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Hindu women line up to vote in elections in Dhaka, Bangladesh.
REUTERS/Mohammad Shahisullah

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SWEDEN

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Minority Rights Group International

Minority Rights Group International (MRG) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) working to secure the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and indigenous peoples worldwide, and to promote cooperation and understanding between communities. Our activities are focused on international advocacy, training, publishing and outreach. We are guided by the needs expressed by our worldwide partner network of organizations, which represent minority and indigenous peoples.

MRG works with over 150 organizations in nearly 50 countries. Our governing Council, which meets twice a year, has members from 10 different countries. MRG has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and observer status with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR). MRG is registered as a charity and a company limited by guarantee under English law: registered charity no. 282305, limited company no. 1544957.

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Under threat: The challenges facing religious minorities in Bangladesh

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• Since 2013, Bangladesh has been hit by a series of violent incidents targeting, among other groups, its religious minorities. Whether authored by domestic militant groups or by international armed extremist organizations such as Islamic State (IS), who have claimed responsibility for many of these incidents, the authorities have singularly failed to protect its Ahmadi, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Shi'a Muslim communities from these attacks, as well as regular incidents of communal violence.	• Consequently, though the recent violence has highlighted how vulnerable minorities are to attacks, their situation is also informed by wider structural issues within Bangladeshi society, including political marginalization, social prejudice and economic opportunism. The variety of abuses they experience, from forced abduction and sexual assault to land grabbing and arson, have occurred within a broader climate of impunity.
• For these groups, who alongside atheists have borne the brunt of these attacks, this violence is the latest chapter in a long history of discrimination. Despite the promise of independence in 1971 and the passing of a secularist Constitution the following year, in the ensuing years an increasingly restrictive religious nationalism has sidelined Bangladesh's minorities as second-class citizens within their own country.	• Though better protection of minorities by law enforcement agencies and judicial authorities is essential – especially as many previous abuses appear to have been carried out with their involvement – a wider process of social transformation is also needed, with authorities investing greater efforts to challenge stereotypes and champion respect for all beliefs. This requires an environment that nurtures rather than represses freedoms, while ensuring the basic right to religious expression – a right that, in the current context of Bangladesh, is increasingly under threat.

1 Introduction

Since 2013, Bangladesh has experienced a series of violent attacks by extremists. The victims have included – besides atheists, secular bloggers, liberals and foreigners – many Buddhists, Christians and Hindus as well as Ahmadis and Shi'a Muslims. A large number of the attacks targeting religious minorities in particular have subsequently been claimed by the organization Islamic State (IS) – a claim vigorously denied by the Bangladeshi government, which has attributed the attacks to domestic militant groups. Regardless of their authorship, since the beginning of this new outbreak of violence, the authorities have visibly failed to ensure the protection of those targeted. Besides the rising death toll, including civilians killed indiscriminately in bombings or individually selected by armed assailants with machetes in premeditated attacks, the insecurity has diminished the ability of civil society to operate freely. Furthermore, communal violence – long a problem for religious minorities – continues to take place on a regular basis, driven by political rivalries, expropriation and the apparent impunity enjoyed by perpetrators.

For religious minorities, who have borne much of the brunt of these attacks, this violence is the latest chapter in a long history of discrimination and segregation that stretches back to the country's independence and the legacy of colonialism, the 1947 Partition and the bloody civil war in 1971 during which the Hindu population in particular was targeted. Despite the promise of the early years, with the passing of a Constitution that professed the equality of all faiths and the secularity of the state, the subsequent emergence of military rule and an increasingly restrictive religious nationalism saw religious minorities sidelined within their own country. Though the return of democracy in the 1990s brought some improvements, discrimination has persisted. Indeed, in the shifting struggles between the currently ascendant Awami League (AL) and its opposition parties, in particular the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), non-Muslim groups have frequently become collateral victims of their rivalry and a divisive political environment that has seen both sides implicated in human rights abuses. Bangladesh's last federal election, in January 2014, was accompanied by some of the worst electoral violence the country has seen. The situation was further exacerbated by the BNP's electoral boycott and the AL government's heavy-handed treatment of opposition groups.

Consequently, though the recent attacks have highlighted the lack of protection of minority rights in the context of rising extremism, their situation is also informed by wider structural issues within Bangladeshi society, including political instability and marginalization, social prejudice and economic opportunism. The variety of abuses they experience, from forced abduction and sexual assault to land grabbing and arson, have often seen the perpetrators go unpunished. In many cases, official policies have made religious minority rights more precarious rather than less: in the Chittagong Hills, for example, the government-sponsored migration of Bengali settlers since the 1970s has led to increasing conflict with indigenous peoples, who are predominantly Buddhist and Christian, as well as Hindu and animist, leaving many displaced from their ancestral land.

This briefing, drawing on a detailed review of published sources, fieldwork by local rapporteurs and first-hand author interviews with a number of activists, lawyers and journalists, aims to provide a fuller picture of the complex challenges facing these communities and the need for a society-wide solution to the insecurity that has convulsed the country in the last few years. While a stronger commitment to the rights and security of vulnerable communities, including religious minorities, would be welcome – especially as many rights abuses have been carried out with the apparent complicity of members of the police and military – this alone will not be sufficient. A more ambitious process of transformation, spanning not only legal and institutional reform but also the restructuring of the law enforcement system to ensure more effective redress for victims, is needed. Beyond that, authorities must invest greater efforts through education, awareness raising and an open media to challenge demeaning stereotypes and champion respect for all beliefs. This requires, more than ever, an environment that nurtures rather than represses freedoms while protecting the fundamental right to religious expression – a right that, in Bangladesh's current context, is under threat.

2 Historical background

'After the independence of the country, this country became a country where majority people were Muslim and they developed a behaviour of ruling the minorities. Somehow it was also spread that the minorities were not in favor of the country's development. That myth was passed on from generation to generation.'
(Journalist, July 2016)

Modern-day Bangladesh was born in 1971, following the bloody fight for independence known as the Liberation War, which resulted in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) gaining independence from Pakistan (then West Pakistan). The Liberation War resulted in the deaths of an unknown number of Bangladeshi civilians, including many members of religious minorities, and left a lasting mark on the country. The conflict, while ensuring Bangladesh's independence, nevertheless left a legacy of political turmoil that has further impeded the rights and freedoms of minorities. This section will provide an overview of the history of Bangladesh from 1905 to the present day.

The legacy of imperial rule, 1905-47

In 1905 the Bengal province of India was partitioned, effectively separating the predominantly Muslim eastern area from the mostly Hindu western area. The motivation of the British colonizers to enact the partition of Bengal was purportedly to improve the administrative effectiveness of the large province, particularly in the neglected eastern areas, though in practice it was heavily driven by a desire to weaken Hindu-led opposition to British rule in Bengal. While the partition was largely welcomed by the Muslim majority in the east, who saw in it prospects for political, social and economic advancement, many Hindus regarded it as an attempt to weaken the Indian nationalist movement. Due to the resistance and unrest the partition provoked, led by Calcutta-based Hindu elites in the influential Swadeshi movement, it was annulled in 1911, after which the two sections of Bengal were formally reunified. However, this led to lasting resentment among many Bengali Muslims in the east who had benefited from the partition.

During the period following the reunification of Bengal, other divisions were made based on language. In 1947, however, the whole of India was divided along religious lines. This had a lasting impact on intercommunal relations in the newly independent states: 'Because of the British strategies of categorisation and enumeration, notions of majority and minority became equated with dominance and disenfranchisement.'[1]

Partition and the struggle for independence, 1947-70

Many Muslim leaders in the subcontinent believed the 1947 Partition would bring much-needed protection for the region's Muslim population, but these sentiments changed as 'dissension, frustration, and disillusionment about the viability of one Muslim nation grew'.[2] Adding to these concerns was the refusal of the Pakistani government to recognize Bengali as an official language of united Pakistan and their insistence on Urdu being the official language of the country. The 1947 Partition, which created a Muslim nation made up of West Pakistan (now Pakistan) and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), led to a divide between Urdu and Bengali speakers, culminating in what is known as the (Bengali) Language Movement. From 1947 to 1951, the tense debate regarding language mostly took place in parliamentary debates and newspaper articles. By 1952, however, the movement had become more confrontational in nature, directly challenging state authority. In February that year, police opened fire on protesters at Dhaka University, killing a number of students and sparking unrest across the country. At the same time, religious minorities faced an increasingly hostile environment as Pakistan enacted a series of repressive measures, including the passing in 1965 of the Enemy Property Act that paved the way for the widespread expropriation of Hindu-owned land.[3] Islamiyat was also made compulsory for all students between classes 6 and 8 during this period.

The persistent social, political and economic exclusion of East Pakistan galvanized the formation of a Bengali nationalist movement centred around the Bangladesh AL. Under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who advocated for greater political and economic autonomy

from central government, the AL eventually achieved a landslide victory in Pakistan's 1970 election, winning 167 of the 169 seats in East Pakistan. In a bid to stop the east gaining independence, the West Pakistan military was deployed in March 1971 to East Pakistan, leading to the deaths of an unknown number of civilians – estimated by some sources as between 300,000 and 500,000, though the official government estimate is 3 million – in a targeted campaign that only ended with the military's surrender on 16 December 1971 and included widespread sexual violence. Many millions were forced to flee to India, where they lived in poor conditions in refugee camps. Religious minorities, particularly the Hindu population, were specifically targeted.[4]

Post-independence: 1971 onwards

Following the withdrawal of Pakistani military forces, the newly independent Bangladesh passed its first national Constitution in November 1972. This established 'nationalism', 'socialism', 'secularism' and 'democracy' as central principles of the state, paving the way for an inclusive environment for different religious communities to coexist. In particular, Article 12 of the Constitution called for the elimination of 'communalism in all its forms; the granting by the state of political status in favour of any religion; the abuse of religion for political purposes; any discrimination against or persecution of persons practising a particular religion'.[5]

However, in other areas its provisions fell short, particularly in its designation of Bengali as the sole state language and its declaration that Bangladeshi citizens would be known as Bengalis (Article 6) – emphasizing Bengali nationalism as being based on the 'unity and solidarity of the Bengalee nation, which derived its identity from its language and culture' (Article 9), in what was designated a unitary state (Article 1).[6] To an extent drawing on narratives of the Liberation War, premised on Bengali nationalism, this effectively excluded the many culturally and linguistically non-Bengali communities in the country: according to some estimates these include around 45 different groups, such as indigenous peoples in the Chittagong Hills, the majority of whom also belong to religious minorities, as well as other groups such as Bihari Muslims.

In 1975, Rahman was assassinated, beginning a long period of military rule that only ended in December 1990. These years saw the increasing entrenchment of a majoritarian politics that placed emphasis on the role of Islam in the country's political affairs, often at the expense of religious minorities and their rights. In 1977, for example, the Constitution's stated principle of 'secularism' was replaced with the declaration that 'Absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah shall be the basis of all actions.'[7] This was reinforced in 1988 by then President Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad's passing of the Eighth Constitution Amendment Act, declaring Islam the official state religion.

Even after the end of military rule and the restoration of democratic politics, however, the role of religion in civil life and the status of minorities within Bangladesh has continued to be contested. Political tensions between supporters of the secular AL, who held power throughout the 1990s, and the BNP, as well as a number of other parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami, have frequently led to boycotts, arrests and even violence. This political turbulence persisted between 2001 and 2008, with the BNP in power, before a landslide result in the December 2008 elections saw the AL regain control of parliament.

While the roots of religious discrimination extend back to colonialism and the bitter legacy of Partition, the marginalization of Bangladesh's minorities has persisted since independence. One continued source of insecurity is the broader regional context elsewhere in South Asia, including the treatment of India's Muslim minorities. In 1992, for example, the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in India led to large-scale rioting in Bangladesh, the looting of Hindu shops and businesses, targeted sexual violence and the deaths of at least 10 people.[8]

At the same time, ongoing political developments – in particular, the death sentences passed on a number of high-ranking members of the organization Jamaat-e-Islami for war crimes carried out in the 1971 War of Independence, including many aimed specifically at Hindu communities – have served to deepen social divisions, with minorities frequently bearing the brunt of the ensuing violence as they are assumed to be AL sympathizers. For example, following the passing in February 2013 of a death sentence on Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, Vice President of Jamaat-e-Islami, for crimes against humanity – including charges of arson, looting, forced conversion and forced emigration of Hindu communities[9] – Hindu homes, businesses and places of worship were targeted in a series of attacks over a period of weeks.[10]

Since 2013, too, extremist organizations such as the Al-Qaeda-inspired Ansarullah Bangla Team and Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent have established or strengthened their presence within Bangladesh. This development has been accompanied by a spate of brutal attacks particularly targeting Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, Ahmadis, Shi'a Muslims and a variety of other groups, including atheists, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) activists and foreigners. While the identity of the perpetrators has not

always been clear – the Bangladeshi government has consistently denied the presence of IS-affiliated militants within the country, despite the group claiming responsibility for many of these incidents – a continuum undoubtedly connects the recent wave of violence with the deep-seated discrimination that religious minorities in Bangladesh have struggled with for decades.

The precarious situation of religious minorities in the country was further undermined by the 2014 elections, the most violent in Bangladesh's history, with religious minorities specifically targeted in many parts of the country, particularly the north and southeast.[11] Many Hindu businesses and homes were singled out, with some attacks also aimed at Christians.[12] A large number of these attacks were reportedly driven by disputes over land and property. The anniversary of the election in 2015 saw renewed violence between government and opposition groups.[13] The resulting political deadlock between the AL and the BNP, the main opposition party, has created a highly adversarial environment that extremist groups have been able to exploit to their own advantage. Meanwhile, the AL government's heavy-handed stifling of dissent – including 'enforced disappearances, torture and extra-judicial killings'[14] – has only served to further impede the country's shrinking democratic space, with civil society and journalists operating in an increasingly restricted environment.

In this context, the difficulties experienced by Bangladesh's religious minorities have intensified. Religious minorities continue to face persecution, land theft and the threat of violence, with successive governments apparently unable or unwilling to address the underlying causes. Numbering among the poorest and most marginalized sections of the Bangladeshi populations, their situation has been further exacerbated by land grabbing and exclusion from many areas of employment.

3 Bangladesh's religious minorities

This section outlines the specific histories and conditions of Bangladesh's religious minorities. The largest, now officially estimated at around 8.5 per cent, is the Hindu population, followed by Buddhists (0.6 per cent) and Christians (0.3 per cent). In addition, some indigenous peoples, such as Mro, practice animism. However, while the majority of Muslims are Sunni, a small proportion are Shi'a and as such represent a sectarian minority. Similarly, the Ahmadi community – who self-identify as Muslim – have for decades been stigmatized by extremist groups who have called for the community to be formally designated as non-Muslim. While this briefing does not examine their situation in detail, Sufi Muslims have also been subjected to violent attacks. The country also has a growing number of atheists who, despite the risks they face, have become increasingly vocal in recent years in expressing their beliefs.

Bangladesh's trajectory in the decades since independence has seen a shrinking in its religious diversity, reflected in the relative decline of religious minorities from 23.1 per cent of the population in 1971 to 9.6 per cent today – a contraction largely due to the mass migration of its Hindu population.[15] This has been accompanied by the emergence of a majoritarian politics that has sidelined religious minorities from public life. Nevertheless, the particular challenges and threats vary from community to community.

3.1 Hindus

'There are people who are out there looking for the opportunity to launch attacks on the Hindus, at every opportunity.'
(Senior Hindu community leader, January 2016)

The oppression of Hindus in Bangladesh has been a constant feature in its history, both when it was still East Pakistan and since independence. They were particularly targeted during the Bangladesh Liberation War as many Pakistanis blamed them for the secession, resulting in targeted executions, rape and other human rights abuses against Hindu communities. Today, though distributed across Bangladesh, the Hindu population is particularly concentrated in the north and southwest of the country.[16]

While justice for many of the victims remains elusive, attempts to prosecute alleged perpetrators have frequently ignited fresh rounds of violence in recent years. The activities of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), set up by the AL in 2009 to try those accused of carrying out human rights abuses during the war for independence, has become increasingly politicized as many of those charged are associated with the opposition BNP or Jamaat-e-Islami. For example, on 28 February 2013 Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, a Bangladeshi Islamist politician and the Vice President of Jamaat-e-Islami, was convicted on 16 charges, including murder, looting, arson, rape and forcible conversion of Hindus to Islam, and sentenced to death on two counts. In the weeks following the judgment, a number of Hindu establishments – including houses, businesses and temples – were attacked, vandalized and burnt down in reprisal attacks by his supporters.[17] The violence was spread out across the country and Hindus living in almost all the divisions of Bangladesh were affected.[18] More than 50 temples were attacked and over 1,500 homes reportedly destroyed.[19]

Similar scapegoating has occurred after almost every national election in Bangladesh, with the Hindu community targeted as the presumed 'vote bank' of the AL by opposition

Table 1: Composition of religious communities (%), 1951-2011*

	1951	1961	1974	1981	1991	2001	2011
Muslim	76.9	80.4	85.4	86.7	88.3	89.7	90.4
Hindu	22.0	18.5	13.5	12.1	10.5	9.2	8.5
Buddhist	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.6
Christian	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3
Others	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.1

* BASED ON OFFICIAL CENSUS ESTIMATES.

supporters and extremists. However, as one respondent pointed out, framing their persecution as primarily political overlooks the dynamics of communal discrimination at play.[20] Indeed, the social stigmatization of community members has also enabled violence against them. For example, in April 2014 a Muslim teacher with a long-standing grudge against his Hindu colleague allegedly set up a false account in his name where he then posted derogatory remarks about Islam. He subsequently mobilized a crowd of around 1,000 locals in an attack against the Hindu community, leaving 10 injured and 32 homes destroyed.[21]

Major political events such as national elections have also served as flashpoints for communal violence. In early 2014, for instance, in the build up to the election, Hindus were subjected to threats and attacks to intimidate communities ahead of the vote. In the wake of the AL's electoral victory, Hindus and other minorities continued to be targeted, with a large number of Hindu temples burnt down, vandalized and looted.[22] The refusal of communities to boycott the elections led to widespread violence in certain areas, such as Malopara, where Jamaat-e-Islami activists spread false rumours that a number of their members had been killed in clashes to incite large-scale attacks against the community. An estimated 500 Hindu families from Gopalpur village alone lost their homes in the violence.[23]

Minority women and their everyday experiences of discrimination

The continued inequalities facing Bangladeshi women are especially acute for minority women, who face multiple forms of discrimination both from within their own communities and from majority members. For instance, the continued prevalence of separate personal laws, covering areas such as marriage, divorce and inheritance, leaves Buddhist, Christian and Hindu women vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by their partners and in-laws.[24] More broadly, they face social, economic and political exclusion, and in the context of intercommunal conflict are often targeted with sexual violence.[25] This is especially the case for indigenous Buddhist, Christian and Hindu women, who are often specifically targeted to intimidate and displace communities from their land:[26] the Kapaeeng Foundation documented 122 cases of sexual violence against indigenous women in 2014 and 85 in 2015, a significant rise from the reported incidence in previous years.[27]

From day to day, too, the experiences of minority women in areas such as attire are characterized by popular discrimination. This was reflected in a number of accounts from respondents of the stigma they felt as a result of their dress. As one Hindu woman described:

> *'Last year, during the Durga Puja season, I was at the market in Dhaka. Suddenly, two men approached me and hurled abusive words towards me. I was shocked and before I even realized, they were gone in the crowd. They were insulting me for wearing Sindur* [a mark made on the forehead using red powder by Hindu women signalling that they are married]. *I cried all the way back to home. Now I don't wear any Sindur when I go to public places.'*[28]

When asked if she filed any report, she replied:

> *'You are kidding me! Our idols are being destroyed and no one is being punished even after being identified. You think the law enforcers would help me? I would have been subjected to further insult at the police station.'*

Another woman, a Buddhist, said that nowadays on her way to her university she chooses to wear long scarves and cover her head, as many Muslim girls do in the country, to avoid identification:

> *'I feel more secure that way. I used to receive so many comments every time I wore my community's traditional dress.'*[29]

Activists have highlighted that this violence is not perpetrated exclusively by Jamaat-e-Islami members, with local leaders and politicians of different backgrounds exploiting communal tensions to consolidate their own position.[30] For example, on 5 July 2015 a group of around 50 armed men conscripted by a local strongman, an AL parliamentarian, reportedly attacked several villages and displaced villagers from their ancestral homes. Months later, the families were still unable to return for fear of further violence.[31] At a press briefing organized by a number of human rights organizations in early January 2016, rights activists and leaders of the Hindu community confirmed that the ruling AL party's political leaders, ranging from party members to ministers, were also involved in grabbing land belonging to community members.[32]

Importantly, land appropriations were until recently enabled by the so-called Vested Property Act (formerly known as the Enemy Property Act during Pakistani rule), a piece of legislation that allowed authorities to take over 'enemy' land, much of it in practice belonging to Hindus. This led to the expropriation of as much as 2.6 million acres between 1965 and 2006, with devastating effects for an estimated 1.2 million Hindu households.[33] Since then, there have been numerous attempts by Hindus who lost property through the Act to reclaim it, particularly since the creation of the Vested Properties Return (Amendment) Bill of 2011, which required the government to publish details of those properties which can be returned to their rightful owners. However, implementation has so far been limited, with many of those who have attempted to restore property ownership reportedly intimidated and thousands of cases delayed in a legal limbo, meaning relatively few cases have so far been resolved in practice.[34]

Another legacy of the Vested Property Act is the migration of millions of Hindus to India in the face of land grabbing and displacement from their homes. The decline of the Hindu population, from more than 22 per cent in the 1940s to less than 9 per cent today, is the result of this exodus: between 1964 and 2001, for instance, an estimated 8.1 million 'missing Hindus' left, amounting to around 219,000 people annually.[35] Continued discrimination, land grabbing and the growing threat of violence have meant that Bangladeshi Hindus have continued to emigrate, in many cases irregularly, to India.[36]

More recently, Hindus have been targeted not only in intercommunal attacks but increasingly by extremist militants. On 5 December 2015, a series of blasts targeting a Hindu ceremony in Dinjapur left six worshippers injured.[37] A few days later, another temple in Dinajpur was attacked by militants with guns and bombs, leaving nine injured.[38]

Within the Hindu community, the Dalit population remains especially marginalized and subject to discrimination not only by the majority population but also by more affluent, higher-caste Hindus who may, for example, exclude them from certain rituals[39] and from shared spaces such as temples, restaurants and markets. Isolated in remote rural settlements or segregated in poorly serviced urban 'colonies', they face widespread poverty, ostracization and food insecurity. Besides exclusion from many areas of employment, they have also been subjected to land grabbing, violence and forced conversion.[40] As a result, anti-discrimination measures aimed at improving the situation of Bangladesh's Hindus need to take particular account of this highly marginalized group.

3.2 Buddhists

Bangladesh's Buddhists, who represent less than 1 per cent of the national population, are mostly concentrated in the Chittagong Hills and northern areas of the country. The Chittagong Hill Tracts are home to 11 culturally and ethno-linguistically diverse indigenous peoples, collectively referred to as the *Jumma*. Of those that make up the *Jumma*, the Chakma and Marma represent the majority of those who identify as Buddhists. Historically, sectarian clashes between Buddhists and the country's majority Muslim population have been rare. However, Buddhists have long been subjected to discrimination, violence and displacement due to ongoing tensions over land and political participation, particularly in the Chittagong Hills (see box on 'A history of conflict in the Chittagong Hills'). However, violence against the country's indigenous communities is also widespread elsewhere. In the north and north-eastern plains, for example, according to figures compiled by the National Adivasi Forum, more than 140 indigenous people have been killed, dozens of women raped and an estimated 10,000 forced to migrate to India.[41] Since 2012, targeted attacks against Buddhists in Bangladesh have increased, with the alleged perpetrators ranging from members of the armed forces to locals, both members of the ruling AL party and Islamic parties.

Jumma and the growing Bengali population have taken on increasingly charged religious dimensions, too. In this regard, the attacks that took place on 29 September 2012 in Ramu were notable not only for their intensity, but also for the strong religious dimensions to the violence. The attacks began after a rumour spread that the image of a burnt Qur'an had been posted by a local Buddhist youth – though a subsequent investigation found that the person in question had not been involved.[47] In the ensuing violence, more than 20 Buddhist temples and 40 homes were reportedly torched and looted before authorities restored order. The incident undermined intercommunal harmony in Ramu to such an extent that, even eight months on, Ramu residents were reportedly living in fear and trust between communities had yet to be restored.[48]

Media reports also suggested that the police had allegedly detained innocent people rather than arresting those actually responsible for the attacks, making tensions worse.[49] Witnesses were apparently afraid to submit depositions to the courts and those who did attend the court claimed not to have seen anything.[50] While the government quickly ordered damaged properties and places of worship to be rebuilt, investing around US$2.5 million in reconstruction efforts – an important signal of support to the victims – the perpetrators nevertheless largely managed to evade

A history of conflict in the Chittagong Hills

Located in south-eastern Bangladesh, the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) have long been populated by a diverse range of non-Bengali ethnic and linguistic groups, such as Chakma and Marmas. Predominantly Buddhist, though in some cases also practising elements of Hindu religious rituals, even before Partition in 1947, these communities faced increasing pressure from displacement and the migration of large numbers of Bengali settlers to the area. With Partition, the area was controversially ceded to Pakistan rather than India, despite the majority of population being non-Muslim.

These and other factors – including the construction of the Kaptai Dam in the late 1950s and early 1960s – were the cause of considerable conflict as indigenous peoples were impoverished or forced from their land amid a rapid shift in population, actively encouraged by the government. While the indigenous population comprised more than 98 per cent of the population in 1947, the influx of Bengali settlers in the years that followed – rising to 9 per cent in 1956, 40 per cent by 1981 and 50 per cent of the local population in 1991 – dramatically shifted this demographic.[42] This process was actively accelerated by the government's policy, beginning in the late 1970s, to resettle hundreds of thousands of Bengali migrants through various incentives. This programme, also pursued by subsequent governments, came shortly after the outbreak of armed conflict between the Bangladeshi army and the Shanti Bahini, a guerrilla force drawn largely from local hill tribes. This was the armed wing of the JSS, whose key demands were for constitutional recognition of indigenous identities, as well as regional autonomy. In this context, resettlement was seen as a tool to evict or assimilate the indigenous population. The conflict brought about particularly widespread violence in the 1980s and 1990s, which led thousands of indigenous peoples to migrate to India.

While the conflict was formally brought to an end with the signing of the 1997 CHT Peace Accord, most of its terms have yet to be implemented and in the meantime the problem of targeted violence against the community, including sexual assault, remains widespread. While sexual violence was used as a weapon of war during the conflict, with large numbers of indigenous women reportedly raped during this period, Bengali settlers and security forces continue to perpetrate attacks against them to this day.[43] Impunity for the perpetrators, with few attacks even reported, let alone prosecuted, has encouraged further attacks. The protracted nature of this problem was illustrated by the announcement in October 2016 that the investigation into the case of Kalpana Chakma, a female indigenous rights activist abducted in 1996 who has not been heard from since, was being formally closed due to lack of evidence, despite extensive testimony from witnesses apparently identifying some of the main perpetrators.[44]

Furthermore, the continued presence of large numbers of Bangladeshi military personnel has only exacerbated insecurity in the area, while providing little or no protection for indigenous residents.[45] Land loss continues to be endemic, with the Kapaeeng Foundation reporting that more than 5,200 acres of land within the CHT were appropriated by officials, local settlers and companies during 2015 alone for plantations, tourist resorts and other uses.[46]

justice. While 19 criminal cases were filed in the wake of the violence, as well as 364 indicted by police on related cases and 193 arrests made, the central investigation failed to progress and the major culprits reportedly remained free. In September 2015, the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief reported that 'none of the perpetrators of the Ramu violence have been brought to justice as of now'.[51]

A further round of violence occurred between 29 July and 3 August 2013 in Taindong, when a number of attacks were launched by Bengali Muslims against various Buddhist villages, allegedly with the aim of grabbing indigenous lands. As with previous attacks, the violence appeared to be part of a premeditated plan to secure control of indigenous territory. Many of those who fled lost their land as a result. Nevertheless, two Buddhist temples were also actively targeted, reinforcing the communal nature of the violence.[52] Indigenous community leaders blamed the widespread culture of impunity for enabling the violence, arguing that the lack of concrete measures against settlers who had carried out previous attacks had acted as a major catalyst for the violence. 'Complaints against the settlers are not much listened to by the law enforcement agencies,' said one representative. 'And there is not a single example over the decades that the perpetrators got the punishment for crime.'[53] Indeed, Bangladesh Border Guard (BGB) personnel have often contributed to violence against the community. On 10 June 2014, for instance, at least 18 people, including a number of women, sustained injuries in Khagrachari in violence between local indigenous peoples and members of the BGB triggered by the BGB's proposal to establish a headquarters in Dighinala Upazila, on what the indigenous community regarded as ancestral land.[54]

Elsewhere in Bangladesh, land grabbing has devastated indigenous Buddhist communities as their ancestral

territory has been seized by powerful local actors. In Kuakata, for example, land donated by the state to the indigenous Rakhine community was subsequently seized illegally and used to build a shopping complex. Residents in the area have struggled to maintain their spiritual traditions as cremation grounds, sacred waterways and temples have been damaged or looted. While there were no fewer than 19 Buddhist temples in the area as of 1906, today only one remains.[55]

Human rights monitoring groups have highlighted how predominantly Buddhist indigenous communities continue to be vulnerable, particularly in the CHT, to targeted attacks, sexual violence and land appropriation. For example, the Kapaeeng Foundation documented at least 13 extra-judicial killings of indigenous community members during 2015, the torture and physical mistreatment of at least 134 others and the looting, vandalization and burning of many indigenous homes in CHT and the plains.[56]

3.3 Christians

Like Buddhists, Christians also make up less than 1 per cent of Bangladesh's population, concentrated primarily in Barisal, Khulna and Gazipur.[57] Sectarian clashes between them and the majority population were until recently infrequent. However, their lives in Bangladesh have often been characterized by discrimination in many areas of their lives, including employment or housing. There have been reports of some Muslim landlords refusing to rent apartments to Christian families,[58] for example, and Christians and other minorities typically work disproportionately in the most marginalized, poorly paid jobs such as street sweepers.[59] Like other minorities, Christians have on occasion been targeted during periods of political upheaval, such as in early 2014 when Christians in some areas were attacked around the country's national elections.[60]

Bangladesh has witnessed a number of cases in recent years where Christians have been specifically targeted. One of the first major attacks took place on 3 June 2001, when a bomb was detonated in a Catholic church in a village in Gopalgank village, south of Bangladesh, killing at least 9 people and injuring 20 others.[61] While this remains the worst single incident against the community, violence against Christians has continued, enabled in part by their marginalized position within Bangladeshi society. In some cases, the attacks appear to have been driven by material concerns such as land. In the words of one Christian representative, 'Christians are attacked for their land and property, and the attackers are backed by all political parties. They think Christians are a minuscule minority, weak and unable to protest and resist.'[62]

In the CHT, in areas populated by Christian indigenous communities, conflict over land with Muslim Bengali settlers has sometimes taken on a religious dimension as a result. Some Bengali settlers have allegedly spread rumours of plans by indigenous residents to set up an autonomous Christian state, triggering heavy surveillance from local security forces.[63] Elsewhere in the country, similar tensions arise between Christian and majority communities. On 7 January 2014, for example, Mandi Catholics were attacked by a group of Muslims and a house in Jamalpur set alight, apparently due to a dispute over land.[64] An attack on a convent in Dinajpur in July 2014 by more than 50 armed men, including robbery and attempted rape, was attributed by clergy in part to a local land dispute.[65]

Increasingly, Christians have also been targeted by extremist groups. For instance, at the beginning of October 2015, alleged Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) members attempted to slit the throat of a pastor in Pabna.[66] Around the same time, a number of priests were sent a series of death threats, purportedly from members of the outlawed JMB and IS.[67] In November, further threats were issued anonymously to priests in Rangpur[68] and another attack was carried out on an Italian priest in Dinajpur.[69] On 10 December, three Christians were stabbed by unknown assailants in their home, leaving them in a critical condition. While police presented the incident as a robbery, community members claimed that the stabbings were a premeditated attack on the community.[70] Following these attacks, Christians reportedly skipped the traditional Christmas midnight mass services due to the increasing number of threats issued against Christian leaders.[71]

3.4 Ahmadiyya

Bangladesh's Ahmadiyya originated in the early twentieth century and today there are an estimated 100,000 followers in the country.[71] While the community regard themselves as Muslim, certain doctrinal differences have led some extremists to condemn their beliefs as heretical. As a result, the community has been subjected to increasing hostility since the early 1990s as militant organizations have mobilized against them, aided by the increasing influence of Islam in the country's politics and the ascent of the BNP to power in 1991. Following an anti-Ahmadi conference in December that year calling for a ban on the Ahmadi faith, similar to that imposed in Pakistan, a series of major attacks were carried out against the community. These included the looting and arson of the Bahshkibazar Ahmadiyya complex in Dhaka in October 1992 by a crowd of more than 1,200 people, as well as numerous other attacks across the country against

Ahmadi mosques, offices and homes, culminating in the bombing of a mosque in Khulna in October 1999 that left six dead and several others seriously injured.

This violence formed part of a broader effort by extremists to pressure authorities to declare the community non-Muslim. In 2004, the government, led by the BNP in coalition with Jamaat-e-Islami, responded to threats to dismantle Ahmadi mosques if action was not taken against the community by banning the production, sale and distribution of Ahmadi publications – a decision justified by the government 'in view of objectionable materials in such publications that hurt or might hurt the sentiments of the majority Muslim population of Bangladesh'.[73] This measure failed to mollify extremists within the country and further entrenched a climate of impunity for those targeting the community.

Importantly, it also established a precedent for the restriction of Ahmadi beliefs in the name of security. In a number of instances, the government has imposed Section 144 (an emergency measure) in districts where threats have been made against the Ahmadiyya community. On 19 May 2006, for instance, Brahmanbaria district headquarters imposed Section 144 following threats from anti-Ahmadiyya preachers, resulting in the eventual cancellation of the Ahmadiyya annual convention that month.[74] Alleged security concerns have also been used on occasion by law enforcement agencies and government officials as a pretext to prevent the community from practising their rituals. In March 2007, for example, the Ahmadiyya Regional Jalsa was brought to a halt by the district authorities in Shalshiri village, Ponchogarh District, on security grounds, despite taking place in an area with a large Ahmadi population. The local community, though it approached the district authorities twice to secure permission, were reportedly not allowed to go ahead with their gathering.[75]

Community leaders have highlighted that, while the community has struggled against a backdrop of continued violence, few of these incidents are reported in national media.[76] Discrimination against the community, as one Ahmadi representative noted, has become a way of life for the community.[77] This is reflected in the fact that many of the attacks carried out against the community are not perpetrated by isolated extremist cells but by crowds of locals, in many cases mobilized by preachers or politicians. In February 2013, the destruction of a venue scheduled to host the centenary celebrations of the Ahmadi community in Bangladesh, for instance, was carried out by a mob reportedly numbering as many as 20,000 people. Ahmadi leaders complained that police failed to adequately protect the site from attack.[78]

However, militants have also targeted the community. Most recently, a suicide bombing of an Ahmadi congregation in Bagmara on 25 December 2015 left three worshippers injured, with IS claiming responsibility for the attack.[79]

3.5 Shi'a

Though their exact numbers are unknown, Shi'a make up a sizeable minority of Bangladesh's Muslim population alongside the Sunni majority. Until recently, however, they enjoyed similar rights to other Muslims and attacks on Shi'a Muslims were rare. However, the explosion on 24 October 2015 of a series of homemade bombs in front of Hossaini Dalan, Dhaka's main Shi'a shrine, represented a new phase of sectarian violence for the country. The bomb blasts killed one person and caused injuries to at least 80 others.[80] IS subsequently claimed responsibility for the attack, though the government has repeatedly denied its presence in the country and instead attributed the attacks to local militant groups, including JMB.[81]

Following the incident, the European Parliament passed a resolution on 26 November 2015 urging Bangladesh's government 'to offer sufficient protection and guarantees to minorities such as Shi'a Muslims, Ahmadiyya, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians'. It also called for the government and religious leaders to support efforts at reconciliation.[82] However, the very same day another attack against Shi'a civilians took place when militants attacked worshippers at a Shi'a mosque in Bogra, killing the muezzin and wounding three others.[83] IS announced it was behind the attacks, a claim again denied by the authorities who blamed the attacks on local militants.[84]

3.6 Bahá'í

As information on their community is relatively scarce, the exact number of Bangladesh's Bahá'í community is unknown, though some estimates range from a little over 10,000[85] to in excess of 60,000,[86] even as many as 100,000[87] or 300,000.[88] While the earliest community members are believed to have settled around the 1920s, the first local governing body was established in 1952 in the wake of Partition, with others subsequently established in Chittagong and Mymensingha. Following independence, a National Spiritual Assembly was established in 1972. Now relatively dispersed, Bahá'í nevertheless remain active in social work[89] and are able to freely congregate, practise their faith and establish administrative centres within Bangladesh.[90] For example, in December 2011 a conference brought together a large number of judges and lawyers to discuss the application of Bahá'í personal law in the country.[91]

Despite this relatively tolerant climate, however, like other religious minorities Bahá'í have been targeted by extremists, with the attempted shooting of a community member in November 2015 later claimed by IS, along with similar attacks the same month on a Sufi Muslim and an Italian doctor working as a missionary – though authorities insisted that they were the result of 'internal disputes'.[92]

The assault by extremists on atheists and secular dissent

Although atheism is not generally considered a religion, their rights to freedom of belief remain the same: in the words of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, 'holding atheistic convictions is in any case covered by everyone's right to freedom of religion or belief in conjunction with freedom of expression and other human rights'.[93] However, those who express their status as non-believers or openly criticize religious teachings in Bangladesh have been targeted for their beliefs. Though there are no statistics available on the population of this group, the most visible of them are the bloggers or publishers, often identified as 'free thinkers' within Bangladesh, who have been subjected to a series of high-profile attacks in recent years.

On 15 February 2013, Ahmed Rajib Haider was the first to be killed with machetes due to his writings. Since then, the frequency of the attacks has escalated, with four bloggers and a publisher for their secularist views during 2015 alone. Consequently, many activists are now living in fear of further attacks, with some having fled the country to escape possible attacks. The attacks have continued into 2016, with a blogger and a professor killed in separate incidents by militants in April. Furthermore, in many cases law enforcement agencies have never caught the attackers – a situation that has led activists to criticize the authorities for failing to curb a growing culture of impunity for extremists.[94] Indeed, officials have at times responded to the murder of bloggers by placing some of the blame on the writings of the victims themselves.[95]

These attacks, a number of which have been claimed by groups purportedly affiliated with IS or al-Qaeda, have also widened to encompass other groups, such as foreigners and LGBT groups – as reflected in the April 2016 murder of two leading LGBT activists[96] and the July 2016 attacks on a café in Dhaka that left 20 hostages dead, 18 of whom were foreigners.[97] Amid intensifying violence, the range of potential targets for extremist violence has expanded.


Bangladesh
Panchagarh
Kurigram
INDIA
Gaibandha
Nowgaon
Rajshahi
Natore
Tangail
BANGLADESH
Pabna
Kushtia
Dhaka
Jhenaidah
Khagrachhari
INDIA
Chittagong
Bandarban
BAY OF BENGAL
0
50
100 km
BURMA

4 Current challenges

4.1 The slide towards extremism

The severity of communal violence in Bangladesh varies from year to year, its manifestations linked to a range of factors including domestic and regional politics, but also social and economic factors. Nevertheless, the recent increase in extremist violence showed little sign of waning in 2016, with numerous attacks carried out during the year. While the most high-profile attack took place on 3 July on a café in Dhaka that killed 20 hostages, the majority foreigners, there has also been a series of deadly attacks against religious minorities throughout the year. Like the incident in Dhaka, many of these attacks have been claimed by IS – a claim refuted by authorities who blame local militants for the violence. Bangladesh has a long history of home-grown extremist groups, including groups such as JMB, active since the early 2000s and now a close sympathizer of IS, responsible for a large number of attacks against Hindu priests, Buddhist monks and Shi'a.[98] More recently, the Ansarullah Bangla Team has gained notoriety for its attack on bloggers, beginning in 2013, as well as its release of a lengthy 'kill list' of secular writers and activists in September 2015.[99] However, many commentators have highlighted evidence suggesting that increasing links between domestic and international terrorist networks have blurred these distinctions, as Bangladeshi militants have sought to emulate the violence espoused by IS and al-Qaeda.[100]

Regardless of their authorship, there has been no apparent slowdown in attacks carried out against minorities during the year. These included, on 11 February 2016, the beheading of a Hindu trader,[101] the murder on 21 February of a Hindu priest in Panchagarh,[102] the murder on 25 May of a Hindu businessman in Gaibandha[103] and the killing of a 70-year-old Hindu priest in Jhenaidah[104] on 7 June, followed by another lethal attack on a Hindu monastery worker on 10 June[105] – all attacks reportedly claimed by IS. Other deadly militant attacks included the murder of a Hindu tailor on 30 April outside his home,[106] and the killing of a Hindu monastery worker on 1 July in Jhenaidah.[107]

Nor were Hindus the only minority targeted. On 7 January, militants allegedly associated with IS killed a Christian convert in Jhenaidah,[108] followed by the knifing to death of another Christian convert on 22 March in Kurigram, also claimed by IS, presented as 'a lesson to others'.[109] On 20 May, a doctor in Kushtia was murdered by militants with a machete – according to IS, the attack was carried out because the victim 'called to Christianity'[110]

Deadly attacks in Bangladesh, January-September 2016

- **7 January 2016**, Jhenaidah: militants allegedly associated with IS killed a Christian convert, though the authorities dispute the involvement of IS.[116]
- **8 February 2016**, Gaibandha: a Hindu trader is reportedly beheaded by unknown assailants.[117]
- **21 February 2016**, Panchagarh: a Hindu priest was murdered and three others injured after men armed with machetes launched an attack on a temple. IS claimed responsibility for the attack.[118]
- **14 March 2016**, Kaliganj town, Jhenaidah district: a Shi'a preacher was murdered in south-western Bangladesh by militants. IS claimed responsibility for the attack.[119]
- **22 March 2016**, Kurigram: militants armed with knives killed a 68-year-old Christian convert. IS subsequently presented the attack as 'a lesson to others', though their claim of responsibility was dismissed as 'bogus' by authorities.[120]
- **6 April 2016**, Dhaka: a young law student was killed by militants, apparently in reprisal for his secular writings.[121]
- **23 April 2016**, Rajshahi: a liberal English literature professor was murdered by religious extremists, allegedly for 'calling to atheism', though he had not publicly spoken against religion, in an attack claimed by IS.[122]
- **25 April 2016**, Dhaka: the editor of an LGBT magazine and his friend were killed at his home by a group of assailants with machetes.[123]
- **29 April 2016**, Khagrachhari: the body of a Hindu indigenous farmer is found. Neighbours believed he had been murdered a few days before by Bengali settlers.[124]
- **30 April 2016**, Tangail: a Hindu tailor was murdered by unidentified men outside his shop. The victim had

previously been arrested in 2012 on allegations of making derogatory remarks about Islam.[125]

- **7 May 2016**, Rajshahi: a Sufi cleric is murdered by unknown militants.[126]
- **14 May 2016**, Bandarban: a 75-year-old Buddhist priest died after his throat was cut by a group of assailants at a temple in Baishari.
- **20 May 2016**, Kushtia district: a doctor on a motorcycle was killed by militants with a machete. The unidentified assailants were subsequently able to escape. IS, who reportedly took credit for the attack, claimed that the attack was carried out because the victim had 'called to Christianity'.[127]
- **25 May 2016**, Gaibandha: a Hindu businessman was murdered in his shop by unknown assailants in an attack subsequently claimed by IS, though local police arrested a Hindu youth who they claimed had a financial dispute with the victim.[128]
- **5 June 2016**, Bonpara village, Natore district: a 65-year-old Christian grocer was murdered by unknown assailants in an attack subsequently claimed by IS.[129]
- **7 June 2016**, Jhenaidah: A 70-year-old Hindu priest was attacked by three militants, who cut his throat. IS claimed responsibility for the killing, though the authorities blamed the attack on domestic extremists.[130]
- **10 June 2016**, Pabna: a 62-year-old Hindu monastery worker was killed by a group of unknown assailants with machetes while taking an early morning stroll. IS subsequently took credit for the attack.[131]
- **30 June 2016**, Bandarban: a Buddhist farmer was killed with machetes. IS subsequently claimed to have been behind the attack.[132]
- **1 July 2016**, Jhenaidah: a Hindu monastery worker was killed by unknown militants with machetes.[133]
- **1 July 2016**, Dhaka: an attack on a café in Dhaka by armed militants ended with 20 hostages, most of them foreigners, dead. IS claimed responsibility for the attack, though authorities attributed it to a domestic extremist group.[134]
- **3 September 2016**, Nowgaon: the body of a Hindu barber, murdered by unknown assailants, was found in a paddy field.[135]

– while on 5 June 2016 a 65-year-old Christian grocer in Natore was murdered by unknown assailants in an attack subsequently claimed by IS.[111] Authorities refuted the group's alleged responsibility for the attacks. A deadly attack was also carried out on 14 March, when a Shi'a preacher who worked as a homeopathic doctor was murdered with machetes in Jehnaidah. IS claimed responsibility for the killing.[112] On 14 May, a 75-year-old Buddhist priest's throat was cut in a temple in Baisahari, Bandarban.[113]

Regardless of the degree to which IS actually played a role in these attacks, the authorities have not only shown a consistent failure to protect minorities but also to bring many of the perpetrators to justice. The launch in June 2016 of a nationwide crackdown on militants following a series of attacks, including the murder of a senior policeman's wife, appeared to signal a shift towards a more concerted response against extremist organizations – yet the operation, which reportedly led to thousands of arrests, was also criticized by civil society groups for widespread allegations of police abuse and corruption, while BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami activists accused authorities of using the round-up to specifically target them.[114] Nor, troublingly, were authorities able to prevent the attempted murder in Manipur of a Hindu teacher on 15 June by assailants with knives amidst this crackdown.[115]

4.2 Beyond the headlines – the reality of everyday discrimination

While the degree of involvement of domestic or international terrorist networks in the recent spate of killings is contested, it is certainly the case that religious extremism pre-dates the global rise of IS, reflected in banned militant organizations such as Harkut-ul-Jihad and JMB. Yet social prejudice and religious intolerance towards non-Muslim minorities is a problem not confined to small extremist outfits, but is a wider societal issue. Indeed, extremist movements within the country have at times enjoyed clear signs of wider support among some Bangladeshis. On 6 April 2013, for instance, demonstrations staged by the group Hefazat-e-Islam saw at least half a million supporters take to the streets in Dhaka with a series of demands that included the hanging of atheist bloggers, the imposition of an anti-blasphemy law with the death penalty and the designation of Ahmadis as 'non-Muslims'.[136]

Consequently, though the recent spate of terror attacks is highly significant, they represent only one part of the violence and discrimination that religious minorities in Bangladesh experience on an almost daily basis. Communal violence also remains commonplace. Leading rights organization Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) reports that, between January and June 2016, violence

targeting Hindus in Bangladesh resulted in the burning of 66 homes, 24 people being injured and the destruction of at least 49 temples, monasteries or statues.[137] Similar incidents continued throughout 2016, including an effigy damaged in Chandpur district on 3 March,[138] the desecration of Hindu deities in Bagerhat district on 15 July[139] and vandalism of two separate temples in Baagerhat district on 6 August.[140]

Much of this violence is carried out at a local level by individuals or groups rather than militants, often driven by personal disputes, land grabbing and the apparent impunity that characterizes many attacks. To take one example, on 14 May, a Hindu family in Jalokati district who had long suffered persecution from other residents were attacked by the local AL leader and around 50 men, who looted their property and vandalized their Hindu deities.[141] Addressing these issues extends beyond immediate security to broader problems of inequality and social stigmatization.

This is evident in the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence to which minority girls and women are subjected. For example, on 8 May an 11-year-old Hindu girl was kidnapped in Bogra with the intention of rape and forcible conversion. Though witnesses identified a number of perpetrators, the police failed to make any arrests or rescue the victim, with one senior official reportedly dismissing the case as a voluntary elopement for love rather than a forcible abduction.[142] The case, far from atypical, illustrates the frequent reality of police inaction and the barriers this creates for minority victims seeking protection or justice. Furthermore, forced conversion to Islam is allegedly used by some perpetrators of abduction and rape to seal their control over the victim and reduce the support available from their own community.[143] When minority members do launch a complaint, the repercussions for them and their community can be devastating. In January 2016, for instance, a crowd attacked a Hindu neighbourhood in Rishipolli, Monirampur, setting fire to houses and injuring at least 15 people, following complaints from three Hindu girls to their school about their harassment by a group of Muslim youths, who subsequently led the attack.[144]

Similar problems extend to another common form of attack against minorities – politically motivated violence. Attacks against religious minorities by party activists remain routine, particularly during major political events such as the 2001 and 2014 national elections, and have continued during the year. Religious minorities frequently find themselves caught in the crossfire of bitter local conflicts between rival parties or candidates. For instance, on 10 March, after an attack by the incumbent AL representative against the electoral camps of a rival who was challenging him as a breakaway AL candidate, the latter's supporters then launched an attack on Hindu homes and vandalized a temple.[145] In April, following local elections in Lohajang Upazila, Munshigonj district, around 100 people reportedly attacked the Hindu community for not casting their votes in favour of the defeated opposition candidate. Seven were injured and eight homes damaged in the attacks, while a number of Hindu deities were desecrated: police and officials reportedly failed to come to the community's aid during the violence.[146] Similar attacks were reported in Kishoreghonj District, where initially no perpetrators were arrested, despite being identified as repeat offenders with a history of targeted violence against minorities.[147] On 21 March, a Hindu AL representative was severely tortured by the opposition candidate and his men in Firozpur district,[148] while on 29 May, following defeat in local elections in Cox's Bazaar, hundreds of opposition supporters targeted Hindu homes, businesses and places of worship.[149]

Even what appear to be more general crimes, such as theft, may be targeted particularly at minorities due to their lack of protection and the apparent unwillingness of police to investigate their cases. On 22 June 2016, for instance, a Hindu worshipper was attacked as he returned home from the temple by a group of armed assailants who allegedly attempted to kill him, though local police reportedly refused to treat it as a targeted assault and classified it only as a robbery.[150] Earlier that month, on 6 June, a group also attacked a Hindu man at his house in Mymensingh, stealing his savings and inflicting serious injuries on him. The victim was reportedly threatened by the assailants to leave his home within a week.[151] Entire communities have also been pressured to leave, further highlighting the lack of security in many areas. On 15 July 2016, for example, a death threat was sent to a Hindu temple in Barisal, claiming that an attack would be launched imminently against the community and that any Hindus wishing to protect themselves should leave for India immediately.[152]

The predominantly Buddhist and Christian indigenous communities in the CHT also remain vulnerable to violent attacks from settlers, security personnel and local officials attempting to secure political power or control over land. In July, the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samit (PCJSS), an indigenous political party in the CHT, claimed that attacks orchestrated by AL members against them had resulted in 2 dead, 30 injured, 16 detained, 50 falsely charged and 200 forced from their homes.[153] On 10 March, a religious ceremony taking place in a Buddhist temple in Khagrachari Hill District to commemorate the passing of its abbot was interrupted by armed soldiers, who entered the grounds and intimidated those present.[154] On 14 April, three indigenous Garo Christian men in Jhenaigati were reportedly abducted by men in security uniform.[155]

In addition, according to reports as many as 187 indigenous men, women and children in Kalenga Forest

Reserve had attempted to cross into India at the end of June, following intimidation and harassment allegedly carried out by forest officials.[156] Tensions between forest guards and indigenous communities frequently arise due to conflict over land, often the result of official policies. Earlier in 2016, for instance, it was announced that the forestry department had designated 9,145 acres of indigenous land in Modhupur as reserved forest for conservation and tourist safaris.[157]

Indigenous communities continue to be targeted by settlers in an apparent effort to intimidate them or gain control over their land. Among other incidents, on 27 March, a 150-year-old Rakhine cemetery in Patuakhali district was allegedly targeted by local Bengali settlers and the graves damaged or demolished, apparently with the aim of grabbing their land.[158] On 29 April, the body of a Hindu indigenous farmer was found in Khagrachhari: neighbours believed he had been murdered a few days before by Bengali settlers.[159] On 4 August, a Buddhist temple in Bandarban was attacked by unknown assailants who seriously assaulted an elderly monk.[160] On 2 October, a Buddha statue was vandalized by a group of more than 20 men.[161]

Incidents such as these illustrate that attacks against religious minorities are not only driven by militant extremism, whether domestic or international in nature, but also enabled by impunity, vested interests and social discrimination. In many cases, officials are themselves complicit in the violence. On 15 May, for instance, a Hindu headmaster in Narayanganj District was publicly humiliated after being falsely accused of defaming Islam. In the presence of local MP AKM Selim Osman, a crowd forced the victim to do repeated squats while holding his ears before being beaten. Other officials and police were also reportedly in attendance during the incident. The victim claimed that the accusations were part of a targeted campaign against him and he was reinstated following a public outcry.[162]

Consequently, addressing the insecurity affecting religious minorities requires a concerted societal transformation within Bangladesh to address the deep-seated exclusion and inequality that form the backdrop to the abuse they face. The rest of this section outlines some of the key areas where change is urgently needed.

4.3 The legal context

> *'We have laws – what we don't have is implementation. As a lawyer, I do believe that if there was proper implementation the Penal Code alone could have provided redress to the victims.'*[163]
> (Human rights advocate, July 2016)

On paper, religious minorities are afforded freedom of belief and worship within the Constitution. Besides affirming the equality of all citizens before the law and their right to protection, the text also stipulates that 'The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.'[164] Furthermore, 'every citizen has the right to profess, practice or propagate any religion' and 'every religious community or denomination has the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions'.[165] However, though the removal of the 'secularism' principle in the Constitution was reversed in 2011 by the AL government, Islam has retained its designation as the state religion. A legal challenge, first lodged in 1988 when the amendment was made, was formally rejected in March 2016.[166] A separate issue, technically related to indigeneity rather than religion but disproportionately affecting the Buddhist and Christian communities who make up the majority of Bangladesh's indigenous peoples, is the fact that their status is still not officially recognized. The Constitution's 2011 amendment refers to them as 'tribes', 'minor races' and 'ethnic sects and communities',[167] but crucially not as 'indigenous' – a designation that would strengthen their land rights. Indeed, 'as recently as October 2015, the government issued circulars warning against use of that word to describe ethno-religious minorities in any events hosted on public property'.[168]

Other pieces of national legislation implicitly support the equal protection of minorities against violence and discrimination. The 1860 Penal Code explicitly condemns murder, rape, abduction and other abuses against all citizens, as well as the damage or defilement of places of worship, the intentional outrage of religious feeling and the disturbance of religious assembly[169] – all threats impacting especially on minorities, though at present the charges are often used against those accused of criticizing Islam, including many minority members. Similarly, Bangladesh's law explicitly criminalizes many of the offences that have characterized attacks against minority communities. The Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000, for instance, stipulates that those guilty of kidnapping should be 'punished with transportation for life or with rigorous imprisonment for either description, which may extend to fourteen years and also with fine',[170] while 'whoever commits rape with a woman or a child, shall be punished with rigorous imprisonment for life and with fine'.[171]

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), acceded to by Bangladesh in 2000, stipulates that each state should take steps 'to respect and to ensure to all individuals within its territory and subject to its jurisdiction the rights recognized in the present Covenant, without distinction of any kind',[172] and confers on minority groups the right 'to enjoy their own culture' and 'to profess and practice their own religion'.[173] There is

also a range of other conventions signed or acceded to by Bangladesh – for example, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination – that have particular relevance for the country's religious minorities, given the threats they face of abuses such as forced marriage. The 1964 Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, acceded to by Bangladesh in 1998, observes that 'marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses'[174] and prohibits marriage under the legal minimum age.

Consequently, problems arise not from a legal vacuum but rather the failure to enforce existing legal provisions. At the same time, lack of political will or obstruction has contributed to continued injustices for many minority members. The 2001 Vested Property Return Act, for instance, tabled by the AL just before the end of its term, stipulated a 180-day deadline to prepare a list of vested property with the aim of facilitating its return. The successor BNP government, however, amended the provision of the deadline to an 'indefinite period', meaning that, in practice, these measures were not implemented. Only with the passing of the Vested Properties Return (Amendment) Act in 2011 did Hindu families have the legal basis to reclaim their property. Despite this, activists have highlighted the continued failure to restore property to many victims, in part due to obstruction by officials themselves complicit in land grabbing.[175]

4.4 The problem of impunity and the status of rights implementation

There have been some notable attempts by activists to call the government to account for its failure to protect the rights of religious minorities. In 2013, following a series of attacks on religious minorities in Bangladesh, particularly the Hindu community, a writ was filed in the Divisional Bench of the High Court Division by a consortium of rights organizations, highlighting numerous documented cases of violence and abuses carried out against minorities. But while the court ruled that a high-level investigatory committee should be established, vulnerable areas identified and measures taken to boost security for minorities, the government reportedly failed to respond.[176]

Addressing political inaction, then, is as necessary as any legal reform. In this regard, the reconstitution in 2009 of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), initially established two years before, was a welcome step. Mandated to review the country's legal standards and represent victims of human rights violations, the NHRC has, among other activities, highlighted the continued insecurity of the country's religious minorities and the government's failure to protect them adequately. However, while the NHRC can, for example, provide legal assistance to those affected and undertake an inquiry on their behalf, it does not enjoy any executive power to enforce human rights but can only provide recommendations – a major obstacle to its effectiveness that fundamentally limits its ability to enforce its findings.[177]

Enforcing basic protections for religious minorities across the country therefore requires a substantive transformation of the current response from police, security forces and the judiciary to ensure that violence and discrimination against the community are prevented or identified. Further, steps must be taken to protect victims, to resolve ongoing situations such as forced abductions and to file cases against the perpetrators to bring them to justice. At present, a recurrent problem is the failure of police to adequately investigate or even recognize allegations of rights abuses, including serious incidents such as physical assault or abduction, leaving victims and their families with no legal recourse. The persistent problem of impunity for those responsible for crimes such as land grabbing, intimidation and even murder has been an essential element in the continued abuse of minorities. Hence there have been calls from community members and activists for more substantive reforms and the creation of tailored legislation, fast-track tribunals and other measures to address specific violations of minority rights.[178]

This problem is illustrated by the recurrence of targeted post-election unrest, a cycle that Bangladesh has so far failed to break. For example, an investigation into the violence that consumed the country in the wake of the 2001 elections found that the attacks, directed disproportionately at Hindus and other religious minorities, left 355 dead and included 3,270 incidents of rape, looting and arson.[179] It also found that as many as 25,000 people, including 25 MPs and members of the BNP-Jamaat alliance, were involved in the attacks.[180] The recommendations included prosecuting the perpetrators of the violence, compensation for the victims and the creation of district-level committees with dedicated police and judiciary to probe alleged incidents of violence against minorities. However, despite reports having been submitted to the government in April 2011, the findings had yet to be acted on when a fresh wave of violence broke out following the January 2014 elections. A senior official involved highlighted that if the recommendations had been acted on at the time, much of the violence might have been prevented.[181]

4.5 Barriers to representation

An important dimension to the difficulties minorities experience in securing justice is their historic under-representation in public institutions such as the police, military and civil bureaucracy. Gauging their current levels of representation is problematic due to a lack of reliable or accessible recent data, though previous studies have demonstrated limited levels of representation at senior levels of the army, police force and civil administration.[182] Poverty and marginalization continue to be major obstacles to justice: 'Members of minority religious groups often had the lowest socio-economic status and the least recourse to political means to redress wrongs done to them.'[183]

Though there have been some signs of improvement towards greater inclusion, with the appointment of a number of minority members to senior positions – in January 2015, for instance, the government appointed the first Hindu to hold the office of chief justice in the Supreme Court[184] – 'religious minorities remain underrepresented in politics and state agencies'.[185] With 14 Hindu members, the current parliament has the highest levels of representation of the community in the country's history, compared to six in 1991, five in 1996, three in 2001 and ten in 2008.[186]

Nevertheless, even the current number amounts to just 4 per cent of the parliament, a fraction of their proportion within the national population. Historically, too, Hindu MPs have been concentrated in one party: since 1991, save for one exception, all Hindus elected to parliament were members of the AL.[187] As for other religious minorities, there is presently just one Christian member of parliament, an indigenous Garo elected in the July 2016 parliamentary by-elections as a member of the AL, and two indigenous Buddhist members.[188] Despite their limited representation, however, there are currently no affirmative measures in place to raise the proportion of minorities in parliament.[189] Consequently, religious minorities remain marginalized within Bangladesh's mainstream politics.

4.6 Education

Education has a central role to play in ending the discrimination experienced by minorities, both by increasing their opportunity to high-level employment (for example, in the civil administration, industry and judiciary) and by challenging entrenched stereotypes through awareness raising and positive representations. Unfortunately, at present the educational sector is doing little to challenge negative attitudes, and indeed in some ways may even be reinforcing them.

Bangladesh's educational system has undergone some reforms since the days of Pakistani rule, when *Islamiyat* – religious instruction in Islam – was mandatory for all students regardless of their faith. Following independence, efforts to secularize the country's schooling system by separating education from religion were rejected by a large majority of its citizens. Following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, *Islamiyat* was reinstated, but this time students from other minorities were able to study their own religion instead. However, the resources and teaching of these non-Muslim faiths were often deficient.[190]

The strongly Islamic tone of Bangladesh's education system increased further with the establishment of madrassa schools in the 1980s throughout the country, steadily expanding with considerable government support to number thousands today. In addition to these publicly funded institutions, however, there are also private Qawmi madrassas funded by businesses, diaspora or Muslim organizations in the Middle East. A large proportion of these graduates subsequently end up themselves in influential positions within education.[191] While the links between madrassa institutions and extremism are disputed, with many providing a wide-ranging education in different disciplines, there are fears that some – in particular, private madrassas operating outside the national curriculum – may be fostering intolerance and denigrating religious minorities in their teachings. The government has reportedly committed to take steps to ensure that in future the educational curriculum is standardized through the country to prevent this.[192]

While religious minorities are not now obliged to take lessons in *Islamiyat*, positive educational initiatives promoting diversity and an understanding of other religions among the Muslim majority – with some notable exceptions, such as the University of Dhaka's Department of World Religions and Culture – remain limited.[193] Discrimination, poverty and other structural factors have also resulted in a striking lack of representation of religious minorities in higher education, both as students and teachers. In Dhaka University, for instance, out of 50,713 students and 1,245 teachers, only 2,498 (4.9 per cent) and 76 (6.1 per cent) respectively were non-Muslim.[194] Consequently, their opportunities to access better paid or professional work opportunities remain limited.

4.7 Press and social media

The media play an important role in shaping people's perceptions about discrimination against minorities in Bangladesh. However, many of those affected by violence have questioned the credibility of both the media and government sources. These concerns are reinforced by the fact that a large number of the major media houses in Bangladesh are owned by influential people, including

both powerful business people and those holding political positions. Major broadcasters, such as Radio Bangladesh and Bangladesh Television, are state-owned, and media outlets generally are frequently politicized in favour of one or other of the main political parties.[195]

One persistent problem is that, with the exception of large-scale attacks, media outlets typically fail to cover everyday instances of violence against minorities, such as sexual harassment, abduction and forced marriage. As a result, the daily realities confronting these communities remain largely invisible. As one journalist interviewed for this report commented: 'The media basically provide the news that the majority people are interested in. As a result, thinking the media in Bangladesh will play any revolutionary role to ensure the rights of the religious minorities will not help.'[196]

Furthermore, journalists and editors in Bangladesh now face the growing threat of extremist violence. Beginning with the publication of a 'hit list' of 84 secularist writers by the Ansarullah Bangla Team, writers, publishers and editors have increasingly been targets of intimidation or attack. In 2015, four bloggers were murdered in separate incidents as well as a secular publisher, in the process silencing many other voices of tolerance, diversity and inclusion. In this context, minorities and their supporters now face a shrinking space in which to articulate their views freely. Indeed, minority writers and editors have themselves been targeted. The Christian editor of Hotline Bangladesh, who had published extensively on religiously motivated violence within the country, departed for the United States in July 2016 after a prolonged campaign of intimidation by extremists left her in fear of her life.[197]

This situation has been further complicated by the frequently unsupportive stance of Bangladesh's government.[198] Indeed, many journalists have faced legal threats and imprisonment when authorities have sought to clamp down on dissent, further adding to their precarious situation and undermining freedom of expression within the country. The government has also actively cracked down on writers for their views, particularly when deemed to offend religious sensibilities, including the arrest of four secular bloggers in April 2013. One of them, Asif Mohiuddin, was himself recovering from injuries he had recently sustained in a knife attack carried out against him by extremists.[199]

The advent of widespread access to social media in Bangladesh has also had mixed implications for minorities. One respondent interviewed for this report, himself a blogger, noted the attacks against Buddhist communities in Ramu in 2012 as a significant moment in the development of online extremism.[200] The violence, triggered by the posting of an image that allegedly insulted Islam and was falsely linked to a Buddhist youth, was subsequently replicated in a similar fashion elsewhere. On 2 November 2013, for example, false allegations of an allegedly derogatory post by a Hindu boy on Facebook led to a large crowd attacking a Hindu village in Pabna.[201] On 5 May 2014, as many as 3,000 people attacked Hindu homes and a temple in Comilla district after two young men from the community were accused of allegedly insulting Islam on Facebook.[202] More recently, a Hindu teacher in Bogar was suspended in May 2016 following allegations that an account he was accused of operating under a pseudonym had 'liked' a post judged to be derogatory towards Islam.[203]

Paradoxically, then, minorities find their own activities online, real or fabricated, subjected to intense scrutiny, while enjoying little in the way of protection from abuse and hate speech from other users. This is despite the fact that the government has monitored and censored other content it has deemed unsuitable, including through the creation of an official committee to identify anyone suspected of posting content that might be construed as insulting Islam.[204] Similarly, the 2006 Information and Communication Technology Act, while supposedly designed to prevent cybercrime, has been criticized by rights groups such as Article 19 – who have called for a number of its provisions to be repealed or amended – as criminalizing legitimate expression.[205]

Indeed, just as the country's secular bloggers have found themselves prosecuted on charges of 'hate speech' towards the Muslim majority while they themselves are denied protection from vilification and threats in the press and on social media,[206] religious minorities have been increasingly targeted through the web. As one activist who closely follows social media commented, the rise of social media has greatly expanded the opportunities for extremist groups to inflame intercommunal tensions from those available through mainstream media, with blogs favoured for longer-term impact while Facebook was effective for triggering more immediate reactions. The latter has reportedly been used to disseminate content and photos, some of them fake, on the situation of Muslims in India and Myanmar to provoke hostility towards Buddhist and Hindu communities within Bangladesh. In some cases online extremists are reportedly paid or recruited to carry out these campaigns.[207]

Nevertheless, media outlets and the internet have also provided important opportunities for the concerns of religious minorities and other groups to be articulated. In addition to a number of progressive press outlets, online forums and civil society webpages have provided an important platform to record violations – for instance, attacks against indigenous communities in the CHT – that might otherwise have gone unreported. The power of

the media and, in particular, the relatively recent but highly popular medium of blogging in Bangladesh is one reason why secular writers have been targeted with such vehemence by extremists.

Yet for this space to flourish, the government must ensure the right to freedom of expression is respected, a situation that it has at times actively discouraged through its own actions. Reporters Without Borders ranks Bangladesh 144th out of a total of 180 countries in its 2016 World Press Freedom Index and notes the dangers of openly criticizing the Constitution or Islam: 'Journalists and bloggers who refuse to submit to censorship or to censor themselves on these subjects risk life imprisonment or the death penalty. Outspoken secularists are also targeted by Islamist militants.'[208] Bangladesh's status in Freedom House's 2016 Press Freedom Index also declined, following the murder of several activists and bloggers, from 'Partly free' to 'Not free'.[209]

In this environment, the space for minority community members and rights activists to communicate rights violations, challenge discriminatory attitudes and mobilize support appears to be shrinking, particularly amid the apparent inability of authorities to protect writers and editors from targeted killings by militants. Nevertheless, there have been some inspiring instances of positive messages of tolerance and solidarity. For instance, following the public humiliation of the Hindu headmaster, falsely accused of blasphemy in Narayanganj in May 2016, who as documented earlier in this report was forced to do squats with his hands behind his ears, hundreds of Bangladeshis posted images of themselves in the same position along with hashtags of apology to express their support and protest against his treatment.[210] Incidents such as these demonstrate the great opportunity that media and online platforms offer rights groups, though the current environment has meant that their full potential has yet to be realized.

4.8 The role of civil society

An important dimension of the discrimination that religious minorities face in Bangladesh is that it is not confined to militant organizations, but is also facilitated by a broader social and institutional environment where they are still sidelined and denigrated. In this regard, civil society has a crucial role to play in encouraging dialogue, raising awareness, challenging stereotypes and mobilizing communities to advocate for minorities' rights is also essential. For all the rhetoric around tackling extremism and improving security, however, civil society organizations and activists remain clearly vulnerable to attack. As a result, their ability to mobilize around key minority issues in the country is limited until they are able to do so safe from militant attacks.

However, while extremist violence remains the greatest threat for civil society, with the many recent violent attacks against writers, activists and community members having a knock-on effect on the activities of their peers who have had to operate in a context of extreme insecurity, the government has also proved to be a source of constraint. While part of the problem arises from the existence of repressive legislation more generally, such as the Information and Communication Technology Act, an additional problem is its specific targeting of writers and activists for their activities, including, at time, that these are insulting to Islam. This has contributed to the shrinking of the space available for public activism and dialogue within Bangladesh.

Where they have been able to, civil society groups have worked hard to lobby for legal reform, secure justice for victims and inform Bangladeshis on the situation of religious minorities and other groups. Moving forward, they must be allowed to build up a fuller, more focused response beyond the reactive and fast-changing environment they currently have to contend with. This means changing attitudes, through training, education, awareness raising, partnerships and a range of other activities. With each other, too, civil society organizations also need to coordinate effectively and work collaboratively to achieve common goals. This requires a collective sense of solidarity among different religious minorities as well as between them and general human rights NGOs focusing on other areas, such as gender rights or freedom of expression, with a shared emphasis on equality and inclusion.

There have been some recent examples of religious leaders and communities contributing to this process – for example, the distribution in June 2016 of an evening meal (*iftar*) during Ramadan by Buddhist monks at the Dharmarajika monastery in Dhaka to poor Muslims as a way of building intercommunal harmony.[211] Other examples include the gathering of Christians, Hindus and Muslims in June 2014 to commemorate the anniversary of the bombing of the Catholic church in Baniarchar in 2001.[212] Moments such as these offer a compelling alternative vision to the propaganda and division promoted by extremists, and promotes an inclusive vision of Bangladesh.

5 Conclusion – the need for real change

'Campaigns against non-Muslims in Bangladesh are a common phenomenon in every community. Here the Muslim children are taught that they are the best humans while the other religions are fake and to some extent are anti-Muslim. This unacceptable practice has been persistent for years.'
(Rights activist, July 2016)

While religious minorities are still vulnerable to targeted attacks by extremists, while land grabbing continues to be carried out with the complicity of soldiers and officials, while minority women live with the threat of abduction and rape, justice and equality will remain elusive. The recent spate of attacks against Ahmadis, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Shi'a Muslims as well as atheists and secularists, though they highlight the insecurity facing these communities, do not represent the full extent of the rights abuses carried out on an almost daily basis against them.

In this regard, arbitrary or one-off measures are not sufficient in themselves to achieve transformative change. As the challenges facing minorities are multidimensional, the efforts to bring them to an end must also be wide ranging, including continuous monitoring of human rights abuses and awareness raising through education, seminars and other forms of outreach. There is also the fundamental tension between the nominal secularism of the state – formally re-enshrined in 2010 – and the continued elevation of Islam as the state religion above other faiths. This contradiction underlines the discriminatory hierarchies that persist in every level of public life.

As outlined in this briefing, a central element to achieving this will be proper reform of the current judicial system – from the initial police response to preventing and identifying violations, to the court and judiciary ensuring all cases are effectively prosecuted. Ending impunity for the perpetrators of these attacks is an essential first step to greater security for their victims. Beyond this, political and legal reform is also necessary to address the political opportunism, land theft and continued rights gaps that underpin many of their abuses. This, in turn, should be accompanied by a positive process of engagement and participation – for example, by expanding their low levels of representation in Bangladesh's parliament, judiciary, security forces and civil administration.

In this regard, some recent gestures of support from the government, such as the assurances of protection issued by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in December 2015 to Christian leaders after a series of attacks against the community, are welcome signs of a degree of political will to achieve real change for religious minorities. Nevertheless, symbolic measures alone will not be sufficient to have a lasting impact on the lives of religious minorities, particularly as the discrimination against communities is driven not only by official discrimination by officials, lawmakers and security forces, but also by popular prejudice. Recognizing that the issues extend beyond security to the fundamental driver of discrimination against religious minorities – a situation that many majority Bangladeshis, including politicians, officials and local leaders, still actively benefit from – is a necessary step for lasting change to occur.

6 Recommendations

To the Government of Bangladesh:

- **Guarantee the security of religious minorities**: There should be a clear signal, from parliament and senior officials to local authorities and police, that the protection of the rights of minority communities is a priority. In particular, there must be a stronger commitment to understanding and recognizing the potential drivers of violence – such as land grabbing, political rivalries and extremist hate speech – so preventive action can be taken before any abuses occur. This must also involve an end to political deadlock in the country, and the prioritization of the safety and security of vulnerable groups in Bangladesh.

- **Enforce legal protections for religious minorities**: In addition to ensuring the rights guaranteed in the Constitution for all Bangladeshi citizens are respected, the government should implement anti-discrimination legislation aimed specifically at religious minorities and with a particular focus on the intersectional discrimination experienced by marginalized groups within communities, such as women and Dalits. It should also review current inequalities within the legal system, including the place of Islam as the sole state religion and the use of draconian provisions against secular writers and activists. The government should also take steps to strengthen human rights monitoring mechanisms, including the NHRC, to support their capacity to respond to violations against minority communities.

- **Ensure justice to victims of targeted rights abuses**: The government should take strict measures to end the culture of impunity, ensuring that abuses are effectively identified and acted on by police and the judiciary. When abuses involve politicians, law enforcement officials and other state representatives, the authorities must ensure full and lasting redress for those affected and the prosecution of the perpetrators. Among other measures, authorities should implement a thorough process of education and training on minority rights issues among police and judicial officials, including sensitization to the specific challenges facing women and girls, such as sexual assault, abduction and forced marriage.

- **Promote the participation of religious minorities**: Positive steps should be taken to raise the current low levels of representation of religious minorities in parliament, the security forces, the judiciary and civil administration. While specific measures such as quotas would be welcome, it is necessary to transform the current environment of discrimination by removing the many barriers that continue to separate minorities as second-class citizens at all levels of public life.

- **Address the root causes of violence and discrimination against religious minorities**: Besides legal and institutional reform, the authorities must also undertake a broader set of policies to address the long-term structural factors behind minorities' marginalization. Measures should also be taken to tackle the problem of prejudice and social stigmatization through educational programmes, public awareness-raising campaigns, media initiatives, online campaigns and cultural platforms to celebrate the contribution of religious minorities to the country.

- **Support the work of civil society organizations on behalf of religious minorities**: Writers, activists and lawyers should enjoy the freedom to investigate rights abuses, conduct awareness-raising campaigns and mobilize community members without fear of intimidation or violence by extremists. As a matter of urgency, authorities should immediately bring an end to all official harassment of activists through arrests, intimidation and other means. Beyond this, authorities must also provide assistance to rights organizations, including financial support and protection.

- **Strengthen the capacity of the NHRC to address violations**: In line with the mandate stipulated in the NHRC Act 2009, the NHRC should be afforded greater autonomy to investigate accusations of rights violations and hold the government accountable for its failure to prevent these abuses. Clear channels of communication should be established with central policy makers to pass on reported rights violations against religious minorities. Greater resources and manpower need to be allocated to the NHRC to allow it to adequately carry out its mandate.

To civil society:

- **Mobilize a more coordinated response to rights violations**: Human rights organizations and non-governmental organizations, both national and international, should work more proactively to address the situation of religious minorities in Bangladesh, speaking out in unison to condemn minority rights violations as an attack on society as a whole and the rights guaranteed all citizens by law. In the current insecurity facing activists, secularists, LGBT groups and liberals, the need to work together against repression and intimidation is more important than ever.

To the media:

- **Provide adequate coverage to minority rights issues**: Bangladeshi media outlets should highlight incidents of abuses, expropriation and violence against religious minorities, including less documented cases such as abductions, land grabbing and political intimidation. Recognizing that the situation of minorities is a central issue to Bangladeshi society as a whole, the press should engage activists and community leaders to provide them with a much-needed platform to articulate their concerns.

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Under threat: The challenges facing religious minorities in Bangladesh

Since 2013, Bangladesh has experienced a series of violent attacks by extremists. The victims have included – besides atheists, secular bloggers, liberals and foreigners – many Buddhists, Christians and Hindus as well as Ahmadis and Shi'a Muslims. A large number of the attacks targeting religious minorities in particular have subsequently been claimed by the organization Islamic State (IS) – a claim vigorously denied by the Bangladeshi government, which has attributed the attacks to domestic militant groups. Regardless of their authorship, since the beginning of this new outbreak of violence, the authorities have visibly failed to ensure the protection of those targeted.

For religious minorities, who have borne much of the brunt of these attacks, this violence is the latest chapter in a long history of discrimination and segregation that stretches back to the country's independence and the legacy of colonialism, the 1947 Partition and the bloody civil war in 1971 during which the Hindu population in particular was targeted.

This briefing, drawing on a detailed review of published sources, fieldwork by local rapporteurs and first-hand author interviews with a number of activists, lawyers and journalists, aims to provide a fuller picture of the complex challenges facing these communities and the need for a society-wide solution to the insecurity that has convulsed the country in the last few years.

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