Judicial Activism in Bangladesh: 
A Golden Mean Approach
Judicial Activism in Bangladesh: A Golden Mean Approach

By

Ridwanul Hoque
Dedication

The late Moulana Abdul Fattah, my father
Nawal Fattah Hoque, my son
# Table of Contents

Table of Cases .................................................................................................................................................. x

Table of Statutes .................................................................................................................................................. xxvi

Foreword ......................................................................................................................................................... xxviii
Professor Werner Menski

Preface and Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. xxxii

Abbreviations .................................................................................................................................................. xxxviii

Chapter One ................................................................................................................................................... 1
Introduction: Judicial Activism in Perspective
1.1 The wider context
1.2 Focus and scope of the study
1.3 The structure of the book
1.4 A brief note on methodology

Chapter Two ................................................................................................................................................... 18
Dominant Legal Theories, Separation of Powers, and Judicial Activism: The Need for a New Approach
2.1 Deficiencies of existing legal theories and jurisprudence
2.2 Separation of powers and judicial activism: Conflict or congruence?
2.3 Existing debates about the judicial role
2.4 A new approach to legal theories, separation of powers and the judicial role

Chapter Three ............................................................................................................................................. 59
Judicial Activism in a Global Context
3.1 Judicial activism in the USA and the UK
3.2 Judicial activism in South Africa
3.3 Judicial activism in India
3.4 Judicial activism in Pakistan
# Table of Contents

## Chapter Four

Development of Constitutionalism and Judicial Activism in Bangladesh: A Critical Analysis

1. The Constitution and the legal system of Bangladesh: The missing transformativeness
2. The place of the judiciary under the Constitution
3. Judicial activism in the formative years: Kazi Mukhlesur Rahman and the aborted seeds of activism
5. The winds of judicial activism (1989): The basic structure doctrine
6. After democratic restoration (1991-): People as a central focus?

## Chapter Five

Public Interest Judicial Activism in Bangladesh: Beyond Access to Justice

1. The delayed birth of public interest litigation
2. Public interest rights litigation: Measuring judicial activism
3. Suo motu judicial intervention: Public interest at work
4. Public interest constitutionalism litigation: The new public face of the judiciary
5. Post-emergency public interest judicial activism
6. The problems of PIL-based judicial activism in Bangladesh
7. Fundamental rights and fundamental state policy principles: Bridging the divide

## Chapter Six

Judicial (In)activism during the 2007 Emergency

1. Emergency and the Constitution of Bangladesh
2. Emergency and the role of courts
3. The 2007 Emergency in Bangladesh: Judicial passivity or submissivism?
4. Judicial role during the 2007 Emergency: A critique
5. Post-emergency new judicial activism

## Chapter Seven

Overcoming the Barriers of Judicial Agency: Changing Discourses of Remedial Expansion and Comparativism

1. Factors retarding judicial activism
2. Strategic factors that enhance judicial activism
3. Comparativism as activism
Chapter Eight........................................................................................................... 245
Conclusions: Towards Golden Mean Judicial Activism
  8.1 Summary of the findings
  8.2 Balanced and contextualised judicial activism
  8.3 Judicial activism in Bangladesh: The way forward

Appendix .............................................................................................................. 271

Bibliography........................................................................................................ 288

Index .................................................................................................................... 345
## Table of Cases

A v B 1996 (1) KLT 275.
A v Secretary of State for the Home Department [2004] UKHL 56.
A v Secretary of State for the Home Department [2005] 2 WLR 87.
A (FC) v SSHD [2004] UKHL 56.
A. K. Fazlul Hoque v Secretary, Ministry of Housing (2005) 57 DLR (HCD) 725.
A. K. M. Fazlul Quader Chowdhury v Govt. of Pakistan (1957) 9 DLR (Dacca) 139.
Abdul Awal v Mofasiluddin Ahmed (1975) 27 DLR (HCD) 637.
Abdul Baqui Baluch v Pakistan (1968) 20 DLR (SC) 249.
Abdul Bari Sarker v Bangladesh (1994) 46 DLR (AD) 37.
Abdul Gafur v Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1997) 17 BLD (HCD) 453.
Abdul Latif Mirza v Govt. of Bangladesh (1979) 31 DLR (AD) 1.
Abdul Momen v Dhaka City Corporation & Ors (1997) 50 DLR (HCD) 300.
Abdul Momen Chowdhury and Ors v Election Commission, WP No. 2561 of 2005.
Abdur Rashid Sarker v Bangladesh (1996) 48 DLR (AD) 99.
Abdus Shukoor Dada v The State (1976) 28 DLR (HCD) 441.
Abul Kashem v Member (Excise), NBR (1981) 1 BCR (HCD) 279.
Advocate Sultana Kamal and Others v Bangladesh (2009) 14 BLC (HCD) 141.
AFM Naziruddin v Mrs. Hamida Banu (1993) 45 DLR (AD) 38.
Ahammed v Ayesha 1990 (1) KLT 172.
Ahmed Nazir v Bangladesh (1975) 27 DLR (HCD) 199.
Al-Amin Construction Co. v Govt. of Bangladesh (2003) 55 DLR (HCD) 510.
Alam Ara Huq v Govt. of Bangladesh (1990) 42 DLR (HCD) 98.
Aleya Begum v Bangladesh (2001) 53 DLR (HCD) 63.
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Al-Jehad Trust v Federation of Pakistan PLD 1996 SC 324.
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Amareesh Chakravarty v Bangladesh (1979) 31 DLR (AD) 240.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asma Jilani v Punjab PLD 1972 SC 139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated Provincial Picture Houses v Wednesbury Corporation [1948] 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KB 223.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ataur Rahman v BM Muhibur Rahman (2009) 14 BLC (AD) 61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ataur Rahman v Md. Nasim 52 (2000) DLR (HCD) 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azad Rickshaw Puller Union v State of Punjab, AIR 1981 SC 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. L. Wadehra (Dr.) v Union of India (1996) 2 SCC 594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Singh v Union of India (2004) 3 SCC 363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baker v Canada (Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration) [1999] 2 SCR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>817.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BALCO Employees’ Union v India (2002) 2 SCC 333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bandhua Mukti Morcha v Union of India, (1984) 3 SCC 161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh v Abdur Rob (1981) 33 DLR (AD) 142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh v Dr. Shamima Sultana Rita Civ. P. No. 485 of 2002 in the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appellate Division, Bangladesh Supreme Court (unreported).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh v Dr. Dhiman Chowdhury (1995) 47 DLR (AD) 52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh v Mahbubuddin Ahmed (1998) 18 BLD (AD) 87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh v Md. Salimullah (1983) 35 DLR (AD) 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh v Samboon Asavhan (1980) 32 DLR (AD) 252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh v Sheikh Hasina (2008) 60 DLR (AD) 90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh v Unimarine S. A. Panama (1977) 29 DLR (AD) 252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh v Winifred Rubie (1982) 2 BLD (AD) 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Beverage Industries Ltd v Rowshan Akhter and Others (2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62 DLR (HCD) 483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Biman Corporation v Rabia Bashri Irene (2003) 55 DLR (AD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>132.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Italian Marble Works Ltd v Bangladesh (2006) 14 BLT (</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special) (HCD) 1; (2010) 62 DLR (HCD) 70 (judgment of 29 August</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Krishi Bank v Meghna Enterprise (1998) 50 DLR (AD) 194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh National Women Lawyers’ Association v Jahangirnagar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University, WP No. 3271/1998.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Paribesh Andolan v Bangladesh (2006) 58 DLR (HCD) 441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1994) 46 DLR (HCD) 426</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Retired Govt. Employees’ Welfare Association v Bangladesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1999) 51 DLR (AD) 121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Sangbadpatra Parishad v Bangladesh (1991) 43 DLR (AD) 126.</td>
</tr>
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Judicial Activism in Bangladesh

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Hamidul Huq Chowdhury v Bangladesh (1982) 34 DLR (HCD) 190; (1981) 33 DLR (HCD) 381.
Hasina Begum v Bangladesh (Vasanteck Slum Eviction), WP No. 567 of 2003.
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Himachal Pradesh v Parent of a Student at Medical College, Simla (1985) 3 SCC 169.
H. M. Ershad v Bangladesh (2001) 21 BLD (AD) 69.
Hoffman v South African Airways 2001 (1) SA 1 (CC); 1997 (6) BCLR 708 (CC).
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K v Minister of Safety and Security 2005 (3) SA 179 (SCA).
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Kapila Hingorani v State of Bihar 2003 SCCL Com 472.
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Kazi Mukhlesur Rahman v Bangladesh (1974) 26 DLR (AD) 44 (Berubari Case).
Khairul Alam Pipul v Bangladesh, WP No. 1171 of 2006.
Khandaker Moshtaque Ahmed v Bangladesh (1982) 34 DLR (AD) 222.
Khawaza Tariq Rahim v Federation of Pakistan PLD 1992 SC 646.
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Khushi Kabir v Bangladesh and Others, WP No. 3091 of 2000.
Kudrat-E-Elahi Panir v Bangladesh (1992) 44 DLR (AD) 319.
Kumar Padma Prasad v Union of India (1992) 2 SCC 428.
L. Chandra Kumar v India (1997) 3 SCC 261.
Laxmi Kant Pandey v Union of India AIR 1984 SC 469.
Lutfur Rahman v Election Commissioner (1975) 27 DLR (HCD) 278.
M. Abdul Huq v Fazlul Quader Chowdhury (1963) 15 DLR (Dacca) 355 (affirmed in PLD 1963 SC 486).
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M. C. Mehta v Union of India (1991) 2 SCC 137.
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Md. Shahanewas v Govt. of Bangladesh (1998) 18 BLD (HCD) 337.
M. G. Bhuiyan v Bangladesh (1981) 1 BCR (AD) 80.
Mia Ahmed Kabir v Bangladesh (1998) 50 DLR (HCD) 496.
Minerva Mills v Union of India AIR 1980 SC 1789.
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Mofizur Rahman v Govt. of Bangladesh (1982) 34 DLR (AD) 321.
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Mrs Farzana Muazzem v SEC and Others (2002) 54 DLR (HCD) 66.
M/s A. T. J. Industries v Govt. of Bangladesh (1976) 28 DLR (HCD) 27.
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Mujibur Rahman v Bangladesh (1993) 13 BLD (AD) 54.
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(HCD) 201.
Shahabuddin Chisti v RAJKUK (2009) 61 DLR (AD) 73
Shahriiar Rashid Khan v Bangladesh (1998) 18 BLD (AD) 55.
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TABLE OF STATUTES

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If leading global minds like Jacques Derrida and Amartya Sen tell us almost in unison that justice is always ‘in the making’ and is never perfectly reached, lawyers should long ago have realised that they have their work cut out forever in the arduous task of finding the right balance between ideal and practice. A lot of legal writing these days, however, under attractive banners like ‘international law,’ ‘human rights’ and ‘good governance’ engages in simplistic fantasies about an ideal world. Worse, many authors prescribe their own versions of soft-sounding remedies that may be quite harsh and are often plainly unrealistic. Even less constructively, it has become a fashion to critique ‘third world’ abuses of law and power without offering meaningful guidance on how to solve mankind’s perennial problems over justice, which of course also plague the ‘first world’, only in different forms and often under more sophisticated covers. This smug tendency to advise others, especially ‘Oriental others’ on how to cultivate justice has made a growth industry out of certain aspects of Eurocentric and North American legal academia, with attractive offerings of courses, snazzy and expensive special programmes and even international missions purportedly designed to make this world a better place.

Since many such initiatives are driven by privileged people from the West, there is an element of self-interested activism in much of this, which ultimately may just lead to cushy jobs for so-called progressive people and/or their acolytes, with pompous claims occupying moral high grounds that may be little else than newly colonised islands of self-interested idealism in a global sea of continuing poverty and deprivation. Many academics can talk endlessly and with ease about poverty alleviation, activisms of all kinds, and now prominently post-conflict reconstruction, without ever having to dirty their hands with the polluting real concerns of the ‘slumdogs’ of this world. Sitting in judgment from the high table perspective of Western academia seems such an easy task, but is it ultimately constructive? And, does it tell us enough about law itself as a tool for achieving progress on the road to justice?

When an elite academic from a less developed country embarks on building a legal career, whether as a practitioner or an academic, s/he has many crucial choices to make about methodology and ideology. Choices
also have to be made about how to understand and enliven the meaning and application of activism in a world that remains full of basic rights abuses despite glorious statements and brilliant theories. In a recent conference, an experienced academic from a border region of the East/West and North/South divide suggested that by now lawyers know a lot about law, but when it comes to choice making, do we grab the right tools to accomplish the job in hand? Or do we simply fall back to well-established old models of law as command of the sovereign or slippery rule of law symbolisms to prescribe wonder drugs for legal development and the cultivation of justice? While most lawyers indeed know quite well that law is in reality a plurality of pluralities, they almost instinctively reach for plumbing tools that are just not sufficiently sophisticated to plug the constant leaks of justice and the leakages of accountability and responsible governance that appear all over the globe. We should know better, and we often do know better, but we simply are not activist enough.

What Upendra Baxi would call ‘hard labour with a pen’ becomes of necessity a form of political intervention in which a scholar puts his or her conscience on the block in an effort to make a career and–hopefully–also to make a difference. Those of us who like to fool ourselves that we can create a better world by writing books rather than digging wells or teaching people how to raise goats or chickens need to do continuous soul-searching, which in some parts of the world is called *ijtihad*, to maintain an activist stance that continues to be able to improve this world.

When Ridwanul Hoque first embarked on the research for the present book, which was to lead to a PhD as a foundation for a solid academic career, he was brimming with globally inspired ideals about judicial activism and the power of judges. But as a Bangladeshi lawyer, he also knew deep down that reality is cruelly different. As a public law expert, he was aware of the ease with which one nation could suppress another, and how easily strong individuals could exploit their privileges. He knew how quickly electoral mandates could turn into dictatorships and how easy it was, even at the level of college politics, to sideline peripheral players in any scenario through purportedly due processes of law. Nurtured in the hothouse of Bangladeshi illusions about nation-building and good governance, Ridwan thus embarked on a journey of researching how–and ultimately even whether–judicial activism could make a real difference. The hope remained that there must be a right way, a correct path, familiar themes to Muslims and really all humans, at the end of the day. But this hope was always threatened by the unsatisfactory realities of political and legal abuse and by disrespect for the concerns of those who need the protection of others. Somehow, there was always opposition to whatever
was suggested or done, fights over principles and practice, violent disagreements over how justice was to be perceived and be apportioned.

In re-examining global legal theory and testing it against the troublesome realities of his own jurisdiction, a country that in 2011 will celebrate only its 40th birthday, Ridwan did not shy away from taking a critical and even self-critical approach to call a spade a spade where necessary, and to pinpoint abuses of law and procedure where they occurred. Writing about judicial activism easily gets shackled by fussy and pedestrian debates about what judges may or may not do as unelected agents of governance. The book produced here out of the foundations of the doctoral thesis goes much beyond such reductionist pedestrianisation of law, for it courageously lifts the debate into the skies of global legal realism. The analysis perceptively addresses bottlenecks of justice, identifying shackles and mental blocks in our own minds against activating concerns for justice for the common citizen. The delayed birth of public interest litigation in Bangladesh is clearly not only due to colonial manipulation of legal minds and of governance. It creates a lot of continuing pain and injustice because even post-colonial governments that rule in the name of the people have been constantly tempted to abuse power. Bangladeshis know only too well that this is not even an issue of party politics or of a particular personality trait; it seems to be a systemic defect built into post-colonial structures of governance in South Asia and elsewhere.

Bangladesh is a case in point for such tortuous neglect of principles of good governance, disregard of basic norms of public service and particularly accountability of those in power. Rather than enjoying the ruler’s privilege and authority, destructive positioning and petty politicking have squandered precious resources and much goodwill that this new nation found on its contested birth. It has been easy to condemn this young country and its not so young leading elites for lack of concern for justice and for creating barriers to benign judicial intervention in cases of abuse. This excellent detailed study partly blames traditional anglocentric legal education for lack of sensitivity about culture-specific problems over basic justice. But it also demonstrates that controlling abuse of public power and private privileges remains a critical challenge not just for Bangladeshi judges, but also for the amazingly rich, though often not properly managed nation of Bangladesh, and for the whole world.

This fine book is therefore much more than a case study of the author’s familiar terrain or a critical description of a messy national jurisdiction. It is a wonderful and ultimately very insightful illustration of the global challenge of legal navigation–kite flying, as I call it now–in which easy