



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: BANGLADESH

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Challenges to Religious Freedom in Bangladesh

By Harrison Akins, Policy Analyst

In March 2020, Freedom House's [Annual Report on Freedom in the World](#) downgraded Bangladesh's political rights score; the country, under the rule of the Awami League and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, was deemed to be "partly free," where "due process guarantees are poorly upheld and security forces carry out a range of human rights abuses with near impunity." The World Justice Project's [2020 Rule of Law Index](#) likewise noted this decline, lowering Bangladesh's global ranking to 115 out of 128 countries.

Amidst the Bangladeshi governments' broader crackdown on civil rights, freedom of religion or belief continues to be impacted, especially for the country's religious minorities—including Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and Ahmadi Muslims. Religious freedom within Bangladesh faces a number of existing and new challenges. Among them are the ongoing problems with the legacy of the Vested Property Act; the introduction and enforcement of the Digital Security Act with provisions that criminalize blasphemy; the rise of religious extremism; and challenges posed by local law enforcement. This country update gives a background of Bangladesh's religious freedom conditions and then provides an overview of current concerns and how they pose ongoing challenges to freedom of religion or belief in the country.

USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Background

Bangladesh is a majority Sunni Muslim country, comprising approximately 90 percent of the population. The remaining population consists of Hindus (9.5 percent) and smaller communities of Christians, Buddhists, Ahmadi Muslims, and Animists (less than 1 percent). Bangladesh's [constitution](#) asserts secularism as one of the fundamental principles of state policy, but according to Article 2(a), "The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal rights in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions." In 2015, the Bangladeshi Supreme Court rejected a petition challenging Islam's status as the state religion. Article 41 further protects "freedom of religion," including the "right to profess, practice or propagate any religion" and the right of "every religious community or denomination ... to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions." These rights, however, are "subject to law, public order and morality."



Despite constitutional guarantees for religious freedom, religious minorities experience discrimination and have faced societal pressure to migrate to India, often as a by-product of broader political instability. The mass displacement of religious minorities, especially Hindus, stems from complex historical events—including [Partition](#); anti-Hindu [rioting](#) in then East Pakistan in response to perceived assaults on Islam and Muslims by India’s Hindu majority; and the Pakistan military’s [mass atrocities](#) against citizens during the 1971 war that led to Bangladesh’s independence. It is [estimated](#) that 90 percent of the 5.5 million Bangladeshi refugees that reached India by June 1971 were Hindus.

Vested Property Act

In 1965, Pakistan introduced the Enemy Property Act permitting authorities to confiscate land and buildings owned by individuals, particularly Hindus, who had either migrated to India (even if only temporarily) or were perceived to support India. After gaining independence, Bangladesh retained the law, re-naming it the Vested Property Act. In 1974, the High Court directed the government to refrain from confiscating property under the law. Despite this ruling, government officials continued to arbitrarily designate Hindu-owned land as enemy property with little oversight; confiscate the land and evict the owners; and then lease it out to the majority population. According to some [estimates](#), 1.5 million households have been impacted by this

law which led to the loss of over three million acres, 87 percent of which was Hindu-owned property and temples. Through the Vested Property (Return) Act in 2001 and the Vested Property Return (Amendment) Act in 2011, the government repealed the Vested Property Act and allowed for affected individuals to file claims for the return of confiscated property. Religious minorities, however, have [complained of costly delays in adjudicating claims due to](#) indifferent or corrupt local government officials handling the individual cases, despite instructions from the Ministry of Law for the speedy disposal of land disputes. In 2018, for example, the Ministry of Land [reported](#) that only 15,224 of 118,173 cases filed under the Vested Property (Return) Act had been successfully adjudicated, leading to the recovering of 8,187.5 acres of land, primarily to Hindus. There are also continued reports of land grabs within religious minority communities, including seizure of their houses of worship. Such actions are often [preceded](#) by physical assaults on families to drive them off their land and [reportedly](#) occur with the complicity or direct involvement of local government officials. In September 2019, in recognition of this ongoing problem at the local level, the Land Minister Saifuzzaman Chowdhury [stated](#) that his ministry sent letters to district commissioners that grabbed land should be returned to the rightful owners and the act should be treated as a criminal offense.

Digital Security Act

In October 2018, the Bangladeshi parliament passed the [Digital Security Act](#) (DSA) criminalizing acts within the digital space under the auspices of increasing digital security. Civil rights [organizations](#), however, were quick to point out that many of the DSA's provisions limit civil rights, including freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief. While Bangladesh's Penal Code punishes blasphemy with up to two years in prison and a fine, the DSA further criminalizes blasphemy as a non-bailable offense and increases the penalties. Article 28 of the new law prohibits "Publication, Broadcast, etc. of such information in any website or in any electronic format that hampers the religious sentiment or values." It further reads that any person or group will be considered to have committed a criminal offense under this overly vague provision if they "intentionally or knowingly with the aim of hurting religious sentiments or values or with the intention to provoke publish or broadcast anything by means of any website or any electronic format which hurts religious sentiment or values." The DSA sets as the punishment not more than seven years for the first offense and not more than 10 years for repeat offenses.

In January 2020, Sufi folk singer Shariat Sarker was arrested under the DSA after an Islamic scholar filed charges that comments made by Sarker, and uploaded to YouTube after a December 2019 performance, hurt the "religious sentiments" of Muslims. The offending remarks [included](#) arguments that the Qur'an does not prohibit music and statements he has made against religion being used as a political tool. Sarker was imprisoned after having his bail petition rejected while he awaits trial.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [urged](#) the Bangladeshi government to "urgently revise the DSA, to ensure that it is in line with international human rights laws 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."

The presence of such laws also encourages non-state actors to target individuals suspected of blasphemy. In October 2019, for example, the religious group

Shorbodolio Muslim Oikya Parishad (All Party Muslim Unity Council) [called](#) for the death of a Hindu man after accusing him of posting blasphemous content on Facebook that insulted the Prophet Muhammad. The accused individual was arrested under the DSA.

Thousands of the group's supporters launched protests in the Bhola District, approximately 100 kilometers from the capital city of Dhaka, in response to the postings. The Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council reported that several Hindu temples and Hindu homes were stoned amidst the protests. Additional police were deployed and officers opened fire to disperse the protestors, killing four people. The police later filed First Information Reports (FIRs) against 5,000 unidentified individuals involved in the protests. It was later revealed that the accused individual had his Facebook account hacked and was being blackmailed for money under threat of having additional blasphemous content posted under his name. After this revelation, however, the leadership of the Shorbodolio Muslim Oikya Parishad continued to call for punitive action against the Hindu man, rather than the two Muslim men behind the posts, with Prime Minister Hasina [warning](#) that government action would be taken against any incitement to violence.

Local Law Enforcement Challenges

Beyond concerns about the aforementioned laws, religious minorities also face societal discrimination and campaigns of harassment and intimidation from extremist groups, which includes the [spread](#) of hate speech and disinformation on social media. Conservative Muslim clerics and Sunni hardline groups have repeatedly denounced non-Muslim faiths, including accusing Christians of forcing Muslims to convert, as well as speaking against other Muslim sects. In an April 2019 rally, for example, the leadership of Hefazat-e-Islam, an umbrella group of extreme Islamic groups, [called](#) on the Bangladeshi government to declare officially Ahmadi Muslims to be non-Muslims. Religious groups, such as Hefazat-e-Islam, also have continued to exert pressure on the Bangladeshi government for policy changes, most notably in the country's [educational curricula](#) and ensuring that religious minorities are edited out of Ministry of Education-approved textbooks.

This inflammatory rhetoric is regularly accompanied by physical assaults against religious minorities, often not only for the purposes of land grabs and monetary extortion, but also to express anger over alleged blasphemy or personal disputes, or simply to instill fear in the broader community. Major attacks in recent years include:

- In 2016, alleged Islamic State affiliates in Bangladesh conducted a series of attacks against individuals within religious minority communities, in addition to secular bloggers, foreigners, and LGBT activists. Attacks against religious minorities included the [murder](#) of a Christian pastor after receiving death threats for his conversion and evangelistic work; a Hindu tailor [hacked](#) to death outside his shop in Tangail; a 65-year-old Christian man [murdered](#) near his church in Bonpura, Bangladesh, after leaving Sunday services; a Hindu priest [killed](#) with his body nearly decapitated in Jhenaidah District; a law student [murdered](#) for promoting secularism online and supporting the removal of Islam as Bangladesh's state religion; the senior editor of Bangladesh's only LGBT magazine [hacked](#) to death in his home in Dhaka; and gunmen [killing](#) twenty people, mostly foreigners, in an attack on a Dhaka bakery.
- In November 2017, a mob [burned](#) down a Hindu village after false rumors spread that a Hindu youth from the area had insulted the Prophet of Islam on Facebook. One person was killed in the incident, five others seriously injured, and over 30 homes destroyed;
- On March 30, 2018, a mob [attacked](#) an Ahmadiyya mosque in Jamalpur District, injuring 22 Ahmadi Muslims;
- In October 2018, unidentified individuals [destroyed](#) a Buddhist monastery in Khagrachhari District in the Chittagong Hill Tract region; and
- In early February 2019, extremist groups led coordinated [attacks](#) against the homes of Ahmadi Muslims in Panchagarh ahead of an annual Ahmadiyya convention known as a Jalsa, despite local authorities having already canceled the three-day event. Approximately 50 Ahmadi Muslims were injured in the attacks.

Heightened Government Response and Ongoing Challenges

The Bangladeshi government, concerned by the rise of religious extremism and continuing violent attacks against religious minorities, has increased its attention to this problem at the national level. Following the 2012 mob [attack](#) against Buddhist monasteries in Ramu, Prime Minister Hasina visited the area, met with the Buddhist community, and pledged government support for reconstruction of the destroyed monasteries. A year later, she [presided](#) over an opening ceremony for the rebuilt religious institutions. Beginning in 2016, the government instituted a sweeping [crackdown](#) on religious extremism, leading to over 14,000 arrests of suspected militants along with subsequent [efforts](#) to challenge the hate speech of radical Islamic clerics. In April 2019, under directions from Prime Minister Hasina, imams across the country [delivered](#) a khutbah, or sermon, during Friday prayers denouncing terrorism and extremism.

Despite such efforts at the national level, religious minorities still face challenges stemming from extremism and broader societal prejudices. Civil society groups, in particular, have pointed to the gap between national level policies and local officials' actions. In recent years, a number of local administrative and police officials have demonstrated a general apathy toward promoting religious tolerance, strengthening protections for religious minorities, properly investigating crimes, and ensuring accountability for attacks against religious minorities.

This has particularly been a challenge for indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT) region of eastern Bangladesh—largely comprised of Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, and Animists—who are still dealing with the consequences of a twenty year civil conflict between the Shanti Bahini and Bangladeshi military. The [1997 CHT Peace Accord](#) resolved the conflict and called for the government to “make efforts to maintain separate culture and traditions of the tribals.” CHT political leaders, however, are still [pushing](#) for the full implementation of this accord and complain of continued campaigns of forced conversion by settlers; [attacks](#) by non-state actors; and land grabs without adequate responses from local officials. In August 2019, following the murder of a Buddhist monk, for instance, a Buddhist organization, Parbatya Bhikkhu Sangha, [resorted](#) to forming a human chain around the Deputy Commissioner's office in Rangamati in the CHT to pressure him to arrest the culprits and increase security



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for the Buddhist community. In September 2019, human rights activists and Buddhist leaders similarly [expressed](#) frustration about the slow work of local courts in Cox's Bazar in administering justice for the 2012 Ramu attacks. The apathy, and at times complicity, of local officials for discrimination and attacks against minorities has created a culture of impunity for non-state actors to continue to resort to violence, especially with regard to land grabs or personal disputes. Anti-minority bias and corruption among local officials is [compounded](#) by issues of low capacity that continue to plague law enforcement institutions in many part of the country.

Conclusion

In many of Prime Minister Hasina's public addresses, both [within](#) Bangladesh and [abroad](#), she has highlighted the importance of religious freedom and religious tolerance for her country. Despite such rhetoric and other positive efforts made by its political leadership, Bangladesh faces a number of ongoing challenges to the freedom of religion or belief, especially for its religious minorities. With the United States and Bangladesh strengthening their bilateral relationship, including

cooperating on the influx of nearly one million Rohingya refugees from Burma since 2017, U.S. officials have continued to engage with Bangladesh's religious communities, including numerous visits to Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian religious sites by the U.S. Ambassador in Dhaka, and have stressed the importance of protecting religious freedom, especially pointing to the threat [posed](#) by religious extremism. The U.S. government should continue to support Bangladesh's efforts to combat religious extremism and urge that all levels of the Bangladeshi government—from the local to national level—work to safeguard freedom of religion or belief for all religious minorities in accordance with international human rights standards.

Bangladesh also faces new pressures from the spread of COVID-19 and resulting lockdown of large parts of the country. As one of the world's most densely populated countries and with poor healthcare infrastructure and limited resources, Bangladesh faces tremendous public health [challenges](#) for all of its residents. As it addresses those challenges, the Bangladeshi government should ensure that no religious minorities are singled out for discriminatory treatment.

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