

Bangladesh: Freedom of religion or belief

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Introduction

Minority groups in Bangladesh continue to face discrimination in the law, in society and in their treatment by enforcement agencies.

Although secularism is enshrined in Article 12 of the 1972 constitution, Article 2(A) asserts that Islam is the state religion and that other religions may be practised in peace and harmony. However, a series of attacks that took place between 2015 and 2017 resulted in the deaths of several bloggers, atheists and members of religious minority groups: a worrying indication of the fate of anyone holding or expressing an opinion contrary to the state and to Islam.

Religious minorities and indigenous communities continue to be targets of discrimination, violence and land grabbing in Bangladesh. Political unrest led to repeated cycles of violence in 2013, 2014 and early 2015, with religious minorities becoming the victims of intimidation and attacks by Islamist groups and radical opposition party members.

Attacks on religious minorities

Multiple attacks on Ahmadi and Shi'a mosques, Buddhist and Hindu temples, as well as threats to Christian leaders, reflect the ongoing struggles for religious minorities. Hindu and indigenous communities are vulnerable to gender based violence, with evidence of repeated cases of rape, forced marriage and conversion of underage girls.

- In November 2015 ten priests from different churches in Rangpur received written death threats with a warning that "Those who are preaching Christianity in Bangladesh must leave this world one by one."
- On 26 November 2015 masked gunmen stormed a Shi'a mosque in Haripur village in Bogra, north-west Bangladesh, killing one person and injuring three others.
- On 30 June 2016 Mong Shwe Lung Marma, a Buddhist, was murdered in Bandarban.
- On 30 October 2016 a violent mob attacked several Hindu temples at Nasirnagar Upazila, Chittagong, after Rasraj Das, a Hindu fisherman, allegedly uploaded a blasphemous post to Facebook.
- On 9 May 2017 an Ahmadi cleric, Imam Mustafizur Rahman, from Ishwarganj, northern Bangladesh, was attacked by three men with cleavers who stormed the mosque.

While the government has promised extra security to those facing severe intimidation, more effective and holistic action is necessary to eliminate the underlying motives for these threats and to combat the growing fundamentalist voices threatening freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

Land-grabbing

Hindus, Christians and indigenous groups are victims of land-grabbing. The Enemy Property Act was historically used to systematically strip Hindus of their rights to property. Although this law has been repealed, land grabbing remains a serious issue, with a multitude of religious minorities suffering daily from land insecurity.

This is an issue that consumes the nation's court system. According to the Association of Land Reform and Development, approximately 75% of the estimated three million pending court cases are related to land disputes.

Freedom of expression

Due to the recent threats and attacks perpetrated against secular activists, human rights defenders and religious minorities, there is concern that the space for civil society and dissent is being curbed. Increasing violations of freedom of expression are indicated by attacks on bloggers and publishers of secular material.

Despite the introduction of a National Human Rights Commission in 2010, these concerns are intensified by new and revised laws that impede freedom of expression, particularly the Information and Technology Act 2006 (ICT Act).

Rohingya Muslim refugees

Since October 2016 an escalating humanitarian crisis in Rakhine State in Burma/Myanmar has left thousands displaced and hundreds dead, with reports of the destruction of entire villages and thousands of homes in attacks by the Burma Army. The UN Secretary-General described the situation as "catastrophic" and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights called it a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing".

Reports estimate that over 400,000 Rohingyas have fled to Bangladesh seeking refuge as the humanitarian crisis reaches unprecedented levels.

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Recommendations

- Urge the government of Bangladesh to address violent acts of religious intolerance, discrimination and gender-based violence, and to uphold its constitutional commitments to secularism, freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression, freedom of thought and the rule of law.
- Encourage the government of Bangladesh to take swift action to tackle rising terrorism and violence, ensuring impartial investigations and the prosecution of those responsible for attacks against religious minorities, in order to end the culture of impunity around these crimes.
- Call on the government of Bangladesh to take more effective and holistic action to eliminate the underlying motives for threats to religious minorities and to combat the growing fundamentalist voices threatening FoRB.
- Urge the government of Bangladesh to repeal section 57 of the ICT Act and to ensure all other sections of the Act are compatible with international standards on freedom of expression.
- In bilateral meetings, urge the government of Bangladesh to strengthen rule of law through impartial investigations into attacks on human rights defenders; implement reforms to combat impunity for these attacks; and enforce protective measures for their safety.
- Urge the government of Bangladesh to raise awareness of the Vested Property Return Act among religious communities, and digitise the land record system to minimise land disputes and use of fake documents. In addition, the government must tackle corruption within political parties and the Ministry of Land and land registry offices, and prosecute politicians and officials involved in land grabbing.
- Support the government of Bangladesh in its efforts to implement an effective resettlement programme for Rohingya refugees and improve access to health, education, water and sanitation, disaster risk management, and social protection.