



Police reforms in Bangladesh – post anti-discrimination movement 2024

Md. Fardin Labib*

ABSTRACT

This paper critically looks into the challenges facing the Bangladesh police force in the aftermath of the anti-discrimination movement 2024, which involved a breakdown in public trust and placed a severe strain on law enforcement. The paper will work toward providing some recommendations that reform the police force and can help restore public confidence in the police, introduce further accountability, and help prevent any future abuse of the police by a government or any influential figure.

Key Words Police; authoritarian; accountability; public; trust; community; politicize; transparency.

INTRODUCTION

The police force of any country is set up for the service of its citizens – to protect them in times of danger. Ideally, the police should cooperate with the public for better improvement of the country and to help create a sense of security amongst the people rather than fear. In Bangladesh, too, the expectation of its people from their police is to act as protectors. However, in the last 15 years, this police force turned into ruthless enforcers of an increasingly authoritarian government by committing many acts which violated human rights which resulted in people viewing the police as a symbol of oppression. It reached its height in July 2024 when police were deployed with full force against the students and the general public who launched protests which started off as protests to demand reform in quota systems later becoming a larger movement of people demanding the resignation of the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League government. During this period, the police used live ammunition, rubber bullets, and tear gas against unarmed protesters to silence the movement and bar them from pushing the ruling party from power. But the protests gained momentum and took a toll on the eventual fall of the Awami League government. After this, due to the police being involved in the killings and violence during the movement, these motives served as the catalyst for nationwide attacks by mobs against police personnel and police stations. A report on bdnews24 dated 7 August 2024 revealed the breakdown of the rule of law in Bangladesh

when the government of Sheikh Hasina was no longer in power where many senior officials and officers had gone into hiding to avoid retaliation. As a result, many police stations remained empty and unguarded, showing the scenario of unrest which marked a severe deterioration in the level of trust between people and the police and the repercussions of using the police as a political tool. Another report by *The Daily Star* speculated that “nearly 700–800 officers, including some cadre officers, were absent without leave.” The report also stated that, “amid this situation, the law enforcers hardly venture outside their stations when not escorted by army personnel, especially after dark. Their services have remained largely limited to registering complaints and cases. But people are not getting the police services after calling the number because the police stations do not have enough police personnel and logistic support.”

This paper will provide some recommendations by looking into the police force of other countries and how they operate to solve critical issues such as gaining public trust, ensuring accountability and transparency of the police officers, and depoliticizing the police force so that future governments or political parties cannot use the police force in a way that the previous government did.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A survey conducted by Transparency International Bangladesh in 2021, which covered 15,840 households, depicted alarming levels of corruption within the country's law

Correspondence to: Md. Fardin Labib, Department of Criminology, Dhaka University, Dhaka - 1207, Bangladesh. **E-mail:** fardinlabib10@gmail.com

To cite: Labib Md. F. (2025). Police reforms in Bangladesh – post anti-discrimination movement 2024. *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being*, 10(3), 157–160. <https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.431>

© Author(s) 2025. Open Access. This work is distributed under the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license. For commercial re-use, please contact sales@sgpublishing.ca.

SG PUBLISHING Published by **SG Publishing Inc.** **CSKA** Official publication of the **Community Safety Knowledge Alliance.**

enforcement agencies, particularly police and Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) forces. It found that as high as 70.9% of the households reported having experienced some form of corruption, while 74.4% said they had been victimized by corrupt practices of the law enforcement agencies. These findings suggest that corruption in the law enforcement sector of Bangladesh is systemic and acts as a severe impediment to governance, public trust, and the rule of law. Apprehensions are further substantiated by the U.S. Department of State's 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, which reported impunity for abuses committed by security forces. These abuses included extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, and suppression of peaceful assembly and association. The report criticized the government for failing to take adequate measures to investigate, prosecute, or otherwise hold accountable officials and security personnel implicated in these abuses or in corrupt activities. Human rights groups have faulted the government for promoting a culture of impunity, which has been eating away at the rule of law and citizens' rights bit by bit. Domestic human rights organizations have documented scores of abuses committed by the police; for example, Ain o Salish Kendra reported that 19 people died in extrajudicial killings or in custody in 2022. Of them, four died in so-called "crossfire" with the law enforcement agencies, and eight died due to physical torture before or during custody. Such incidents indicate that excessive force and unlawful means on the part of the security personnel are commonplace. The Centre for Governance Studies, through a detailed analysis of extrajudicial killings between 2019 and 2021, has implicated police forces, specifically the Detective Branch, at 51.2%, while RAB was implicated in 28.8%. This again proves that disproportionate and egregious human rights abuses take place on the part of law enforcement agencies, and thus confidence level at the general public level in those agencies is unprecedentedly low. It also gives notice that the killings are not some sort of isolated accident but rather part of a general strategy of control within the state, often against people perceived to be political dissidents or threats to the existing power structure. Reports by international bodies and organizations further reinforce the gravity of the situation. The United Nations Committee Against Torture, along with several advocacy groups, has criticized the rampant practice of torture perpetrated by security forces in Bangladesh. Documented allegations include beatings with iron rods, electric shocks, kneecappings, rape, sexual abuse, and mock executions, and these practices are sometimes inflicted on suspected militants or members of opposition parties in order to elicit information. Besides this, torture has been executed with the purpose of extorting bribes and confessions, which in many instances has caused death. In 2023, Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Organization passed its comments on the prevalence of torture and humiliating treatment at the hands of Bangladeshi police forces. It insisted on permanent impunity by the government for failing to take proper measures against security personnel who commit such crimes. There have been widespread reports on the use of security forces to muzzle opposition leaders, government critics, and dissidents, suggesting that law enforcement agencies are used not only in maintaining law and order but also as an instrument of political repression.

METHODOLOGY

This paper relies on secondary data to develop recommendations for the reform of the Bangladesh police force. Materials have been widely researched from newspapers, academic articles, journals, and public forums to determine which issues the police force face the most. From the careful examination of these materials, this paper hopes to underline the challenges and recommend practical ways through which they can be addressed.

FINDINGS

This section presents a set of recommendations derived from an in-depth examination of policing systems of various countries and proposing the most effective strategies that can be adopted to address the issues seen within the Bangladesh police force.

Human Rights Violation

In a case of Denmark on mechanisms addressing human rights violations by police officers, Amnesty International (2008) proposed some recommendations for investigating and acting on complaints against the police.

- The complaints body should consist of people of acknowledged independence and probity, who are not members of the police force, and that the complaints body should have at its disposal its own corps of independent investigators to look into complaints. In Bangladesh, There is a separate cell known as the "IGP Complaint Cell" at the police headquarters in the capital. The cell has two mobile phone numbers – 01769693535 and 01769693536 – to submit complaints directly against any unethical or unprofessional activities of police members. According to *Dhaka Tribune*, many plaintiffs have reported significant resistance from police stations in accepting their complaints. In some instances, police officers allegedly refused to take the cases, leading to delays and frustrations for the families seeking justice.
- The body should be afforded all necessary powers and authority to conduct investigations into complaints against the police, including the power to summon witnesses and to subpoena evidence and documents.
- The body must have the authority to determine if a case should be closed or if an apology is necessary, suggest proper compensation for the victim to relevant authorities, and decide if the perpetrator should face legal action.

Strategies to Address Political Forms of Police Corruption

Addressing political corruption within law enforcement requires a comprehensive approach that considers broader systemic issues and the intricate social and political dynamics of a country. To render the police as politically neutral, USAID advocates for a more extensive mechanism to ensure

external accountability and to keep the policing activities quite independent from political executives. Countries like the UK and Japan have attained such neutrality by creating a cushion between political expediency and laws that are enforced. The Public Safety Commission System in Japan plays an important role in maintaining the separation between police operations and political influence. They include independent commissions for public safety at the national and prefectural levels, which are charged with supervising the administration of police forces in their respective jurisdictions. Commissions have been designed to remove police operations from ruling party interference as well as other political pressures. In one word, these commissions insulate law enforcement from the immediate influences of political power and help keep police work honest and straightforward. The creation of specialized oversight bodies is especially recommended in the case where internal controls are failing and the police lack the will, resources, and capacity to exercise these controls effectively.

Strengthening Public Trust

In many developing countries grappling with high levels of police corruption, particularly those emerging from conflict, a major challenge in police reform is rebuilding public trust and establishing the legitimacy of law enforcement institutions. In these contexts, police officers are often viewed as a source of fear rather than protection, making it essential to implement strategies that foster collaboration between the police and the community.

- In Berkeley, California, the Police Review Commission addresses this issue by holding public meetings twice a month. These meetings offer community organizations the opportunity to voice concerns, suggest changes, and introduce proposals for reviewing or reforming specific police policies.
- In Venezuela, as part of police reform, community councils are given a role in monitoring police forces to combat corruption. This initiative allows the public to share information, propose ideas, and actively engage in ensuring citizen security through various consultation forums (Suggett, 2009).

According to Finn (2001) in *Citizen Review of Police: Approaches and Implementation*, many U.S. communities involve residents in overseeing their local police departments through citizen oversight, a system designed to ensure police accountability. While there is no universal model, citizen oversight systems generally fall into four categories as follows:

1. Citizens investigate allegations of police misconduct and provide recommendations to the police chief or sheriff.
2. Police investigate allegations and make findings, while citizens review the process and recommend approval or rejection of the findings to the chief or sheriff.
3. Citizens review cases where complainants appeal findings by the police or sheriff's department,

then recommend their own findings to the chief or sheriff.

4. An auditor evaluates the complaint investigation process for fairness and thoroughness, reporting findings to both the department and the public.

In this report, Citizens have reported that they

- Feel “validated” when the oversight body agrees with their allegations or when they have an opportunity to be heard by an independent overseer regardless of the outcome;
- Are satisfied at being able to express their concerns in person to the officer; and
- Feel they are contributing to holding the department accountable for officers' behaviour.

Police and sheriff's department administrators have reported that citizen oversight

- Improves their relationship and image with the community;
- Has strengthened the quality of the department's internal investigations of alleged officer misconduct and reassured the public that the process is thorough and fair; and
- Has made valuable policy and procedure recommendations.
- Strengthening community policing can boost public trust and also provide citizens with necessary education of maintaining basic law and order and also bolster the police force with additional manpower. For instance, according to the Business Standard (2024), the traffic Mirpur Division of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) called for volunteers in managing the traffic system to address ongoing traffic problems under the initiative called Traffic Assistant Group (TAG).

Other Necessary Measures

- Providing specialized training on managing protests or crowd control situations.
- Installing body cameras on police uniforms and dash cameras on patrol vehicles in areas with high crime rates.
- Creating a national and/or state database to track disciplinary actions against individual officers and departments, with records made publicly accessible, either freely, through freedom of information requests, or available to all police departments for hiring purposes.

CONCLUSION

Experience testifies that, if law enforcement officers faced a genuine risk of losing their jobs, they would have less motivation to involve themselves in corrupt practices. When there is very little chance of losing a vocation as compared to what one can receive from accepting money meant to bribe, many

people see no alternative than engaging in bribery. Therefore, police salaries and benefits must be periodically evaluated and adjusted so that the temptation of corruption does not become excessive. In this way, we promote a more accountable and corruption-resistant police force by increasing the cost of unethical behaviour. Moreover, strict disciplinary actions with specified consequences for misconduct may also discourage corrupt practices further still. It is important to create an environment where honesty gets rewards while any wrong doing like bribery attracts severe punishment thus earning public trust and respect among those who confront criminal activities.

FUNDING

None.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

*Department of Criminology, Dhaka University, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

REFERENCES

- Amnesty International. (2008, January 18). *Police accountability mechanisms in Denmark*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/eur180012008eng.pdf>
- Finn, P. (2001, March). *Citizen review of police: Approaches and implementation*. National Institute of Justice. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/184430.pdf>
- Suggett, J. (2009, April 3). *Human rights and police reform in Venezuela: A Venezuelan perspective*. Venezuelanalysis. <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/4349/>
- The Business Standard. (2024, September 11). *Police call for volunteers to assist in traffic management in Mirpur*. <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/police-call-volunteers-assist-traffic-management-mirpur-938746>