

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

August 2, 2024

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

We write with grave concerns regarding the state of democracy and human rights in Bangladesh and urge the U.S. Department of State to redouble its efforts to support the democratic aspirations of the Bangladeshi people. Our concerns have only become more acute following recent deadly clashes between student protestors and security forces and Bangladesh's national elections on January 7, 2024, which the United States, United Nations (UN), and other observers have rightly criticized as being neither free nor fair.<sup>1</sup>

Since their inception, U.S.-Bangladeshi relations have been predicated on mutual respect for the rule of law, the promotion of democracy, and the protection of human rights. Core priorities have also included strengthening people-to-people ties, enhancing regional security, and bolstering inclusive economic growth and development. Since Bangladesh's independence in 1971, with support from the United States and other international partners, it has made great strides in improving the lives of its citizens. Over the past 50 years, ties between our two countries have grown stronger and deeper and have been enriched by the contributions of a growing and vibrant Bangladeshi American community.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, we have watched with growing alarm as these shared principles have come under threat in Bangladesh as the ruling Awami League and Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina have acted in an increasingly authoritarian manner since returning to power in 2009.<sup>3</sup>

We have been heartened by actions taken by President Biden and his Administration to bolster human and civil rights in Bangladesh. These include the December 10, 2021 imposition of sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), following widespread allegations that it committed grave human rights abuses as part of the Bangladeshi government's war on drugs.<sup>4</sup> As supporters of Bangladesh's democracy, we also welcomed the May 24, 2023 announcement of a new U.S. visa policy that restricts the issuance of visas for any Bangladeshi individual believed to be involved in undermining the democratic election process in Bangladesh, including current and former officials, members of political parties, and members of law enforcement, security

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<sup>1</sup> Press Release, U.S. Department of State, Parliamentary Elections in Bangladesh (Jan. 8, 2024), <https://www.state.gov/parliamentary-elections-in-bangladesh/>; *One-Sided Bangladesh Election Raises Fear of One-Party Rule*, Voice of America (Jan. 9, 2024), <https://www.voanews.com/a/one-sided-bangladesh-election-raises-fear-of-one-party-rule-/7433199.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *U.S. Relations With Bangladesh*, U.S. Department of State (July 19, 2022), <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-bangladesh/>.

<sup>3</sup> Meenakshi Ganguly, *Bangladesh's Brutal Crackdown on Political Opposition*, Human Rights Watch (Dec. 9, 2022), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/09/bangladeshs-brutal-crackdown-political-opposition>.

<sup>4</sup> Press Release, U.S. Department of the Treasury, Treasury Sanctions Perpetrators of Serious Human Rights Abuse on International Human Rights Day (Dec. 10, 2021), <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0526>.

services, and the judiciary.<sup>5</sup> In addition to these actions, we also appreciate the consistent messages conveyed to Bangladeshi officials over the past years urging them to allow free and fair elections and to improve respect for human rights, including the rights of workers.<sup>6</sup> Sadly, the Bangladeshi government has continued to take actions that undermine democratic processes, including by holding deeply flawed elections in January, failing to improve labor regulations, and, most recently, violently cracking down on demonstrations using guns, tear gas, and imposing a near-total shutdown of Internet services.

The January 7, 2024 election was largely boycotted by Bangladesh's political opposition, which itself was hamstrung by a wave of arrests following demonstrations on October 28, 2023. According to widespread reporting, tens of thousands of opposition leaders and activists were arrested and detained in the weeks leading up to elections. While some opposition activists and leaders have been freed since the election, many still remain in prison, with little prospect of receiving justice in a politicized legal system even if they do make bail.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, journalists and online critics of the government have seen their freedom of expression come under serious attack through harassment, surveillance, physical assaults, and a draconian digital censorship law.<sup>8</sup> Most importantly, the election was marred by violence and not supported by a large swath of the Bangladeshi electorate, with voter turnout at about 40 percent when the polls closed compared to 80 percent in the previous national election in 2018.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond members of the political opposition, workers and trade unionists have long faced violence, repression, and labor rights violations in Bangladesh. Workers who attempt to form or join trade unions are met with threats and mass dismissals, government labor inspectors fail to sufficiently monitor millions of workplaces, employers fail to pay livable wages, and sexual violence in the workplace is rampant. Wage discrimination persists and unsafe working conditions in the country's largest employment sectors, which include the garment, shipping, and leather industries, result in millions of workplace injuries and tens of thousands of workplace deaths annually.<sup>10</sup> After the November 2023 killing of Imran Hossain, a factory worker and unionist, by police during a crackdown against fair wage protests, we welcomed the State Department's statement condemning violence against workers in Bangladesh and expressing

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<sup>5</sup> Press Release, U.S. Department of State, Announcement of Visa Policy to Promote Democratic Elections in Bangladesh (May 24, 2023), <https://www.state.gov/announcement-of-visa-policy-to-promote-democratic-elections-in-bangladesh/>.

<sup>6</sup> Ali Riaz, *What the new US visa policy for Bangladesh means*, Atlantic Council (June 6, 2023), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/what-the-new-us-visa-policy-for-bangladesh-means/>.

<sup>7</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, *Bangladesh's Sham Election and the Regression of Democracy in South and Southeast Asia*, Council on Foreign Relations (Jan. 10, 2024), <https://www.cfr.org/blog/bangladeshs-sham-election-and-regression-democracy-south-and-southeast-asia>; Kamran Reza Chowdhury, *With election over, Bangladesh opposition leaders trickle out of jail on bail*, BenarNews (Feb. 22, 2024), <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/bail-granted-02222024143611.html>.

<sup>8</sup> *Bangladesh: End crackdown on journalists and online critics, and protect freedom of expression*, Amnesty International (May 3, 2023), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa13/6740/2023/en/>.

<sup>9</sup> Sudipto Ganguly and Ruma Paul, *Bangladesh turnout low in election set to keep PM Hasina in power*, Reuters (Jan. 7, 2024), <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pm-hasina-set-extend-tenure-main-bangladesh-opposition-boycotts-election-2024-01-06/>.

<sup>10</sup> *Bangladesh: Abuse of workers' rights on increase, warns ITUC*, International Trade Union Confederation (Mar. 11, 2021), <https://www.ituc-csi.org/bangladesh-abuse-of-workers-rights>.

concern about the ongoing repression of workers and union members.<sup>11</sup> However, the Bangladeshi government has yet to amend its labor laws to protect workers' freedom of association in line with the United Nations' International Labor Organization's conventions and standards.<sup>12</sup>

Most recently, Bangladesh has suffered one of the worst outbreaks in violence in years as the government cracked down on students protesting a quota system that allocates up to 30 percent of government jobs for relatives of veterans that fought in the country's war of independence in 1971.<sup>13</sup> Police, protestors, opposition activists, and pro-government supporters clashed in the capital of Dhaka and cities across the country, with at least 170 people killed, thousands arrested, and thousands injured.<sup>14</sup> In responding to the student demonstrations, the Bangladeshi authorities deployed the previously sanctioned paramilitary Rapid Action Battalion; condoned the use of tear gas, rubber bullets, and sound grenades by riot police against protestors; imposed a strict, military-enforced curfew and "shoot-on-sight" orders; and shut down Internet and mobile services across Bangladesh.<sup>15</sup>

Given these alarming and continuing trends, we hope that you will lead the U.S. Department of State in upholding the shared democratic principles that have long underpinned the U.S.-Bangladeshi relationship. The United States must condemn all acts of violence, ensure critical civil liberties, such as the freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, are protected, and take action to hold complicit government officials accountable for the above abuses against the Bangladeshi people. Moreover, in order to prevent the further deterioration of democracy in Bangladesh, the United States must partner with the international community to support the right of the Bangladeshi people to a representative democratic government that upholds human rights and respects individual freedoms.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

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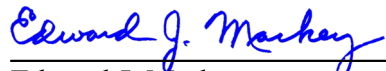
<sup>11</sup> Press Release, U.S. Department of State, On Worker Rights and Wage Protests in Bangladesh, (Nov. 8, 2023), <https://www.state.gov/on-worker-rights-and-wage-protests-in-bangladesh/>.


<sup>12</sup> *Bangladesh: Events of 2023*, Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/bangladesh>.

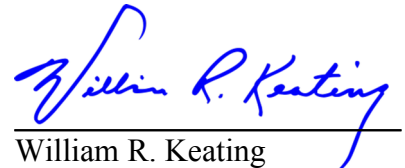
<sup>13</sup> Julhas Alam & Sheikh Saaliq, *Bangladesh imposes strict curfew with a 'shoot-on-sight-order' following deadly protests*, Associated Press (July 20, 2024), <https://apnews.com/article/bangladesh-student-protests-curfew-government-jobs-quota-9af35994b4855ffac9bd962861447cda>.


<sup>14</sup> *Bangladesh protests death toll nears 180, with more than 2,500 people arrested after days of unrest*, CBS News (July 23, 2024), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/bangladesh-news-protests-deaths-mass-arrests-job-quotas/>.


<sup>15</sup> Samra Zulfaqar et al., *Bangladesh has erupted over jobs reserved for the children of 'freedom fighters.'* Here's what you need to know, CNN (July 21, 2024), <https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/19/asia/bangladesh-job-quota-protests-explainer-intl-hnk/index.html>.


  
Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator

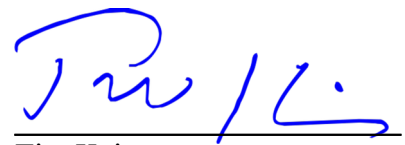
  
James P. McGovern  
Member of Congress

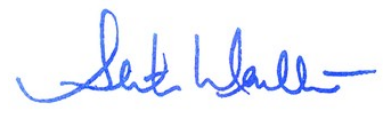
  
William R. Keating  
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Chris Van Hollen  
United States Senator


  
Tammy Baldwin  
United States Senator

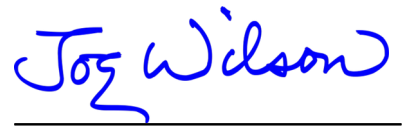
  
Grace Meng  
Member of Congress

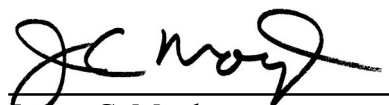
  
Tim Kaine  
United States Senator

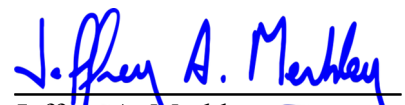
  
Seth Moulton  
Member of Congress

  
Lori Trahan  
Member of Congress

  
Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senator

  
Joe Wilson  
Member of Congress

  
James C. Moylan  
Member of Congress

  
Jeffrey A. Merkley  
United States Senator



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Christopher S. Murphy  
United States Senator



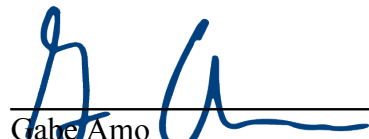
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Dina Titus  
Member of Congress



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Gerald E. Connolly  
Member of Congress



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Gabe Amo  
Member of Congress



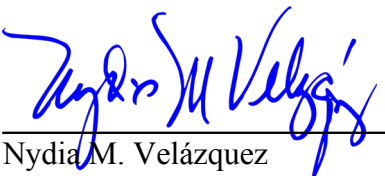
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Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  
Member of Congress



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Ilhan Omar  
Member of Congress



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Nydia M. Velázquez  
Member of Congress



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Daniel T. Kildee  
Member of Congress



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Barbara Lee  
Member of Congress