

**DUBLIN**

Front Line Defenders – Head Office  
First Floor, Avoca Court  
Temple Road, Blackrock  
Co. Dublin, A94 R7W3, Ireland

info@frontlinedefenders.org  
www.frontlinedefenders.org

phone +353 1 212 3750  
fax +353 1 212 1001

**BRUSSELS**

Front Line Defenders – EU Office  
Square Marie-Louise 72  
1000 Brussels  
Belgium

euoffice@frontlinedefenders.org  
www.frontlinedefenders.org

phone +32 2 230 9383  
fax +32 2 230 0028

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## **Bangladesh: Academic activist and human rights defender Maidul Islam facing harassment from the Chittagong University for exercising freedom of expression**

On 23 August 2023, academic activist and human rights defender **Maidul Islam** received a show cause letter from the Chittagong University concerning his Facebook posts on the civil and political situation in Bangladesh in light of the upcoming elections. The show cause letter was based on a request sent to the Vice Chancellor by the Chittagong University Teachers' Association (CUTA) in Bangladesh urging the Vice Chancellor to take legal action against the human rights defender.

[Maidul Islam](#) is an Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology, University of Chittagong (CU), Bangladesh. Currently, the human rights defender is on study leave and pursuing his PhD degree at the Department of Sociology in the University of Pittsburgh, USA. He is also an advocate for academic freedom and civil and political rights on social media and the issues of discrimination, social justice and human rights violations.

Maidul Islam is facing harassment due to his recent social media posts using the hashtag #StepDownHasina as a criticism against the authorities in Bangladesh and concerns over transparency in the upcoming elections in the country. Chittagong University is one of the fully autonomous public universities in Bangladesh and its 1973 ordinance, alongside the country's constitution, guarantees freedom of expression. Hence, the show cause letter is of severe concern as it infringes upon the freedom of expression of academics.

On 1 August 2023, a member of the student wing of the ruling party, the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), triggered an online smear campaign against the human rights defender where 41 members of the BCL and Awami politicians across the country, including Chittagong University teachers supportive of the ruling party, were tagged in the post. On 20 August 2023, the CUTA held an emergency meeting and urged the Vice Chancellor in a letter to take legal action against Maidul Islam for criticising the government on social media.

In July 2019, Maidul Islam received a fellowship offer from Leiden University, but the Chittagong University administration never granted him education leave to go to the Netherlands and study even though the human rights defender had no legal barrier or travel restriction. 275 university teachers across the country and abroad issued a statement to the authorities in support of Maidul Islam, urging the university to support him for joining the fellowship but there was no response.

The current incident is the latest of many in the chain of harassment Maidul Islam has faced due to his human rights work and academic activism. Maidul Islam was targeted by the student wing of the ruling party and the university administration because of his social media posts in support of the 2018 quota reform movement and against the physical attack by the police and BCL on quota reform movement participants. Additionally, he also raised concerns over the university students' poor food facilities and living conditions in university dormitories. On 23 July 2018, a leader of the student wing of the ruling party lodged a complaint against him. According to the First Information Report, the case was filed at Hathhazari police station under section 57 of the ICT Act, 2006 (the act was amended in 2013 and section 57 was repealed in 2018) referring to two of his Facebook posts as "defamatory against the Prime Minister."

On 24 September 2018, Maidul Islam was imprisoned for 37 days on orders of a Chittagong judicial magistrate. On 7 October 2018, Chattogram court granted three-day remand against Maidul. On 9 October 2018, the High Court granted him bail for six months. However, he was not released until 30 October 2018 after some procedural delays. The university administration did not provide any support to him, rather he was temporarily dismissed from his job on 24 September 2018 immediately after the court sent him to jail. Since returning to his university residence after his job was restored, the human rights defender has received continuous threats from members of the BCL.

Maidul Islam's family, especially his wife Rozyna Begum, has also faced severe consequences and harassment. After the ICT Act case was filed against her husband, Rozyna Begum facilitated the process of dealing with the police and the court. She was a teacher at the Chittagong College, but had to leave her job. BCL cadres flooded social media with smear campaigns against Rozyna Begum, including sexist comments against her which severely impacted her mental health. While Maidul Islam is in the US, Rozyna Begum and family are still in Bangladesh at risk of facing harassment.

Front Line Defenders expresses its grave concern at the harassment of human rights defender Maidul Islam, which it believes is solely motivated by his peaceful and legitimate academic activism and human rights work. Front Line Defenders is seriously concerned for the psychological well-being of the human rights defender and his family.

**Front Line Defenders urges the Chittagong University to:**

1. Uphold its independence as an autonomous public university and end the harassment against Maidul Islam for exercising his freedom of expression;

**Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Bangladesh to:**

1. Take all necessary steps to stop the online smear campaign against Maidul Islam and bring legal action against the perpetrators;
2. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Maidul Islam as well as of the members of his family;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Bangladesh are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including harassment and online smear campaigns.