

October 11, 2013

Odhikar under Surveillance: 19 Years of Struggle for Upholding Human Rights in Bangladesh

STATEMENT

October 10 was the 19th anniversary of Odhikar. For nineteen years the Organisation has been consistent in campaigning for upholding human rights and justice in Bangladesh; and has earned its reputation as an unwavering watchdog of the people's right to liberty, justice and governance. Its core commitments are to uphold human rights and the rule of law; and to ensure people's rights against discrimination by any political forces in power. Odhikar's struggle started in 1994 and continues unabated. Nevertheless, the conditions under which the organisation is working today are becoming more challenging.

Due to its consistent human rights work, Odhikar has been put under serious intimidation and threats by the State machineries during all regimes. During the military-backed 'caretaker' government in May 2007, its Director ASM Nasiruddin Elan was picked up and mentally tortured by Navy intelligence. More recently, the Organisation's Secretary, Advocate Adilur Rahman Khan has been detained since August 10, 2013 in connection with a case filed under the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act, 2006 (as amended in 2009) in relation to a fact-finding mission report released by Odhikar on the operation carried out on May 5-6, 2013 by law enforcement agencies in the context of the assembly of Hefazate Islam activists in Dhaka. On September 4, 2013, a charge sheet was filed against Adilur Rahman Khan as well as against Odhikar's Director Nasiruddin Elan for allegedly "distorting images by using photo shop and publishing a fabricated report, which enraged public sentiment", under Section 57 of the ICT Act and Sections 505 (c) and 505A of the Penal Code. On September 11, 2013 the Cyber Crimes Tribunal Judge AKM Shamsul Alam issued a warrant of arrest against Elan.

On October 8, 2013, the High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh granted a six-month interim bail to Adilur Rahman Khan. On October 9, 2013, the Office of the Attorney General filed an application before the Chamber Judge to the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court, requesting a stay on the High Court's order granting bail. However, the Chamber Judge decided on the same day to uphold the High Court Division's decision. Odhikar recalls that the bail petition filed by Adilur's lawyers was earlier rejected three times in the same case, twice by the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Court on August 11 and September 9, 2013 and once by the Cyber Crimes Tribunal in Dhaka on September 25. As per the bail order given by the High



Court, the prison authority had to release Adilur Rahman Khan on October 10. However, he was released from prison on bail on October 11, 2013.

Odhikar regularly publishes its monthly human rights monitoring reports on violations of rights and liberty. Odhikar is continuously under surveillance and its staff are being harassed in various ways. Their activities, movement and cell phones are monitored all the time. Human rights defenders, who are associated with Odhikar at the district level, are also harassed in different ways while gathering information. Therefore, Odhikar was unable to provide sufficient information to complete a proper monthly report for August and September 2013.

In Bangladesh, the liberal space for freedom of assembly and of association in lieu with freedom of expression and thoughts has seen abruptly declined in the recent past despite the changes in the forms of government. Over the years several repressive laws had been enacted and continue to remain in operation on grounds of national security and combatting terrorism.

After 19 years of constant efforts to improve the human rights situation in Bangladesh, Odhikar has earned credibility, both nationally and internationally. The human rights situation has seriously deteriorated in the last two years and still remains unstable, which makes Odhikar even more determined and committed to continue its struggle for the establishment of the rights of the people of Bangladesh. Odhikar will continue to fight against the State repression and will continue its struggle until democratic rights and fundamental freedoms are fully ensured.

In solidarity,
The Odhikar Team