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FACTSHEET **BANGLADESH**

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

By Sema Hasan, Senior Policy Analyst

Overview

In July 2024, student-led protests ushered in a new political movement and the installation of a new caretaker government in Bangladesh. In August, with the backing of the military, Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus assumed the role of chief adviser for Bangladesh. Since then, the caretaker government has proposed a wide range of amendments, reforms, and constitutional changes, but underlying tensions between religious communities remain.

In light of these developments, in May 2025, USCIRF conducted a delegation to Dhaka, Bangladesh, and met with civil society and government officials to discuss religious freedom. This factsheet provides a summary of religious freedom conditions in Bangladesh, including key observations from USCIRF's delegation and insight into the concerns raised by religious minorities who expressed fear about their safety and ability to openly express their faith. It highlights the religious freedom implications of the interim government's constitutional and political reform efforts as well as current challenges law enforcement faces in responding to religious freedom violations. It also describes how misinformation and disinformation is contributing to recent attacks against religious minority communities and efforts by more conservative Islamic parties to push ideological demands.

Background

Bangladesh is a majority Sunni Muslim country, comprising approximately 91 percent of the population. The remaining population is an estimated eight percent Hindu, with smaller numbers of other religions, including Buddhists, Christians, Ahmadiyya Muslims, Sufis, Bauls, Baha'is, indigenous peoples, and atheists.

Bangladesh's 1972 Constitution establishes Islam as the state religion under Article 2A, but it simultaneously mandates that the state ensures equal status for the practice of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and other religions. It also guarantees secularism, eliminating state favor of any religion or the abuse of religion for political purposes as well as "any discrimination against, or persecution of, persons practicing a particular religion." Article 41 of the Constitution further guarantees that Bangladeshi citizens have the right to profess, practice, or propagate any religion and ensures that religious communities have the right to establish and maintain their religious institutions. Article 41 maintains that individuals attending educational institutions are not required to "receive religious instruction, or to take in or to attend any religious ceremony or worship, if that instruction, ceremony or worship relates to a religion other than his own."



Despite these constitutional protections, Bangladesh continues to maintain a blasphemy law—under Section 195A of the Penal Code—that criminalizes “hurting religious sentiment.” Additionally, the Cyber Security Act of 2023 further prohibits the publication of information in “any electronic format” that hurts religious values or sentiment, making such an offense punishable by a maximum of two years in prison.

July 2024 Protests and August Violence

In July 2024, student-led protests triggered a broad and widespread movement challenging the Bangladeshi political system and then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s leadership. The government responded with a violent attempt to crack down on protestors. Unable to quell the protests, the government gradually lost control over the country and Hasina fled Bangladesh on August 5, seeking refuge in India. Following Hasina’s departure, a government did not exist from August 5 to 8. During the time between Hasina’s departure and the establishment of the current caretaker government, episodes of violence and human rights abuses occurred, including reported attacks against religious minority communities. Such attacks included mob violence and retaliatory assaults against Hindus who were perceived to be supporters or members of the Awami League, Hasina’s political party.

While exact numbers are difficult to obtain, the United Nations (UN) explained that “widespread attacks” against Hindu homes, business, and temples were reported throughout Bangladesh. According to the UN, such

violence often involved arson, vandalism, and physical assaults, all of which were met with “insufficient police response.” Their reporting *estimates* that 37 violent attacks occurred between August 5 and 15 alone. In January 2025, however, the Bangladeshi police published a report estimating that a total of 1,769 attacks and acts of vandalism occurred from August 5 to 20. Of these incidents in the police report, 1,234 were politically motivated, while 20 were communal and 161 were false claims. Reports indicate, however, that in response to these attacks, students and members of the Muslim community *gathered* in front of minority-owned businesses and houses of worship, including temples and churches, to offer protection.

Constitutional Reform Implications for Religious Freedom

Bangladesh’s current constitutional reform process has presented unique implications for religious freedom, as demonstrated by ongoing discussions of the role of secularism and a noticeable absence of religious minority participation. Following the transition in government, in October 2024, Chief Adviser Yunus established a commission to reform the country’s Constitution. As of February 2025, the Constitutional Reform Commission has offered a number of recommendations for the new Constitution. In February, the interim government also *established* the Consensus Commission to review and consider the recommendations of six different commissions, including constitutional reform.

Potential Removal of Secularism from the Constitution

In the preamble to the Constitution, the Commission recommends removing references to secularism, replacing it with “pluralism.” This recommendation has faced mixed responses from different political parties. The Bangladeshi National Party (BNP), for example, rejected the suggestion and instead insisted on restoring the phrase “absolute faith in Almighty Allah.” Jamaat-e-Islami, the largest Islamic political party in Bangladesh, and the National Citizen’s Party (NCP), which was formed in February 2025 by students who led the July 2024 protests, both partially agreed with the inclusion of the word “pluralism” but argued it should be phrased as “multiculturalism” or replaced with a Bangla translation.

Expansion of Constitutional Protections

Regarding fundamental rights and freedoms, the Commission recommends expanding the list of prohibitions on discrimination to include “protection from extrajudicial killings and disappearances to protect the right to life, including the right to bail and abolishing the provisions related to preventative detention.” This marks a significant shift from Hasina’s government, under which targeted *killings* of atheist bloggers occurred as well as the imprisonment of dissidents, *including* religious minorities and journalists.

The extent to which religious minority communities have been involved in the reform process remains unclear. Many religious minority communities have expressed that they have not been included or consulted in the reform process and that minority groups are underrepresented in politics and state agencies. For example, within the whole *cabinet* under the interim government, only one member is a Hindu and one is a member of the Buddhist community from the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Bangladesh’s indigenous community members, many of whom live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, have *called for* constitutional recognition.

Women’s Reform Commission Opposed by Conservative Islamic Groups

In addition to constitutional reforms, in August 2024, Chief Adviser Yunus established the Women’s Reform Commission, whose recommendations have direct implications for religious freedom and have been opposed by different religious groups. The Commission’s goal is to review “existing discrimination against women in legal,

social, economic, and political structures” and to offer recommendations for the interim government. Aligning with the mandate, in May 2025, the Commission made 433 recommendations under 15 thematic areas to combat discrimination against women. Some conservative Islamic groups, including Hefazat-e-Islami, have called these recommendations anti-Islamic and have organized moderately sized rallies to protest the Commission.

Among the recommendations, the Commission suggested implementing a civil code to supplement religiously based family and personal law. This recommendation, and the Commission as a whole, has been met with mixed responses. Some Bangladeshis argue that the lack of inclusion of religious scholars on the Commission is a missed opportunity to mediate among different groups and ideas. Currently, family law related to marriage and divorce includes separate provisions for Muslims, Christians, and Hindus. Interfaith couples may be married under the Special Marriage Act of 1872. However, under the Act, couples are required to renounce their faiths in order to marry. According to Bangladeshi civil law, Muslim marriages can only be registered by a Muslim marriage registrar, known as a Kazi. Similarly for Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists, it is expected that individuals notify their respective marriage registrar.

In response to these recommendations, in May, Hefazat-e-Islam led a 20,000-member rally through Dhaka to articulate a list of *demands* to the Bangladeshi government, including disbanding the Women’s Reform Commission, restoration of “full trust and faith” in Allah in the Constitution, and withdrawing all cases against Hefazat leaders. Following the protest, six women served a *legal notice* on Hefazat-e-Islam, alleging that leaders called members of the Women’s Reform Commission “prostitutes.” Hefazat subsequently issued a public apology.

More broadly, however, some women have complained of more public displays of conservative Islamic views on university campuses. In May 2025, for example, a university professor, Nadira Yasmin, *transferred* to another college after receiving threats from Hefazat and other religious groups calling for her removal from her post. These religious groups claimed that Yasmin’s work as a women’s rights activist contradicted Islam. Other groups, like Islami Andolan Bangladesh, previously *forced* organizers to cancel a women’s soccer game in February, calling it “un-Islamic.”

Registration of Places of Worship

While religious minority communities do not describe exceeding challenges in conducting operations from their places of worship, some communities continue to [report](#) land grabs as an issue. According to the Ministry of Religious Affairs, religious communities are not required to register their places of worship. However, religious groups seeking to form associations with multiple houses of worship are required to register as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, there are several different “welfare trusts” designed to oversee the construction of houses of worship and other activities for religious groups. These include the Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist Welfare Trusts.

Some religious minority communities have demanded an upgrade of the Hindu Welfare Trust to a Hindu Foundation and similar upgrades to the Buddhist and Christian Welfare Trusts. Additionally, land grabbing continues to exacerbate tensions between religious groups. For example, in October 2024, 21 Hindu families [protested](#) the grabbing of 1.5 acres of land in Patukhali district after previously filing a written complaint with police. In April 2025, Religious Affairs Adviser Khalid Hossain [said](#) that individuals should contact the Buddhist Religious Welfare Trust with the proper documents to have illegally occupied land of mosques, temples, and crematoriums returned to their rightful owners, which minority communities continue to report as an issue.

Enforcement of Cyber Security Ordinance

Historically, cyber security crime laws have been used in Bangladesh to target both political dissidents and religious minorities. The 2023 Cyber Security Act (CSA) criminalized the publication of online content that could be perceived as “hurting religious sentiment,” therefore acting in practice as a blasphemy law. Blasphemy-related offenses under this law could be punishable by up to five years in prison. During then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s tenure, Bangladeshi authorities engaged in arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances of political dissidents and religious minorities, most often by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). In November 2023, for example, authorities arrested Selim Khan, an atheist blogger who was charged under Section 28 of the CSA for “hurting religious sentiment.” While Khan was granted bail in March 2024, human rights organizations [reported](#) that he was still detained due to “procedural delays.”

While not widespread, some arrests under the CSA’s blasphemy provision have occurred under the interim government. In February, for example, poet Sohel Hasan Galib was [arrested](#) for “hurting religious sentiment” by allegedly insulting Islam. In 2024, Galib was accused of “satirizing” the Prophet Muhammad in a poem that went viral on social media. On February 14, 2025, he was brought to court and [arrested](#) under Section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. In March 2025, the Dhaka Cyber Tribunal ordered the Criminal Investigation Department to investigate the [complaint](#) against Rakhal Raha, a member of the Textbook Revision Committee, who was accused of “hurting religious sentiment” through a social media post. In May, the case against Raha was [dismissed](#). In March, human rights defender Nahid Hasan was charged under the CSA for “hurting religious sentiment.” In April, police [arrested](#) a Hindu man for allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad. He was sent to jail by a court on April 23.

Under the interim government, proposed changes have been suggested to the CSA in the form of a new Cyber Security Ordinance (CSO). However, the ordinance [retains](#) provisions criminalizing the spread of “religious hatred” and “hurting religious sentiment.” The law advisor has [claimed](#) that the ordinance defines “religious hatred” in such a way to prevent misinterpretation and harassment of civilians.

Attacks and Harassment against Religious Minorities

Sporadic violence and harassment targeting members of religious minority communities remains an issue in Bangladesh. While the interim government condemned 2,924 attacks against religious minority communities that occurred in July 2024, according to a UN [report](#), there has been a lack of accountability, in part due to the collapse of the law enforcement system. Additionally, members of the Hindu, indigenous, and Ahmadiyya and Sufi Muslim communities continue to report cases of discrimination.

Attacks against Hindus

The Hindu community, in particular, continues to describe targeted violence and fear since the July 2024 protests. In November 2024, an [estimated](#) 30,000 Hindus protested in Chattogram, calling for the interim government to offer protection from attacks and harassment. Protestors additionally urged the government to drop sedition charges against 19 Hindu leaders, whom authorities accused of

disrespecting the Bangladeshi flag during a previous protest in October. Among those accused is Hindu priest Krishna Das Prabhu, also known as Chinmoy Das, who was arrested in November 2024 and [denied](#) bail in January 2025, leading to [renewed](#) protests and clashes that resulted in the death of a Muslim lawyer. Following the killing of the Muslim lawyer, reported incidents of intimidation and attacks in Hindu neighborhoods increased. In May 2025, the Supreme Court [granted](#) a stay on a High Court order granting Das bail.

Civil society groups like the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC) have claimed that attacks against religious minorities in Bangladesh have continued under the interim government. In March, they [reported](#) that in the first three months of 2025, a total of 92 incidents took place targeting religious minorities. This includes 11 murders, three rapes, 25 attacks on temples, and 28 instances of vandalism. Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), a Bangladeshi human rights organization, [reported](#) a total of 48 attacks against religious minorities from January to April 2025, including 25 attacks against Hindu statues. Hindu religious leaders also reported to USCIRF a sense of fear among its community members, emphasizing that in some areas, Hindu women have stopped wearing bangles and bindis to avoid being harassed. Bangladeshi media sources also continue to report some instances of violence, vandalism, and harassment against religious minorities. On May 22, 2025, for example, an [attack](#) on the Hindu community in Dahar Mashihati village resulted in the destruction and vandalism of an estimated 20 homes. The attack occurred following the death of Tariqul Islam, a local leader of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP).

Attacks against Ahmadiyya and Sufi Muslims

Ahmadiyya Muslims also reported attacks against members of their community in the aftermath of the July 2024 protests and under the interim government. In September 2024, they [accused](#) Islamist mobs of attacking members of their community, including several attacks on mosques. Ahmadiyya Muslim leaders further emphasized that violence against their community was not new, citing the March 2023 [attack](#) during their annual Jalsa Salana in Ahmednagar. The community reported additional attacks in April 2025, noting that a mosque in Bahadurpur was vandalized.

Further fueling religious tensions, hardline religious groups, including Hefazat-e-Islam, have sought to discredit and undermine the Ahmadiyya Muslim community's ability to practice their religion freely.

Hefazat-e-Islam has circulated a list of [13 demands](#), including calling for the Ahmadiyya community to be declared non-Muslims and calling for the enactment of a blasphemy law to punish atheists.

Sufi leaders have similarly accused Islamist mobs of attacking [80 shrines](#) since July 2024. Islamist groups in Bangladesh [consider](#) Sufi practices “un-Islamic” and members of the Baul mystic sect to be heretics. In September 2024, a mob attacked the home of a Sufi leader, [reportedly](#) resulting in the deaths of 40 people. On January 24, 2025, a mob reportedly attacked three Sufi shrines in Narshingdi district. Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus [condemned](#) the attacks.

Attacks against Indigenous Groups in Chittagong Hill Tracts

Indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts also continue to report attacks since the July 2024 uprising. In September and October 2024, for example, a spate of attacks between Buddhist-majority indigenous groups and Bengali Muslim settlers resulted in the targeting of religious sites and the [killing](#) of at least four people. Buddhist temples were [reportedly](#) vandalized and looted, with inaction from security forces. Subsequently, a Buddhist monastic association announced it would not hold an annual month-long religious festival at Buddhist temples, citing fears of insecurity.

Law Enforcement Challenges in Protecting Religious Minorities

Since the transition in power in August 2024, the Bangladeshi police force has struggled to sufficiently protect religious minority communities from harassment and attack, both in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and elsewhere. Following the July 2024 protests, Bangladesh's police force collapsed, and almost all went into [hiding](#) for fear of reprisal. Dozens of police officers were also killed during the protests. With a [hollowed-out](#) police force, the military stepped up to fill the vacuum. Many religious minority members report that the army has been responsive to recent cases of harassment or attacks.

The army chief additionally promised heightened security during Durga Puja, the largest Hindu holiday. The weeks leading up to the October holiday [reportedly](#) remained tense, however, and members of the Hindu community noted some [instances](#) of vandalism at temples. According to one Bangladeshi human rights organization, despite the security measures, 26 attacks on Hindu statues took place during Durga Puja in 2024. During the celebrations,

police [arrested](#) two members of an Islamic cultural group in Chattogram after six members [sang](#) a song calling for an Islamic revolution.

Role of Misinformation and Disinformation in Aggravating Religious Tensions

During and after the July 2024 protests, misinformation and disinformation [saturated](#) the news environment, particularly related to attacks against religious minority communities, which have created a climate of fear. Bangladeshi government officials have cited disinformation from the Indian media as an obstacle to religious freedom in the country. Such [disinformation](#) falsely claimed that certain Hindu temples were attacked, circulating fabricated videos of arson or Hindu women being attacked. Human rights organizations similarly say that social media and misinformation continue to contribute to attacks against religious minorities. In more remote areas of the country, they note that Hindu communities are more susceptible to disinformation, contributing to an even greater sense of fear and grievances.

Since the transition in government, there have been several flashpoints that have fueled disinformation campaigns from India media. In October 2024, the arrest of Chinmoy Das served as one such point. The Indian foreign minister responded to the arrest, portraying it as an example of ongoing persecution of minority rights in Bangladesh.

Additionally, journalists in Bangladesh reporting on religious freedom issues expressed concerns about harassment from mobs and more conservative Islamic groups. In November 2024, for example, a mob [accused](#) news sources like the *Daily Star* of promoting ideals they considered “contrary to Islam,” including secularism and women’s rights. The attackers demanded that these newspapers be closed if they did not apologize for their “anti-Islamic positions.”

Status of Rohingya Refugees in Cox’s Bazar

Since 2017, Bangladesh has hosted nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees fleeing persecution in neighboring Burma, with continued flows of refugee arrivals each week. UN representatives reported to USCIRF that the July 2024 protests exacerbated security conditions in Cox’s Bazar due to the collapse of the police force. Cuts in U.S. foreign assistance funding has also [contributed](#) to famine and malnutrition in the camps. They additionally

highlighted continued assaults in the camps, and increased recruitment efforts by armed rebel groups to fight against the Arakan Army.

Some refugees have left the camps and attempted to make dangerous journeys to seek protection elsewhere. In May 2025, reports indicate that [over 400](#) Rohingya died at sea attempting to leave Bangladesh, making it one of the deadliest incidents at sea involving Rohingya. [According](#) to interim Chief Advisor Yunus, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres suggested the possibility of a “humanitarian corridor” to allow for the passage of aid to Bangladesh, but this notion did not progress beyond initial discussions. UN representatives additionally emphasized that conditions in Burma are not yet safe for the Rohingya to return. Such dire human rights conditions in Burma led USCIRF to recommend in its [2025 Annual Report](#) that the U.S. government extend and redesignate Burma for Temporary Protective Status (TPS), which is set to expire in November 2025.

Impact of Upcoming Elections on Religious Freedom

National elections have the potential to either reinforce or ease religious tensions in Bangladesh. Chief Adviser Yunus has publicly announced that elections will be held between December 2025 and June 2026. Religious minority communities and human rights organizations anticipate that violence along religious lines will occur during the upcoming elections. However, beyond deploying police forces, Bangladeshi authorities have not articulated a specific plan to address communal violence.

For decades, political leadership in Bangladesh has oscillated between the Awami League and the BNP, both of which have a history of drawing on religious identities to obtain votes. While the Awami League was considered a more secular party that incorporated religious minorities into the political party, attacks against religious minorities still continued under Sheikh Hasina. In May 2025, the interim government announced that the activities of the Awami League would be banned under the Antiterrorism Act, making it unable to contest upcoming elections. According to the interim government, the ban will be lifted once several legal cases against the Awami League and its leaders are completed. The BNP has been described as a more conservative political party with [ties](#) to Islamic parties like Jamaat-e-Islami, who were [banned](#) under Hasina’s rule. In June 2025, the government reversed Hasina’s ban on Jamaat.



Conclusion

While the interim government has made progress in introducing needed reforms to direct Bangladesh's political stability, tensions and religious freedom concerns still persist in the country. Throughout his public speeches and remarks, Chief Advisor Yunus has reiterated the importance of religious freedom in Bangladesh and a commitment to maintain religious harmony. However, many individuals with whom USCIRF met during its delegation expressed concern about their safety and ability to express their faith openly. Some religious minorities and Muslim women emphasized that they continue to face societal-level discrimination from more hardline Islamic groups, and they emphasized that attacks along religious lines, while sporadic, continue. Religious minorities further expressed fears about potential violence during elections, which they anticipate will fall along religious lines, and concern about a lack of representation in the current government. All religious minorities should be able to practice their beliefs without fear of attack or retribution.

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan legislative branch agency established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.