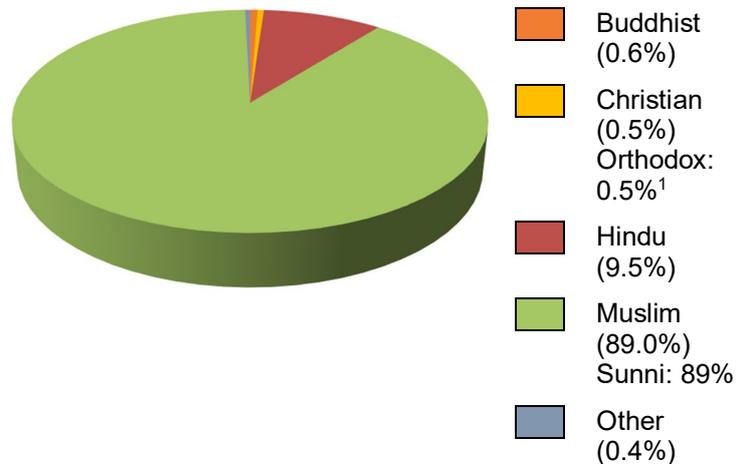


BANGLADESH



Area: 143,998 km ²	Population: 156.6 million	Political system: Democracy	Major Language(s): Bengali, English
---	-------------------------------------	---------------------------------------	---

Legal framework on Freedom of Religion and actual application

Historically Bangladesh was regarded as a predominantly Muslim nation where people practiced a peaceful and tolerant form of Islam, however recent events have painted a very different picture. In the past 18 months, 48 murders have taken place, 28 claimed by groups linked to Al-Qaeda or Daesh (ISIS). Those targeted include bloggers defending secularism and freedom of expression, free thinkers claiming the right not to profess any religion, and university professors. Also attacked were Hindu and Buddhist priests, Christian clergymen and lay people, who were singled out because they belong to the country's religious minorities – as well as a Muslim converts to Christianity and Shi'a Muslims. The list is long and, despite the promises of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina that the killings "will not go unpunished,"² there is deep concern in the country.

"Initially, we used to consider such attacks as isolated incidents but now it has become a matter of grave concern," the Secretary of the Bangladesh Christian Association said on 9th June 2016.³ And the Secretary General of the Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council of Bangladesh said "Entire communities are terrified and feel very insecure. We see no intervention of political parties to find solutions to these problems".⁴

Religious demography

At 156 million, Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world (with 1,100 inhabitants per square kilometre). According to the 2011 census, Sunni Muslims account for nearly 90 percent of the population – making it third most populous Muslim country in the world after Indonesia and Pakistan – whilst the main minority, Hinduism, is a little over nine percent (between 9.1 and 9.5 percent depending on the source). The remaining 0.5 percent consists of Christians (of which Catholics are the majority) and Buddhists. Some numerically smaller groups also live in Bangladesh, with about 100,000 members each, such as Ahmadis and Shi'a Muslims. Some groups fall between the statistical cracks, most notably the Rohingya, a Muslim minority from Myanmar. Some 32,000 of them are officially registered as refugees, but the actual number in the south-eastern region of Cox's Bazar is estimated to be between 200,000 and 500,000.⁵

Secular country or Islamic nation?

On 28th March 2016, Bangladesh's High Court confirmed Islam's status as the state religion.⁶ In doing so, the judges settled an old constitutional debate. Their decision came in response to a petition filed in the High Court in 1988. At the time, a dozen prominent figures had questioned the legitimacy of the constitutional amendment that had made Islam the religion of State. They eventually abandoned their pursuit, believing that the judges would be unfavourable to them. Their argument was as follows: the recognition of Islam as the state religion contradicts the principle of the State's secularity. Article 2A of the Constitution, which states that the "state religion of the Republic is Islam", contradicts Article 12, which defends "Secularism and freedom of religion" by banning the State from showing any favouritism to any religion.⁷ In full, Article 2A says, "The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal right in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions."⁸

The justices therefore had a weighty issue in their hands, namely deciding Islam's place in Bangladeshi society. At present, with the country torn by religious tensions and the rise of an Islamist movement, the justices had to define the role of Islam in society and they ruled in favour of its preeminent place in the constitutional charter.

Yet throughout its history Bangladesh, which declared its independence in 1971, has come up against the question of how to define its identity. Is it a secular country or an Islamic nation? Sunni Islam certainly occupies a preponderant place in a Bangladesh that takes pride in its tolerant and moderate traditions. In 1972, Bangladesh adopted a constitution based on a linguistic and secular identity, and it was only in 1988 that the military regime led by dictator Hussein Muhammad Ershad decided to amend it to make Islam the state religion. Since then, a powerful political and intellectual movement has sought to restore the historic principle of national secularism. So far, their efforts have been in vain.

This conflict over identity has crystallised into two opposing ideological camps, the "secularists" versus the "Islamists". "The relationship between religion and state is central in the history of India's partition from Pakistan in 1947, but also in the history of Bangladesh's nation-building project since its inception in 1971," said Samuel Berthet, historian at the University of Shiv Nadar, India.⁹ Indeed, Bangladesh was originally East Pakistan, before it broke away from the western part in 1971 during an extremely violent war of liberation. The human losses from the war for independence range from 300,000 to three million, depending on the sources. The pro-Pakistan militia, defending an Islamic-based sense of nationhood, tried to crush the secessionists.

"At the time of Bangladesh's creation, the reference to religion was thus associated with Pakistani tutelage, whilst secularism was associated with Bangladeshi nation building," said Berthet. He added:

Gradually, under the influence and growing trade with the Middle East, ideas and perceptions shifted. After the idea of state religion was enshrined in the constitution in 1988 by an authoritarian regime, the concept of religious majority was used as a justification for the idea of a state religion itself. This influenced a significant part of the population, and continues to weigh heavily on a democracy with a majoritarian system. However, the notion of state religion has also had an impact on the status of minorities. For the partisans of Bangladesh based on its original blueprint, dropping every reference to a state religion is paramount. This demand has become synonymous with freedom of expression, as well as the freedom to practice any religion.¹⁰

In 2011, there were calls to restore the principle of secularism, but the then ruling Awami League did not dare change Islam's constitutional status. Led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the centre-left party was afraid of alienating part of its Muslim electorate. On the other side, it faces Begum Khaleda Zia, leader of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which is allied to the powerful Islamist *Jamaat-e-Islami* party. In 1991, the BNP supported the constitutional status of Islam, defending the idea on the grounds that it was the religion of the vast majority of the population. The two women – Hasina and Zia – whose fierce rivalry has dragged Bangladesh into

an endless cycle of political stalemate, embody the two opposing visions of Bangladesh's history and identity.

Incidents

Surging Islamist violence in society

The decision of the High Court has been a source of tension and violence however, both those in power and ordinary Bangladeshis seem unable to prevent the escalation of religiously motivated attacks.

In 2012, Islamists began attacking young human rights and pro-democracy activists whom they accused of being "atheists". The following year, many intellectuals were threatened and some were killed. In 2015, five liberal bloggers and a publisher were murdered. Every time, the story was more or less the same: men on a motorcycle would apparently come out of nowhere to stab or hack defenceless people to death. These bloggers and publishers killed in 2015 were part of a small movement among Bangladesh's youth and intellectuals who continue to write "against the country's extremism and obscurantism", particularly criticising the religious intolerance of a nation whose institutions are officially secular. Since the murder in February 2013 of 30-year-old blogger and architect Ahmed Rajeeb (Rajib) Haider, who had his throat cut,¹¹ they have become the target of Islamist groups, including *Jamaat-e Islami*. In last two years, courts have sentenced to death many of *Jamaat's* leaders for their involvement in the massacres carried out during the country's fight for independence in 1971.¹² For their part, Islamist circles demand the execution of all atheist bloggers and the implementation of anti-blasphemy legislation. The authorities have responded to such pressures by making it harder for bloggers, forcing their web hosts to erase hundreds of posts regarded as defaming Islam and Muhammad.

Bloggers are not the only target. Extremists have also gone after religious minorities, attacking members of the Ahmadi, Shi'a, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian communities. They have also murdered homosexuals and foreigners (Cesare Tavella, an Italian involved in development work, was killed on 28th September 2015 in Dhaka,¹³ and Hoshi Kunio, from Japan, was shot dead on 3rd October in Rangpur District¹⁴). In a short span of 18 months, no fewer than 48 people have been murdered. Al-Qaeda or Daesh (ISIS) claimed responsibility for 28 of them. Yet Bangladeshi authorities have systematically denied such claims, insisting instead that international Islamist terrorism has not taken root in Bangladesh. Instead, they blame home-grown Islamist groups like *Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen*. For the Bangladeshi government, this group – which had six of its top leaders hanged in 2007 and whose members are regularly killed in shootouts with police – is the main threat to the country's internal security.¹⁵

The pace of the murders is accelerating. On 10th June 2016, an employee of a Hindu temple was hacked to death.¹⁶ The previous Sunday, 5th June, a Catholic grocer met the same fate.¹⁷ On the same day, in another region of the country, the wife of a police officer, known to have arrested Islamist militants, was killed, executed by a commando before her 6-year-old son.¹⁸

The murder of the Catholic grocer occurred in Bonpara, a village in Natore District, about 170 km northwest of the capital Dhaka. Home to one of the oldest Christian communities in the country, the parish of Our Lady of Lourdes is located in the Diocese of Rajshahi. With about 4,000 members, it is known for its 10-metre-high statue of Our Lady of Lourdes. After Mass, at noon on Sunday, 5th June 2016, Sunil Gomes, 72, was going back to his small grocery store, which he had been running for the past three years, when he was attacked by several unidentified men who hacked him to death. He died instantly. Daesh (ISIS) later claimed responsibility for the murder.

According to Sunil Gomes's family, he had no enemies. He had worked as a gardener at the church for years. One of his brothers, Fr Proshanto Gomes, is a priest in the neighbouring Diocese of Dinajpur. "He was an innocent, simple and pious man. We don't know why he was murdered like this. We are living in fear," his eldest daughter Sopna Gomes told *UCAnews*.¹⁹

In a country where Christians make up less than one percent of the population, the murder added one more name to an ever-growing list. On 22nd March 2016, Hossain Ali, a Muslim convert to Christianity, had his throat cut by three men. Once again Daesh claimed responsibility, saying the murder “was a lesson to others”.²⁰ On 18th November 2015, an Italian Catholic missionary, Father Piero Parolari, 64, was shot and wounded in Dinajpur, in the north.²¹ On 5th October 2015, a Protestant clergyman, Rev Luke Sarkar, was stabbed and seriously wounded,²² apparently by activists of the *Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen*. Meanwhile, many Catholic priests, Protestant pastors, NGO members and Christian charities have received death threats.

Other religious minorities have also been targeted. In early June, a Hindu merchant was hacked to death, and a Buddhist doctor was killed the same way. Earlier, in October 2015, a grenade attack left one person dead and several wounded at a Shi’a gathering in Huseni Dalan, an important Shi’a shrine in Old Dhaka.²³ On 5th December 2015, ten people were wounded when a bomb exploded at the Kantajew Hindu Temple, in Dinajpur District.²⁴ On 21st February 2016, one person was killed in another attack against a Hindu temple in northern Bangladesh: the temple’s head priest had his throat cut and two others were seriously wounded.²⁵ Finally, on 14th March of this year, Abdur Razzak, a Sunni turned Shi’a preacher, was stabbed to death in Kaliganj, in the country’s southwest.²⁶

Prospects for freedom of religion

According to Monsignor Nicephorus D’Cruze, Catholic Bishop of Sylhet and president of the Commission for Interreligious Dialogue of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Bangladesh, recent attacks on religious minorities are the indirect consequence of Islam’s special constitutional status. “When a state officially accepts a state religion, then it puts [up] barricades for communal harmony because it recognises supremacy of a particular religion and makes other religions inferior,” the bishop told *UCANews*.²⁷ “We hope and demand that every religion in Bangladesh is put on an equal footing in terms of status and respect,” he added. Hindu community leaders agree. “As the state religion, Islam put[s] psychological pressure on minorities, and makes them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation,” said Govinda Chadra Pramanik, secretary of Bangladesh National Hindu Grand Alliance.²⁸

After a long period of silence, government authorities finally responded. On 11th June 2016, police launched a four-day crackdown: more than 11,600 people were arrested, including 166 suspected Islamists.²⁹ However, the question remains whether the police response will be sufficient to stop the recent wave of murders against members of religious minorities and secular intellectuals. For Bishop Gervas Rozario of Rajshahi, president of the Commission for Justice and Peace of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Bangladesh, sudden mass arrests will not be enough to prevent more terrorist acts from occurring in the country. Of the 12,000 people arrested, local media noted that more than 2,000 belong to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, the main opposition party. “The government might have a different agenda, including weakening opposition parties further, because this crackdown is not an effective way to eradicate militancy,” Bishop Rozario said.³⁰ For the bishop, rather than carry out mass arrests, the authorities should employ the intelligence services and special police force to fight terrorism and protect minorities. Police, he noted, are usually far less inclined to carry out arrests when members of minorities are the targets of violent actions.

In Dhaka, Rosaline Costa heads the local branch of NGO Hotline Human Rights Trust. She believes that these arrests are ineffectual because the real extremists are hiding, especially in madrasas, i.e. Quranic schools. “Police usually avoid religious places like madrasas which are a breeding ground for militancy and militants take shelter there. Police can’t curb militancy unless they bust militant dens like madrasas,” she said.³¹

There is, however, a positive note in this bleak landscape. On 18th June, *Jamaiatul Ulema* (Ulema Council) issued a fatwa denouncing terrorism and militant activities in the name of Islam. Terrorism

is “contrary to Islam” and is “a crime against humanity,” it said. Titled ‘Edict of peace for well-being of humanity’, the ruling was backed by about 100,000 Muslim leaders, clerics and scholars.³² “The world is plagued with militancy through misinterpretation of Islam,” said Maolana Fariduddin Masoud, a respected religious leader, on 17th June 2016. “In order to eradicate terrorism, we need an awakening of conscience.” Hence, “We will conduct seminars in mosques all over the country.” However, “The government and media need to support our efforts,” he added.³³

According to Nirmol Rozario, general secretary of the Bangladesh Christian Association, the fatwa is “a positive move”.³⁴ For Theophil Nokrek, secretary of the Commission for Justice and Peace of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Bangladesh, “It is good to see Islamic clerics reiterate... [that] torturing and killing in the name of religion is un-Islamic”.³⁵

¹ Copts.

² *Radio Vatican*, “Bangladesh: le Premier ministre promet de protéger les minorités,” (Bangladesh: prime minister pledges to protect minorities) 9th June 2016 http://fr.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/06/09/bangladesh__le_premier_ministre_promet_de_prot%C3%A9ger_les_minorit%C3%A9s/1236063.

³ *Radio Vatican*, *op. cit.*; *New Age*, “Christian man hacked to death”, 6th June 2016 <http://newagebd.net/233929/christian-man-hacked-to-death/>.

⁴ *Radio Vatican*, *ibid*; *Fides*, “Targeted killings of religious minorities: Justice is urgently needed,” 9th June 2016 http://www.fides.org/en/news/60192-.ASIA_BANGLADESH_Targeted_killings_of_religious_minorities_Justice_is_urgently_needed#.V2iTBgrLIU

⁵ *Médecins sans frontières 2010*, “Bangladesh: Violent Crackdown Fuels Humanitarian Crisis for Unrecognized Rohingya Refugees,” <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/news-stories/special-report/bangladesh-violent-crackdown-fuels-humanitarian-crisis-unrecognized>.

⁶ *Aljazeera*, “Bangladesh court upholds Islam as religion of the state,” 28th March 2016

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/bangladesh-court-upholds-islam-religion-state-160328112919301.html>.

⁷ Article 12 of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh: “Secularism and freedom of religion. Art. 12: The principle of secularism shall be realised by the elimination of (a) communalism in all its forms; (b) the granting by the State of political status in favour of any religion; (c) the abuse of religion for political purposes; (d) any discrimination against, or persecution of, persons practicing a particular religion.”

⁸ Article 2A of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh: “The state religion: The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal right in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions.”

⁹ *Églises d’Asie*, “La Cour suprême examine le statut de l’islam dans la Constitution,” (Supreme Court examines Islam’s status in the constitution) 17th March 2016 <http://eglisie.mepasie.org/asia-du-sud/bangladesh/2016-03-17-la-cour-supreme-examine-le-statut-de-l2019islam-dans-la-constitution/>.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ *Églises d’Asie*, “Affrontements meurtriers entre les islamistes réclamant une loi anti-blasphème et leurs opposants,” (Deadly clashes between Islamists demanding a blasphemy law and their opponents) 8th April 2013 <http://eglisie.mepasie.org/asia-du-sud/bangladesh/2013-04-08-affrontements-meurtriers-entre-les-islamistes-qui-reclament-une-loi-anti-blaspheme-et-leurs-opposants>.

¹² *Églises d’Asie*, “Affrontements meurtriers après l’exécution de l’islamiste Abdur Kader Mollah,” (Deadly clashes after the execution of Islamist Abdur Kader Mullah) 13th December 2013 <http://eglisie.mepasie.org/asia-du-sud/bangladesh/2013-12-13-affrontements-meurtriers-apres-l2019execution-de-l2019islamiste-abdur-kader-mollah>.

¹³ *New York Times*, “ISIS Says It Killed Italian Aid Worker in Bangladesh,” 29th September 2015

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/30/world/asia/isis-bangladesh-cesare-tavella.html?_r=0.

¹⁴ *The Japan Times*, “IS claims killing of Japanese in Bangladesh,” 4th October 2015

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/10/04/national/islamic-state-claims-responsibility-killing-japanese-man-bangladesh/#.V2BDLhIhFvA>.

¹⁵ *CTC - Combating Terrorism Center*, “Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh: Weakened, But Not Destroyed,” 30th November 2011 <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/jamaatul-mujahidin-bangladesh-weakened-but-not-destroyed>.

¹⁶ *The Hindu*, “Hindu ashram worker hacked to death in Bangladesh,” 11th June 2016

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/hindu-ashram-worker-hacked-to-death-in-bangladesh/article8713685.ece>.

¹⁷ *Églises d’Asie*, “La minorité chrétienne à nouveau ciblée par l’assassinat à l’arme blanche d’un catholique,” (Christian minority targeted again after Catholic hacked to death) 6th June 2016 <http://eglisie.mepasie.org/asia-du-sud/bangladesh/2016-06-06-la-minorite-chretienne-a-nouveau-ciblee-par-l2019assassinat-a-l2019arme-blanche-d2019un-catholique>.

¹⁸ *Reuters*, “Wife of Bangladeshi anti-terrorism policeman stabbed, shot dead,” 5th June 2016

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-bangladesh-violence-idUSKCN0YR06B>.

¹⁹ *UCANews*, “Catholic hacked to death in Bangladesh,” 6th June 2016 <http://www.ucanews.com/news/catholic-hacked-to-death-in-bangladesh/76240>.

²⁰ *Églises d’Asie*, “‘Une leçon pour les autres’: l’État islamique revendique l’assassinat d’un musulman converti au christianisme,” (A lesson for everyone : Islamic State claims responsibility for the murder of Muslim convert to christianisme),”

Christianity) 23rd March 2016 <http://eglasiemepasie.org/asi-du-sud/bangladesh/2016-03-23-ab-une-lecon-pour-les-autres-bb-l2019etat-islamique-revendique-l2019assassinat-d2019un-musulman-converti-au-christianisme>.

²¹ *Églises d'Asie*, "Un missionnaire italien grièvement blessé par un commando armé," (An Italian missionary seriously wounded by gunmen) 18th November 2015 <http://eglasiemepasie.org/asi-du-sud/bangladesh/2015-11-18-un-missionnaire-italien-grievement-blesse-par-un-commando-arme>.

²² *UCANews*, "Protestant pastor escapes murder attempt in Bangladesh," 6th October 2015 <http://www.ucanews.com/news/protestant-pastor-escapes-murder-attempt-in-bangladesh/74390>.

²³ *Dhaka Tribune*, "Bomb attack on Shia gathering kills 1, injures nearly 60," 24th October 2015 <http://www.dhakatribune.com/crime/2015/oct/24/3-crude-bombs-injures-50-city>.

²⁴ *The Hindu*, "10 injured in bomb attack on Bangladesh temple," 6th December 2015 (<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-international/10-injured-in-bomb-attack-on-bangladesh-temple/article7953297.ece>).

²⁵ *The Hindu*, "IS claims murder of top Hindu priest in Bangladesh," 22nd February 2016 (<http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/is-claims-murder-of-top-hindu-priest-in-bangladesh/article8267725.ece>).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *UCANews*, "Top Bangladesh court reviews Islam as state religion," 1st March 2016 <http://www.ucanews.com/news/top-bangladesh-court-reviews-islam-as-state-religion/75360>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *AFP*, "Rights experts slam mass arrests as Bangladesh hunts killers," 17th June 2016 (<http://en.rfi.fr/wire/20160617-rights-experts-slam-mass-arrests-bangladesh-hunts-killers>).

³⁰ *UCANews*, "Bishop, activists critical of anti-militancy drive in Bangladesh," 14th June 2016 (<http://www.ucanews.com/news/bishop-activists-critical-of-anti-militancy-drive-in-bangladesh/76312>).

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *The Indian Express*, "Over 1 lakh Bangladesh clerics issue fatwa against extremism," 18th June 2016 (<http://indianexpress.com/article/world/world-news/over-1-lakh-bangladesh-clerics-issue-fatwa-against-extremism-2861497/>).

³³ *UCANews*, "Bangladeshi Christians back 'fatwa' against terrorism," 17th June 2016 <http://www.ucanews.com/news/bangladeshi-christians-back-fatwa-against-terrorism/76343>.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*