

Bangladesh (6)



2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:

Bangladesh

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BANGLADESH

The Constitution establishes Islam as the state religion but also stipulates the right to practice the religion of one's choice, and the Government respects this provision in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

Citizens generally are free to practice the religion of their choice; however, members of the majority Muslim population sometimes commit acts of violence against members of religious minorities. Violence against Ahmadiyas increased during the period covered by this report. Police, who generally are ineffective in upholding law and order, often are slow to assist in such cases.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution establishes Islam as the state religion but also stipulates the right--subject to law, public order, and morality--to practice the religion of one's choice, and the Government respects this provision in practice. Religious organizations are not required to register with the Government; however, all nongovernmental organizations (NGO's), including religious organizations, are required to register with the NGO Affairs Bureau if they receive foreign money for social development projects. The Government has the legal ability to cancel the registration of an NGO or to take other action against it; such powers rarely are used and have not affected NGO's with religious affiliations.

Religious Demography

Sunni Muslims constitute 88 percent of the population. About 10 percent of the population are Hindu. The rest are Christian (mostly Catholic) and Buddhist; these faiths are found predominantly in the tribal (non-Bengali) populations of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. There are small populations of Shi'a Muslims, Sikhs, Baha'is, and Ahmadiyas. Estimates of these populations vary widely, from a few hundred up to



100,000 adherents for each faith.

Family laws concerning marriage, divorce, and adoption differ depending on the religion of the person involved.

Religion exerts a powerful influence on politics, and the Government is sensitive to the Muslim consciousness of the majority of its citizens. Religion is taught in schools, and children have the right to be taught their own religion. In practice, schools with very small numbers of religious minority students often work out arrangements with local churches or temples, which then direct religious studies outside school hours. The country celebrates holy days from the Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian faiths as national holidays.

The Government allows various religions to establish places of worship, to train clergy, to travel for religious purposes, and to maintain links with coreligionists abroad.

The law permits citizens to proselytize. However, strong social resistance to conversion from Islam means that most missionary efforts by non-Muslims are aimed at Hindus and tribal groups.

Foreign missionaries may work in the country, but their right to proselytize is not protected in the Constitution, and some foreign missionaries face problems obtaining visas. There are no financial penalties imposed on the basis of religious beliefs. However, many Hindus complain that they have been unable to recover landholdings lost because of discrimination in the application of the law, especially the Vested Property Act. Property ownership, particularly among Hindus, has been a contentious issue since independence in 1971, when many Hindus lost land because of anti-Hindu discrimination in the application of the law. The Vested Property Act is a vestige of Pakistani law, which allowed "enemy" (in practice, Hindu) lands to be expropriated by the State. The law was suspended in 1984, but some claims allegedly have been backdated. Prior to its 1996 election victory, the Awami League promised to repeal the Vested Property Act, but to date the Awami League Government has not done so.

Violence against Ahmadiyas increased during the period covered by this report, and police have not always intervened promptly to prevent harassment of Ahmadiyas (see Section II). In the past, the Government sometimes failed to take action against Islamic extremists who have attacked women, members of religious minorities, and development workers (see Section II).

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversions of Minor U.S. Citizens

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S.

citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Relations between the religious communities generally are amicable. Persons who practice different religions often join each others' festivals and celebrations. Shi'a Muslims practice their faith without interference from Sunnis. Hindu-Buddhist-Christian unity councils exist at the local and national levels. Nevertheless, clashes between religious groups occasionally occur. There have been, in recent years, cases of violence directed against the religious minority communities that have resulted in the loss of lives and property. Police, who generally are ineffective in upholding law and order, often are slow to assist in such cases. Such intercommunal violence has caused some members of religious minorities to depart the country, primarily Hindus emigrating to India where many have relatives; however this phenomenon is rare.

The Ahmadiyas, whom many mainstream Muslims consider heretical, have been the target of increased attacks and harassment. In 1999 several mosques belonging to the Ahmadiya sect were attacked. On October 8, 1999, a bomb killed six Ahmadiyas who were attending Friday prayers at their mosque in Khulna. The only suspect questioned by police was a fellow Ahmadiya who later was released. No other suspects have been questioned, and the case remains unresolved. In November 1999, Sunni Muslims ransacked an Ahmadiya mosque near Natore, in western Bangladesh. In subsequent clashes between Ahmadiyas and Sunnis, 35 persons were injured. Ahmadiyas regained control of their mosque and filed a criminal case against 30 persons allegedly responsible for the conflict. That case remains pending. After a January 1999 attack on an Ahmadiya mosque in Kushtia, two police officials were disciplined for failing to discharge their duties in controlling the incident. Ahmadiya leaders report that their mosque remains under the control of local police and Ahmadiyas are unable to worship there 15 months after the original attack.

Islamic extremists occasionally have attacked women, members of religious minorities, and development workers. The Government sometimes has failed to criticize, investigate, and prosecute the perpetrators of these attacks. The Government responded quickly, but ineffectively, after an April 1998 attack on a Catholic school in Dhaka.

Some members of the Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist minorities continue to perceive and experience discrimination from the Muslim majority.

Religious minorities are disadvantaged in practice in such areas as access to government jobs and political office. Selection boards in the government services do not have minority group representation. The current Government has appointed a few Hindus to senior civil service positions. However, religious minorities remain underrepresented in government jobs, especially at the higher levels of the civil and foreign

services. Very few members of the armed forces are non-Muslims.

Feminist author Taslima Nasreen, whose writings and statements provoked death threats from some Islamic groups in 1993 and 1994, returned to the country in September 1998, after having lived abroad since 1994. Nasreen immediately went into hiding. The Government has taken no action against those who issued death threats against her in 1993 and 1994, even though such threats may violate the law. Following Nasreen's return, there were a number of small demonstrations by Islamic groups calling for her arrest and punishment by death. The Government provided Nasreen protection from possible threats. Despite such protection, in early November 1998, the leader of the Chittagong branch of the Jamaat-e-Islami, the largest Islamic party, personally offered a reward for information as to her whereabouts. The central Jamaat office in Dhaka stated that the Jamaat did not approve of the reward offer. The Government did not attempt to prosecute Nasreen for charges filed by authorities in 1994 under a section of the Penal Code that stipulates punishment for anyone convicted of intentionally insulting religious beliefs. However, a private citizen filed similar charges in 1994, and a judge issued an arrest warrant in that case after Nasreen's September 1998 return. The warrant never was executed, and Nasreen later requested and received anticipatory bail from the High Court. She was allowed to leave the country freely in January 1999. She lives abroad in self-imposed exile. On August 12, 1999, the Bangladesh government banned the import, sale, and distribution of "My Childhood," Nasreen's latest book. The government ban cited the likelihood that the book would inflame passions and offend religious sentiments in the Muslim community.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy maintains a dialog with government, religious, and minority community representatives to promote religious freedom and to discuss problems therewith. On an informal basis, the Embassy also has assisted some U.S. Christian-affiliated relief organizations in guiding paperwork for schools and other projects through government channels. The Government has been receptive to discussion of such subjects and generally helpful in resolving problems. [end of document]

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