A Legacy of Virtue the Government Can't Silence: The Case of Shahidul Alam

written by Andy Heintz | September 23, 2018



The job for media pundits and intellectuals is often to question black and white narratives that are, in reality; washed in greys. But there are other times when things aren't so complicated. There are times when one side clearly stands for inclusivism, creativity, empathy, mercy, mirth, humor, compassion and an unabashed zeal for the act of living, while the other side represents grim, cynical, self-interested raw power perpetuated by those who use violence to cover their insecurities, fears and incapacity to see that one's reason for living on this earth has nothing to do with the allure of power and control. The arrest of renowned photographer Shahidul Alam by the Bangladeshi government is one these times.

Alam, 63, was detained on Aug. 5, 2018, by plain-clothed officers who identified themselves as the detective branch of the Bangladeshi government. He was charged under the Section 57 Information and Communication Technology Act (ICT) with "spreading propaganda and false information used against a government" and for making "provocative comments" about the government's violent response to students protesting for safer roads, in an interview he conducted with *Al Jazeera*.

He was arrested hours after the interview.

Bangladeshi's ruling government, the Awami League, has consistently used Section 57 as a legal bludgeon to silence critics. The Bangladeshi court rejected Alam's bail plea on Sept. 11 and he remains imprisoned.

The protests, which started in Dhaka but spread throughout the country, began after a private bus ran over a group of college students, killing two. Road safety is a major problem in Bangladesh: More than 3,000 people die in road accidents each year according to data collected by the World Health Organization.

In the interview with *Al Jazeera*, Alam criticized the police's disproportionate use of force against the unarmed student protesters.

"The police specifically asked for help from armed goons to combat unarmed students demanding safe roads," Alam said. "There are people with machetes abusing unarmed students and police are standing by watching it happen. In some cases, they [the police] have been actually helping out. This morning there was tear-gassing. I saw the police ganging up and trying to catch unarmed students, whereas goons are walking around carrying sticks and machetes and they [the police] are just standing by."

When asked by the *Al Jazeera* reporter if the protests represented something bigger, he said the government is clinging on to rule "by brute force, looting the banks, gagging the media, extrajudicial

killings and disappearances, and protection money and bribery at all levels."

In an interview with this writer, Alam's niece Sofia Karim described what she had heard about her uncle's abduction:

"They restrained the security guard, they messed up his cameras, they took the hard drives out of his cameras before they abducted him," Karim said. "My aunt [Alam's wife, Rahnuma Ahmed] was in a friend's flat in the building on another floor, and she heard screaming. It was a bad scream. She knew it was his scream. She went downstairs, and the security guard explained he had been taken away."

Alam's valid criticisms left the government with two options: they could take seriously his as well as the students' complaints and try to implement changes and reforms that would help the country's citizens as well as improve the government's image, or, they could try to silence a man who has arguably brought Bangladesh more global recognition than any other citizen. Unfortunately, they chose the latter.

When Ahmed and some friends went to the detective branch office to see what had happened to her husband, they waited all night for answers, but they were given no information about his whereabouts.

"What we know now is that when they abducted him, they put him in a vehicle and blindfolded him and his hands were handcuffed behind his back," Karim said. "At detective branch headquarters, large objects were placed on his head and he was threatened with waterboarding. They threatened to pick up my aunt, they punched him in the face, and they accused him of being a Mossad agent."

The next morning at police headquarters, according to Karim, Alam was offered a statement to sign, promising that he would remain silent.

"They said if he signed the statement, they would release him, but he refused to sign, and that was when the ICT charge was brought against him," she said. "Back in London [where Karim and her mother Najma Karim live], the first time we saw him was footage when he was taken to court. We saw that he was being dragged, he was limping, and there were no shoes on his feet. This is when he yelled out to the camera 'they beat me, they washed my blood-stained Punjab and made me wear it again. I was denied legal representation.'

"That was really distressing for us to watch because we knew he had been abused that night. My uncle's work has always been risky — so risky — and we have always been fearful for his safety. But seeing evidence that he was caught and abused physically was really, really hard for us to see."

After his family pleaded to the court that he needed medical help because he had been tortured, the Bangladeshi high court ruled he should be assessed for torture. He was in fact assessed in a government hospital but, Karim said, it was not an independent assessment.

"The assessments they did were just general assessments and not specific to torture. The government denied he'd been tortured," she said.

After his assessment, Alam was put in remand.

"Remand is basically when they hold you in a detective branch rather than in prison, and they interrogate you," Karim said. "The word on the street is you get tortured there. Human rights organizations have recorded cases of torture in remand and there are other journalists who have written about being tortured under remand. I think it's quite common to use the ICT act to put

people under remand, but the legality of this has been questioned."

After six days in remand, Karim found out Alam had been put in jail and was awaiting bail. The family finally made contact with him in prison, but the contact was limited because of the structure of the prison.

"What you have is a large room that is divided where you have all the family members on one side and all the prisoners on the other side, so these aren't one-on-one meetings," Karim said. "My Mum said there were about 60 visitors on the family members' side on the day she went to visit Shahidul. Everyone was screaming to whoever they were trying to visit to get messages across, and you could not hear anything."

The contact the family made with Shahidul, however, was heartbreaking and frightening.

"He was not mentally well when he was first put into prison, which was very troubling for us because my uncle is a cat with nine lives," Karim said. "He has always been very brave, and he goes into dangerous situations and he always bounces back because he's the strongest living human being I know. Through his work he has been to some of the most hostile environments in the world. He's incredibly strong, so when I heard he was suffering flashbacks from his abduction, he was having extreme anxiety that also was triggered by what he heard from other prisoners, and that when he was shutting his eyes he could see bars, so he couldn't sleep, I thought 'oh no, this is not like him. It sounds like he has post-traumatic stress disorder.'"

His family told the authorities he needed medical attention, but instead, he was put into a prison hospital. Since his arrest, Alam has received an outpouring of support from Nobel Laureates, authors, fellow photographers, artists and intellectuals, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Amartya Sen, Tawakkol Karman, Jody Williams, Shirin Ebadi, Muhammad Yunus, Sharon Stone, Jimmy Wales, Richard Branson, Óscar Arias Sánchez, José Manuel Ramos-Horta, Mairead Maguire, Anish Kapoor, Betty Williams, Arundhati Roy, Gro Harlem Brundtland, Vijay Prashad, and Eve Ensler.

A petition Karim started in the United Kingdom calling for Alam's release has been signed by filmmakers, artists and leaders of some of Britain's cultural institutions including filmmaker Steve McQueen, dancer-choreographer Akram Khan, Tate's France Morris, director of London's National Portrait Gallery Nicholas Cullinan, Sarah Munro, director of Gateshead's Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, and Sophia Wright of Magnum Photos.

In addition, a group of photographers, filmmakers, artists and journalists from India have demanded Alam's "immediate, unconditional and honorable release" including Pablo Bartholomew, Ronny Sen, Raghu Rai, and Sanjay Kak. Nepalese artists put installations and art throughout the valleys of Kathmandu as they voiced their support for Alam. Solidarity with him also was shown in Peru where Alta Tecnología Andina (ATA) and the Cultural Center Ricardo Palma came together to organize a photographic exhibition titled "Shahidul Alam: A voice from the shadows."

"This exhibition seeks to attract the attention of the public to the committed work of this Bengali photographer and activist and to promote solidarity with him," Curator José-Carlos Mariátegui and Jorge Villacorta told the *Dhaka Tribune*. "We are sure that it will be the first of a number of exhibitions around the world. If the Bangladeshi government tries to silence Alam, its powerful images will speak for him."

But to concentrate solely on the famous figures who have signed petitions and called for his release would dishonor his legacy. He would be the first to tell people not to forget about the student

protesters and other political prisoners in Bangladesh.

“It’s been so grim for us, so you can imagine what it’s like for other prisoners who don’t have any support, or the families of those who have disappeared,” Karim said. “Shahidul’s whole arena of struggle is to fight for the voiceless. He would definitely want us to be looking out for them. His message has always been ‘stay strong, stay strong, keep working, keep working.’ When he was put into prison, and my aunt went to see him one time, he managed to scream a message to her: ‘Don’t waste time to see me, just keep working, keep working.’”

Alam and others were inspired by the student’s willingness to criticize the government despite the risk of retaliation.

“What I know from families in Bangladesh is that the general public was very proud of these students,” Karim said. “They thought it was so great that the younger generation were not politically apathetic, they are coming out and doing all of the heavy lifting. They were saying these kids were not from the rich, private schools or the international schools of wealthy children. They are just regular kids from regular government schools. This is very promising for our country’s future. What a contrast to the current government.”

Since he has been imprisoned, Alam has been acutely aware of the hierarchy of the prison system, which led him to initially prefer to be sent to a commoner’s prison to show solidarity with other prisoners.

“Bangladesh has a prison system of different degrees of status and accommodation,” Karim said. “Different classes of prisoners are entitled to different levels of accommodation. Shahidul was entitled to something called Class 1 Division. Class 1 gives a prisoner a room of his own, a bathroom, a desk and a chair.”

Karim said her family eventually applied for Class 1 Division status because Alam had become so ill that his health was deteriorating. He was granted Class 1 status and his health is gradually improving, although the family still worries.

“I feel worst for my Mum because she is 72 and he is the only living sibling in her family that is left,” Karim said. “She’s really close to Shahidul. She’s not saying it, but I know she’s thinking ‘will I ever see him again?’”

At his core, Alam has not just been a voice for the voiceless — he has been someone who has willingly used his vast talents to give others a voice.

“He’s intuitively interested in the human condition,” Karim said. “He is interested in both the beauty and horror of the human condition. He started his career in London, and he could have led a very cozy existence here. But he wanted to go to Bangladesh and challenge how Bangladesh is represented in the West. He thought the only way this was going to happen was for Bangladesh to start producing its own messages. He returned to Bangladesh and started doing photography, and the closer he got to the subjects he was taking pictures of, the more of a bond he formed with those people. He’s an intensely strong person, but he’s also very, very sensitive.”

Alam has blended his art with activism throughout his career. His photography has tackled topics such as the Bangladeshi war of liberation in 1971; the clashes between protesters and police from the era of authoritarian rule in the 1980s to the free and fair elections in 1991; the controversial, elite anti-crime force Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) that has been accused by local and international human rights groups of torture and hundreds of extrajudicial killings since it was formed by the government in 2004; the plight of the Rohingya refugees fleeing to Bangladesh to escape the

genocidal intentions of the Myanmar military, and his recent photography of the student protests before his camera was destroyed.

What is most tragic and ironic about Alam's jailing is that he is a patriot in the truest sense of the word: he loves his country, but he is determined to hold his government accountable and document its abuses. If that was the type of patriotism practiced by people in all countries, fewer wars would be fought and the world would be a far better place.

Alam started the Drik Picture Library in 1989 to combat what he considered to be stereotypical portrayals of his country by Western media. He founded the Pathshala South Asian Media Institute in 1998 – a multimedia educational organization that teaches photography and challenges social inequality – so Bangladeshis and citizens from other South Asian countries wouldn't have to travel abroad to get an education like he had to do. Then, in 1999 he launched the international Chobi Mela Photo festival in 1999. Known for its inclusivity and diversity, the festival has played host to photographers from more than 20 countries who have tackled topics such as social inequality, injustice, and cultural and economic hegemony. But his indomitable spirit would not allow him to rest on his laurels. Determined to challenge the dominance of Western photography in the world, he started Majority World photo agency, which features photography by people from Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

Karim said her uncle coined the term "Majority World" because he didn't like these regions of the globe being referred to as the third world since they were home to most of the world's citizens.

"He always wanted to enable photographers from disadvantaged communities and disadvantaged parts of the world to be able to take pictures and sell those pictures to earn a living. He also wanted to challenge the dominance of Western photography," Karim said.

Perhaps this is why he is so beloved around the world. Although a deeply compassionate man, Alam's first instinct seems to be to speak truth to power, whether it be about his own government's abuses, the genocidal actions of the Myanmar military, or the dehumanizing and patronizing way Bangladeshis and other non-Westerners are often portrayed in Western photography.

"There is not a single documentary photographer in the [Indian] subcontinent who is untouched by Shahidul," Ronny Sen told *NPR*. "He belongs to the world."

Reading and researching about Alam, and then hearing about his predicament, is an emotional experience. Often when the body count piles up in one country after another as violence begets more violence, and the little people (in spirit, not in body) with access to big weapons (both legal and military), use the only language they seem to know—senseless and brutish violence—it's easy to suffer empathy fatigue and become hardened to the suffering of others. Even the most kindly of adults will advise their young sons and daughters "to make sure to look out for yourself first, because no one else will."

Shahidul Alam's life and legacy represent a middle finger to the negative assumption that human beings only act out of their own self-interests. Alam didn't have to risk his safety time and time again in some of the world's most hostile environments, but he did it anyway. He has lived a life that many of us aspire to live, but we never do because we lose our softness and idealism somewhere along the way. When someone like Alam lives the life that we promised ourselves we would live when we were younger and less jaded, and then he ends up being silenced by illegitimate force, it can evoke long-repressed emotions of righteous anger and compassion for our fellow human being.

This story could end better than it began. The Awami League could free Alam, the student protesters

and all political prisoners in Bangladesh. There is no rule that says repressive regimes must always remain repressive. But even if he is not released and Bangladeshi politics remain a haven for the fearful, power-hungry and insecure, Alam's legacy will live on despite the best efforts of his oppressors.

"He's an excellent photographer with an incredibly aesthetic eye and he loves the art itself, but he was willing to forego that to pursue activism," Karim said. "In a speech at the Dhaka Arts Summit he said, 'For me the main thing is activism. Art has now become the vehicle from which I do the activism. But if there came a time when the art would fall away, then I would quite happily let it go, because my main mission is activism.'"

Shahidul Alam belongs to the world and the world needs him. Give him back to us.

Andy Heintz is a freelance writer. He is completing a book of interviews called *Dissidents of the International Left*.

For a sample of some of Shahidul Alam's photographs, see here.

Shahidul Alam photo credit: Sourobh Deb's Facebook page.