



Sheikh Hasina Regime's Narratives and Mechanisms of Oppression: A Detailed Report

A comprehensive analysis of authoritarian control, systematic human rights violations, and propaganda machinery under Sheikh Hasina's government (2009-2024)

Overview

Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government (2009-2024) engineered a multifaceted system of narratives, institutional mechanisms, and propaganda campaigns to consolidate authoritarian power, suppress opposition, and justify systematic human rights violations. Over 15 years, the regime created sophisticated false narratives that were embedded into institutional structures, enforced through violence, and disseminated via controlled media and digital manipulation.

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of these narratives, their creation and dissemination, mechanisms of manipulation, and institutional structures of oppression. The evidence presented documents a calculated strategy to maintain power through a coordinated assault on democratic institutions, human rights, and civil society.

15

Years of Rule

Duration of authoritarian consolidation

1.4K+

Deaths in 2024

Killed during July crackdown

3.5K+

Disappearances

Enforced disappearances documented

I. Primary Narratives Constructed by the Regime

The Hasina regime constructed four primary interconnected narratives that formed the ideological foundation of authoritarian rule. Each narrative served specific functions: legitimizing power, delegitimizing opposition, creating dependencies, and justifying violence. These narratives were not merely rhetorical devices but were institutionalized through law, enforced through violence, and disseminated through controlled information ecosystems.

Bengali Nationalist Narrative

Weaponized 1971 liberation history to position the Awami League as sole legitimate custodians of independence

Personality Cult

Dynastic worship of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Sheikh Hasina mandated through law and massive investment

Protection Narrative

Claimed only Hasina's rule could prevent violence and maintain stability for minorities

Minority Weaponization

Systematically manipulated Hindu community grievances to build political support and justify repression

A. Bengali Nationalist and Anti-Pakistani Narrative

The regime's foundational legitimacy narrative was built on weaponized Bengali nationalism and rewritten history of the 1971 Liberation War. Hasina and the Awami League positioned themselves as sole custodians of Bangladesh's liberation legacy, despite the multi-party nature of the actual independence movement. This narrative transformed Bengali identity from a unifying linguistic and cultural concept into an exclusionary political tool.

Opposition Delegitimization: The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Jamaat-e-Islami, and other opposition parties were systematically labeled as "anti-national," "pro-Pakistani," or enemies of the 1971 spirit. This created a binary political landscape where supporting the Awami League represented patriotism while opposition represented betrayal of national independence.

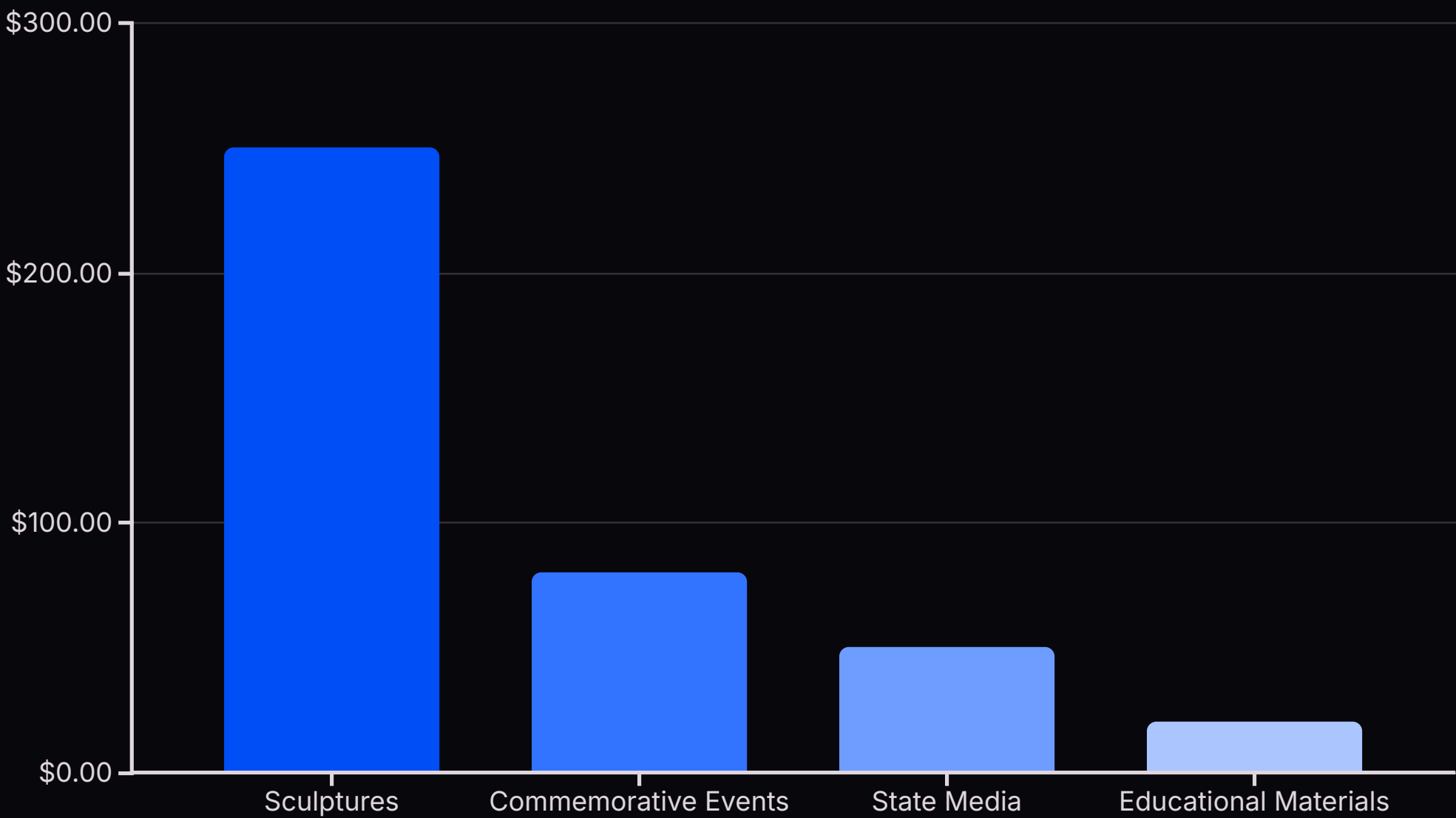
Historical Appropriation: The regime recast the 1971 war as primarily an Awami League achievement, marginalizing other resistance fighters and political forces. This was particularly weaponized against Jamaat-e-Islami, which did collaborate with Pakistan during 1971, but was then extended to all opposition, creating guilt by association.

"The Awami League transformed the legitimate heritage of 1971 into a weapon of political exclusion, where criticism of the government became redefined as betrayal of the nation itself."

B. The Personality Cult of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Sheikh Hasina

Rather than creating an ideological movement, Hasina constructed a dynasty-worship system unprecedented in scale. Unlike historical fascism where ideology transcends individuals, Hasina created purely dynastic worship where the Sheikh family itself—not an ideology—was venerated. This meant even senior Awami League leaders had to defer to the family, creating hierarchical power relationships based on blood rather than political conviction.

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Constitutional Mandates Amendments made it illegal to criticize Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, his ideals, or deeds through writing, speech, or electronic media. The state mandated placement of Mujib's portrait in every school, government office, and diplomatic mission.	Massive Glorification Campaign Bangladesh spent approximately 400 crore constructing around ten thousand sculptures and artistic depictions of Sheikh Mujib. In 2021 alone, over 1,220 sculptures were created to celebrate Mujib's 100th birthday. State-sponsored biopics, commemorative events, and holidays were created exclusively around the Sheikh family.	Dynastic Hierarchy The personality cult was purely dynastic rather than ideological. The Sheikh family itself was venerated, creating power relationships based on blood lineage rather than political conviction or merit.



C. Protection and Stability Narrative

The regime justified authoritarian measures through a security-first narrative that reframed democratic competition as existential threat. Hasina claimed only her rule could prevent communal violence and maintain state stability. In October 2023 Durga Puja speech, she declared that Hindus could not worship in temples during BNP rule or military regimes, creating a historical narrative that regime change meant minority persecution.



Fear-Based Legitimacy

Creation of narrative that only Awami League rule prevented communal violence and chaos



Anti-Terrorism Framing

Opposition activities, peaceful protests, and dissent reframed as "terrorism" and "anti-state activities"



Incumbent Self-Perpetuation

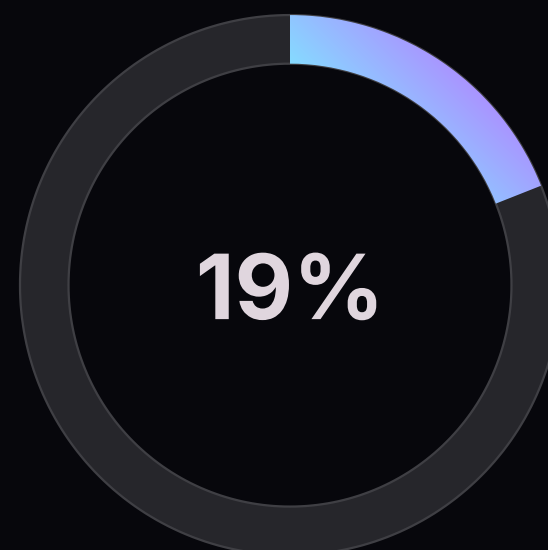
Democratic turnover reframed as endangering the nation, justifying elimination of competition

This narrative transformed opposition removal from political choice into national necessity. The regime successfully created perception that stability and security were products of authoritarian control rather than democratic governance, inverting the fundamental relationship between state power and citizen safety.

D. Hindu Minority Weaponization Narrative

Perhaps the regime's most insidious narrative involved systematically appropriating legitimate Hindu community grievances to build political support. Hasina explicitly created the narrative that Hindu survival depended on Awami League rule. She described the party as a "safeguard against a violent majority" and portrayed regime opponents as threats to minority existence. This transformed constitutional protection into partisan patronage.

Disproportionate Police Recruitment: The regime recruited Hindus into security forces at rates vastly exceeding their population share. Of 62 Assistant Superintendent of Police recruits in one batch, at least 12 were Hindu (approximately 19% compared to 8% population share).



Hindu Police Recruitment

Versus 8% population share



Attacks Documented

On Hindus during regime rule

Hindu officers were granted impunity for human rights violations and rewarded with prestigious positions. Former RAB chief Pradeep Kumar Das, accused of 204 extrajudicial killings, received the Bangladesh Police Medal—one of the most prestigious police awards.

- ❑ **The Ultimate Betrayal:** Despite the protection narrative, 3,679 attacks on the Hindu community were documented between January 2013 and September 2021 while the regime was in power. Significantly, Awami League members were allegedly involved in some attacks, including the 2016 Nasirnagar attacks on Hindu temples. The regime blamed opposition parties without substantive action. This exposed the narrative's falsity: minorities received no actual protection, only participation in oppression of opponents.

II. Creation and Dissemination Mechanisms

The regime's narratives required sophisticated mechanisms for creation, amplification, and enforcement. These mechanisms operated across multiple domains: traditional media, digital platforms, legal frameworks, and international channels. Each mechanism reinforced the others, creating an integrated system of information control that made counter-narratives extremely difficult to sustain.

01

Media Monopoly

Control of television licenses, newspaper ownership, and editorial independence

02

Legal Weaponization

Digital Security Act creating prosecution threats for dissent

03

Digital Manipulation

Coordinated disinformation campaigns and troll networks

04

International Backing

India's diplomatic support providing crucial legitimacy



A. Media Monopoly and Information Control

During Hasina's tenure, major media outlets were controlled by regime loyalists and business cronies. Sheikh Hasina ensured control by granting television licenses to dozens of channels that parroted government narratives while denying licenses to critical outlets. Press censorship intensified dramatically from 2015 onward.

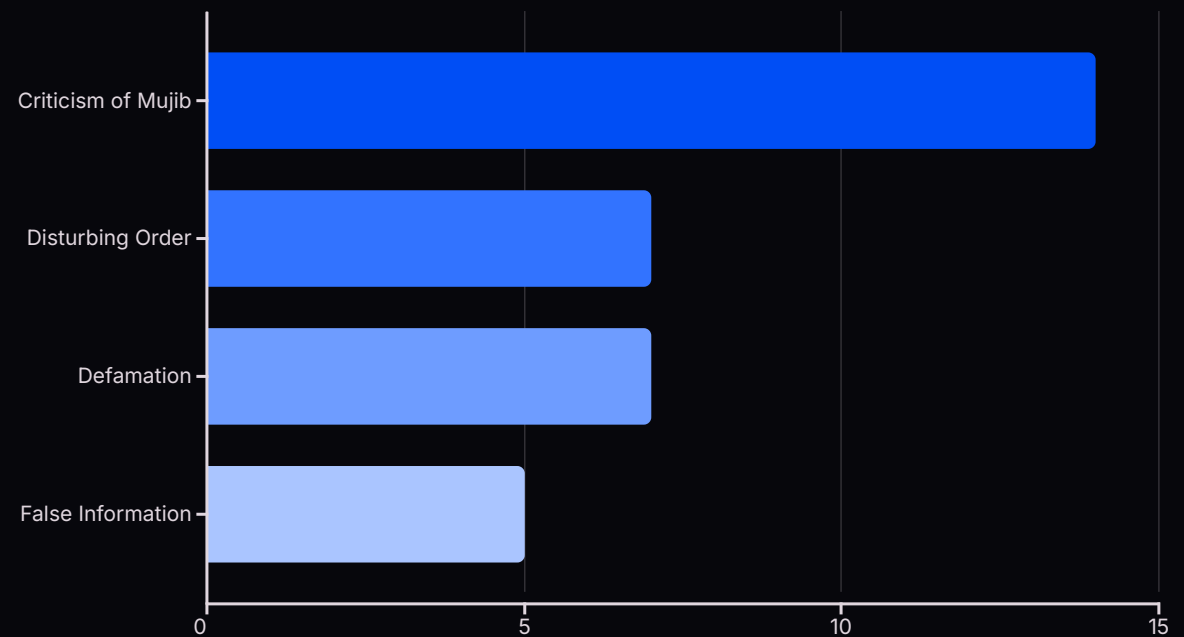


The Prime Minister publicly denounced media outlets from Parliament—most notably in March 2023 labeling Prothom Alo "an enemy of the Awami League, democracy, and the people of Bangladesh". Hours later, mobs attacked the Prothom Alo office, issued threats, and vandalized its logo. This created a pattern: public denunciation by regime followed by mob violence against journalists, creating climate of fear without direct government censorship orders.

B. Digital Security Act as Weaponization Tool

The Digital Security Act 2018 (DSA) became the regime's primary instrument for enforcing narratives. The Act defined crimes in deliberately ambiguous language. Posting content "liable to disturb public order" carried 7-year prison sentences. Criticism of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (labeled "negative propaganda against the Father of the Nation") carried 14-year sentences.

This created legal uncertainty where citizens could not distinguish permissible speech from prosecutable conduct. The law's objective was "to inspire fear" through undefined terms that meant even truthful reporting could be prosecuted if the regime determined it "disturbed public order."



835

DSA Cases

Filed from January 2020 to January 2022

90%+

Political Targeting

Cases filed by ruling party associates

100%

Chilling Effect

Self-censorship became rational response

The Centre for Governance Studies documented that the majority of cases were filed by people associated with the ruling party. Multiple simultaneous cases were filed against same individuals for identical conduct, demonstrating prosecution was harassment rather than rule enforcement.

C. Coordinated Disinformation Campaigns

The regime deployed sophisticated digital disinformation infrastructure that operated domestically and internationally. Against exiled investigative journalist Zulkarnain Saer Khan, the state deployed comprehensive disinformation including fabricated images, slanderous accusations, and false associations with terrorism and Hamas. Over 3,000 derogatory Facebook posts were circulated through pro-government networks within three years.

Anti-Opposition Smears

Systematic fabrication of images, accusations, and terrorist associations against critics

International Coordination

Foreign Ministry instructed envoys to "spontaneously" counter anti-state narratives abroad

State-Orchestrated Mobilization

PM instructed party operatives to spend 30+ minutes daily countering criticism online

In early 2023, the Foreign Ministry instructed envoys abroad to respond "spontaneously" to anti-state narratives without waiting for direction from Dhaka. This revealed systematic international disinformation campaign coordination. In September 2023, Prime Minister Hasina instructed party operatives to spend at least 30 minutes daily countering anti-government content online. A domestic coordination committee was established to address "anti-state propaganda," formalizing what was publicly framed as "information correction" but functioned as state-directed disinformation.

Social Media Monopoly and Troll Networks: Pro-state commentators and paid troll networks were deployed to drown out dissenting voices. This coordinated online intimidation created perception of majority support for regime when actual sentiment might differ. Pro-government content was systematically amplified through fake accounts, artificial engagement metrics, and coordinated sharing strategies to create impression of grassroots support.

III. Institutional Mechanisms of Control

The regime's narratives were not merely rhetorical constructs but were embedded into and enforced through institutional structures. These institutions operated with systematic coordination, creating an integrated apparatus of repression spanning security forces, electoral administration, judiciary, and student organizations. The sophistication of this institutional architecture distinguished the Hasina regime from simpler authoritarian systems.

Security Infrastructure

RAB, DGFI, NSI conducting
extrajudicial killings and
disappearances

Secret Detention Centers

Network of torture facilities
operated with full state
knowledge

Electoral Fraud

Systematic rigging through
institutional capture and
violence

Judicial Weaponization

International Crimes Tribunal used for political prosecution

A. Security and Intelligence Infrastructure

Rapid Action Battalion (RAB): The specialized police force became the primary tool of terror. Since its creation in 2004, RAB has been implicated in approximately 1,400+ extrajudicial killings. Despite Human Rights Watch documentation and Amnesty International reports, no RAB officer has ever been prosecuted for these killings.

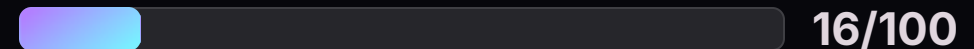
Secret Detention Centers: RAB operated secret detention sites including the notorious Task Force for Interrogation (TFI) cell at RAB-1 compound in Dhaka. These facilities were located just across from the international airport, revealing they were maintained with full state knowledge. The Commission of Inquiry discovered at least 16 secret detention sites across the country.

Intelligence Agencies: The Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), National Security Intelligence (NSI), and National Telecommunications Monitoring Centre (NTMC) operated in coordination with RAB. DGFI conducted domestic surveillance and repression alongside its foreign intelligence functions. NSI maintained secret detention facilities where torture occurred. NTMC conducted mass surveillance through Deep Packet Inspection technology installed in all internet providers.



RAB Officers Prosecuted

Zero prosecutions despite 1,400+ killings



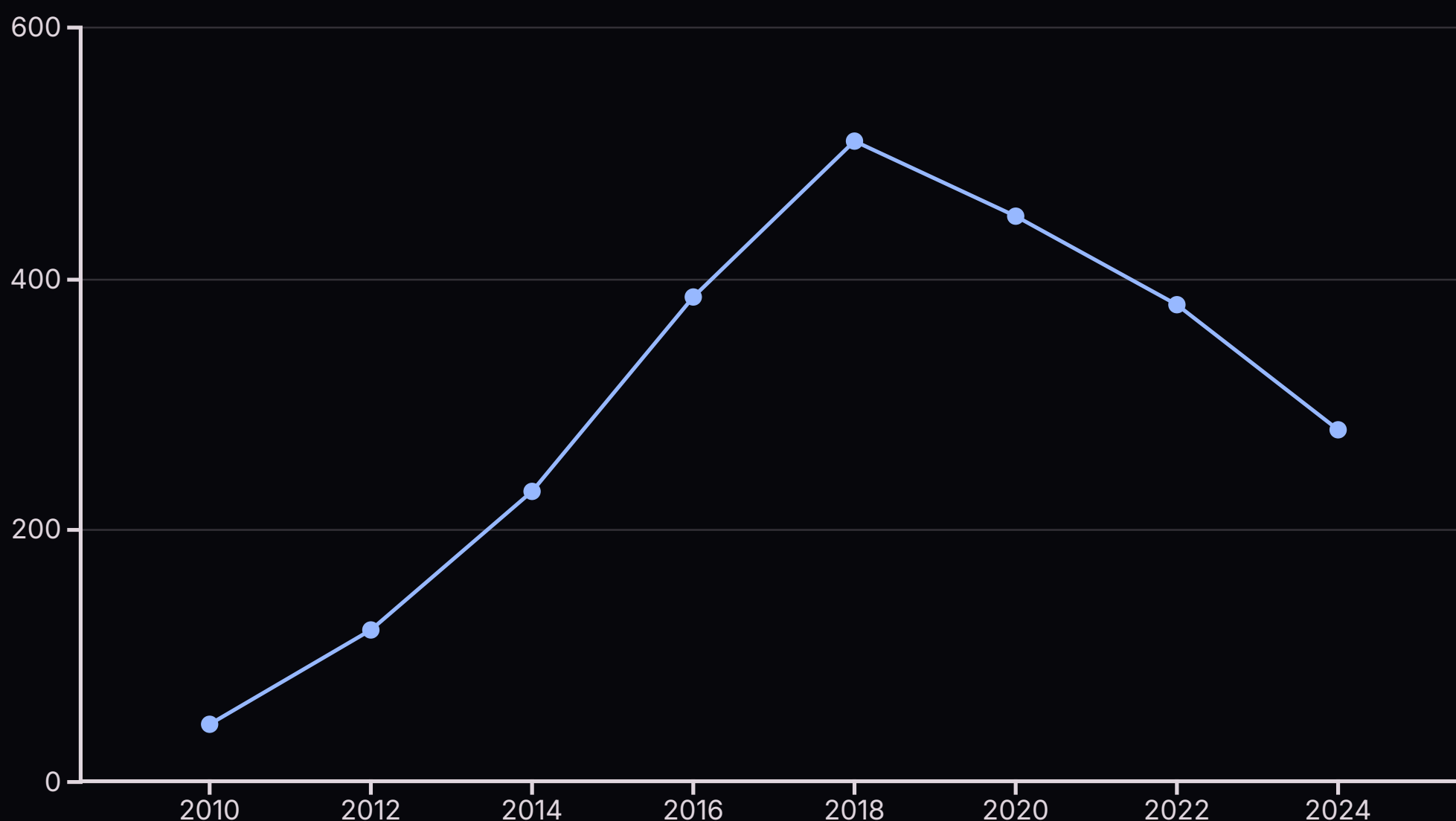
Secret Sites Discovered

Commission found 16+ detention facilities

Torture Documentation: Victims reported systematic torture including being beaten, hung from ceiling, and electrocuted. Cells were so cramped that prisoners could not stand or fully lie down—one cell under a staircase was deliberately kept windowless and dark.

B. Enforced Disappearances Coordinated from Center

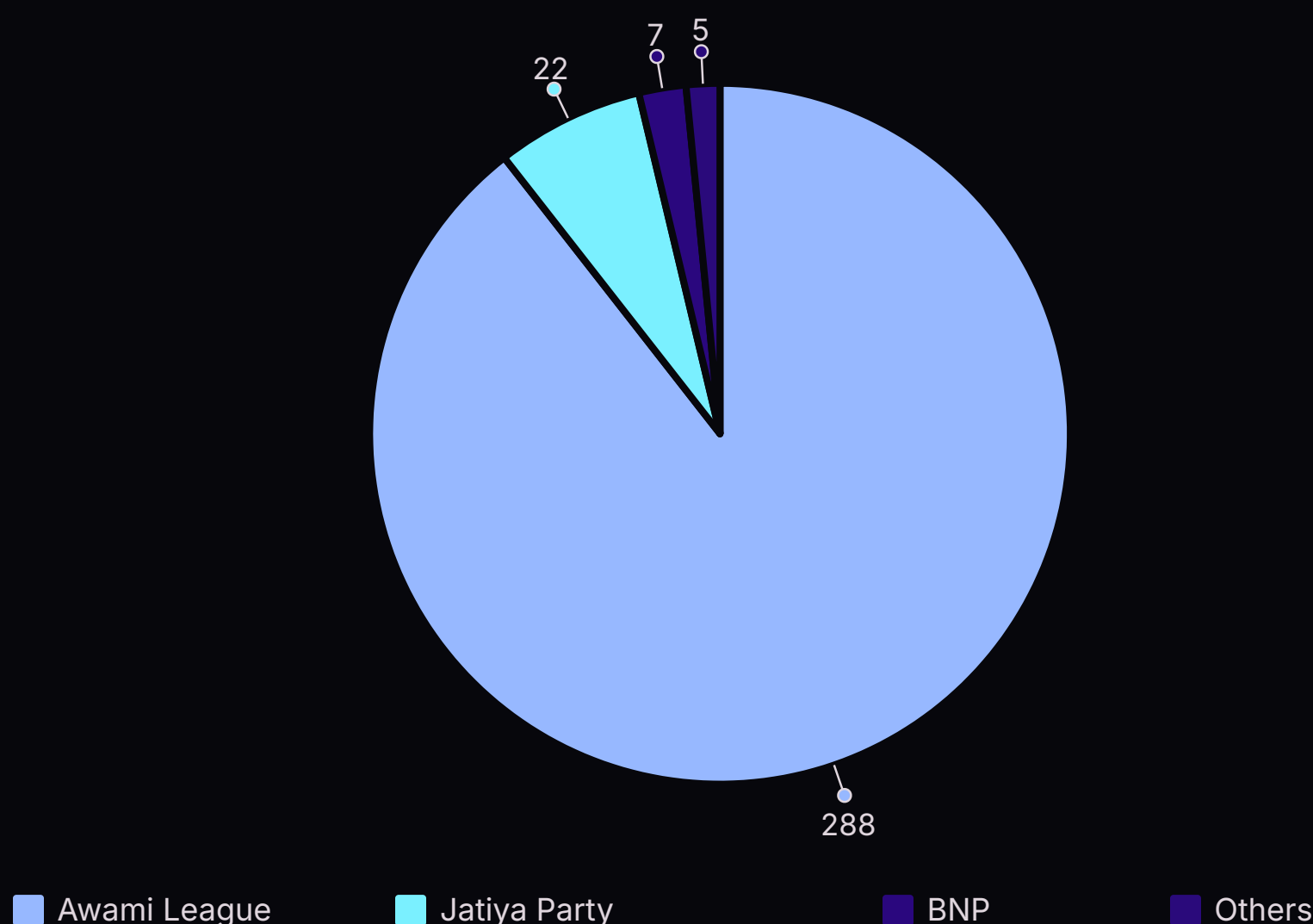
The Commission of Inquiry established after Hasina's fall estimated over 3,500 enforced disappearances during 15 years. Approximately 1,800 of these are now under formal investigation. As of late 2024, at least 200 people remained missing. The Commission found that disappearances operated under a "central command structure" with Sheikh Hasina and senior military/police officials involved in overseeing the systematic violations. This reveals disappearances were not rogue operations but state policy.



Case Study: Mir Ahmad Bin Quasem (Arman), son of Jamaat-e-Islami leader Mir Quasem Ali, was disappeared in August 2016 after his father was tried by the International Crimes Tribunal. He was held in a dark cell at RAB-1 for 8 years, told nothing of his whereabouts while his family agonized. His father was executed three weeks after his disappearance. Other similar cases involving sons of opposition leaders demonstrate systematic targeting based on family relationships.

C. Electoral Fraud and Institutional Capture

The 2011 constitutional amendment abolished the caretaker government system, enabling the ruling party to oversee elections for itself. This structural corruption of the electoral system, combined with control of security forces and media, made fair elections impossible.

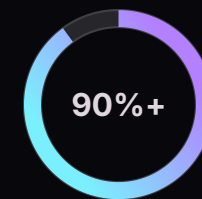


D. International Crimes Tribunal as Political Weapon

Of approximately 13 indictments by the International Crimes Tribunal, over 90% targeted Jamaat-e-Islami members, with only 2 targeting BNP members. This demonstrated the tribunal was instrumentalized for anti-opposition political purposes rather than neutral war crimes prosecution.

Procedural Violations: Human Rights Watch identified "glaring violations of fair trial standards". Defense witnesses disappeared or faced harassment. Judge neutrality was questioned with judges resigning due to controversy over their impartiality. The Economist criticized the tribunal for government interference, insufficient time allocated for defense, and kidnapping of defense witnesses.

Retroactive Application of Law: Abdul Quader Mollah was initially sentenced to life imprisonment, but public demonstrations and regime pressure led to death sentence—applying amended legislation retroactively after his trial concluded. This violated international fair trial standards.



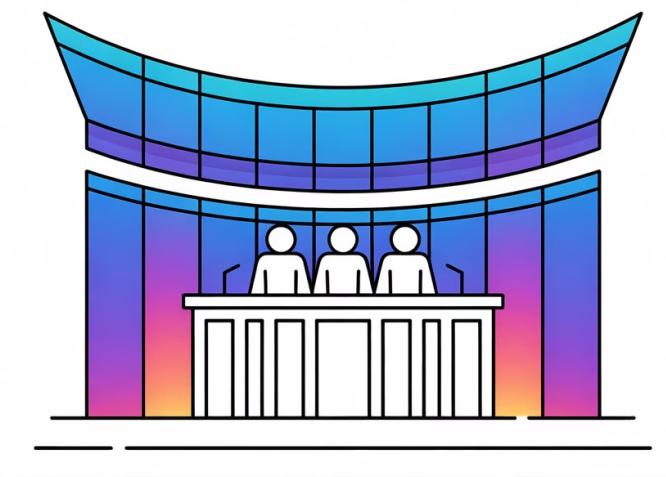
Jamaat-e-Islami Targets

Of all tribunal indictments



Fair Trial Standards

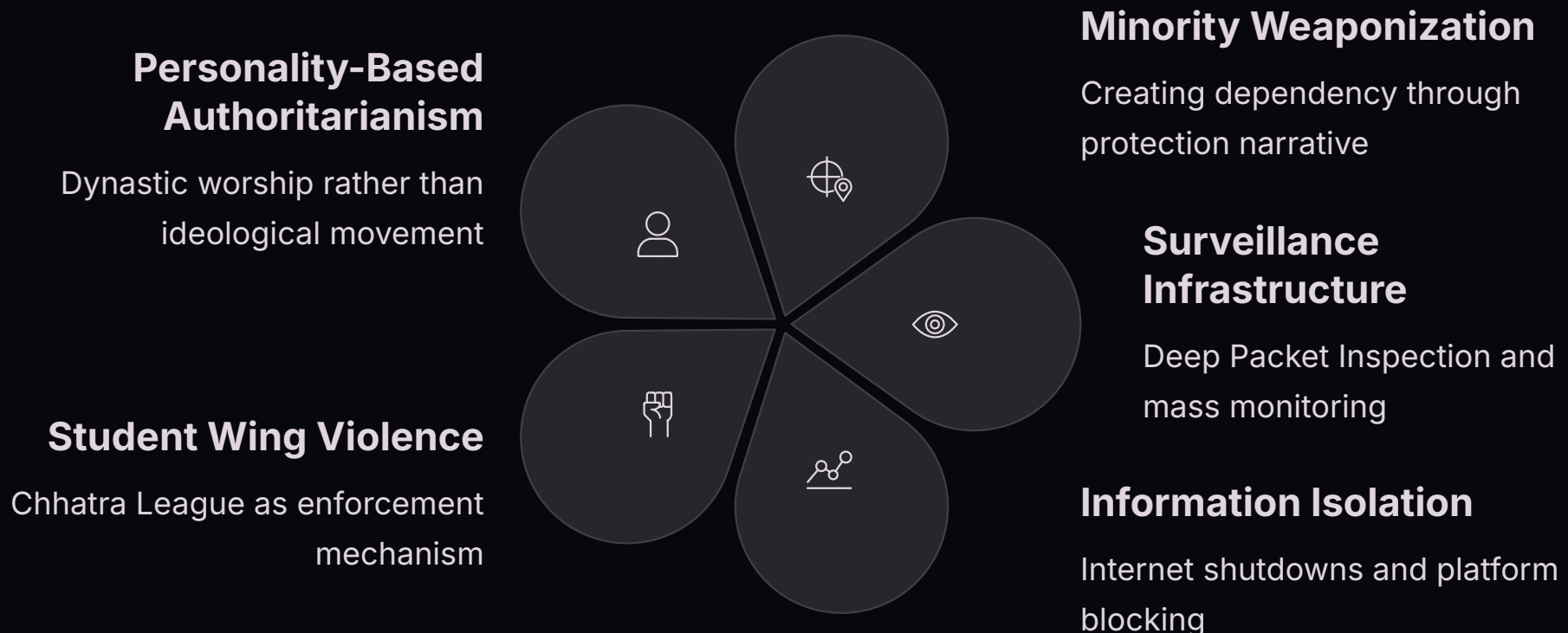
Met according to HRW assessment



The tribunal's high-profile trials served to keep Jamaat-e-Islami figures imprisoned, executed, or in exile, eliminating a major opposition force while maintaining appearance of neutral justice. Arbitrary arrests of opposition activists, journalists, and civilians on fabricated charges without proper investigation became systematic. Charges of being on the friend list of another accused were used as basis for prosecution. Multiple simultaneous cases were filed against same individuals for identical conduct.

IV. Mechanisms of Manipulation and Control

Beyond institutional structures, the regime employed sophisticated psychological and social manipulation mechanisms that created dependencies, weaponized identities, and transformed surveillance into omnipresent control. These mechanisms operated at the intersection of technology, violence, and social engineering.



Unlike historical fascism with transformative ideologies, Hasina created personalistic authoritarianism centered on the Sheikh family. Even party ideology "Mujibism" was secondary to family loyalty. This personal rather than ideological nature affected how the regime was eventually overthrown and subsequent power struggles.

Surveillance Infrastructure: Deep Packet Inspection technology was installed in all internet providers by February 2019, enabling mass surveillance and censorship without judicial oversight. The National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre lacked adequate legal framework protecting privacy. Section 97k of the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulation Act permitted warrantless surveillance on vague "national security" grounds. Bangladesh ranked in the top five globally for internet shutdowns during Hasina's rule.

Conclusion

Sheikh Hasina's regime engineered a comprehensive system of false narratives integrated into state institutions and enforced through systematic violence. The core narratives—Bengali nationalism, dynastic personality cult, protective stability, and Hindu minority weaponization—were designed to justify authoritarian consolidation by reframing democracy suppression as national preservation.

These narratives were created through controlled media monopolies, the Digital Security Act's threat of prosecution for dissent, coordinated disinformation campaigns on social media, and international backing from India. They were enforced through secret detention centers, extrajudicial killings by RAB, electoral fraud, and the Chhatra League's campus terror system.

The regime's collapse reveals the fragility of narrative-based authoritarianism when reality contradicts core claims. When the state killed 1,400 students, the "protection narrative" became incredible, causing rapid regime collapse.

Understanding these mechanisms is essential for preventing similar authoritarian consolidation and for building democratic institutions resistant to both direct violence and manipulation through protective-sounding but fundamentally oppressive narratives. The case of Bangladesh under Sheikh Hasina demonstrates how sophisticated narrative construction, institutional capture, and systematic violence can create self-reinforcing authoritarian systems—and how those systems ultimately collapse when their foundational narratives are exposed as lies through undeniable state violence against citizens demanding basic rights.

1.4K

Deaths

July 2024 crackdown

3.5K

Disappeared

Over 15 years

835

DSA Cases

2020-2022 alone

20K

Sites Blocked

Websites censored