

4. Patterns in the data

The Awami League has long denied the occurrence of enforced disappearances in Bangladesh. Their minions continue to repeat these denials today, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Beyond denial, they actively blame the victims—labelling them as extremists and terrorists—and claim that instead of being forcibly disappeared by the State, these individuals were actually engaged in terrorist training at the time of their disappearance.

Even now, after the Chief Advisor Professor Yunus has publicly visited several secret detention sites accompanied by the victims and the media; after both national and international media have exposed these facilities and featured the voices of the victims; even after many survivors have come forward—at great personal risk—to share their stories ... the denial persists. This refusal to acknowledge reality resembles not political defensiveness but something far more entrenched: a form of historical denialism so extreme that, it echoes the closed loops of a cult.

This chapter, and indeed this report as well as our previous one, directly challenge that denial. It presents the documented cases of 253 individuals, out of the nearly 1800 complaints we have received, whose testimonies are remarkably consistent across time, geography, and experience. These are not random or self-selected stories. As explained below, the individuals involved could not have known the framework by which their cases would later be chosen.

While it is conceivable that a few people in a nation might fabricate stories of disappearance, the notion that hundreds would independently invent such consistent, patterned accounts over more than a decade defies belief. The only credible explanation is that these are not coincidences or conspiracies, but evidence of a systemic, institutionalised practice—one that was not only permitted, but normalised.

4.1 The documented sample

The sample contains complaints that meet the following criteria:

1. There was contemporaneous documentation, such as a General Diary (GD), media report, or court case filing at the time of the disappearance.
2. The victim reappeared in law enforcement custody, formally recorded as having been arrested in connection with a case filed by a law enforcement agency.
3. The victim survived and provided firsthand testimony of their detention, including descriptions of secret facilities and fellow detainees.

The sections below explain why we chose these three criteria with which to filter out our sample for the purposes of this second interim report.

4.1.1 Contemporaneous evidence at the point of abduction

The absence of official documentation at the point of disappearance has long posed serious obstacles to proving cases of enforced disappearance. This is not simply a bureaucratic failure. It reflects a deliberate system designed to frustrate accountability. For instance, victims' families have long been systematically denied the right to file GDs when their complaints implicated law enforcement agencies in disappearances or extrajudicial killings. In many instances, police stations explicitly refused to accept such complaints unless the language was altered to remove references to security forces. A 2014 Amnesty International report documented this pattern with disturbing clarity: "Police officers said if the family removed all references to RAB and changed the wording from 'abducted' to 'missing,' they would accept the complaint" (Source: Amnesty International, "Stop them NOW", October 2014). This process was designed to neutralise the legal and political implications of the incident.

This pattern is echoed across the nearly 1800 complaints submitted to us. Out of these, only around 250 complaints included any form of contemporaneous documentation, whether through a GD, court record, or media report, at the time of disappearance. The overwhelming majority of families reported being actively discouraged or threatened when attempting to file a formal report. A family member reported (Code FBH⁴): "কর্তব্যরত অফিসারের কাছে ঘটনার বিবরণ বললে, তিনি সাধারণ ডায়েরি নিতে

⁴ 23 year old male; abducted by the police in 2016; disappeared for 17 days

অপারগতা প্রকাশ করেন। পরে ওসি মহোদয়ের শরণাপন্ন হলে তিনি বিভিন্ন জায়গায় ফোনে যোগাযোগ করেন। তিনি বলেন যে, প্রশাসনের নামে জিডি করা যাবে না।” (4-1) Similarly, a survivor recounted (Code EBB⁵):

জিডি নেয় নাই। তিন চার দিন গিয়েছিল আমার ওয়াইফ। বলছে যে খোঁজেন গা, থানায় যান, ডিবির কাছে যান। আমরা তো এখন জিডি নিতে পারবো না। ... আমি কি বলব। আমার বউয়ের কান্নায় বলে ওয়াল ভাইঙ্গা যায়। ডিবির আই ও বলে যে, তোমার বউ প্রতিদিন আইসা যেন চার-পাঁচ ঘন্টা করে কান্না করতো। মনে হচ্ছে ওয়াল ভাইঙ্গা যাবে। ... থানায় বলেছিল ওরা, খুঁইজা দেখেন। যদি র্যাব-পুলিশ-ডিবিরা নিয়ে থাকে, অনেক সময় গুম করার ইচ্ছা না থাকলেও জিডি-টিডি করলে গুম কইরা ফালায়। আপনারা আপসে খুঁইজা খুঁইজা দেখেন। (4-2)

This practice continued even after the political transition of 5 August 2024. In one instance, a victim (Code BGDE⁶) who had accompanied the Chief Advisor during a visit to a secret detention facility later received anonymous threats over phone from individuals claiming to represent the Detective Branch. When advised to file a GD with his local police station, he was initially unable to do so because the officers refused to record his complaint. It was only after direct intervention by a member of the Commission that the GD was finally accepted. This incident illustrates the persistence of a culture of institutional denial even after significant political changes.

Therefore, the fact that we have been able to identify over 250 instances of contemporaneous documentation is a feat in itself. The lack of documentation at the point of abduction in most cases is not a matter of ignorance or dereliction of duty. Rather, it is because people were actively prevented from filing such reports. In the absence of documentation at the point of occurrence, proving abduction via eyewitness testimony poses its own challenges, which is why we have not included those cases in this current report but hope to do so in our final report.

To illustrate the type of difficulties that can arise when using eyewitness accounts, we present here two instances: In one case, attempts to locate original witnesses to a victim’s abduction (Code DIA⁷) were hindered when handpicked witnesses of CTTC’s staged arrest for the media—who are usually linked to law enforcement or local political actors—intimidated the original eyewitnesses into silence. In another case, the abduction of a woman from a hospital was only verified years later when a nearby security guard came forward to testify (Code EDI⁸). Together, these examples show the challenges of relying solely on witness accounts minus official records, especially given the risk of retaliation. Evidently, the system was structured to erase all traces of these crimes.

⁵ 46 year old male; abducted by RAB 4 in 2016; disappeared for 19 days

⁶ 37 year old male; abducted by DGFI and RAB in 2016; disappeared for 167 days

⁷ 25 year old male; abducted by CTTC in 2019; disappeared for 8 days

⁸ 30 year old female; abducted by CTTC in 2023; disappeared for 67 days

4.1.2 Resurfaced through the criminal justice system

After weeks or months in secret detention, many victims were reintroduced into the legal system under fabricated charges. Law enforcement would claim to have arrested them the previous day and would present them before a magistrate alongside planted evidence. For instance, Code BDJF⁹ remembers:

কোর্টে চালান করার সময় আমাকে বলতেছে যে, “তোমাকে কিন্তু এখন কোর্টে দিয়ে দিব। তুমি যদি বল ম্যাজিস্ট্রেট বা জজের সামনে যে তুমি তিন মাস আগে এরেস্ট হইছো, তাহলে কিন্তু তোমাকে আরো পাঁচটা মামলা দিব। তো বলবা যে আমি আজকে গ্রেফতার হইছি।” (4-3)

This practice has been extensively documented before the 5 August changeover as well. In its 2017 report ‘We Don’t Have Him’, Human Rights Watch stated: “In most cases, the men remain in secret detention for weeks or months before the police suddenly claim to have arrested them the previous day. The men are then taken to the magistrate court and are remanded into police custody on the basis of a concocted story.” Similarly, the US Department of State’s December 2019 report on human rights in Bangladesh also noted this manipulation of due process: “Authorities generally permitted defence lawyers to meet with their clients only after formal charges were filed in the courts, which in some cases occurred weeks or months after the initial arrest.”

4.1.3 Survivors testify about captivity conditions

Once abducted, victims were usually taken to secret detention facilities where they were held incommunicado and subjected to interrogation. In some cases, victims were able to see or hear others detained alongside them, forming a hidden network of witnesses that is only now becoming visible.

One survivor described how detainees in facing cells developed creative methods of communication (Code BHFI¹⁰). He recounted writing messages in the air using mirror writing so others could read them. To demonstrate this, he wrote his name in mirror writing on a Commission member’s notebook. In some instances, victims were unaware that others had witnessed their detention. One detainee told us that across from his cell was a man studying physics at a particular university. Though he did not know the name of this man, we had already received a complaint

⁹ 22 year old male; abducted by CTTC in 2022; disappeared for 96 days

¹⁰ 16 year old male; abducted by RAB 7, RAB Intelligence and RAB 14 in 2017; disappeared for 3.5 years

from that same physicist (Code IGB¹¹) and were able to connect the two accounts, allowing them to serve as witnesses to each other's detention.

The period between disappearance and formal arrest would be erased from the official record. During this time, victims, often accused of terrorism, were paraded before the media with planted evidence. Human Rights Watch documented such incidents in its May 2011 report 'Crossfire: Continued Human Rights Abuses by Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion' noting, "When he (Masum) woke up, he was taken to his own apartment... RAB had placed seven or eight bottles of Phensedyl... on his bed. When Masum tried to protest, someone punched him again, and he was forcibly photographed with the bottles." In many cases, coerced civilian witnesses were forced to validate these fabrications.

4.1.4 The logic of the sample

The purpose of this section is to clarify why these 253 cases were selected in this sample and to explain what gives this sample its credibility. There are three reasons to treat this sample seriously.

1. First reason – *previously documented patterns*: As discussed above, the kind of patterns documented here have already been identified, documented, and analysed by independent and international bodies, albeit at much smaller scales. Thus these patterns were visible long before this report was even conceptualised. We are not claiming to have discovered new information but are reaffirming at scale what has been visible to independent actors for over a decade.

2. Second reason – *strict inclusion criteria*: The 253 cases meet the following three conditions: (a) Contemporaneous documentation: A contemporaneous general diary, news report, or legal filing was produced at the time the victim went missing; (b) Reappearance in legal custody: The victim was later produced in state custody with formal acknowledgment; (c) Testimony: The victim is alive and therefore can provide testimony about the period of enforced disappearance including descriptions of their locations of captivity. Each of these three steps is clearly evidenced.

3. Third reason – *temporal and geographic dispersion with no prior coordination*: The credibility of this dataset is further reinforced by the temporal and geographic dispersion of the cases, which span over a decade (2010-2023) and originate from diverse regions across the country. These

¹¹ 26 year old male; abducted by DGFI, RAB Intelligence and RAB 3 in 2019; disappeared for 110 days

survivors were not part of a coordinated group, nor could they have anticipated or influenced the selection criteria later adopted by this Commission.

Most crucially, our inclusion requirement of contemporaneous documentation—i.e. GD entries, court case filings, or media reports—was not a foreseeable or obvious threshold at the time the disappearances took place. Prior to the establishment of this Commission, it would not have been clear that the primary obstacle to recognition would be the absence of such records, nor that such documentation would come to determine which cases could be credibly verified.

The victims themselves, held incommunicado, were also in no position to influence the creation of such records. The records were generated by family members, journalists, or lawyers at the time of the disappearance, long before any possibility of retrospective selection or public spotlight. As such, the consistency of these 253 accounts cannot plausibly be explained by coaching, collusion, or fabrication. Instead, their coherence across time, space, and testimony points to a systemic pattern rooted in the institutional behaviour of the security apparatus, not in individual narratives constructed after the fact.

4.1.5 The central assertion

This therefore is our central assertion: It is not impossible that, in one or two or three cases, a person might disappear and later falsely claim to have been forcibly disappeared. But it is unreasonable to believe that over 250 such people, spread out over a decade, across multiple districts, all gave similarly detailed accounts of captivity, torture, and fabricated charges, simply by coincidence. That level of coordination is implausible.

The cases in our subset are not isolated narratives. They are documented, validated, and collectively point to an institutional pattern. They enabled us to reconstruct the full trajectory of enforced disappearance, from abduction to secret detention and thereafter to fabricated arrest. They also allowed us to identify the locations of clandestine facilities based on repeated, corroborated testimonies.

The burden of explanation lies with those who would suggest that 253 individuals—all of whom were legally acknowledged by the state after their reappearance—fabricated their accounts in identical ways over a span of more than a decade. For these reasons, we assert that this sample offers a legitimate and significant body of evidence for understanding the practice of enforced disappearance in Bangladesh.

4.2 Differences in the sample

In this section, we provide evidence of the heterogeneity of the sample—spread across space, time, age, profession, and duration of disappearance—to support the claim that these cases do not indicate the spread of extremism or similar pathology in Bangladesh but rather reveal a coordinated, state-backed system of enforced disappearance.

4.2.1 Spread across time

The chart shows that abductions in this sample occurred across a wide span of time, with cases reported every year from 2010 to 2023. While the peak was in 2017, the distribution reveals that incidents were not limited to a single year or period. Instead, they occurred persistently over more than a decade, underscoring the sustained and recurring nature of the practice. This temporal spread reinforces the conclusion that enforced disappearances have been part of a long-standing pattern rather than short-term or isolated events.

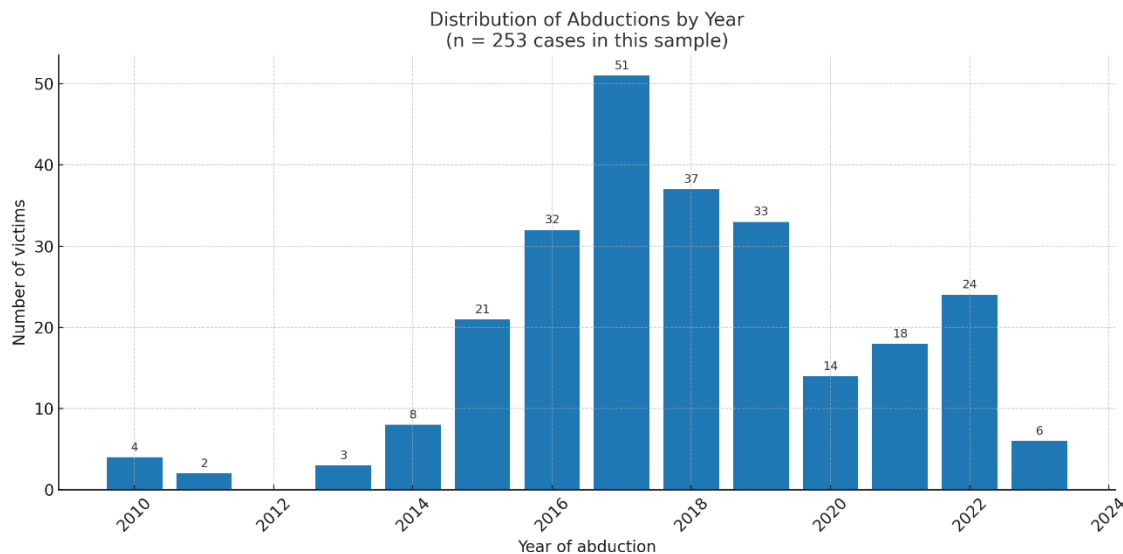


Fig 4A: Distribution of abductions by year in the sample

4.2.2 Spread across space

The chart shows that abductions in this sample are spread across 36 out of 64 districts in Bangladesh—covering over half the country. While a few districts have a notably higher number of cases, the presence of incidents across such a wide range of areas demonstrates this is not a

localised issue. Instead, it reflects a geographically dispersed pattern of abuse affecting diverse parts of the country.

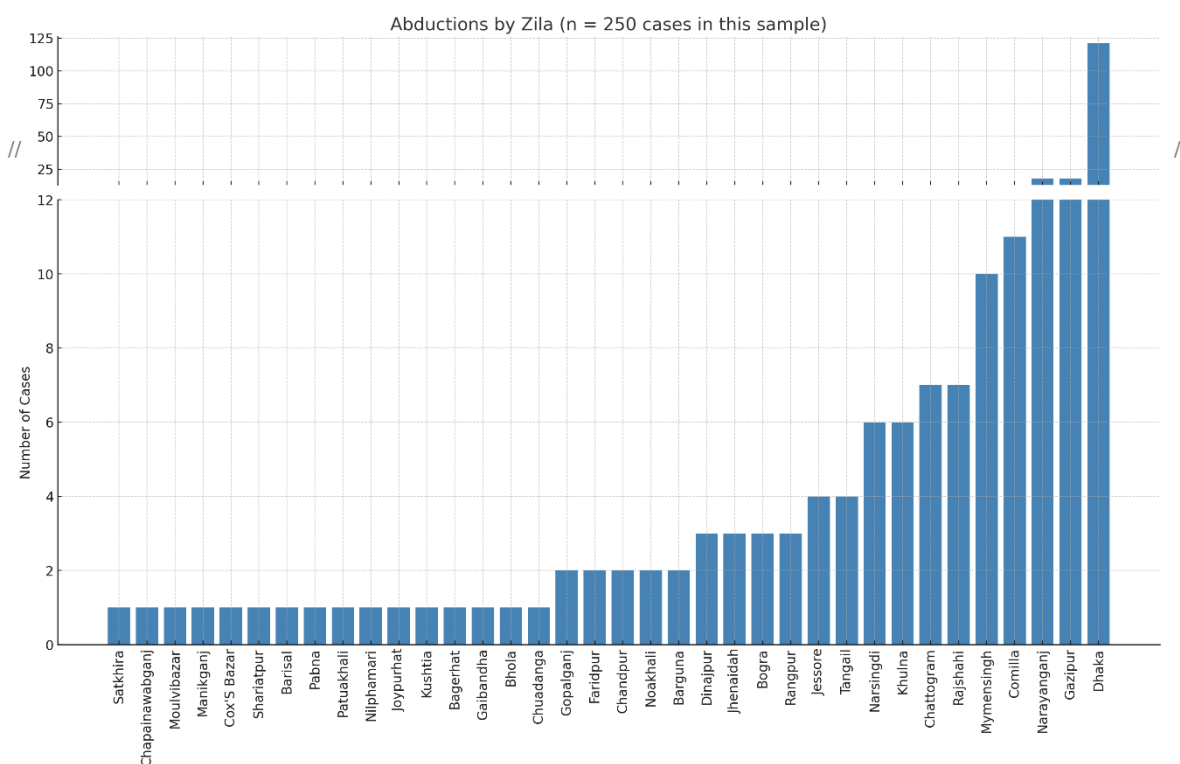


Fig 4B: Distributions of abduction by district in the sample

4.2.3 Spread across age

The chart shows the distribution of age at the time of abduction for the 253 individuals included in this subset of the dataset. Of these, age information was available for 252 victims. The majority fell between the ages of 19 and 35, with a distinct peak around ages 27-28. Notably, at least 10 individuals from even this small sample were minors under the age of 18 at the time of abduction, raising serious concerns under international and domestic protections for children.

Authorities may argue that younger individuals were targeted based on their higher statistical likelihood of radicalisation, a claim that some counter-extremism studies support, noting that ideological shifts often begin in late adolescence. However, the data presented here complicate that rationale.

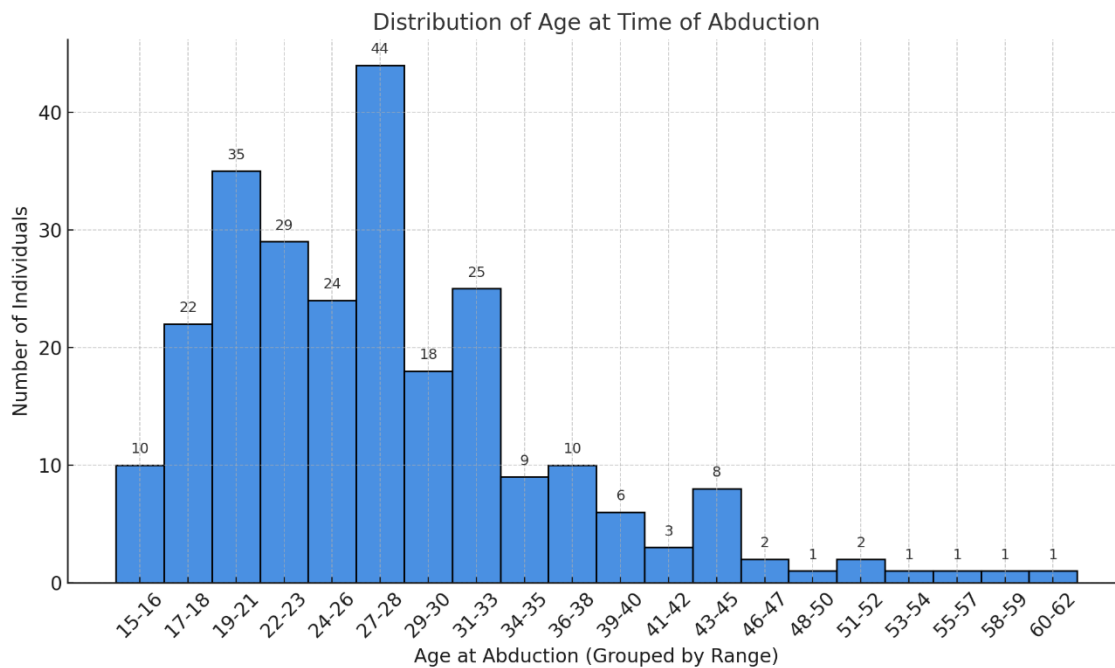


Fig 4C: Distribution of age of abduction in the sample

The peak does not occur in the teenage or early 20s range, where radicalisation is said to most commonly begin. Instead, the largest cohort falls in the late 20s, an age bracket more closely associated with political maturity and organising capacity. This suggests that the system of enforced disappearance may have been driven less by counterterrorism objectives than by an intent to neutralise perceived political threats. The pattern in the chart can support this interpretation.

4.2.4 Spread across professions

Out of a total sample of 253 victims, 228 disclosed their professions, while 25 did not. Among those who did, the data reflect a wide range of backgrounds—students, businesspeople, teachers, private service holders, journalists, day labourers, and others—indicating that individuals from many different sectors were affected. However, the higher numbers among students and businesspeople suggest that certain professions were more heavily targeted, pointing to a pattern in how different groups experienced the impact of abductions.

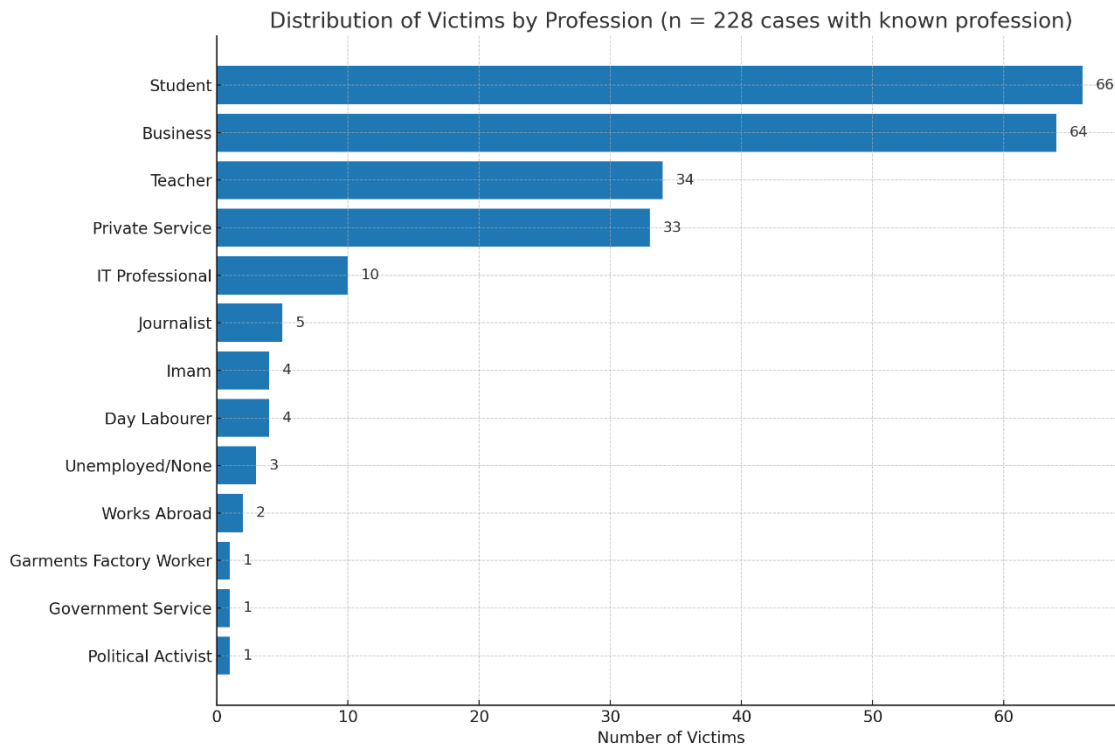


Fig 4D: Distribution of victims' profession in the sample

This pattern becomes more telling when considered alongside the age data. The peak age of abduction falls in the late 20s, aligning closely with professions such as business, teaching, and private service, which typically involve individuals with growing social or organisational influence. While students also make up a large share of victims, many in this category are older, including postgraduate or politically active individuals. Together, the data suggests that abductions may not have been primarily about deterring youthful radicalisation but instead aimed at suppressing those already engaged in or capable of political organizing.

4.2.5 Arbitrary custody gaps, i.e. periods of enforced disappearance

The distribution of enforced disappearance durations reveals both the unpredictability and psychological toll of the practice. In this sample of 253 cases, victims were held for vastly differing lengths of time – from a single day to over five years. While the median duration of disappearance was 47 days, a significant number of individuals were missing for several months or even years, with outliers extending beyond 1800 days.

The median means half of the victims were held for less than 47 days, and half for more, and is a more reliable indicator than the average in a dataset skewed by extreme cases. The use of a broken y-axis below helps to visually emphasise the existence of these long-term disappearances without diminishing the scale of more common ones. Crucially, the lack of consistency in duration, and the absence of clear justification for why one person is held longer than another, reinforces the extrajudicial and punitive character of the system.

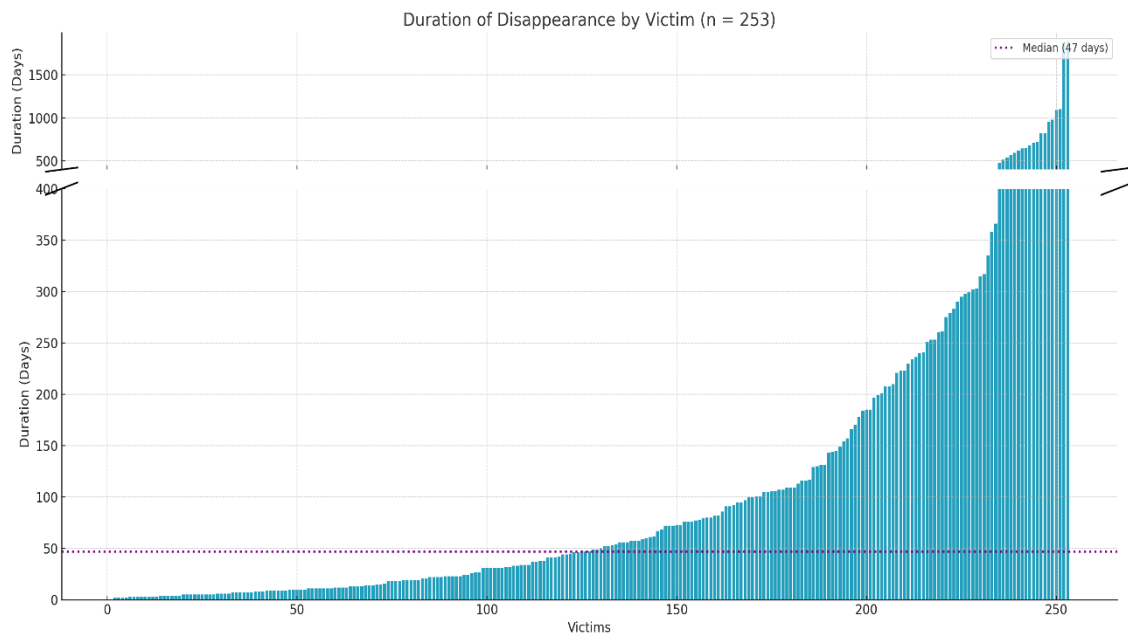


Fig 4E: Duration of disappearance of victim in the sample

The patterns suggest that these were not merely isolated or operational decisions based on individual risk or case complexity, but part of a broader apparatus of intimidation and control. If the variation in how long victims were disappeared had followed some legal or operational logic, we might expect consistent categories—shorter durations for less severe cases, longer for those considered greater threats. Instead, the data shows arbitrary and extreme inconsistencies.

Combined with other patterns, such as the use of plain clothes, blanket terrorism charges, and targeting of politically active or organising-age individuals, the durations appear less a matter of intelligence gathering or national security, and more a method of governance by fear. The uncertainty of how long one might be disappeared becomes, in itself, a tool of repression.

4.3 Similarities in the sample

In this heterogeneous sample, what stands out are the notable categories of homogeneity. For example, victims show striking similarity in their political identification, mode of disappearance, religion, and gender. Many cases also involve multiple security agencies, and there are consistent patterns in media coverage. Furthermore, as we will discuss in the next chapter, despite the diversity in locations and timing of abductions, there is a remarkable uniformity in the judicial treatment of victims, including the coercion used when taking statements, the specific laws invoked, and the language of the charges.

4.3.1 Similarities in political identity

As a whole, we find that victims are often hesitant to disclose their political affiliations—a reluctance that appears to stem from the legacy of the 15-year Sheikh Hasina regime. Many of those who were forcibly disappeared seem to have held oppositional political views, but the trauma associated with their disappearance makes it particularly difficult for them to acknowledge their political identity openly. It is common for victims to initially deny any political involvement; however, as interviews progress, their past affiliation with an opposition party is often revealed, sometimes involuntarily. This lingering fear remains palpable throughout the process.

As a Commission, we have found it difficult to press victims on this point out of concern that they might misinterpret our intentions. We were mindful not to create the impression that we sought to politicise their experiences or show bias towards or against any particular party. As such, we approached the matter with sensitivity and did not insist when the victims were unwilling to disclose such information.

Nonetheless, in a number of cases, the victims did voluntarily acknowledge their political background, either in writing or during oral testimony. Of the 253 complaints under examination in this interim report, we were able to determine the political affiliation of 101 individuals, which constitutes approximately 40 percent of the sample. It is important to reiterate that these 253 cases represent a specific subset of the nearly 1800 complaints currently in our possession. Only those cases for which official documentation exist at the point of abduction, who are alive, and who resurface with a case filed against them by a security force were included in this sample.

The political affiliation data derived from this subset, therefore, should not be assumed to reflect the exact proportions found across the full dataset. When the broader pool of cases is examined,

the distribution across different opposition parties do shift. However, one trend has remained consistent throughout our inquiry: individuals affiliated with opposition political parties are significantly overrepresented among the victims, as compared to supporters of the then ruling party. This observation is supported by the data, even though the exact proportions vary across subsets.

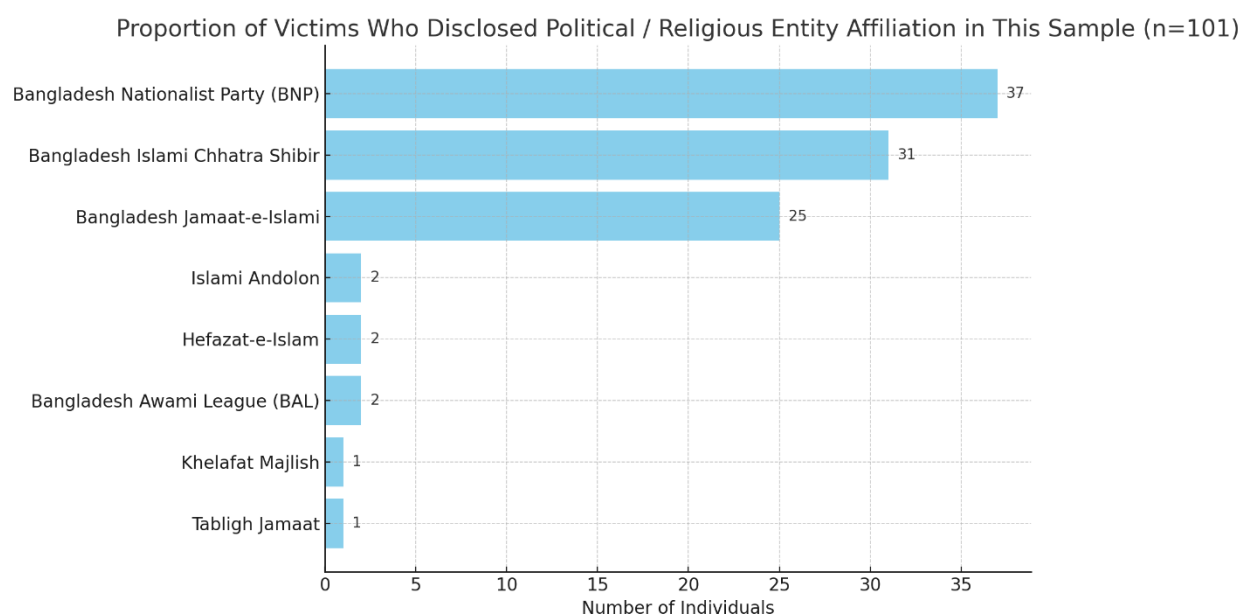


Fig 4F: Disclosed political/religious entity identity in the sample

Within this group of 101 individuals who disclosed their political affiliations, the vast majority identified with what were, at the time, opposition political parties. Only two individuals were associated with the ruling regime. In the rare cases involving supporters or activists of the ruling party, we usually find the enforced disappearances appear to be the result of intra-party factional disputes, personal property conflicts, or other criminal dynamics unrelated to political dissent. In the two instances from our present sample of 253, for example, as far as we have been able to determine, enforced disappearance within Awami League happened because of intra-party dispute regarding upazila parishad elections (Code BGCE¹²) and political mobilisation (Code ECI¹³).

Beyond the demographic breakdown, the political imperative underlying the system of enforced disappearance is also evident in the nature of interrogation described by the victims. Many reported being questioned extensively and explicitly about their political identities, affiliations, and roles.

¹² 38 year old male; abducted by RAB 15 and RAB 7 in 2022; disappeared for 1 year and 5 months

¹³ 26 year old male; abducted by RAB Intelligence and RAB 1 in 2017; disappeared for 48 days

We elaborate on two such cases below, where the victims were interrogated by officials from different agencies but were subjected to similarly politically charged questioning.

Despite the differences in the institutions—one being DGFI and the other RAB—and in the professional backgrounds of the interrogators—military versus police—what stands out is the striking similarity in the nature of questioning of the victims. In both cases, the focus was heavily centred on political information: the victims were repeatedly asked about their political identities and associations. This pattern underscores a broader structural reality, which is that the Awami League regime's system of enforced disappearance was constructed with a clear political imperative that also happened to serve other purposes as and when needed.

Code BHHH¹⁴ is a BNP activist who was held at DGFI's JIC, where he was interrogated by military officers, as only military personnel were assigned to that role at that location during the relevant period. He recalls being questioned about BNP leaders:

তারা বুঝায় দিল যে, “আমরা সব আপনার সম্বন্ধে জানি।” আমি বিএনপি করি। ম্যাডামের সাথে চলি। এগুলো সবই তারা জানে। ... “আপনি আমাদেরকে আগে বলেন, আপনি বেগম খালেদা জিয়ার জন্য কি করতেন?” আমি পার্টি করি। আমাকে যখন যে টাস্ক দেওয়া হয়, আমি টাস্কটা ফলো করি। ... ওরা জিজ্ঞেস করছে: “উনার সেফটি সিকিউরিটিতে কোন কোন দেশ ইনভলভ? কারা তাকে সহযোগিতা করে?” আমি বলেছি, “আমি জানি না।” ... তো যখন বলছি জানি না, তখন বলল যে, “দেখেন, আপনি যত আমাদের সাথে নন-কোঅপারেশন করবেন, আপনার জন্য দিন তত খারাপ হবে।” তখন বলল যে, “আপনি এম্বাসিগুলোতে যেতেন। এম্বাসি থেকে গিফট আসতো। উনি গিফট দিত। এগুলো গিফটে কি ছিল?” আমি বললাম, “আমি জানি না।”

তখন মনে আছে, একটা জোরে—মানে হাতুড়ি না কি দিয়ে—বাড়ি মেরেছে জানি না, মানে আমার হাঁটুর মধ্যে। আমার তখন গলায় আওয়াজ আটকে গেছে পুরা। মানে এত জোরে লেগেছে, আমি তখন আর কথা বলতে পারছিলাম না। তো পাশ থেকে আরেকজন ইয়াং অফিসার তখন চিল্লাচ্ছে, “স্যার, একে শেষ করে ফেলি! এই করে ফেলি, ওই করে ফেলি!” তো অন্যজন বলছে, “না, মুখ খুলবে। কয়দিন বন্ধ রাখবে?” তো তখন, ওইদিন ওখানে শেষ। ...

দুই-তিন দিনের মাথায় আবার হুট করে নিয়ে গেল। নিয়ে গিয়ে আবার শুরু করল, “আচ্ছা, আপনার সাথে তো ওইদিন এই কথা হয়েছিল। আপনি কি এখন রেডি বলার জন্য?” আমি বললাম, “আমি কিছু জানি না।” তো বলছে, “তারেক রহমানের একাউন্ট ডিটেইল বলেন—কোন কোন জায়গায় তার টাকা থাকে।” আমি বললাম, “ভাই, আমি জানি না। আই ডোন'ট নো। সিম্পলি ডোন'ট নো।” তো বলছে, “ম্যাডাম জিয়ার টাকা কোথায় দিয়েছেন? কোথায় রাখেন?” আমি বলি, “আমি জানি না।” তখন আবার দিল—আমার দুইটা নি ক্যাপ, মানে তারা দিল [বাড়ি আবার]। তারপর ফেলে রাখলো। ... তাদের মূলত কথা ছিল দুইটা জিনিস - বেগম খালেদা জিয়ার একাউন্ট কোথায় কোথায়? তারেক রহমান সাহেবের

¹⁴ 42 year old male; abducted by DGFI and DB in 2017; disappeared for 129 days

একাউন্ট কোথায় কোথায়? বেগম খালেদা জিয়া এবং তারেক রহমানকে কোন কোন দেশ থেকে সহযোগিতা করে বা করে কিনা, কারা করে? এগুলো জানতে চায়। (4-4)

Conversely, Code BHGH¹⁵ was interrogated at RAB 2 by a police officer whose identity we have been able to confirm. He was questioned, whilst being waterboarded, about his Jamaat Islami-Shibir affiliation:

আমারে চিৎ করে শোয়ায় দিছে। দিয়ে দুই হাতের মধ্যে আর দুই পায়ের মধ্যে বাঁশ ঢুকায় দিছে। তারপর হাত-পায়ের উপরে চারজন উঠে বসে। এরপর মুখের উপরে একটা কাপড় দিয়ে উপর থেকে পানি ঢালতেছিল। যেটাকে আমি কিছু বই পুস্তকে পড়ছিলাম। এর নাম হবে ওয়ারটার বোর্ডিং। তো ওই মাইরটা আমি নিতে পারতেছিলাম না। আমার মনে হয় যে যে কোনো সেকেন্ডের মধ্যে আমি মারা যাবো, আমার শ্বাস বন্ধ হয়ে যাবে। তো ওরা মনে হয় হার্ট চেক করতেছিল যে হার্ট বন্ধ হয়ে যায় কিনা। দুই-আড়াই মিনিট, তিন মিনিট এইটা দিছে।

আর জিজ্ঞেস করছে, “বল, তুই জামাতের? তুই শিবিরের? তুই কি করস?” আমি বলছি যে, “দেখেন, আমি এক সময় ছাত্র শিবির করতাম, এখন আমি করি না। আমি এটা অনেক আগেই ছেড়ে দিছি, ২০১৪ সালের পর থেকে আমি কোন রাজনীতি করি না। আমার বাবা মারা যাওয়ার, ভাই মারা যাওয়ার পর থেকে আমি আসলে পড়াশোনা করে একটা চাকরি নেওয়ার চেষ্টা করছি।” এই নানান প্রশ্ন। “তুই কেন ফজরের নামাজ জামাতে পড়স? মেয়েদের সাথে তোর কোন রিলেশন নাই কেন?” এই সব। ... ওয়ারটার বোর্ড করার মাঝে মাঝে এটা জিজ্ঞেস করে। ওইটা থামায় থামায় কোশেন গুলো করতেছে। ... আমার মনে হয় দুই মিনিট পর আমি সেন্সলেস হয়ে যাই। সর্বশেষ শুধু একটা গালি শুনছিলাম যে, “রাজাকারের বাচ্চা”। এরপর আমার হুশ ছিল না। এরপর আমি বেহুশ হয়ে গেছিলাম। ...

জিজ্ঞাসাবাদের সময় প্রশ্ন করত আমার কেন গার্লফ্রেন্ড নাই? ... তখন আমার মুখে আরেকটু বড় দাড়ি ছিল – “কেন মুখে বড় দাড়ি? টাকনোর উপর কেন প্যান্ট পড়ি?” এই নানান কোশেন। “আমার ভাই কেন জামাতে ইসলামী করত?” তো এগুলো বলছে, আর ফাঁকে ফাঁকে উনি খুবই বাজে গালি দিত। ... আমি জাস্ট কান্না করতেছিলাম আর বলতেছিলাম, “স্যার, আমি মিথ্যা কিছুই বলতেছি না। আপনি আমার কথা বিশ্বাস না হইলে আমার এলাকায় যাইয়া খবর নিয়ে দেখেন। আমি মিথ্যা কিছু বলতেছি না। আমি সবই সত্য বলতেছি। আমি এক সময় শিবির করতাম, এখন শিবির করি না, স্যার। আমার ভাই জামাত করতো, সে মারা গেছে। আর আমার পরিবারের অন্য কেউ জামাত-শিবিরের সাথে সরাসরি নাই।” তখন বলছে, “না, তোর বাপেও জামাত করছে।” আমি বলছি, “না, বাবা কখনো জামাত করে নাই। সে ইসলাম প্রিয় মানুষ ছিল, ধর্ম-কর্ম মানতেন। আমার পরিবার ধর্ম-কর্ম করে, তারা জামাত করে না। আমি শিবির করছি, ভাইয়া জামাত-শিবির করছে।” ...

আরো দুইটা জিনিসে খুব ফোকাস করছে। আমরা সাত-আট জন মিলে রোহিঙ্গাদের হেল্প করার জন্য একটা টিম করে গেছিলাম। আর কোন কিছু না। তো ওইখানে কেন গেছিলাম? তাদেরকে কেন হেল্প করছি? আর ভারত-পাকিস্তান। আমার কোনটাকে ভালো লাগে, এই টাইপের। ... প্রশ্নটা বলছে যে, “তোর কি ভারত ভালো লাগে? বাংলাদেশ-ভারত-পাকিস্তানের মধ্যে কাদেরকে ভালো লাগে? বাংলাদেশকে স্বাধীন ভালো লাগে?”... তারপর বলছে যে, “রোহিঙ্গাদেরকে তোরা হেল্প করতে গেছ। তোরা আসলে কী চাস? রোহিঙ্গাদেরকে তোরা কি এই দেশে রাখবি? রাইখা দিতে চাস, নাকি ফেরত

¹⁵ 19 year old male; abducted by RAB 2 in 2017; disappeared for 10 months

দিতে চাস? রোহিঙ্গাদেরকে তোরা কি এরকম তোর জামাত-শিবিরের মত জঙ্গী বানাবি? তোদের চিন্তা-ভাবনা কি?” আমি বলছি যে, “দেখেন, আমার এই ব্যাপারে কোন চিন্তা-ভাবনা নাই। ওদের কষ্ট দেখে আমরা জাস্ট একটা টিম করে টাকা-পয়সা কালেক্ট করে ওদেরকে হেল্প করছি। ওদেরকে আসলে কোন কিছু বানানো বা ইসলামী মানুষ বানানো, এরকম আমার কোন চিন্তা ছিল না।” এই জিনিসগুলো নিয়ে ফোকাস করছে বেশি। আর জামাতের-শিবিরে আমি কোন পদে আছি? কি করি? (4-5)

4.3.2 Similarities in the mode of disappearance

Of the 233 individuals who disclosed information about the appearance of their abductors, 221 reported that the men were in plain clothes rather than in uniform. This overwhelming pattern reinforces the covert and extrajudicial nature of these operations, where official identity was deliberately obscured. The use of “civil dress” was a calculated tactic to avoid institutional accountability, heighten fear, and complicate efforts to trace responsibility. The consistency of this practice across such a wide range of cases suggests it was not incidental, but a standardised method of operation.

4.3.3 Similarities in religion and gender

Out of the 253 cases, the vast majority of victims are Muslim, with only two involving Hindus. Similarly, nearly all victims are male, with just two female victims. This pattern aligns with the overall profile of enforced disappearances in Bangladesh, where Muslim men have been disproportionately targeted. It also reflects challenges in encouraging female victims to come forward and lodge complaints.

Whilst this data alone does not rule out the possibility that victims were targeted solely on suspicion of extremism, it clearly suggests that not all were singled out for that reason. In a Muslim-majority country like Bangladesh, with a large population of politically active Muslim men, the targeting may also have been primarily political. This interpretation gains further weight when considered alongside other data on political identity.

The low number of female victims may reflect a focus on individuals with organisational roles or street-level mobilisation capacity, positions typically occupied by male activists. Additionally, the inclusion of Hindu victims, disappeared for political reasons, indicates that the repression extended beyond allegations of Islamic extremism and into a wider political crackdown.

4.3.4 Multi agency involvement

Out of the 253 cases in this sample, 138—i.e. about 55%—involve multi-agency participation. In these cases, one agency carries out the initial abduction and subsequently transfers the victim to another, often involving a third or even fourth agency before the person is ultimately produced before a court.

This degree of coordination has two major implications. First, it appears to serve as a mechanism for masking culpability, diffusing responsibility across multiple institutions so that no single agency bears full accountability. Second, and more significantly, it reveals a high level of inter-agency cooperation, pointing to a deliberate and systematic repression apparatus operated at the state level.

Notably, such multi-agency involvement is most frequently observed in cases connected to RAB Intelligence and DGFI. Intelligence agencies such as these typically do not engage directly with the criminal justice system. They do not file formal charges or produce detainees before the court. Instead, victims are transferred to police or other law enforcement units that possess the legal authority to initiate judicial proceedings. Therefore, multi-agency coordination is a necessity for them.

The coordination between agencies is not only institutional but operationally visible. Victims frequently report being blindfolded and transported in vehicles, only to be stopped mid-transit and handed over to a different team. In many such cases, the blindfolds and handcuffs are physically replaced during the transfer. We infer that each agency uses its own equipment, suggesting a meticulous administrative process during these handovers. This level of detail reinforces the conclusion that such practices are not ad hoc, but part of an organised state security framework.

Importantly, we are attempting to assess agency-level culpability based primarily on victim testimony. Victims are often unable to clearly identify the specific agencies involved, either due to being blindfolded, disoriented, or afraid. In this context, the identification of 138 cases with confirmed multi-agency involvement is in itself a significant finding. The true number may well be higher.

In contrast, cases involving CTTC show a different operational pattern. Multi-agency involvement in such cases is relatively attenuated. Typically, one CTTC team is responsible for the abduction, another for producing the individual before court or filing charges, and a third for presenting

witnesses to substantiate the case. Unlike other agencies, CTTC and DB appear to have more in-house mechanisms for handling the entire cycle from disappearance to legal proceedings. Other forces lack such integrated structures and thus rely more heavily on inter-agency transfers.

Taken together, these findings not only highlight the structural complexity of enforced disappearance practices in Bangladesh but also underscore the extent to which institutional coordination facilitates abuse while shielding perpetrators from accountability. The prevalence of multi-agency operations points toward a centrally managed, state-directed system of repression that is both deliberate and highly organised. A simple counterterrorism operation would not require such cover.

4.3.5 Similarities in media treatment

At the end of their period of enforced disappearance, law enforcement agents held press briefings where most of the individuals in our sample were paraded before cameras, usually branded as terrorists. For the victims, being made to appear before the media (called “মিডিয়া করা” or “doing media”) was a double-edged sword.

On one hand, it meant they would not be killed, and announcing they were held in custody meant they could enter the criminal justice system formally. On the other hand, it ensured their reputations would be permanently besmirched through a media trial. Their names, photographs, and alleged crimes were announced publicly before any formal charges or court hearings, denying them the opportunity to respond or defend themselves. Police narratives would dominate the media coverage, shaping public perception and prejudging guilt before judicial verdicts.

Even if acquitted later, the criminal label often lingered in public memory and online records, creating grave challenges for employment, education, and travel for years to come. Code CIC¹⁶ described being denied US visa, even six years after the incident, despite receiving two post-doc offers from renowned universities. During the visa interview, he reports, “Embassy staff clearly told me that because there is a case against me, it is not possible to grant me a visa.” He was acquitted in the case filed against him by RAB.

As a result of the public shaming, in many cases, their friends and neighbours would shun these victims out of fear that they themselves could become involved in terrorism investigations. Code

¹⁶ 30 year old male; abducted by RAB 2 in 2018; disappeared for 5 days

BIAI¹⁷ recalls that even her mother's political party colleagues abandoned the family when she was disappeared and later branded a terrorist, with the situation changing only after the 5 August changeover: “দুঃসম্পর্কের মানুষ অনেকে আগে রিউমার ছড়াতো যে, মেয়ে জঙ্গি হয়ে গেছে। আমার আব্বুকে অনেক টলারেট করতে হয়েছে। তবে এখন পরিস্থিতি চেঞ্জ হয়েছে এবং তারা নিজেরাই স্বেচ্ছায় আমাকে দেখতে চায়, কথা বলতে চায়। বাড়িতে যাওয়ার জন্য বারবার রিকোয়েস্ট করে। এখন পরিস্থিতি চেঞ্জ হয়ে গেছে।” (4-6)

The High Court of Bangladesh has repeatedly condemned media trials as unconstitutional and illegal. In the case of *The State v. Mr. Swadesh Roy*, the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court stated (44 CLC (AD) 49): “Any publication during the pendency of any matter in any Court of law, which tends to interfere with the course of justice in any substantial or real manner by prejudicing the mind of the public against persons concerned in the case before the cause is finally heard, is also contempt... We should not permit anyone to poison the fountain of justice. This would be a grave interference with the administration of justice.” This ruling reaffirms the danger of prejudicial reporting and establishes that media influence, regardless of intent, can erode the foundational impartiality of the judiciary and undermine the administration of justice.

The type of media coverage was divided into two: one uncritically repeated the state narrative, while the other raised some questions about it. The scepticism was usually not about the substance of the accusation. Instead—often based on statements from family members—the reports would question the timing of the person's arrest and possible detention. For instance, Kaler Kantha covered BNP activist Code BAB's¹⁸ predicament as: “দুজনকে গ্রেপ্তারসহ ২৯ জনের বিরুদ্ধে রাব-১০ সোমবার একটি মামলা করেছে। ... তাঁরা ফেসবুকসহ বিভিন্ন সামাজিক যোগাযোগ মাধ্যমে সরকারবিরোধী অপপ্রচার চালিয়েছেন বলে অভিযোগ করা হয়েছে।” (4-7) The report questions the state's narrative with: “স্বজনদের দাবি, গত ২৮ অক্টোবর ‘পিএস টার্ন’ নামের একটি লঞ্চ থেকে জুলভার্নকে ‘প্রশাসনের লোক’ পরিচয়ে তুলে নেওয়া হয়। নিখোঁজ হওয়ার ৯ দিন পর মঙ্গলবার মিরপুর থানায় জুলভার্নকে ডিজিটাল নিরাপত্তা মামলায় গ্রেপ্তার দেখানো হয়েছে।” (4-8) Whilst it indicates the victim was taken into custody well before RAB acknowledged it, the substance of the accusation remained largely unchallenged.

The instances we have noted where the narrative is fully challenged were usually where a political party directly intervened to register their disagreement. For example, on 5 August 2010, The Daily Star published a report headlined “RAB Claim Shibir link with Outlaws”: “The Rapid Action Battalion yesterday claimed to have found link between Islami Chhatra Shibir and banned Islamist

¹⁷ 24 year old female; abducted by the police in 2018; disappeared for 14 days

¹⁸ 59 year old male; abducted by RAB 10 in 2018; disappeared for 10 days

outfits. The elite force claimed that Shibir operatives are collecting arms and explosives from the outlawed organisations to carry out subversive activities in the country.” Shibir provided an addendum, that was published in the same article, arguing: “Meanwhile, in a press release, Islami Chhatra Shibir yesterday alleged that Rab personnel planted the fire-arms and ammunition at the residences of its activists and made the arrests when the activists were in sleep.”

Such instances, however, were few and far between. In the vast majority of cases, we found the media simply parroted the information provided to it by law enforcers who labelled their enforced disappearance victims as terrorists, with no attempt to provide any contrarian accounts whatsoever.