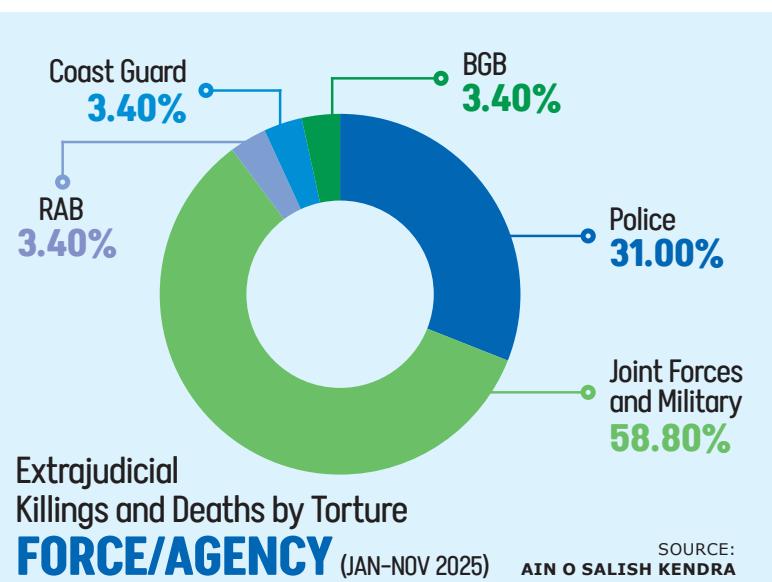
complete while others are ongoing."

Citing probe reports on seven custodial deaths, he said two people were beaten to death by mobs; three died by suicide; and two died of heart attack.

Human rights advocates have called for independent investigations into all extrajudicial killings and custodial deaths, along with stronger oversight mechanisms to ensure accountability within law enforcement agencies.

Rights activist Nur Khan Liton said the country witnessed "alarming continuation" of torture and abuses under previous regimes.

"The perpetrators of these crimes remain in positions of power... No one has been held accountable. There is no sign that justice will be served."



the reports by rights groups.

"In some cases, individuals were beaten by mobs and left critically injured. Police rescued them and then took them to hospital where they died. These incidents were also counted as custodial deaths in the reports."

He claimed that investigations have been launched into all allegations of extrajudicial killings or custodial deaths. "Some probes are

Tawohidul Haque, an associate professor at the Institute of Social Welfare and Research at Dhaka University, pointed out that the lack of transparency surrounding arrests often fuels suspicion.

"Family members must be informed when someone is detained, and they must be allowed to verify that the detainee is alive and unharmed. This will help prevent torture and abuse," he added.

Reforms will mean little unless political actors end culture of violence

Sara Hossain in an interview with Star

ZYMA ISLAM

Justice and accountability for the egregious human rights violations of the past is crucial, but the challenge lies in ensuring this is not done by repeating patterns of reprisal and retaliation, warned Sara Hossain, a senior lawyer at the Supreme Court, as she spoke about the role of political parties in protecting human rights.

"We are undergoing a transition from prolonged autocratic rule marked by severe suppression of civil and political rights," she said, noting that the former ruling party captured key institutions and repressed opponents through enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, restrictions on expression, and pervasive surveillance.

"Judicial harassment was a key tool for political repression, complementing the role of security and law enforcement agencies in suppressing fundamental rights."

"All of this was met with blanket denials from the ruling party and its allies, and strategic silences from aligned civil society groups who continued to assert that any change in the political order would disrupt the march of development. Some remained silent even in the face of the mass killings of July."

She said they also deny the findings of the OHCHR's Fact Finding Mission while selectively citing its recommendations.

"One of the most positive changes we have seen in the past year following the July uprising is the unequivocal condemnation by political parties -- other than the Awami League -- of the most horrific violations of the past years, in particular enforced disappearances, and their unanimous pledges to ensure such cases never recur."

But even as women led these campaigns, she said, they are now being pushed out of public life, facing increased denigration and continued denial of their right to equality.

"Human rights encompass not only the rights to life and liberty, but also equality and non-discrimination, alongside economic, social and cultural rights. Beyond the July Charter's promise to 'expand rights', the parties have not clarified their positions on addressing



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discrimination or promoting inclusion.

"We are also observing a cycle of revenge politics and the parties are, in too many cases, part of initiating and fueling this process."

"Under the last government, many members of opposition groups were criminalised and faced the full force of the law simply for exercising their right to support a political party other than the ruling one. Many know they will likely never have their suffering acknowledged or receive justice. They could have been at the forefront of changing these practices, yet some are now accused of perpetuating them by using legal processes to retaliate against political opponents."

Hossain said members of previously allied parties are also resorting to "lawfare" against one another.

She noted that parties continue to use draconian laws -- many from the colonial era -- including those related to "hurting of religious sentiments" against their opponents.

"Emerging from a prolonged period of autocracy, many had hoped to see significant efforts to rebuild the criminal justice system. Disturbingly, we are seeing renewed use of laws long known as tools of repression and applied again to harass political opponents, including laws on sedition, terrorism, defamation and 'hurting' religious sentiment. These laws are also being used to threaten civil society."

"During the AL-era, the jailing of baul singers like Rita Dewan and Shariat Boyati on trumped-up charges of 'hurting religious sentiment' was clearly considered an abuse of process. Should the arrest and incarceration of Baul Maharaj -- following a case filed by a political party member, among others -- now be seen any differently?"

Hossain called it "unfortunate" that parties have failed to ensure meaningful participation of women and diverse groups in consultations and political actions.

"We've seen renewed patterns of targeting vulnerable groups," she said pointing to recent public commitments by some political figures about declaring Ahmadiyas as non-Muslims.

"When the chief adviser first took office, it was heartening to see how he firmly condemned the attacks and intimidation of Ahmadiyas. Unfortunately, some political leaders have made disturbing public statements threatening this community, in derogation of their own constitutional duties to respect the rights of others."

She stressed that Bangladesh is a country of people of diverse faiths and beliefs, shaped by progressive interpretations of rights through legal changes, court judgments and social mobilisation. "It's crucial to build a common political agenda and consensus about driving this process forward. Consensus is needed to move away from our culture of retaliation and denial, and to instead foster tolerance of offence and enable genuine dissent."

"We have seen a clear regression in women's visibility in public dialogue and discourse, accompanied by a sharp rise in visible misogyny, especially online."

She added that while women's rights are constitutionally guaranteed, political parties have yet to commit to many recommendations made by the Women's Affairs Reform Commission. "Some have not only rejected these, but sought to threaten and vilify the commission's members."

Hossain underscored the need to address the demands that catalysed the uprising. "How are the demands SEE PAGE J2