Cultural Daily

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Shahidul Alam: Case Study in Free Speech

Charity Hume · Wednesday, August 22nd, 2018

With Trump's attack on free speech growing to a nationwide media protest from over three hundred newspapers after his assertion that the press is the "enemy of the people," America stands at a crossroads in its historic First Amendment protections as a democracy. This month, Shahidul Alam, an award winning photojournalist was criminalized, jailed and tortured in Dhaka, Bangladesh for expressing his views in an interview with Al Jazeera. Alam's arrest bears witness to the kind of world Trump thinks he is owed, and Alam's oppression is a warning to us all of the dangers of allowing the first amendment rights of free speech to slide into the trash bin of Trump's version of America.

Shahidul Alam is internationally known as a photographer and activist, whose work has garnered the highest awards for over three decades of documenting human stories in Bangladesh, covering cataclysmic floods, violent protests, the extrajudicial murders of fellow citizens, and the plight of factory and garment workers. Alam's photography has powerfully brought attention to historic events in Bangladesh, and through artistic representations of human suffering, has given voice to those in Bangladesh who lack the means to advocate for social reforms and action.

Woman cooking on a rooftop, Photo: Shahidul Alam

Internationally recognized, Alam's work has been exhibited in the *Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Tate Modern in London, and the Museum of Contemporary Arts in Tehran.* Alam's photography has powerfully brought attention to historic events in Bangladesh, and through artistic representations of human suffering show his intent to use artistic forums to advocate for social reforms and action. On August 5, 2018, in an interview with *Al Jazeera*, Alam advocated for more tolerant, peaceful methods for dealing with unarmed students protesting the government's inaction on ensuring greater road safety. The issues of road safety in Bangladesh have reached a critical point, with an average of 20 deaths a day, amounting to more than 25,000 deaths in the past three years. Sparked by the death of two teenagers killed by a bus in July, Bengali students took to the streets to urgently bring attention to the ongoing carnage citizens have endured with accidents caused by a lack of regulation and safety measures. Although the students were interviewed and repeatedly stated their aim was a peaceful demonstration to bring attention to a common cause, they were violently attacked by hired men wielding machetes, sticks, and rubber bullets. In addition to the violence against students, New York Times reporter, James Estrin reports that many photojournalists covering the protests, including Mr. Alam, have been attacked "by the police and armed gangs linked to the ruling Awami League party." This escalation transformed the protests into a political clash.

Speaking on the students' behalf, Alam drew attention to apparent complicity in the protestors' mistreatment, as government police looked on while hired "goons," armed with machetes and sticks beat the students who were hoping to assemble in a nonviolent protest for road safety. Alam stated to *Al Jazeera* that the attacks on students seemed to be part of a pattern of other abuses by the government: "The looting of banks, the gagging of the media… the extra-judicial killings, the disappearances, the need to give protection money at all levels, bribery at all levels, corruption in education," he said. "It is a never-ending list." In retaliation for this critique, armed police showed up at Alam's home and arrested him, holding him without access to a lawyer. In his appearance on the 6th, he was limping badly, and alleged he had been beaten and tortured. He is now in jail custody and is being held until September 11 to await further sentencing, for violating a law that criminalizes on-line criticism of the government. The potential sentencing for the offense could be as high as 14 years.

Alam's international reputation as an esteemed photojournalist and his stature as part of the country's cultural elite may have brought about the harshness of the government's reaction, in that his criticism of governmental violence has a maturity and weight that is hard to dismiss. *New York Times* reporter James Estrin writes in his *New York Times* article:

> *Mr. Alam has had many encounters with Bangladeshi authorities throughout his career. His 2013 exhibit about extrajudicial disappearances of government opponents was shut down by the police minutes before the show was to open. Undeterred, Mr. Alam and his associates put on an impromptu exhibit in the streets outside the gallery. In 2009, an exhibition of photographs of Tibet at the Drik Gallery provoked the Chinese government to pressure the Bangladeshi government and riot police to shut down the show. And 18 years ago, when the Drik Gallery was the meeting place for government opponents, Mr. Alam was pulled out of a rickshaw by a group of men who stole his computer and camera and stabbed him eight times.*

Alam's courage and advocacy for freedom of expression has been repeatedly tested, and it is time for the world to declare that the nonviolent expression of beliefs to safeguard human rights in Bangladesh must be defended by the global community.

This past week, over three hundred American newspapers condemned Trump's characterization of the press as an "enemy of the people." As the count of journalists who are jailed, imprisoned, tortured and murdered has grown in the past few years, spreading to the Western countries we once believed had safeguarded freedom of speech, it is urgent that those of us in countries where our freedoms are on the line speak with one voice to defend the courage and example of Shahidul Alam, and thereby bear witness to the principles of freedom we hope to see take root and flourish in the world.

In the morgue. Part of "Crossfire," a photo story on extrajudicial killings by the Rapid Action Battalion in Bangladesh. Nov. 20, 2009. Credit Shahidul Alam

Amnesty International urges supporters to write directly to government officials before September 18, calling on them to immediately and unconditionally release Alam, and to ensure that journalists and other citizens be allowed to exercise their human right to freedom of expression.

To make this effort as easy as possible, the following link is from a post by Alam's nephew, an easy template to fill in and sign. Your letters will make an impact if they come from all over the world. Please take the time to send one (or more) out today.

Letter Template to release Shahidul Alam

The offices to contact include:

Minister of Home Affairs
Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal
Email: minister@mha.gov.bd
Salutation: Honourable Home Minister

The Bangladesh High Commission and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Address: Segunbagicha, Dhaka 1000, Bangladesh
Email: ict1@mofa.gov.bd
Salutation: Hon. Minister Mr. Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali, MP

Copies of emails to those officials should also be sent to diplomatic representatives accredited in the sender's country.

In the US:
The Embassy of Bangladesh in Washington, DC
Ambassador Mohammad Ziauddin
Phone: 202-244-0183 (PABX)
Fax: 202-244-2771
202-244-7830
Contact form: http://www.bdembassyusa.org/?page=contact
Salutation: Dear Ambassador

In Canada:
High Commission for Bangladesh in Ottawa, Canada
Ambassador Mizanur Rahman
Phone: +1-613-236-1088
Email: mission.ottawa@mofa.gov.bd
bangla@rogers.com
Salutation: Your Excellency

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Top image: © Christopher Michel. Shahidul Alam at the CatchLight Summit in San Francisco,

November 2017

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