

12 individuals have been slapped with a cyber-crime lawsuit

Before the inception of a fast-track tribunal in 2013, you would be hard pressed to find a person indicted because of committing a cyber-crime. Hardly a surprise as cyber-crime laws in Bangladesh were perhaps not as prevalent or widespread even today as it is on, let's say much more digitally advanced nations. It is after all a fairly new avenue, and it was not until April 9, 2018, Bangladesh listed its new Digital Security Bill in parliament, which was then sent to a parliamentary standing committee for review. The proposed law was in part intended to replace section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act (ICT Act) 2006.

Now when the occasion does arrive, especially if it is a high profile one it tends to catch the nation's attention, as was the case with Monirul Islam, a rubber plantation worker in Srimongol, southern Bangladesh, who was arrested on April 2017, over allegations of defaming the Bangladesh's Prime Minister and "harming the image of Bangladesh".

So, when news filters through that not one but a total of 12 individuals and organizations (listed below, starting with the primary defendant) have been slapped with a cyber-crime lawsuit, filed in accordance with the now freshly inducted Digital Security Act, it forces you to take notice.

Our court correspondent who is already fairly busy these days, hurried over to the Magistrate's court in Rajbari, where the lawsuit was filed by one Mr Akbar Ali, against the staff and contributors of an online based news Publication called 'PortalBangladesh.com'. Our correspondent was able to find out that defamatory article bearing abusive messages and comments against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her family were published by this news outlet. The lawsuit specifically names those involved in writing the article and of course those who published it subsequently, including the co-editor of PortalBangladesh.com. Nevertheless, the lawsuit was filed on 12 March and the names of those accused along with 'PortalBangladesh.com' are, Md. Rashed Alam, MD Anisuzzaman, Azir Uddin, Shah Mohammad Shahinur Rab, MD Hasnain, Mohammad Abu Zobayer Rabbani, MD Sabbir Hossain, Chinmoy Debnath, Nizamuddin Dodon, Moshiul Hossain Khan, Kamrul Islam, MD Tofail Hossain.

Now since the changes have been wrung, anyone found guilty under the new anti-cybercrime laws face serious repercussions including up to 14 years in jail, and a sizeable fine. Our correspondent is yet to determine any ulterior reasons behind the plaintiff's decision to launch a lawsuit of this stature against such a large group. It is unclear whether it was politically motivated as well. The case files meanwhile cite that the plaintiff is merely a devout patriot and an Awami League (current Bangladeshi regime) loyalist.

The defendants meanwhile (most of them as our correspondent found out) were currently plying their trade outside Bangladesh. Due to that very information it has been difficult to garner any information on them.

However we did manage to speak to the investigating office for this lawsuit one Mr Swapan Kumar Majumder, Officer-in-charge of the Rajbari Police station, who are overseeing the general investigations to be conducted regarding this lawsuit. He stated, "Any allegation brought against the honourable Prime Minister, be it small of a large magnitude, is treated with extreme importance here, and a with a level of caution as well. It is easy to just jump to conclusions here without first liaising with the accused individuals here and establishing whether or not the allegations brought have any truth to them." When asked if that has been possible so far he offered, "No because in this unique case, a large portion of the defendants happen to be out of the country and we have only managed to establish that for a few of them. We are yet to trace the whereabouts of all of them. But you shall be informed in due course, so

please no more questions.”

We contacted the Home Ministry for comments on this lawsuit and were rudely declined access to either a spokesperson or representative of the government, by the very irate official who received our call. Any attempts to contact ‘PortalBangladesh.com’ who are at the centre of this lawsuit have been unsuccessful as well.

We will bring you more news about this lawsuit so stay tuned.