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Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
October 2001



The Constitution establishes Islam as the state religion but also stipulates the right to practice the religion of one's choice, and the Government generally 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, police, who generally are ineffective in upholding law and order, often are slow to assist members of religious minorities who have been victims of crimes.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, some members of the Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist minorities continue to perceive and experience discrimination from the Muslim majority.

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. Religious Demography

The total land area of the country is approximately 53,000 square miles, and the population is approximately 130 million. Sunni Muslims constitute 88 percent of the population. About 10 percent of the population are Hindu. The remainder are mainly Christian (mostly Catholic) and Buddhist. Members of these faiths are found predominantly in the tribal (non-Bengali) populations of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, although many other indigenous groups in various parts of the country are Christian as well. There also are small populations of Shi'a Muslims, Sikhs, Baha'is, animists, and Ahmadis. Estimates of their populations vary widely, from a few hundred up to 100,000 adherents for each faith. Religion is an important part of community identity for citizens, including those who do not participate actively in religious prayers or services; atheism is extremely rare.

There are no reliable estimates of the number of missionaries active in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom***Legal/Policy Framework***

The Constitution establishes Islam as the state religion but provides for the right to practice the religion of one's choice, and the Government generally 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 financial assistance for social development projects. The Government has the authority to cancel the registration of an NGO or to take other action against it; however, it rarely has used these powers, and they have not affected NGO's having religious affiliations.

Family laws concerning marriage, divorce, and adoption differ slightly depending on the religion of the person involved. There are no legal restrictions on marriage between members of different faiths.

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 government schools, and parents have the right to have their children taught in their own religion. In practice schools with few 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 puts no restrictions on the establishment of places of worship, the training of clergy, or the maintenance of links with coreligionists abroad.

In April 2001, the Director General of the Islamic Foundation, a government organization dedicated to promoting Islamic culture and studies, forced Maulana Obaidul Haque, Khatib (chief clergyman) of the Baitul Mukarram National Mosque, to retire. The Director General appointed a new Khatib, but after Maulana Obaidul Haque filed a writ petition to protest his forced retirement, the court stayed the decision and he remains Khatib for the National Mosque. The case was pending at the end of the period covered by this report.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In January 2001, the High Court ruled illegal all fatwas, or expert opinions on Islamic law. Fatwas can include the decision as to when a holiday is to begin based upon the sighting of the moon, or an opinion on a religious issue. Islam dictates that only those Muftis (religious scholars) who have expertise in Islamic law are authorized to declare a fatwa. However, in practice village religious leaders sometimes make declarations on individual cases, calling the declaration a fatwa. Sometimes this results in extrajudicial punishments, often against women for their perceived moral transgressions. While the court's intention was to end the extrajudicial enforcement of fatwas or other declarations by religious leaders, the January ruling declared all fatwas illegal. The High Court's January 2001 ruling resulted in violent public protests (see Section III). Several weeks later, the Appellate Court stayed the High Court's ruling.

On April 9, 2001, Parliament passed the Vested Property Return Bill of 2001. This law stipulates that land remaining under government control that was seized under the Vested Property Act of 1965 be returned to its original owners, provided that the original owners or their heirs remain resident citizens. Hindus who fled to India and resettled there will not be eligible to have their land returned, and no provisions were included for compensation for or return of properties that the Government has sold. The Government must publish a list of vested property holdings by October 11, 2001, and claims must be filed within 90 days of the publication date. No further claims are to be accepted.

Foreign missionaries may work in the country, but their right to proselytize is not protected in the Constitution, and foreign missionaries often face delays of several months in obtaining or renewing visas. In the past, some missionaries who were perceived to be converting Muslims to other faiths were subsequently unable to renew their visas, which must be renewed annually.

There are no financial penalties imposed on the basis of religious beliefs; however, religious minorities are disadvantaged in practice in such areas as access to jobs in government or the military, and political office. The Government has appointed some Hindus to senior civil service positions, and some recent promotion lists from the Ministry of the Establishment included from 3 to 7 percent Hindus and other minorities. However, religious minorities remain underrepresented in government jobs, especially at the higher levels of the civil and foreign services. The government-owned Bangladesh Bank employs about 10 percent non-Muslims in its upper ranks. Hindus dominate the teaching profession, particularly at the high school and university levels. Some Hindus report that Muslims tend to favor Hindus in some professions, for example, doctors, lawyers, and accountants. They attribute this to the education that the British offered during the 19th century, which Muslims boycotted but Hindus embraced. Employees are not required to disclose their religion, but religion generally can be determined by a person's name.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On June 3, 2001, in Baniachar, Gopalganj district, a bomb exploded inside a Catholic church during Sunday Mass, killing 10 persons and injuring 20 others. The army arrived to investigate approximately 10 hours after the blast. The bomb, which the army concluded was produced outside of the country, had been placed just inside a side door in a jute bag. Police detained various persons for questioning, but by the end of the period covered by this report, no progress had been made on the case.

In prior years, the Government sometimes has failed to criticize, investigate, and prosecute the perpetrators of attacks on members of religious minorities. For example, the Government responded ineffectively after an April 1998 attack on a Catholic school in Dhaka. When workers started demolishing a dilapidated classroom building on the school's property, someone from a mosque located behind the building shouted repeatedly over the mosque's loudspeaker, "The Christians are tearing down the mosque." A mob then attacked the school, demolishing walls, breaking statues, burning a large cross, and ransacking dormitories while students, most of whom were Muslim, stayed in a locked room. No one was hurt. Policemen stood by and watched as the attack continued throughout the afternoon.

A court later ruled clearly that the disputed classroom building belonged to the school, which produced documents demonstrating ownership for the last 80 years; however, the leaders of the mosque continued to harass school officials. Subsequently the Archbishop instructed the school officials to surrender the land and the building to the mosque management committee members in order to maintain peace.

Under the 1961 Muslim Family Ordinance, female heirs inherit less than male relatives do, and wives have fewer divorce rights than husbands. Men are permitted to have up to four wives, although society strongly discourages polygamy and it rarely is practiced. Laws provide some protection for women against arbitrary divorce and the taking of additional wives by husbands without the first wife's consent, but the protections generally apply only to registered marriages. Marriages in rural areas sometimes are not registered because of ignorance of the law. Under the law, a Muslim husband is required to pay his ex-wife alimony for only 3 months, but this rarely is enforced.

Feminist author Taslima Nasreen, whose latest book was banned in 1999, remained abroad during the period covered by this report, after receiving bail while criminal and civil cases against her for insulting religious beliefs remain pending. There have been no new developments in these cases.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including 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 III. Societal Attitudes

Relations between the religious communities generally are amicable. Persons who practice different religions often join each others' festivals and celebrations, such as weddings. Shi'a Muslims practice their faith without interference from Sunnis. Nevertheless, clashes between religious groups occasionally occur. In recent years, there have been 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 (see Section II). In the past, intercommunal violence caused many Hindus to emigrate to India, but recent emigration of Hindus has decreased significantly and generally can be attributed to economic or family reasons. Some incidents of communal violence still occur.

On October 5, 2000, in Narsingdi, two extortionists demanded approximately \$175 (10,000 Taka) from Hindus during a religious festival. When the Hindus refused, the two damaged the deity and its platform and beat the caretaker. On June 11, 2001, the two criminals were fined approximately \$88 (5,000 Taka) and sentenced to 9 years' imprisonment under the Public Safety Act.

On October 6, 2000, in Gazipur, two boys and one woman were injured in an altercation between Hindus and Muslims. Muslims conducting Friday prayers asked Hindus to lower the music volume at a nearby Hindu festival. When the Hindus refused, Muslims from the mosque damaged a Hindu deity, leading to the violence and injuries. This altercation was resolved through dialog between community leaders.

On October 8, 2000, in Dinajpur, four Muslims set fire to a Hindu temple over a land dispute with the Hindu temple's manager.

In the past, members of the Ahmadi sect, whom many mainstream Muslims consider heretical, were the target of attacks and harassment. In 1999 several mosques belonging to the sect were attacked. On October 8, 1999, a bomb killed six Ahmadis who were attending Friday prayers at their mosque in Khulna. The only suspect questioned by police was a fellow Ahmadi who later was released. No other suspects have been questioned, and the case remains unresolved. In November 1999, Sunni Muslims ransacked an Ahmadi mosque near Natore, in the western part of the country. In subsequent clashes between Ahmadis and Sunnis, 35 persons were injured. Ahmadis 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 Ahmadi mosque in Kushtia, two police officials were disciplined for failing to discharge their duties in controlling the incident. Ahmadi leaders report that their mosque remains under the control of local police, and Ahmadis are unable to worship there more than 2 years after the original attack.

Public reaction to the High Court's January 2001 ruling that declared fatwas to be illegal resulted in violence. Following the court's decision, a number of NGO's organized a rally in Dhaka and transported busloads of persons, mostly women, from all parts of the country to express support for the ruling, which they said was a victory for women and for all who suffered abuses in the name of fatwa. However, Muslim

groups contended that fatwa was an integral part of a Muslim's daily life and called the ruling an attack on their religious freedom. Islamic groups organized blockades to prevent buses from entering Dhaka for the rally, and protested the ruling and the NGO rally. In the ensuing violence, a police officer was killed inside a mosque, and an NGO office was ransacked.

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

The law permits citizens to proselytize; however, strong social resistance to conversion from Islam means that most missionary efforts by Christian groups are aimed at serving communities that have been Christian for several generations or longer.

Section IV. 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. 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]

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