

Legal framework

Secularism is enshrined in Article 12 of the 1972 constitution of Bangladesh, though Article 2(A) asserts that Islam is the state religion.

Section 295(A) of the penal code criminalises the insult or attempted insult of religion ‘with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging religious feelings’ with a punishment of up to two years in prison, with a fine, or both. Section 298 further criminalises making gestures or sounds, or placing objects in the sight of an individual ‘with the deliberate intention of wounding the religious feelings of any person’, punishable with up to one year in prison, with a fine, or both.

These sections have historically been used by the authorities to charge individuals for acts perceived to be a slight against Islam.

Political context

In June 2024 student-led protests broke out against plans to restructure quota-based systems for government job recruitment. In July security forces led by the ruling Awami League violently repressed protesters, resulting in over 1,400 deaths, according to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Fact Finding Report published in February 2025.¹

As protests continued, on 5 August 2024, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned from her position and fled to India, bringing an end to a 15-year premiership that saw her win four consecutive terms in elections marked by irregularities, corruption, the arrests of opposition activists, and political unrest leading to repeated cycles of violence which saw religious minorities subjected to intimidation and attacks by Islamist groups and radical opposition party members.

Hasina’s resignation prompted a rise in anti-minority sentiment in both Bangladesh and neighbouring India. Homes, businesses and places of worship belonging to the Hindu community in Bangladesh were subjected to widespread targeted attacks, with right-wing Hindu nationalist groups in India attacking Bengali Muslims in retaliation.

In February 2026 the centre-right Bangladesh Nationalist Party secured more than two-thirds of parliamentary seats in the country’s general election, with the Jamaat Islamist party coming second. The Awami League was banned from participating.

Violations of freedom of religion or belief

Although the constitution provides for equality for all religions and prohibits discrimination on religious grounds,

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

Furthermore, persistent targeted attacks and threats from the post-August 2024 violence against Ahmadi, Christian and Hindu communities to recent mob-driven harassment of secular writers and minority activists demonstrate that individuals expressing views contrary to hardline religious norms or holding minority beliefs remain at serious risk.² Religious minorities and indigenous communities continue to be targets of discrimination, violence, and land grabbing.

Attacks on religious minorities

Concerns have also been raised over the Waz Mahfil (Islamic gathering) sermons that take place during winter in rural areas. The sermons, preached by radical clerics, often contain inflammatory hate speech and discriminatory language towards religious minorities, which fuel an environment of fear and intolerance. Numerous Christian leaders have also been threatened.

Following the 2024 political transition, radical clerics operating within the Waz Mahfils have gained heightened political clout and public visibility, benefiting from the broader influence of hardline Islamist organisations in the post-regime change landscape. Local law enforcement and administrative authorities frequently hesitate to regulate these mass gatherings, allowing radical speakers to preach inflammatory rhetoric targeting religious minorities, secular figures and non-mainstream Muslim groups with impunity. Their physical footprint is further amplified through digital platforms, particularly Facebook, TikTok and YouTube, where edited clips and highlights of hateful sermons circulate rapidly to millions of users. This digital proliferation transforms localised rural preaching into nationwide campaigns of communal intimidation, fuelling online harassment, mob mobilisation and targeted hate speech against minority communities.

The Ahmadiyya community is particularly vulnerable and faces increased harassment, as Islamist groups demand that the government declares Ahmadis as non-Muslims. There is evidence that police have been instructed to place Ahmadis under nationwide surveillance, including by approaching members of the community outside of their mosques to collect personal details. On 14 January 2020 in Brahmanbaria town, a mosque belonging to the Ahmadiyya community and nearby homes were attacked by madrasa students. Following the incident, the students rallied in front of the Brahmanbaria Press Club demanding a law be passed to declare Ahmadis as non-Muslims.

1 OHCHR, Fact-Finding Report: Human Rights Violations and Abuses related to the Protests of July and August 2024 in Bangladesh, 12 February 2025 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ohchr-fact-finding-report-human-rights-violations-and-abuses-related>

2 See: Amnesty International, Bangladesh: Interim government must take immediate actions to protect Hindu and other minority communities, 14 August 2024 <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/latest/bangladesh-interim-government-must-take-concrete-action-address-injustices-toward/>; Human Rights Watch, World Report 2026: Bangladesh, 8 February 2026 <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2026/country-chapters/bangladesh>; USCIRF, Factsheet: Bangladesh, July 2025 <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2025-07/2025%20Factsheet%20Bangladesh.pdf>

Hindu and indigenous communities are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence, with evidence of repeated cases of rape, forced marriage and conversion of minors disproportionately targeting Hindus. Sustained attacks on the community have been linked to the decline in Hindu population.

Property rights

Land grabbing remains a serious issue for religious minorities in Bangladesh. The Enemy Property Act, historically used to strip Hindus of their property, has been repealed. Despite this, many Hindu families have been stripped of their rights and are unable to recover their landholdings. The Association of Land Reform and Development estimates that 75% of approximately three million pending court cases relate to land disputes. The government has failed to take effective measures to reverse the impact of property seizures.

Freedom of expression

There are concerns that the space for civil society and dissent is being curbed, with rising threats and attacks against secular activists, human rights defenders, and religious minorities.

These concerns are intensified by new and revised laws that impede freedom of expression, particularly the Cyber Security Act (CSA) 2023, which replaced the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) 2018 while retaining many of its restrictive provisions. These legal frameworks contain several vague and overly broad provisions, which are used by the government to silence dissent.

For example, between February and March 2025 human rights defender, writer and cultural activist Nahid Hasan Knowledge was charged under Section 28 of the CSA for 'hurting religious sentiments' following local campaigns by hardline religious groups in Kurigram. Police raided his residence following public demonstrations demanding his arrest.

Although the interim government subsequently approved the Cyber Protection Ordinance (CPO) in late 2024 to replace the CSA and dismiss hundreds of speech-based cases, civil society and human rights organisations note that Section 26 of the CPO retains restrictions on 'hurting religious sentiments,' allowing local authorities and hardline groups to continue leveraging religious sentiment allegations to silence minority and dissenting voices.

Terrorism

Terrorism remains a cause for concern. In March 2025 thousands of members of the banned Hizbut Tahrir Islamist organisation marched near the Baitul Mokarram Mosque in Dhaka demanding the establishment of an Islamic caliphate. Police dispersed protesters using batons and stun grenades, and reported that many were injured and several were arrested during the violence.

In July 2025 police arrested two individuals for suspected connections with the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP, often referred to as the Pakistani Taliban).³ In September the country's inspector general of police reported that law enforcement were closely monitoring a number of Bangladeshi citizens who were attempting to join the TTP.⁴

On 26 December an explosion destroyed the Ummul Qura International Madrasa in Hasnabad, Keraniganj, injuring four people. Investigators recovered improvised explosive devices (IEDs), chemical precursors, and other bomb-making materials from the debris and multiple arrests were made under anti-terrorism laws, with court proceedings later revealing that the explosives had been prepared on-site overnight at a facility linked to Islamic State Bengal (ISB), suggesting an accidental detonation within an active militant operation rather than an external attack.

The Rohingya crisis

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that 1.2 million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar are currently residing in Bangladesh, with an estimated 750,000 having fled since August 2017 when the Myanmar military launched so-called 'clearance operations' against the predominantly Muslim community.⁵ The majority reside in camps in Cox's Bazar, which the UNHCR describes as 'highly congested' and 'highly exposed to weather-related hazards, such as cyclones, flooding and landslides'.⁶

As violence continues in Myanmar, and with the military junta standing credibly accused of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide against the Rohingya, the return of the community to the country remains unlikely. The situation has also been exacerbated by sharp reductions in humanitarian aid and development support around the world.

3 The Business Standard, 'Two arrested in Bangladesh for alleged links to Pakistan-based militant group TTP', 16 July 2025 <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/crime/two-arrested-bangladesh-alleged-links-pakistan-based-militant-group-ttp-1189161>

4 Prothomalo, 'Bangladeshis trying to join Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan under surveillance: IGP', 30 September 2025 (Bangla) <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/onul49mpx9>

5 UNHCR, 'UNHCR, humanitarian partners ask the world not to forget Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh', 2 June 2026 <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/unhcr-humanitarian-partners-ask-world-not-forget-rohingya-refugees-bangladesh>

6 UNHCR, Countries: Bangladesh <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/where-we-work/countries/bangladesh>

Recommendations

To the government of Bangladesh:

- Implement holistic policies to eliminate the underlying motives for threats to religious minorities, and to combat growing fundamentalist voices threatening FoRB in Bangladesh.
- Review the vague and overbroad provisions of the Cyber Protection Ordinance (CPO) and ensure all other sections of the Act are compatible with international standards and do not obstruct freedom of expression.
- Implement an effective resettlement programme for Rohingya refugees and improve access to health, education, water and sanitation, disaster risk management, and social protection without delay.
- 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.
- Remain committed to raising 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.

To the government of the United Kingdom:

- Leverage the UK Prime Minister's Special Envoy for FoRB and the FCDO to keep the situation of religious and ethnic minorities in Bangladesh high on the international agenda.
- Continue to provide humanitarian assistance for Rohingya refugees and host communities, while working with international partners to ensure that any future return to Myanmar is safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable, in accordance with international law.
- Engage diplomatic channels to ensure minority faith groups, secular groups and indigenous leaders are directly represented in ongoing constitutional reform discussions.
- Urge the government of Bangladesh, at every appropriate opportunity, to implement the recommendations highlighted in the recommendation section above 'To the government of Bangladesh'.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Urge Bangladesh to guarantee the right to FoRB for all, in law and in practice, in line with Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which the state is party.
- Encourage Bangladesh to issue a standing invitation to UN Special Procedures.
- Urge all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the right to freedom of religion or belief in their reporting on Bangladesh, addressing the vulnerabilities and violations faced by religion or belief communities and those seeking to defend them.
- Utilise the Universal Periodic Review process to raise FoRB violations in Bangladesh and offer recommendations to advance the right to FoRB.
- Call on Bangladesh to conduct impartial, timely investigations into targeted attacks against religious or belief minorities, ensuring that perpetrators are held to account, and to take effective measures to reverse the impact of property seizures.
- Urge Bangladesh to review the Cyber Protection Ordinance (CPO) in line with international standards and ensure it does not obstruct freedom of expression.
- Urge the government of Bangladesh, at every appropriate opportunity, to implement the recommendations highlighted in the recommendation section above 'To the government of Bangladesh'.

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