

Mr. Asaduzzaman Khan, MP  
Minister  
Ministry of Home Affairs  
Bangladesh Secretariat  
Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh  
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Honourable Minister Khan,

We are concerned by the unjust detention of a Bangladeshi folk singer Shariat Boyati who was arrested on 11 January 2020 for sharing his opinions at an event. Stating his belief that music is not forbidden in the Qur'an, Shariat Boyati criticised some hardline Islamic scholars for fabricating and misrepresenting religious norms.

Accused under section 28(2) of the draconian Digital Security Act, which criminalizes the publication or broadcast of "any information that hurts religious values or sentiments", Shariat Boyati faces up to five years' imprisonment and/or a fine of up to 10 million takas.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has called on Bangladesh to "urgently revise the Digital Security Act, to ensure that it is in line with international human rights law and that it provides for checks and balances against arbitrary arrest, detention, and other undue restrictions of the rights of individuals to the legitimate exercise of their freedom of expression and opinion".

As the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief told the UN Human Rights Council, "subjective feelings of offensiveness...should never guide legislative actions, court decisions or other State activities".

Defending music is not a crime. Shariat Boyati must not be punished for exercising his right to freedom of expression as enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

We urge the Bangladesh government to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Shariat Boyati and drop all charges against him and all those implicated solely for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression;
2. Promptly amend the Digital Security Act such that it complies with international human rights law, including the ICCPR, to which Bangladesh is a state party.

Yours sincerely,