

We, the undersigned hereby call for the immediate and unconditional release of the renowned photographer, artist, teacher, curator and human rights activist Shahidul Alam.

Dr Alam was arrested on 5 August 2018 by around 30-35 members of the detective branch of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police who dragged him away by force. Alam's crime, we are told, is to have contravened the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act. Described as "draconian" by Human Rights Watch, the act has become an infamous means of clamping down on freedom of expression in Bangladesh.

Dr Alam has been accused of hurting "the image of the nation" through comments he made on social media and in an interview with Al Jazeera in which he was critical of the Bangladesh government. His observations were triggered by violence he witnessed towards students who gathered to protest in Dhaka after two of their number were killed by a speeding bus.

Given that Bangladesh presents itself as a democracy, the state should respect the right of Dr Alam, and all other citizens, to freedom of expression. Instead, he has suffered inhumane treatment at the hands of the police and judicial system.

The morning after his arrest, 6 August 2018, he was produced in court. Film footage shows police dragging him by his arms. He is barefoot, limping and struggling to walk. Both the film and reports from his lawyers who later met with him in custody leave no doubt that he has been tortured. During his court appearance, he shouted to observers that he had been assaulted, forced to wear the same clothes after the blood had been washed from them, and threatened with further violence if he didn't testify as directed.

The court returned him to police custody ostensibly on a 7-day remand. However, the day before he was officially due back in court, the judge sent him to prison. Neither Alam nor his lawyer was present at this hearing. His lawyer was not even informed that it was taking place..

Now he is being held in the Keraniganj Central Jail in Dhaka where conditions are extremely poor. After visiting him, his partner Rahnuma Ahmed called for medical attention as he was suffering from respiratory complications, problems with eyesight, and pain in his jaw. None of these symptoms were present before his arrest.

The brutal incarceration of Dr Alam is rooted in broader political repression. In recent years, Bangladesh has seen hundreds of citizens, including writers, intellectuals, lawyers and activists imprisoned and murdered. According to a 2017 report by Human Rights Watch, at least 320 citizens have been “disappeared” since the Awami League government came to power in 2009. This situation has occurred despite the League’s pre-election pledge to react to human rights violations with zero tolerance.

Dr Alam’s entire career has been devoted to combatting abuse of power. As a curator, artist and photographer, he has used images as the vehicle for decades of fearless truth-telling about subjects that include the genocide of the 1971 War of Liberation, the employment of state death squads and the plight of the Rohingya refugees. As the founder of picture agencies Drik and Majority World, and the photography school, Pathshala South Asian Media Institute, Dr Alam has also pioneered the wider practice of photo reportage in the region.

Little wonder he is admired throughout the world. In Britain, he has forged strong connections both through the presence of close family and through exhibitions at institutions including Tate Modern, the Whitechapel Gallery, Autograph ABP, the Willmote Gallery and Rich Mix. He has also run workshops, courses and other educational activities for young photographers in the British-Bengali community and beyond.

We now add our voices to the hundreds of others, from Nobel Laureates to Dr Alam’s own photography students, who in the last weeks have called for his immediate and unconditional release.

We also urge the Bangladesh government to respect the right to freedom of speech and expression for all citizens and to release all other prisoners detained on similar grounds.

SHAHIDUL ALAM OPEN LETTER SIGNATURES

02.09.18

11:00AM

1. Abu Jafar (Artist)
2. Alessio Antoniolli (Director, Gasworks & Triangle Network)
3. Anne McNeill (Director, Impressions Gallery, Bradford)
4. Anish Kapoor (Artist)
5. Akram Khan (Choreographer and Dancer)
6. Antony Gormley (Artist)
7. Assemble (art, architecture and design collective)
8. Ben Okri (Poet and Novelist)
9. Brett Rogers (Director, The Photographers' Gallery)
10. Chantal Joffe (Artist)
11. Charlie Brooker (Writer and Producer)
12. David Sanderson (Arts Correspondent, The Times)
13. Fiona Bradley (Director, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh)
14. Frances Morris (Director, Tate)
15. Hans Ulrich Obrist (Artistic director, Serpentine Gallery)
16. Helen Cammock (Artist)
17. Iwona Blazwick (Director, Whitechapel Gallery)
18. Jodie Ginsberg (CEO Index on Censorship)
19. Joe Scotland (Director, Studio Voltaire, London)
20. John Akomfrah (Artist)
21. Sir John Leighton (Director, National Galleries of Scotland)
22. Jonathan Watkins (Director, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham)
23. Konnie Huq (Writer and Broadcaster)
24. Louisa Buck (The Art Newspaper)
25. Lubaina Himid (Artist)
26. Mahtab Hussain (Photographer)
27. Dr Mark Sealy MBE (Director of Autograph ABP)
28. Mark Wallinger (Artist)
29. Martin Parr (Photographer and Photojournalist)
30. Michael Landy (Artist)
31. Michael Mack (Founder of publisher MACK)
32. Nadav Kander (Artist)
33. Neel Mukherjee (Writer)
34. Nicholas Cullinan (Director, National Portrait Gallery)
35. Nick Serota (Chair of Arts Council England)
36. Olivia Laing (Writer)
37. Pippa Oldfield (Impressions Gallery, Bradford)

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38. Polly Staple (Director Chisenhale Gallery)
39. Rachel Spence (Poet and Arts Writer, Financial Times)
40. Rana Begum (Artist)
41. Rasheed Araeen (Artist)
42. Sally Tallant (Director, Liverpool Biennial)
43. Sarah Munro (Director Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art)
44. Sophie Wright (Global Cultural Director, Magnum Photos)
45. Steve McQueen (artist and film director)
46. Sunil Gupta (Photographer)
47. Teresa Gleadow (Curator, Writer and Editor)
48. Vicken Parsons (Artist)
49. Dr. Ziba Ardalan (Founder/ Director Parasol unit, London)

STATEMENTS FOR SHAHIDUL ALAM

“Freedom of speech, artistic expression and talking truth to power are vital barometers of civilisation. Whatever is done to one person against these central pillars of a fair and tolerant society, is done to all of us. For that reason, I am calling for the immediate release of Shahidul Alam.” **(Nicholas Cullinan, Director, National Portrait Gallery)**

“Shahidul Alam is armed not with a gun but with his camera, and yet the Bangladeshi government deems him dangerous enough to justify his incarceration and torture. What Shahidul represents is truth. Truth of the image. His incarceration is testament to the power of his images; he is a working artist searching for images that reveal us to ourselves. His disappearance must be seen as act against the power of the image. To incarcerate and silence Shahidul is no less an act of terrorism than was the destruction of the Bamyán Buddhas by the Taliban in Afghanistan. This is a cowardly and shameful act by the Bangladeshi government. We demand the immediate release of Shahidul Alam”. **(Anish Kapoor, 31 August 2018)**

“Shahidul as artist and witness confronts power with truth to achieve positive change for his country. He has my total support.” **(Anthony Gormley)**

“Throughout his life and work as a photographer, writer, teacher and activist Shahidul Alam has always stood for communication, dialogue, unity and solidarity. It is a tragedy that his commitment to supporting oppressed voices and unearthing disregarded histories is being misconstrued as divisive and dangerous by those in power.” **(Alessio Antonioli, Director, Gasworks & Triangle Network)**