

20 November 2018

Bangladesh: Harassment of human rights organisation Odhikar

On 17 November 2018, Bangladeshi human rights organisation **Odhikar** reported at a press conference that it is facing intimidation and a smear campaign. A series of fabricated media reports criticising the organisation began after the Election Commission of Bangladesh abruptly cancelled the registration of Odhikar as an election observer on 8 November 2018, without any notice.

Odhikar is a human rights organisation that was founded in 1994 with the aim of raising awareness on human rights and monitoring violations throughout Bangladesh. Odhikar regularly publishes reports on issues of extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture and election irregularities. For several years, the NGO and its members have been targeted by the authorities through surveillance, intimidation and legal harassment. The secretary of Odhikar, [Adilur Rahman Khan](#), was arrested in 2013 and charged with “publishing false images and information” and “disrupting the law and order situation”. Although he was released on bail later, the charges against him are still pending.

On 16 November 2018, the private TV channel Channel I broadcasted a news report claiming that Odhikar was involved in the embezzlement of funds. On 13 November 2018, the daily Bangladesh Protidin published a report titled “Recommendation to stop all the activities of Odhikar” and on 11 November 2018, Bangla Daily Janakantha published a report with the headline “Controversial organisation Odhikar once again involved in murky activities”.

These media reports came after the Election Commission of Bangladesh abruptly cancelled the registration of Odhikar as an election observer on 8 November 2018, referring that the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) had informed them that Odhikar’s registration had expired. However, according to the circular of the NGOAB, registration of an organisation has to be renewed every five years. In accordance to that, Odhikar applied for the renewal of its registration in September 2014 - six months before its tenure of registration expired. Its application is still pending at the Bureau and the NGOAB has neither renewed nor cancelled Odhikar’s registration. This resulted in the closure of all human rights related projects and the suspension of organisational bank accounts.

Front Line Defenders is concerned that the smear campaign against Odhikar will not only impair the work of the organisation but will also lead to an increase in harassment and violence against the human rights defenders. This latest act of latest harassment comes within the context of intensified crackdown on human rights defenders and civil society organisations in Bangladesh ahead of the general election scheduled to be held on 30 December 2018.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Bangladesh to:

1. Confirm Odhikar’s registration with the NGO Affairs Bureau and reinstate the organisations registration for election observation;
2. Immediately cease any further harassment of the human rights organisation Odhikar, as Front Line Defenders believes that this is solely motivated by their legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights;
3. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Odhikar’s staff members and human rights defenders affiliated with them, as well as that of their families;

4. 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 judicial harassment.