

**U.S. Department of State**  
**Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999:**  
**Bangladesh**

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**BANGLADESH**

**Section I. Freedom of Religion**

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

Religious organizations are not required to register with the Government; however, all nongovernmental organizations (NGO's), including religious organizations, are required to register with the NGO Affairs Bureau if they receive foreign money for social development projects. The Government has the legal ability to cancel the registration of an NGO or to take other action against it; such powers are rarely used and have not affected NGO's with religious affiliations.

Sunni Muslims constitute 88 percent of the population. About 10 percent of the population are Hindu. The rest are Christian (mostly Catholic) and Buddhist; these faiths are found predominantly in the tribal (non-Bengali) populations of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. There are small populations of Shi'a Muslims, Sikhs, Baha'is, and Ahmadiyas. Estimates of these populations vary widely, from a few hundred up to 100,000 adherents for each faith. Although the Government is secular, religion exerts a powerful influence on politics, and the Government is sensitive to the Muslim consciousness of the majority of its citizens. Religion is taught in schools, and children have the right to be taught their own religion. In practice, schools with very small numbers of religious minority students often work out arrangements with local churches or temples, which then direct religious studies outside school hours. The country celebrates holy days from the Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist faiths as national holidays.

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

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

Foreign missionaries may work in the country, but their right to proselytize is not protected in the Constitution, and some foreign missionaries face problems obtaining visas. There are no financial penalties imposed on the basis of religious beliefs. However, many Hindus complain that they have been unable to recover landholdings lost because of discrimination in the application of the law, especially the Vested Property Act. Property ownership, particularly among Hindus, has been a con-

tentious issue since independence in 1971, when many Hindus lost land because of anti-Hindu discrimination in the application of the law. The Vested Property Act is a vestige of Pakistani law, which allowed "enemy" (in practice, Hindu) lands to be expropriated by the state. The law was suspended in 1984, but some claims allegedly have been backdated. Prior to its 1996 election victory, the Awami League promised to repeal the Vested Property Act, but to date the Awami League Government has not done so.

Police have not always intervened promptly to prevent harassment of Ahmadiyas, but authorities have taken steps to discipline some police officials responsible for such failures (see Section II). The Government sometimes has failed to take action against Islamic extremists who have attacked women, members of religious minorities, and development workers, but it responded quickly after an April 1998 attack on a Catholic school in Dhaka (see Section II).

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

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

## **Section II. Societal Attitudes**

Relations between the religious communities are generally amicable. Persons who practice different religions often join each others' festivals and celebrations. Shi'a Muslims practice their faith without interference from Sunnis. Nevertheless, clashes between religious groups occasionally occur. There have been, in past years, cases of violence directed against the religious minority communities that have resulted in the loss of property. The last major incidents occurred in 1992, after the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque in neighboring India. There were also some minor incidents around the 1996 elections. Such intercommunal violence reportedly has caused some members of religious minorities to depart the country, primarily Hindus emigrating to India where many have relatives.

The Ahmadiyas, whom many mainstream Muslims consider heretical, have been the target of some attacks and harassment. In January 1999, several hundred persons attacked the Ahmadiya place of worship in Koldiar village in Kushtia. Devotees were beaten and the place of worship was ransacked. Following the attack, Ahmadiyas were harassed on the streets and prevented from praying at their place of worship. Ahmadiyas allege that the local police did not intervene to stop these abuses. According to press reports, the Assistant Police Inspector in the area was fired and the Officer-in-Charge of the police station was withdrawn for failure to discharge his duties during the incident.

Islamic extremists occasionally have attacked women, members of religious minorities, and development workers. The Government sometimes has failed to criticize, investigate, and prosecute the perpetrators of these attacks. However, the Government responded quickly after an April 1998 attack on a Catholic school in Dhaka. The attack by an irate crowd of Muslims occurred after the school won a favorable court decision in a property dispute with a neighboring mosque. The crowd ran-

sacked the school and attacked four churches in Dhaka. During the attack, 40 to 50 persons, including 3 policemen, reportedly were injured. Immediately after the attack began, the Home Ministry dispatched additional police to the site and sought to mediate the issue, but its efforts were ineffective in halting the violence.

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

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

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

### **Section III. U.S. Government Policy**

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

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