

Thursday 26 November 2015

P8_TA(2015)0414

Freedom of expression in Bangladesh**European Parliament resolution of 26 November 2015 on freedom of expression in Bangladesh (2015/2970(RSP))**

(2017/C 366/12)

The European Parliament,

- having regard to its previous resolutions on Bangladesh, in particular those of 21 November 2013 on Bangladesh: human rights and forthcoming elections ⁽¹⁾, of 18 September 2014 on human rights violations in Bangladesh ⁽²⁾ and of 16 January 2014 on recent elections in Bangladesh ⁽³⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 11 December 2012 on a digital freedom strategy in EU foreign policy ⁽⁴⁾ and to its resolution of 13 June 2013 on the freedom of press and media in the world ⁽⁵⁾,
- having regard to the Cooperation Agreement between the European Community and the People's Republic of Bangladesh on Partnership and Development of 2001,
- having regard to the statements of 1 April 2015 and 9 August 2015 by the European External Action Service spokesperson on the murder of bloggers in Bangladesh,
- having regard to the statement of 7 August 2015 by UN experts condemning the killing of blogger Niloy Neel,
- having regard to the statement of 5 November 2015 by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, calling for the state to offer better protection to writers, publishers and other people threatened by extremists in Bangladesh,
- having regard to the statement of 11 February 2015 by the EU Delegation to Bangladesh,
- having regard to the statement of 9 April 2015 by the European External Action Service Spokesperson on the imminent execution of Mr Muhammad Kamaruzzaman in Bangladesh,
- having regard to the statement of 29 October 2014 by the EU Delegation to Bangladesh on capital punishment in the country,
- having regard to the preliminary findings of 9 September 2015 of the country visit to Bangladesh by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief,
- having regard to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948,
- having regard to the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy of 20 July 2015,
- having regard to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966, to which Bangladesh is a party, in particular Article 19 thereof,
- having regard to the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders,

⁽¹⁾ Texts adopted, P7_TA(2013)0516.

⁽²⁾ Texts adopted, P8_TA(2014)0024.

⁽³⁾ Texts adopted, P7_TA(2014)0045.

⁽⁴⁾ Texts adopted, P7_TA(2012)0470.

⁽⁵⁾ Texts adopted, P7_TA(2013)0274.

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- having regard to the EU Guidelines on freedom of expression online and offline of 12 May 2014,
 - having regard to the EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief of 24 June 2013,
 - having regard to the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders,
 - having regard to Rules 135(5) and 123(4) of its Rules of Procedure,
- A. whereas, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, freedom of expression — including freedom of the press and media — is an indispensable pillar of a democratic, pluralistic and open society;
- B. whereas promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief is one of the key priorities of the EU's human rights policy, including the full endorsement of the principle of non-discrimination and equal protection for people holding non-theistic or atheistic beliefs;
- C. whereas Bangladesh has made significant progress in recent years, in particular towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals; whereas the EU has good, long-standing relations with Bangladesh, including through the Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development;
- D. whereas the Bangladesh Constitution adopted in 2014 enshrines fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression;
- E. whereas violations of fundamental freedoms and human rights — including violence, incitement, hate speech, harassment, intimidation and censorship against journalists and bloggers — continue to be widespread in Bangladesh; whereas Bangladesh ranks 146th out of 180 on the World Press Freedom Index;
- F. whereas tensions between secular and religious forces have risen and violence against dissenting voices has increased; whereas for years fundamentalist, domestic Islamist extremist groups — in particular the Ansarullah Bangla Team — have published a 'hit list' of people deemed to be critics of Islam, including Sakharov Prize winner Taslima Nasreen, and have called for the execution of secular bloggers and writers, while conducting brutal murders with relative impunity;
- G. whereas on 31 October 2015 Faisal Arefin Dipan, a publisher at the Jagriti Prokashoni publishing house, was brutally murdered with machetes inside his office in Dhaka; whereas the same day another publisher and two writers were attacked and injured, and whereas others are still facing threats;
- H. whereas at least five secular bloggers and journalists were murdered in the country this year (Niladri Chatterjee, alias Niloy Neel, Faisal Arefin Dipan, Ananta Bijoy Das, Washiqur Rahman Babu and Abhijit Roy) for having used their fundamental right to free speech on political, social and religious issues; whereas Islamist extremist groups have claimed responsibility for several killings;
- I. whereas prominent blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider was murdered in 2013, and university teacher A.K.M. Shafiul Islam in 2014; whereas many other bloggers have received death threats on social media — hit lists have been published on Facebook targeting secular writers — or survived assassination attempts, and several have stopped writing or fled the country;
- J. whereas Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has condemned the killing and expressed her government's commitment to combating terrorism and violent extremism; whereas she has announced a 'zero-tolerance policy' towards any violation of human rights by the enforcement agencies and has passed a Police Reform Act providing for a code of conduct; whereas, in spite of this, she has also supported her government's arrest of secular bloggers and the establishment of an intelligence panel to scan social media for potentially blasphemous content;

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- K. whereas in August 2014 the Bangladesh Government introduced a new media policy, which continues to raise concerns about freedom of expression; whereas parts of this policy impose limits on media freedom, such as in the case of banning speech that is 'anti-state', 'ridicules the national ideology' or 'is inconsistent with Bangladesh's culture' and restricting the reporting of 'anarchy, rebellion, or violence'; whereas the Bangladesh Government has intensified its clampdown on social media, with the temporary or complete shutdown of the entire internet, Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber and Messenger;
- L. whereas in recent months several journalists have been arrested and charged with violating the Information and Communication Technology Act (ICT Act), which criminalises defamatory and 'anti-state' publications;
- M. whereas harassment has increased alarmingly since the unwarranted introduction of laws in 2014; whereas 13 people working in the media sector have faced contempt proceedings, contributing to an overall environment of fear and intimidation and leading to self-censorship;
- N. whereas on 16 August 2015 Probir Sikdar, a journalist and owner of the online newspaper Uttaradhikar Ekattor News, was arrested for allegedly defaming a government minister on Facebook; whereas on 18 August 2015 Shaukat Mahmud, President of the Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists, was arrested for allegedly committing an arson attack on a bus on 23 January 2015 and charged in three cases in connection with the alleged attack;
- O. whereas some members of the opposition parties have disappeared under unclear circumstances in recent years;
- P. whereas the EU is opposed to the use of capital punishment in all cases and under all circumstances, and has consistently called for its universal abolition;
- Q. whereas on 21 November 2015 two senior Bangladeshi opposition leaders were executed for war crimes committed during the 1971 war of independence war with Pakistan after their last-ditch pleas for clemency were rejected;
- R. whereas on 18 November 2015 Piero Arolari, an Italian priest and doctor, was shot, while on 28 September 2015 an Italian aid worker, Cesare Tavella, and on 3 October 2015 a Japanese social worker, Hoshi Kunio, were murdered, and Islamic State militants have claimed responsibility, as they have for the bomb blasts during the Ashura procession at the main Shia Muslim shrine in Dhaka on 24 October 2015, killing one teenaged boy and wounding dozens of others;
- S. whereas the government has put forward the draft Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act, designed to regulate operations and funding for any group receiving foreign grants;
1. Condemns the increasing attacks of Islamist extremists against secularist writers, bloggers, religious minorities and foreign aid workers; deplores the loss of life and offers its sincere condolences to the victims and their families;
 2. Calls on the Bangladesh authorities to further condemn the ongoing horrendous acts against freedom of expression and to act to bring an immediate end to all acts of violence, harassment, intimidation and censorship against journalists, bloggers and civil society;
 3. Expresses its deepest concern at the deteriorating climate regarding the right to freedom of expression which has accompanied the rise of religious fundamentalism, intolerance and extremist violence in Bangladesh; calls on the Bangladesh authorities to strengthen their efforts to improve the protection provided to activists and journalists by the authorities; calls on all political parties and their leaders to unequivocally and unreservedly condemn the extremist violence and to support the right to freedom of expression;

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4. Reminds the competent Bangladesh authorities of their national and international legal obligations, including their responsibility to ensure the security and safety of all citizens, irrespective of their political or religious views, and to guarantee that the freedoms of expression and the press can be exercised without arbitrary limitations and censorship in the country;
5. Call on the Bangladesh authorities to ensure that independent investigations are carried out and explanations are given with respect to the disappearance of members of opposition parties over the last few years, particularly in the months leading up to and subsequent to the January 2014 elections;
6. Urges the Bangladesh authorities to prevent impunity and to do everything possible to identify all attackers and bring them to justice, by launching independent, credible and transparent investigations and ensuring fair trials, without recourse to the death penalty;
7. Notes the efforts being made to make arrests in connection with the murder of Abhijit Roy, Washiqur Rahman Babu and Niladri Chatterjee; welcomes the progress being made in the criminal investigations into the deaths of Italian national Cesare Tavella and Japanese national Konio Hoshi;
8. Urges the Bangladesh Government to take the necessary measures to prevent more killings by taking effective measures to protect writers, publishers and other people who have received threats, not only by providing special physical protection to those who are potential targets of violence, but also by opening public debates that challenge extremist views of all kinds;
9. Calls on the Bangladesh authorities to restore the full independence of the media, to drop all charges against publishers and journalists who have published content critical of the government, to allow the immediate re-opening of all media houses which were closed, and to restore immediately full and unhindered access to all forms of publications, including electronic ones;
10. Calls on the Bangladesh authorities to urgently fulfil its commitments and apply the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity endorsed in 2013;
11. Calls on the Bangladesh authorities to ensure the independence and impartiality of the court system and to amend the Information and Communication Technology Act and the Cyber-Security Act of 2015 in order to bring it into line with international free speech standards, dropping the criminalisation of 'anti-state' publications;
12. Is very concerned at the recurring cases of ethnic and religiously motivated violence, specifically gender-based violence against women and LGBTI people; urges the Bangladesh Government and religious organisations and their leaders to embark on a process of reconciliation; urges the Bangladesh Government to work towards bringing to justice the perpetrators of this kind of violence; urges the Bangladesh Government furthermore to offer sufficient protection and guarantees to minorities such as Shia Muslims, Ahmadiyya, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians, but also Biharis;
13. Notes that the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act of 2014 has led in some cases to legitimate civil society organisations being subject to arbitrary control by the government; calls on the Bangladesh authorities to review this legislation to prevent this;
14. Calls on the Bangladesh authorities to urgently fulfil its commitments and apply the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity endorsed in 2013;
15. Asks the Bangladesh Government to allow international NGOs in the country to undertake their missions and to ensure that all human rights and civil society groups are able to work in a climate free of fear and repression;
16. Calls on the European External Action Service, the EU Delegation to Bangladesh and the Member States' delegations to monitor closely the human rights and political situation in Bangladesh and to use all available instruments, including the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights;

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17. Calls for the EU, in line with its Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy, to raise immediately the above concerns and recommendations with the Bangladeshi authorities;
 18. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the governments and parliaments of the Member States, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Government and Parliament of Bangladesh.
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