Security and Police Reform in Bangladesh: Addressing Impunity and Restoring Public Trust

December 2024

Jagoron

Contents

1

Overview

1

Overview

The security and police forces in Bangladesh, including the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and the Bangladesh Police, are central to the country's law enforcement infrastructure but have long been plagued by allegations of corruption, human rights abuses, and political manipulation. These issues undermine their primary role in maintaining law and order and erode public trust significantly. The excessive use of force, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and arbitrary detention have drawn international criticism and demand urgent reform[1].

Current Challenges - A Culture of Impunity and Repression

One of the most critical issues facing Bangladesh's security sector is the pervasive culture of impunity. The RAB, established in 2004 to combat terrorism and serious crime, has been particularly implicated in numerous human rights violations over the years. Human Rights Watch has reported extensively on the RAB's involvement in extrajudicial killings and other abuses, noting over 1,500 such incidents between 2004 and 2020[3]. This lack of accountability encourages a climate where security forces feel they are above the law.

"Corruption within the police force is rampant, with officers frequently involved in bribery to drop charges or collude with criminal elements."

2

Key Issues

2

Key Issues

Extrajudicial Killings and Enforced Disappearances

Human rights organisations, including Amnesty International, have documented numerous cases where individuals, especially those critical of the government or involved in opposition politics, have been targeted for abduction or summary execution by security forces[4]. These actions have been particularly prevalent during periods of political instability and have been used as a tool for suppressing dissent.

Political Manipulation

Both the police and RAB have been instrumentalized by various administrations to suppress political opposition, especially against parties like the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). This has led to widespread perceptions of the police as a politicized entity rather than a neutral law enforcement body[5].

Corruption and Lack of Accountability

Corruption within the police force is rampant, with officers frequently involved in bribery to drop charges or collude with criminal elements. Transparency International Bangladesh reported in 2022 that a significant majority of households had encountered police corruption[6].
Given the central role of the RAB in numerous human rights abuses, its reform is critical. Steps taken by an interim government could radically transform its operations and restore legitimacy to the security sector.

Proposed Actions:
• Disbanding or Restructuring RAB
One approach could involve disbanding the

RAB and integrating its members into other security branches, subject to rigorous vetting and retraining. An alternative could be restructuring the force with a renewed focus on human rights and accountability, similar to reforms undertaken in other countries with histories of paramilitary abuses[7].

• Establishing Independent Oversight
An independent oversight body could be established with the authority to investigate and prosecute RAB officers accused of human rights abuses. Such a body should be empowered to recommend severe disciplinary actions, including dismissals and criminal charges[8].

• Human Rights Training
Comprehensive human rights training should be mandated for all members of the security forces, emphasising international legal standards and ethical conduct. Studies have shown a significant lack of training in these areas within the RAB and other forces[9].

"The Bangladesh police force suffers from systemic issues such as corruption, inefficiency, and unprofessionalism, which severely damage public perception and efficacy."

3

Reforming The Bangladesh Police: Improving Professionalism and Reducing Corruption

3

Reforming The Bangladesh Police: Improving Professionalism and Reducing Corruption

The Bangladesh police force suffers from systemic issues such as corruption, inefficiency, and unprofessionalism, which severely damage public perception and efficacy.

Transparent Recruitment and Promotion Processes

Introducing merit-based recruitment and clear, transparent promotion processes can help mitigate corruption, as seen in police reforms in other developing countries[10].

Establishing Anti-Corruption Units

Dedicated anti-corruption units could be established within the police to tackle internal corruption, overseen by an independent body to ensure transparency and effectiveness[11].

Improving Pay and Working Conditions

Enhancing salaries and working conditions for police officers can reduce the compulsion to engage in corrupt practices for financial gain. Successful examples in other nations provide a compelling case for this reform[12].

"Civil society organisations should be encouraged to monitor police activities and advocate for victim rights, which has been effective in other contexts in increasing transparency and accountability."

4

Ensuring Accountability Through Civilian Oversight

4

Ensuring Accountability Through Civilian Oversight

Civilian oversight is essential for breaking the cycle of impunity within Bangladesh's security sector. Independent mechanisms can provide accountability and restore public trust.

Creating a Civilian Oversight Board

An independent civilian oversight board with the authority to investigate, recommend disciplinary actions, and refer cases for prosecution could significantly enhance accountability[13].

Establishing Police Ombudsman Offices

Local ombudsman offices can act as accessible points for citizens to report police misconduct, ensuring that grievances are addressed promptly and effectively[14].

Engaging Civil Society

Civil society organisations should be encouraged to monitor police activities and advocate for victim rights, which has been effective in other contexts in increasing transparency and accountability[15].

"Technology can play a critical role in enhancing transparency within law enforcement."

Enhancing Transparency and Accountability Through Technology

5

Enhancing Transparency and Accountability Through Technology

Technology can play a critical role in enhancing transparency within law enforcement through tools such as body cameras and digital record-keeping.
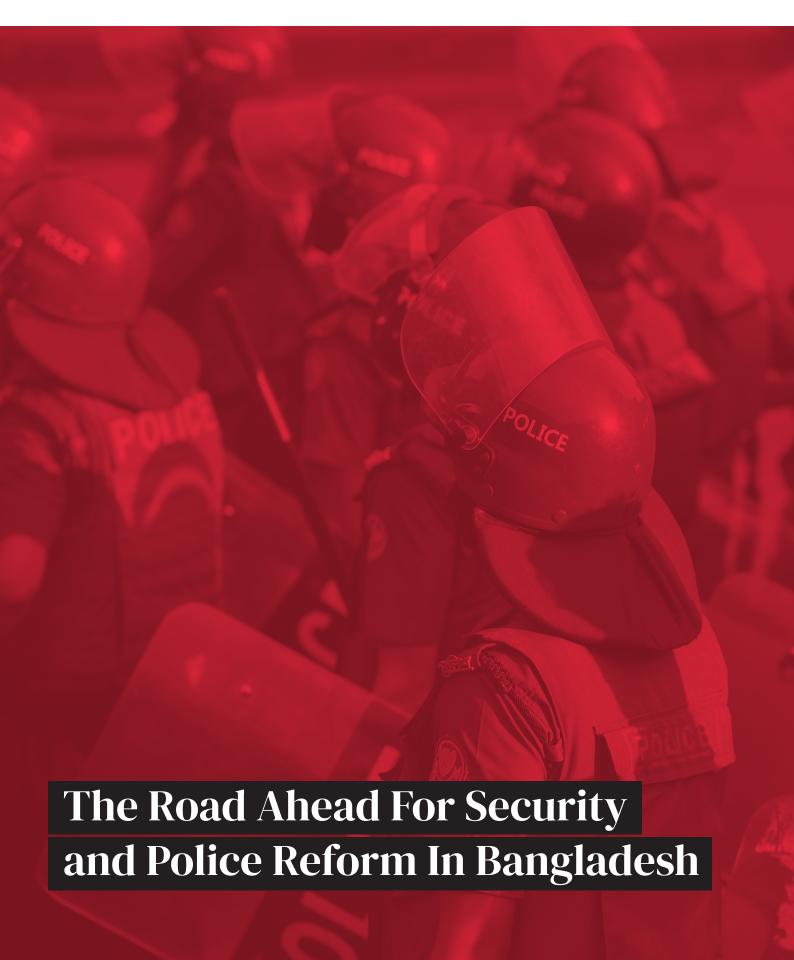
Body Cameras for Law Enforcement

Implementing body cameras can reduce complaints against police and increase accountability by providing indisputable evidence in cases of misconduct[16].

Digitising Police Records and Complaint Systems

Modernising record-keeping and complaint tracking through digital means can prevent tampering and improve case management[17].

"Comprehensive reforms in Bangladesh's security and police forces are crucial for dismantling the culture of impunity, curbing corruption, and restoring public trust."

6

The Road Ahead For Security and Police Reform In Bangladesh

6

The Road Ahead For Security and Police Reform In Bangladesh

Comprehensive reforms in Bangladesh's security and police forces are crucial for dismantling the culture of impunity, curbing corruption, and restoring public trust. By restructuring forces like the RAB, enhancing police professionalism, establishing rigorous oversight, and utilising technology, Bangladesh can create a more accountable, efficient, and human rights-respecting security system. International cooperation and support will be vital in ensuring these reforms align with global best practices and help Bangladesh transition towards a more just and secure society.

✳

FOOTNOTES

1. UN Human Rights Council Report on Bangladesh, 2023

2. Amnesty International Annual Report on Bangladesh, 2023

3. Human Rights Watch report on RAB, 2021

4. Amnesty International Report on Extrajudicial Killings, 2023

5. Analysis by the International Crisis Group on Bangladesh, 2022

6. Transparency International Bangladesh Report, 2022

7. Global Study on Paramilitary Reforms, 2020

8. Recommendations by the International Commission of Jurists, 2022

9. Study by the Bangladesh Human Rights Commission, 2023

10. World Bank Report on Police Reforms, 2021

11. International Best Practices on Anti-Corruption Units, UNODC, 2022

12. IMF Study on the Impact of Economic Conditions on Law Enforcement, 2021

13. Model of Civilian Oversight by the European Court of Human Rights, 2021

14. Successful Cases of Ombudsman Offices in South Asia, 2022

15. Role of NGOs in Policing Oversight, Transparency International, 2022

16. NYPD Body Camera Program Evaluation, 2022

17. IT Innovations in Policing by Stanford University, 2022