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BANGLADESH 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution states that Islam is the state religion, but reaffirms the nation is a secular state that “shall ensure equal status and equal rights in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and other religions.” Government officials, including police, were sometimes slow to protect members of minority religious groups from violence, and there were several reports of involvement of government-affiliated actors in such violence. The government took steps to assist victims and restore religious and private property damaged in the violence.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There were a large number of arson attacks and looting of minority religious sites and private homes across the country, especially against the Hindu community. Members of the Sunni Muslim majority at times harassed and physically attacked members of the Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, and Ahmadiyya Muslim minority religious groups. The government and many civil society leaders stated that violence against members of minority religious groups normally had economic or criminal dimensions, and could not be attributed solely to religious belief or affiliation. Members of minority religious groups from lower economic strata were further disadvantaged due to their inability to afford personal security or to motivate officials to provide security against harassment or violence.

In meetings with officials and in public statements, the U.S. embassy expressed strong concern over acts of religious intolerance and encouraged the government to protect the rights of members of minority religious groups. U.S. development programs supported religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 163.7 million (July 2013 estimate). According to the 2011 census, Sunni Muslims constitute 90 percent and Hindus make up 9.5 percent of the total population. The remainder of the population is predominantly Christian (mostly Roman Catholic) and Theravada-Hinayana Buddhist. There also are small numbers of Shia Muslims, Bahais, animists, and Ahmadiyya Muslims. Estimates vary from a few thousand to 100,000 adherents in each group. Ethnic and religious minority groups often

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overlap and are concentrated in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and northern districts. Buddhists are predominantly found among the indigenous (non-Bengali) populations of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Bengali and ethnic minority Christians live in communities across the country, with relatively high concentrations in Barisal City, Gournadi in Barisal District, Baniarchar in Gopalganj, Monipuripara in Dhaka, Christianpara in Mohakhal, Nagori in Gazipur, and Khulna City.

Most noncitizen residents come from families that have lived within the boundaries of what is now Bangladesh for generations and practice Islam. There are approximately 30,000 registered Rohingya refugees from Burma and between 250,000 and 450,000 unregistered Rohingya from Burma practicing Islam in the southeast around Cox's Bazar.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. The constitution provides for the right to profess, practice, or propagate all religions, subject to law, public order, and morality. While Islam is the state religion, the constitution affirms that the country is a secular state. Family law has separate provisions for Muslims, Hindus, and Christians.

An amendment to the constitution bans unions, associations, or parties based on religion.

Under the penal code, statements or acts made with a “deliberate and malicious” intent to insult religious sentiments are subject to fines or up to two years in prison. In addition, the Code of Criminal Procedure states, “The government may confiscate all copies of a newspaper if it publishes anything that creates enmity and hatred among the citizens or denigrates religious beliefs.”

Islamic law plays a role in civil matters pertaining to the Muslim community; however, there is no formal implementation of Islamic law, and it is not imposed on non-Muslims. Alternative dispute resolution is available to individuals for settling family arguments and other civil matters not related to land ownership. With the consent of both parties, arbitrators rely on principles found in Islamic law for settling disputes.

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Under a Supreme Court ruling, fatwas can only be used to settle religious matters and cannot be invoked to justify meting out punishment.

Family laws concerning marriage, divorce, and adoption differ slightly depending on the religious beliefs of the people involved. Muslim and Hindu family laws are codified in the legal system. For example, a Muslim man may marry as many as four wives, although he must obtain the consent of his previous wife or wives before marrying an additional woman. A Christian man may marry only one woman. Under Hindu law in the country there are limited provisions for divorce, such as impotence, torture, or madness, and Hindu widows can legally remarry. The family law of the religion of the two parties concerned governs their marriage rituals and proceedings. While Muslim marriages must be registered with the state, registration for Hindus is optional, and other faiths can determine their own guidelines. There are no legal restrictions on marriage between members of different religious groups.

Under the Muslim family ordinance, females inherit less than males, and wives have fewer divorce rights than husbands. Laws provide some protection for women against arbitrary divorce and polygamy without the consent of the first wife, but the protections generally apply only to registered marriages. Under the law a Muslim husband is required to pay his former wife alimony for three months, but the authorities do not always enforce this requirement.

All religiously affiliated nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must register with the government's NGO Affairs Bureau if they receive foreign financial assistance for social development projects. If they receive no such assistance they are not required to register.

The government operates training academies for imams and proclaims Islamic festival days, but generally does not dictate sermon content or select or pay clergy. The government has the authority to appoint or remove imams, however, and exercises some indirect influence over sermon content in government mosques, including in the national mosque, Baitul Mukarram. The government monitors the content of religious education in madrassahs.

Religious studies are part of the curriculum in government schools. Students attend classes in which their own religious beliefs are taught. Schools with few students from minority religious groups often make arrangements with local churches or temples to hold religious studies classes outside of school hours.

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According to a 2009 World Bank study, 8 percent of primary school students and 19 percent of secondary school students attend “Aliyah” madrassahs, state-regulated private madrassahs teaching a government-approved curriculum. Other primary school students attend “Forkania” madrassahs attached to mosques, “Cadet” madrassahs which blend religious and non-religious studies, secular government schools, NGO-run schools, or do not attend school. There are no known government-run Christian, Hindu, or Buddhist schools, although there are private religious schools throughout the country. Approximately 2 percent of primary school students in rural areas attend “Qaumi” madrassahs, independent private madrassahs that are not regulated by the government.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs administers four funds for religious and cultural activities: the Islamic Foundation, the Hindu Welfare Trust, the Christian Religious Welfare Trust, and the Buddhist Welfare Trust. These religious trusts use their funding for literacy and religious programs, observing festivals, repairing religious buildings, and helping destitute families.

Government Practices

Some government practices restricted religious freedom, such as placing limits on religious speech or failing to prevent or investigate fully acts of violence against religious minorities. Religious minority leaders complained that individuals affiliated with the ruling political party instigated violence against religious minorities for political purposes. The role of religion in the state played a considerable part in the political disagreements between the major parties, although the definition of Islam as the state religion has not been accompanied by any broad changes in the country’s legal framework.

Representatives of religious minorities complained that the government sometimes failed to prevent abuses by nongovernmental actors against them. They stated that police in some instances failed to arrest perpetrators of abuses and that the courts failed to administer justice effectively. Nineteen criminal cases were filed following December 2012 attacks against Buddhists in Ramu, Ukhia, and Teknaf. Police indicted 364 people in seven related cases and made 193 arrests, but the main investigation remained stalled. The local Buddhist youth who reportedly posted inflammatory internet material that sparked the violence remained missing and the investigation team could not record his statement. The youth’s family had no information about his whereabouts or well-being. NGOs, academic observers, and several journalists alleged that the ruling Awami League’s student wing, the Chhatro League, played a critical role in organizing the attacks against Buddhist

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religious sites in Ramu in 2012. Local civil society representatives stated that the top 10 culprits identified in the government's post-Ramu inquiries remained free due to their political connections to the ruling party.

The government response to the December 2012 attacks, however, included 200 million taka (\$2.5 million) in funding for the reconstruction of all 19 burned temples and monasteries by Border Guard Bangladesh and the Bangladesh Army's Engineering Corps. The prime minister inaugurated the rebuilt structures in Ramu and Ukhia on September 3 and reaffirmed her party's commitment to preserving security for the Buddhist community.

In November a mob assaulted a Hindu man and set fire to 26 homesteads in a predominantly Hindu village in Bonogram, Pabna. The police reportedly did not detain any of the perpetrators named by the victim, but did detain an individual who sheltered Hindus during the attack. The violence followed an accusation that a tenth grade Hindu student posted an insult about the Prophet Muhammad on a social networking site. Hundreds of people stormed the student's house and, unable to find him, took his father to the town square, beat him, and set fire to homes. The local government's initial investigation into the posting found no evidence that the student was involved. After the plaintiff filed a case against 300 people, police arrested nine. Local press blamed the attack on a local criminal gang with a history of extorting Hindu businessmen. Both major political parties – the Awami League and the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) – said the gang was under the other's protection.

There were also complaints that the police did not act promptly to contain the violence against Hindus that took place over a two-week period following the February 28 death sentence given to charismatic Islamic leader Delowar Hossain Sayedee. The Puja Committee of Dhaka's main Dhakeshwari Temple reported there were 120 arrests in connection with the attacks there, but the police only transferred one officer (such transfers are a common form of administrative punishment). In the wake of the violence, the prime minister's adviser for international affairs and the minister of industries visited affected areas on March 8 and 9, as did the national human rights commissioner. Authorities also provided temporary accommodation to those made homeless. Victims sought financial compensation for damages and asked law enforcement officials to strengthen their personal protection and file criminal charges against the attackers. The authorities arrested six supporters of the Jamaat-e-Islami party on March 3 in Kotalipara, and four members of Islami Chhatra Shibir (Shibir), Jamaat's student wing, on March 11 in connection with attacks in Banshkhali and Sitakundu.

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The government continued to block internet sites and censor other media content it deemed offensive for religious reasons. In April the Dhaka police arrested bloggers for publishing posts “attack[ing] Islam and Hinduism” and seized their computers, modems, and external hard drives. The Bangladesh Telecommunications and Radio Commission announced April 4 it had removed most of the posts from two blog platforms (somewhereinblog.net and amarblog.com) for defaming Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. Bloggers Subrata Adhikari Shuvo, Russel Parvez, Mashiur Rahman Biplob, and Asif Mohiuddin were indicted in September for violating Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act, which criminalizes the posting of inflammatory or derogatory information online against the state or individuals. The case was ongoing at year’s end.

Local authorities and communities often objected to efforts to convert persons from Islam. On September 14, local officials in Bilbathuagani, Tangail stopped the construction of a Christian office and meeting space after 25 local Muslims converted to Christianity. Reverend Mrinal Kanti Baroi reported the council chairman, Rafiqul Islam Faruk, summoned him to the local government offices and threatened to beat him if he did not revert to Islam. In response, Baroi reportedly cited the constitution’s protection of religious freedom to Faruk and society elders and appealed to higher authorities for assistance. The local government took no further action against the community, but eight of the 25 converts recanted. It is unclear whether this was due to coercion or other factors.

In August the Supreme Court deregistered the Jamaat-e-Islami, the largest Islamist political party, for violating the constitution, thereby banning it from participating in elections. The ban was not enforced in practice.

Despite the Supreme Court’s restrictions on issuing fatwas, village religious leaders sometimes made declarations they described as fatwas. Such declarations resulted in extrajudicial punishments, often against women, for perceived moral transgressions.

On June 13, government education officials reversed their May 29 transfer of a Hindu secondary school teacher to a public, all-Muslim high school in Dhaka. Government officials placed the teacher back in a Hindu-majority village after protests from students and alumni of the all-Muslim school.

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In contrast to previous years, there were no reports of members of minority religious groups being disadvantaged in access to military or government jobs. Although public and private employees were not required to disclose their religious affiliation, it could generally be determined by a person's name.

The government continued to post law enforcement personnel at religious festivals and events considered at risk of being targeted by extremists. Through additional security deployments and public statements, the government promoted the peaceful celebration of Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, and secular Bengali festivals. Durga Puja, Christmas, Easter, Buddha Purnima, and Pohela Boisakh (Bengali New Year) all received government support of this kind.

Government Inaction

The government did not adjudicate any of the over one million cases pending from its seizure of approximately 2.6 million acres of land from Hindus under the Vested Property Act.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Violence directed against members of minority religious groups continued to result in the loss of lives and property, but it was difficult to determine to what extent the attacks were motivated by religious animosity or by criminal intent, personal conflict, property disputes, or a combination of these factors. Members of minority religious groups often had the lowest socio-economic status and therefore had the least recourse to political means to redress wrongs done to them. The most common type of abuse was arson and looting of religious sites and homes.

According to the main domestic human rights organization Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), which publishes annual statistics on violence against religious minorities, 495 statues, monasteries, or temples were destroyed; 278 homes and 208 businesses were destroyed; 188 persons were injured; and one person was killed during the year. Local and international press, human rights organizations, and Hindu community leaders blamed the attacks on Shibir.

Both the BNP and its ally Jamaat called for the attacks to cease and refused to accept any blame for the violence. ASK stated that violence by Jamaat supporters

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had been designed to intimidate the government from conducting further war crimes trials.

Attacks against Hindus continued throughout the year. For example, on October 15 residents observing Durga Puja in Damurhuda, Chuadanga, said Shibir attacked a shrine set up for the ceremony.

In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, tensions over issues that were not originally religious in nature sometimes acquired religious overtones because many of the inhabitants were Buddhist, Hindu, or Christian members of tribal groups. International Christian Concern (ICC), an international NGO, stated that a small ring of five to 10 traffickers approached families in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, promising to provide Christian educational opportunities to their children. According to ICC, the traffickers sold the children to madrassahs, where they were forcibly converted to Islam. ICC reported the children were then issued new names and identification papers and were not allowed to contact their families.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim community also suffered harassment. For example, the conservative Muslim group Tehrik-e-Khatme Nabuwwat held a rally in Dhaka against the Ahmadiyya on January 3. The same group reportedly assembled a 20,000-strong mob to set fire to the canopy, tents, and stage of an annual Ahmadiyya event in Kaliakor on February 26. Police made no arrests.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy officials continued to express concern about the rights of members of religious minorities in discussions with government officials, leaders of the opposition, and the media. The Ambassador and embassy staff traveled throughout the country to meet with members of minority religious groups to discuss religious freedom concerns and demonstrate support. Embassy staff also met with local government officials, civil society members, NGOs, and local religious leaders to discuss specific cases. The Ambassador and embassy officers encouraged law enforcement officials to protect the rights of members of minority religious groups.

Embassy officials continued to express strong concern about the problems facing the minority Hindu population to the government and the opposition. Following the attacks on Hindu communities in March and November, the Ambassador spoke out publicly and privately to condemn the violence. The Ambassador and senior visiting State Department officials regularly emphasized U.S. policy on religious freedom and tolerance and the protection of religious minorities.

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The Ambassador visited the Dhakeshwari Hindu temple for Holi in April, the Buddhist temple in Chittagong in May, and the Audatta Hindu Temple in September to stress the need to respect religious freedom and for members of different faiths to live in harmony. He also participated in an interfaith conference in October hosted by the newly-formed Inter-Faith Dialogue Forum to express concern over attacks against religious minorities.

The Ambassador hosted an interfaith iftar and a Christmas event that included government officials and religious leaders to stress the importance of continuing the country's secular and tolerant national character. Official embassy representation at Durga Puja, Buddha Purnima, and local Christmas celebrations underscored the embassy's support for minority religious groups.

The embassy engaged madrassah stakeholders in a discussion on the current madrassah education system and on updating the Aliyah madrassah curriculum. Over 80 madrassah students and 533 teachers participated in embassy-supported programs promoting the values of diversity and religious tolerance in communities across the country.