The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**



# Fatullah madrasa fire exposes negligence

## All residential educational institutions must have fire safety precautions

The fire at a residential madrasa in Fatullah, Narayanganj, on Tuesday that left 88 students hospitalised with smoke inhalation, four of them in critical condition, is a stark reminder that fire safety is never a priority in the construction and functioning of most buildings. In this case, the fire broke out around 1:45 am when the madrasa residents were sleeping.

The fire service said that an electrical short circuit in the library could have caused the fire, though further investigation is required. Whatever the source, the fact remains that neither the madrasa authorities nor the state's building authorities stepped up to install fire safety measures in a five-storied residential building where most of its 1,300 students live in the dormitories. The building had no fire extinguisher. The blaze was brought under control within half an hour using water from a water storage facility beside the building.

Such callousness points to negligence in fire safety in buildings all over the country. In many cases, structures are built without approval from the relevant authorities and continue to operate without facing any legal consequences. Yet disasters keep happening due to such negligence. In January, six people were killed in a fire that broke out at a residential building in Uttara, with many others suffering from smoke inhalation. The horrific images of the FR Tower tragedy, with people jumping off the building to their deaths and others desperately trying to climb down ledges and air conditioner shafts, shown live on TV, will continue to haunt us. That such a tall building in a busy area did not have any fire escape is unthinkable. But this is the reality. Despite years of surveys identifying buildings that violate building codes, many continue to stand and operate, while others remain entirely outside the authorities' scrutiny.

**The madrasa fire should be a wake-up call for those in charge of residential buildings. In the case of residential schools and madrasas, fire safety measures must be installed without delay. This includes adequate fire exits, firefighting equipment, evacuation plans, regular fire drills by students and teachers and mandatory electrical inspections and maintenance.**

The madrasa fire should be a wake-up call for those in charge of residential buildings. In the case of residential schools and madrasas, fire safety measures must be installed without delay. This includes adequate fire exits, firefighting equipment, evacuation plans, regular fire drills by students and teachers and mandatory electrical inspections and maintenance. The relevant building authorities and fire service must strengthen coordination, conduct regular inspections and take decisive action against violations before another preventable tragedy exposes the consequences of their inaction.

The Fatullah madrasa's authorities have to be held accountable for violating safety requirements. Educational institutions are responsible for the safety of the children and young people they have been entrusted with. They cannot treat fire safety as an option. We expect the government to conduct a nationwide safety audit of madrasas, schools, hostels, orphanages and other residential educational institutions, identify risks and enforce compliance with basic fire safety standards.

# Stop policing cultural events

## Lawmakers must uphold people's right to cultural expressions

We strongly denounce Habiganj police's action prohibiting a Baul music event from taking place on the premises of Purasunda Government Primary School in the district's Shaistaganj upazila on Monday night. Coincidentally, only a day earlier, Habiganj-3 lawmaker and parliamentary whip GK Gouse had instructed the district administration not to allow folk music events—if not in the district, then at least in his constituency. This casts doubt on the police's justification for stopping the event, which was based on locals' complaints that noise from similar programmes had disturbed their sleep and caused distress to sick people. How can the police cancel a programme even before receiving specific noise complaints about it? Did they then act at the behest of the parliamentary whip?

What's worrying is that the cancellation of music, cultural and sporting events, as well as attacks on syncretic religio-cultural traditions, is being normalised here. According to one estimate, since August 2024, at least 36 such events have either been cancelled or faced threats from right-wing religious groups. According to reports, more than 90 shrines have come under attack between August 2024 and February 2026. Police largely remained passive in these cases, neither providing extra protection or security at programme venues, nor arresting those who issued threats or vandalised event sites. Instead, in some instances, they urged the organisers to cancel events, citing security concerns. The November 3 exhibition at the Liberation War Museum is a case in point.

Surprisingly, some of our lawmakers, instead of voicing support for our diverse cultural traditions and national heritage, are enabling attempts to suppress cultural expressions through their statements and instructions. Not everyone may like folk or Baul songs and their practices, but that does not mean programmes featuring such music should be stopped entirely.

Our constitution, in fact, asks the state to ensure that measures are taken to preserve cultural heritage and expressions, that minority communities can practise their faith and tradition without fear, and that people can express their thoughts in various forms, including creative works. Why, then, are we witnessing our lawmakers, who took an oath under that very constitution, act and speak in ways that contradict it? If the BNP is true to its promise of building an inclusive society, its members should first understand its meaning and not instruct the police to cancel cultural events.

# Draft cyber law revisions could still be a tool for silencing dissent



*Zillur Rahman, a political analyst, is president at the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) and founding board chair of CGS USA. He hosts 'Tritiyo Matra' on Channel i. His X handle is @zillur.*

■ **ZILLUR RAHMAN**

If one intends to silence the media, there is no need to put every critical journalist or investigative reporter in jail. Just a handful of examples are enough to convey the message that uncovering crime or corruption may get a journalist harassed, arrested, dragged into expensive legal proceedings, or driven into bankruptcy. Frightened, many will stop writing critical stories or asking uncomfortable questions, leaving the powerful free from public scrutiny. Censorship is thus often established without formal bans or sweeping restrictions, but through fear and the selective punishment of a few.

Bangladesh knows this all too well. The 2024 uprising was meant to mark a departure from this authoritarian policy that, under the Sheikh Hasina regime, found its most potent expression in the cyber security law. However, attempts to amend the law in recent months have raised fresh doubt about whether the country can decisively break away from that legacy or will end up restoring the tools used to suppress dissent.

In response to consultations with civil society, the government has now reportedly made 12 revisions in the draft cyber law. The revised draft has yet to be released publicly, but from what has been reported, we must admit that some of the changes seem quite positive. Rumour will no longer mean just any unverified information; it should be proven false to qualify as a rumour. Defamation penalties will align with those in the Penal Code of 1860. Journalists and media outlet owners will be granted certain guarantees against being arrested, and provisions allowing the use of mobile courts to investigate certain cybercrimes will be excluded.

However, these concessions still fail to address the basic concerns. The revisions disclosed by officials don't seem to show the government's willingness to give up control over speech. The most alarming of them is that the proposed punishment for spreading rumours stays the same: up to 10 years in prison and/or a fine of up to Tk 40 lakh. Even with the narrowed definition, such severe punishment creates a major risk as the authorities decide what counts as false information.

Journalistic practice often involves dealing with allegations that governments deny. Information on corruption, electoral irregularities, and deaths in custody often emerge through unofficial channels because official institutions are historically secretive and lack transparency. Who decides whether a piece of information is actually false? A government accused of something? The police receiving a complaint? The official in question whose reputation is damaged?

Once the state becomes the judge of what is true or not, the ability to check the facts will depend on the state's approval. Bangladesh knows well what happens when vague cybercrimes become tools of intimidation. According to a study by the Centre for Governance Studies and the TrialWatch initiative of the Clooney Foundation for Justice, 222 cases filed between 2018 and 2023 under the Digital Security Act (DSA) resulted in the criminalisation of 396 journalists. Among the 30 cases that were investigated in-depth, 27 journalists were arrested, half of whom were held for more than a month. Twenty practised self-censorship, and three left journalism forever. Of course, in hindsight, this dataset provides a partial view as the full picture of the total damage caused by the DSA—and its successor, the Cyber Security Act (CSA)—has yet to be established.

But it is clear that successful prosecution was not necessary to hurt someone or enforce censorship. Arrests, uncertainty, expensive legal processes, and reputational damage could do the job. The process that one targeted by the law had to go through became a punishment in itself. That is why the proposed protections for journalists are important but still insufficient. It is good news that the arrests and prosecution of journalists and media owners for publishing information will require prior court approval. But why should ordinary citizens with political views have fewer protections? As Dr Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), noted in his comment on the revisions, protecting journalists but no other citizens may lead to an unfair distinction. Freedom of expression is a constitutional right of every citizen, not just journalists, researchers, activists or politicians.

Another serious gap in the draft is the part on search, seizure and arrest without a warrant (sections 33, 34 and 35), which the revised version has left unaddressed. These provisions may be especially damaging when applied to journalists who keep their sources confidential.

The changes to the provision on blocking content are also inadequate. Authorities will have to notify their decisions within three days and dispose of the application to unblock the content within 15 days. This requirement cannot replace the judicial approval of censorship—notification after censorship is not equivalent to protection from censorship.

Aligning defamation penalties with the Penal Code also seems like a wrong step. Reducing the proposed maximum imprisonment period from five to two years does not solve the main problem: criminal prosecution should not be available for disputes of a reputational nature, which should be resolved through proportional civil remedies.

Moreover, there are concerns about the provisions for cancelling a media organisation's registration or licence after conviction, especially for an individual's offence. It is quite excessive and unreasonable to punish the whole institution for the deeds of its members.

Undoubtedly, the government faces certain cybersecurity problems. Cybercrimes like hacking, fraud, sexual exploitation, harassment, blackmailing and even AI-generated abuse require proper legal measures. But protecting citizens from cybercrimes and protecting the government from criticism are completely different goals. The Editors' Council's recommendations are more plausible: judicial oversight of arrests, search, seizure, and surveillance; protection of confidential sources; protection of public interest reporting; and protection against penalising media outlets for a single publication.

The government should remove criminal penalties for rumours and defamation, strengthen judicial oversight, and provide protection to all citizens without distinction. Its readiness to revise the draft is good news, but real change would be impossible without renouncing the idea that online criticism is a threat to be controlled.

Above all, Bangladesh cannot, and should not, rely on mere assurances that restrictive laws will not be misused. The DSA and CSA proved how easy it is to transform legal tools into weapons of intimidation. The only test of press freedom is journalists' ability to investigate and embarrass the government without fear of imprisonment. The country needs an effective cybersecurity law, not another tool for controlling public opinion.




VISUAL: **ALIZA RAHMAN**

# Why Dhaka doesn't want Hasina back



*David Bergman is a journalist who has written about Bangladesh for many years. His X handle is @TheDavidBergman.*

■ **DAVID BERGMAN**

Seen from Sheikh Hasina's perspective, deciding to try and return to Bangladesh is clever politics.

First, it makes her relevant again; it makes her the centre of the story. Second, it looks brave and self-sacrificing, with her facing imprisonment and possibly even death. Third, it allows her supporters to contrast her "bravery" with that of the current prime minister, Tarique Rahman, who did not attempt to return to Bangladesh and face detention while Awami League was in power.

Fourth, it makes her appear loyal and empathetic towards her Awami League colleagues and supporters, since she suggests she is returning in part because of the rights violations and suffering they now face. Fifth, it will let her and Awami League draw far more critical attention to the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) and the in absentia trial in which she was convicted.

Sixth, and perhaps most importantly, it puts the BNP government in a very difficult position. Officially, the government wants her back to face her sentence. In reality, her return could be the last thing it wants, because it would then have to decide whether to let her execution go ahead or find a way to avoid it, through her appeal or presidential clemency.

There would be huge public demand for her execution. And people would point out that between 2013 and 2016, the Awami League government executed five Jamaat-e-Islami leaders and one BNP leader, all convicted by the same tribunal that has now convicted her.

But the government also knows that Awami League still has considerable support in the country. Executing her could prove explosive, with consequences that are hard to predict and could badly damage both the country and the ruling BNP. Her execution, or even just her being in jail, would almost certainly lead to resurgent Awami League protests resulting in repression and human rights violations as the government tries to contain them.

Then there is the question of who she is. Whatever Hasina's misdeeds and crimes, can a BNP government really hang the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the country's independence leader, whose family was murdered in 1975? It is hard to imagine. The government would also face heavy international pressure not to execute her: from India, obviously, but from other countries as well. Human rights organisations would point out that sentencing someone to death after a trial they took no part in, and possibly with no right of appeal, is a particularly egregious violation of fair trial rights.

Yet sparing her carries its own risk: a "Shahbagh on steroids," with tens of thousands on the streets demanding her execution and serious instability for the government.

So, by offering to return, Hasina makes herself relevant again and hands the government a problem it cannot easily solve, along with the kind of political instability she would be well placed to exploit. That is why her decision is more likely genuine, not just a gesture.

And it explains why the Bangladesh government has responded the way it has. For the last year, since her conviction, it has demanded that India hand Hasina over so she can face the tribunal's death sentence. Now that she says she will come back on her own, it appears to be refusing to help her do that. On the face of it, this makes no sense. The government says it wants her back, yet now that she is offering to come, it seems to be trying to find reasons to keep her away.

The reason is simple: for all the reasons stated above, Hasina inside Bangladesh is far more dangerous to the government than Hasina in Delhi.

Hasina's announcement also puts India in a bind. Her voluntary return would, on the face of it, solve New Delhi's biggest problem with Dhaka: the extradition request it has so far stonewalled. It would not have to hand over a long-standing ally. However, given Dhaka's insistence on a return under Bangladesh's extradition treaty with India, something it claims befits a convicted individual, it would seem that Dhaka would blame India for facilitating any attempt by Hasina to return outside the treaty arrangements, creating a reason for new tensions. In addition, it is difficult to see how India would want to be seen as letting a long-time ally walk towards a possible execution, even if it is apparently her own decision.

Meanwhile, Hasina's presence in India does have a real cost. Her August 2026 press conference in Delhi, where she and her party leaders spread a series of falsehoods and disinformation, derailed preparations for Tarique Rahman's first visit, which Narendra Modi wants as India tries to repair ties and limit Dhaka's drift towards Pakistan and China.

The irony is that Dhaka and Delhi may now share an interest: neither really seems to want Hasina back in Bangladesh, and Dhaka's apparent refusal to give her a passport or travel papers lets India keep her without having to say so.




VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

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