

**R** **F**  
**I** RELIGIOUS  
FREEDOM  
INSTITUTE

# 2020

## BANGLADESH

### Religious Freedom Landscape Report



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION _____	<b>4</b>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS _____	<b>11</b>
OVERVIEW: KEY CHALLENGES _____	<b>13</b>
BACKGROUND: RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY & HISTORY _____	<b>14</b>
CHALLENGE TO RELIGIOUS FREEDOM _____	<b>17</b>
STRENGTHS, OPPORTUNITIES & NEEDS _____	<b>24</b>
BANGLADESH: SWOT ANALYSIS _____	<b>29</b>
PEW RESEARCH CENTER REPORT _____	<b>31</b>
ENDNOTES _____	<b>33</b>



# INTRODUCTION

Religion has been integral to the spirit and culture of humanity for millennia.<sup>1</sup> The cradle of multiple ancient religions, South and Southeast Asia remains one of the world's most religiously diverse and spiritually vibrant regions on earth. At the same time, all too many of its two and a half billion people suffer on account of their religion. The South and Southeast Asia Action Team, an arm of the Religious Freedom Institute (RFI), exists to advance religious freedom for all people throughout this vast region, especially those who are most persecuted. This landscape report on Bangladesh constitutes an important step towards achieving that goal and represents the combined expertise of numerous scholars and analysts.

The purpose of this report on Bangladesh's religious freedom landscape is to determine where and in what ways this fundamental human right is being preserved and promoted, where it is being violated, and what governments, civil society organizations, and communities can do to strengthen this foundational freedom for the future well-being of Bangladesh as well as South and Southeast Asia as a whole. RFI aims to assess where the terrain is rough and treacherous, as well as where it is smooth and pleasant. Only once you know the landscape and identify a favorable route, any experienced traveler knows, can the journey begin.

The RFI's South and Southeast Asia Action Team focuses on eight of the most populous and strategically

significant countries in South and Southeast Asia: Bangladesh, Burma (Myanmar), India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Indonesia and India in particular are the two most populous, economically robust, and strategically significant countries in the region. Together these eight countries have a population of about 2.2 billion people, comprising 86 percent of the regional population (about 2.5 billion) and 28 percent of the total world population (about 7.8 billion).<sup>2</sup> The whole regional population comprises about 32 percent of the world population. South and Southeast Asia is home to the four largest Muslim populations in the world (Indonesia, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), 99 percent of the world's Hindus, and almost all of the world's Buddhist-majority countries.<sup>3</sup> In other words, that is more than 1.15 billion Hindus, 825 million Muslims, and over 80 million Buddhists, as well as about 72 million Christians.<sup>4</sup>

The region is also home to some of the most religiously restricted societies in the world, even while several of its countries maintain reasonably robust democratic institutions and dynamic civil societies.

For example, Polity IV's democracy index rates Indonesia and India as "democracies," with high levels of political competition and restraints on executive power, and Freedom House rates both countries as "partly free" electoral democracies.



## About the Religious Freedom Institute

Securing religious freedom for “everyone, everywhere”—for Buddhists in Bangladesh as much as Muslims in Maryland—is the mission of the RFI. An independent, nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C., RFI is committed to achieving broad acceptance of religious liberty as a fundamental human right, a source of individual and social flourishing, the cornerstone of a successful society, and a driver of national and international security. It achieves this goal by convincing stakeholders in select regions that religious freedom can help them achieve their own goals—political, economic, strategic, and religious.

Accordingly, RFI’s action teams establish a presence in strategic regions across the globe in order to build coalitions and local and regional networks to make religious freedom a greater priority—and ultimately a lived reality—for governments, civil society, religious communities, businesses, and the general public. Each of these sectors of society has a crucial stake in the future of the religious freedom landscape in their country. Drawing on the research of its associated scholars as well as the cumulative body of scholarship produced by its predecessor project, the Religious Freedom Project at Georgetown University, RFI makes an evidence-based case to these and other important sectors and stakeholders that the freedom of religious belief and practice is a principle they can and should embrace in order to benefit themselves and their societies.

Foundational to RFI’s outlook is the recognition that religion is an integral feature of human nature and an irreducible component of human flourishing. Human beings, who are religious animals just as profoundly as they are political animals or conjugal animals, have always asked religious questions, and persist in asking these questions as much as they ever have: Who am I? Where did I come from? What is the meaning and purpose of existence? What is the nature of ultimate reality? The search for the best answers to these questions, and the attempt to align

one's reason, will, and whole being with ultimate or transcendent reality as best as one can discern it, is what we generally call religion. Religious freedom, then, is the most fundamental and distinctively human of all freedoms because it reflects the most basic and characteristically human of all strivings—the striving not only to know the truth, but to *place one's whole self in alignment with the whole truth about the whole of Reality*. As such, religious freedom has at least four distinct dimensions.

The first of these “religious freedoms” reflects the intellectual and spiritual dimension of religion, and requires that all people should be free to use their natural powers of discernment, reason, and intuition to seek and explore the truth about ultimate reality in all of its depths. The second of these freedoms reflects the dimension of doing or practice. It means that all people should be free to engage the truths they have learned from theoretical inquiry and act on them with authenticity and integrity. In other words, this dimension of religious freedom involves engaging one's conscience and will to align oneself as fully as one can with the truths one discovers about transcendent reality. Third, the social dimension means that all people must be free to share the truths they discover about ultimate reality with others, and to join with those of like mind and spirit to live them out. Fourth, the civil or political dimension means that all people should be free, both individually and communally, to express their religious beliefs in civil and political society, and to formulate and propose visions of the common informed by these beliefs. Included here is the right to create and operate religious institutions that reflect a religious community's foundational principles and defining mission.

From a broader perspective, the aforementioned dimensions represent aspects of what might be considered the liberty wing of religious freedom. That is, religious freedom in full requires that people enjoy the liberty to embrace and express whatever beliefs about religion—including unorthodox beliefs or beliefs that differ from traditional religious claims—most accord with the dictates of their own conscience,



without direct, coercive interference by government or non-government actors.

At the same time, religious freedom requires another wing—the wing of equality—in order to take full flight and make it possible for all individuals and societies to achieve both the basic good of religion as well as other components of human flourishing. The equality wing of religious freedom requires that people be free from arbitrary discrimination or unequal treatment because of their beliefs about religion. Violation of religious equality—as through the infliction of systematic discrimination on particular individuals or groups merely because of their religious beliefs or identities, or the creation of a climate of hatred or intolerance of certain people because of religion—is unjust and illegitimate even when it does not directly block or limit one’s free exercise of religion.

One reason is that arbitrary discrimination or unequal treatment is incompatible with the demands of human dignity, which all human beings equally share by virtue of their common humanity. As sources as diverse as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany, and the Declaration on Religious Liberty of the Roman Catholic Church recognize, human dignity is the proximate ground of religious freedom as well as all fundamental human rights, and it is the ground, furthermore, of every person’s entitlement to equal justice.<sup>7</sup> Another reason is that gross violations of religious equality are incompatible with the vision of a society animated by a dynamic pluralism in which all citizens can share their religious and moral

insights with each other. Only within a framework of basic equality can people of all religious perspectives draw on their distinct convictions and unique “spiritual capital” both to contribute to the common good and to enrich the perspectives of their fellow citizens.

Religious freedom is thus a fundamental and capacious right that deserves secure protection in law and widespread respect in culture. On paper if not in practice, this idea has been widely accepted by the international community. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

*Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance (Article 18).*

*Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status (Article 2).<sup>5</sup>*

The mission of the Religious Freedom Institute is motivated by the conviction that religious freedom in full—in its equality dimension and in each of its liberty dimensions—is a natural, universal, and inviolable human right that is grounded in the inherent dignity of every human being. At the same time, because religious

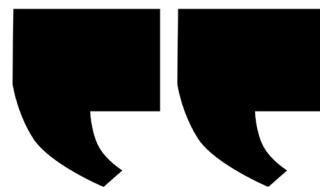


belief and practice are such central components of human life and flourishing, religious freedom is also a powerful driver of a wide array of social goods, including democracy, civil liberty, stability, economic prosperity, equality of women, and security.

RFI activities are further premised on the reality that religious freedom tends to be strong and enduring only when it is embedded in a society's moral and religious culture as well as its legal and political structure. Religious freedom actors must pursue not only top-down institutional reform but also bottom-up persuasion, education, and mobilization. If religious freedom is promoted only by governments and is not practiced at the level of local communities, it remains an empty ideal. On paper, most of the world's national constitutions recognize religious freedom as a fundamental right in one form or another. The reality remains, however, that the vast majority of the world's population lives in countries with high or very high government or social restrictions on religion and the trendlines over the past decade appear to be worsening.<sup>6</sup>

Religious freedom will be a reality for “everyone, everywhere” only when it enjoys grassroots support and is articulated, practiced, and spread at the level of local and national communities and traditions. Advancing religious freedom while respecting local and national contexts entails adopting approaches to articulating and justifying religious freedom that are credible and compelling within local perspectives. In fact, RFI's South and Southeast Asia Action Team seeks to identify and cultivate seeds of religious freedom that are already present in the region's own spiritual and cultural soil. As this Bangladesh landscape report underscores, the soil of South and Southeast Asia tends to be fertile and receptive insofar as all of its countries and cultures enjoy histories and traditions of vibrant religious pluralism.

As the example of Bangladesh highlights, embedding religious freedom in both political structures and moral and spiritual cultures requires an approach that works across multiple sectors—religious, political, legal, cultural, and educational.



***The mission of the Religious Freedom Institute is motivated by the conviction that religious freedom in full—in its equality dimension and in each of its liberty dimensions—is a natural, universal, and inviolable human right that is grounded in the inherent dignity of every human being.***

---

***Religious Freedom Institute***



It requires identifying and mobilizing networks of actors that are willing to contribute resources and effort in a coordinated fashion. Among these actors, RFI's South and Southeast Asia Action Team strives to be a partner that joins with others on a footing of equality and mutual respect, and that works collaboratively towards the goal of religious freedom for "everyone, everywhere," in South and Southeast Asia and beyond.

### ***RFI's South & Southeast Asia Action Team***

RFI pursues its mission and vision through teams of scholars and other experts working to advance religious freedom in a particular region or issue area. This *Bangladesh Religious Freedom Landscape Report* is one of eight religious freedom landscape reports by the South and Southeast Asia Action Team (SSEA-AT) on our eight focus countries of Bangladesh, Burma (Myanmar), India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Building on the analysis in these reports, SSEA-AT is committed to advancing religious freedom across South and Southeast Asia. SSEA-AT seeks first and foremost to build mutual trust and partnerships with local religious freedom actors and entities across the region. Currently, the team has accumulated hundreds of such contacts, including over 275 individuals and more than 200 organizations. These contacts comprise an invaluable foundation and support network, which makes it possible to develop a shared assessment of the religious freedom landscape in South and Southeast Asia as well as a shared action plan that seeks to cultivate religious freedom from the ground up. RFI's ongoing engagement efforts in the region include private meetings with religious and political leaders, activists, and other religious freedom actors and organizations; private meetings with legislators and government officials; public events and grassroots outreach; conflict resolution initiatives; policy formation and analysis; humanitarian relief and/or development services; and educational initiatives.

The purpose of the SSEA-AT's country landscape reports is to survey the current state and future trajectory of religious freedom in the region. Specifically, each country landscape analysis, including the present Bangladesh report:

- ◆ Assesses the religious freedom environment in terms of the favorability of political, socio-cultural, religious, economic, and historical conditions; the leading threats and obstacles to advancing religious freedom given these conditions; the major opportunities or enabling conditions for advancing religious freedom; and the positions of leading political and religious actors vis-à-vis religious freedom. Each report focuses on a given country's religious freedom *capabilities* as well as its religious freedom *challenges*.
- ◆ Assesses the state of empirical knowledge and research on religious freedom, including any significant gaps that may exist.

- ◆ Assesses the education system with respect to religious freedom, including the extent to which religious freedom concepts are integrated into primary, secondary, and higher education curricula.
- ◆ Identifies key religious freedom actors (individuals, organizations, and initiatives) already in place, and actors that might engage in religious freedom activities if given the opportunity, resources, and rationale to do so.
- ◆ Assesses the comparative strengths and weaknesses of these actors.
- ◆ Identifies the major gaps or missing elements in their activities.
- ◆ Evaluates the status of communication in the region, including the primary communicative mechanisms by which the views of elites and public opinion are shaped and disseminated.

Based on the findings in the landscape reports, SSEA-AT has developed a Regional Action Plan that lays out a comprehensive strategy for advancing religious freedom in South and Southeast Asia, with RFI as a partner working in close and equal partnership with other actors. The Regional Action Plan includes:

- ◆ A strategic assessment of the status of religious freedom in the region, based on the findings of the landscape reports.
- ◆ A strategy to leverage political, socio-cultural, religious, economic, and historical factors that are conducive to the promotion of religious freedom throughout SSEA.
- ◆ A strategy to operationalize networks of existing religious freedom actors.
- ◆ A strategy to overcome or neutralize obstacles to the advancement of religious freedom.
- ◆ A strategy to identify and encourage new actors, including religious and political leaders, to advance religious freedom.
- ◆ A strategy to expand the quality and scope of freedoms enjoyed by inhabitants of various countries throughout the region.
- ◆ Recommendations on how funders can most strategically invest to advance religious freedom in the region.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Please note that all of the SSEA-AT's religious freedom landscape reports have been made possible by the generous funding of Templeton Religion Trust and are the result of the collective effort of the entire SSEA-AT, which is comprised of the following:

- ◆ **Director:** Timothy Shah
- ◆ **Associate Director:** Rebecca Samuel Shah
- ◆ **Project Managers:** Liris Thomas and Ana Spevak
- ◆ **RFI Associated Scholars:** Tehmina Arora, Chad Bauman, Robert Hefner, Farahnaz Ispahani, Paul Marshall, Daniel Philpott, Yamini Ravindran, Benedict Rogers, Nilay Saiya, and Eugene Yapp
- ◆ **Research Assistants:** Luke Adams, Michael Gioia, and Matt Mills
- ◆ **Research Interns:** Sachal Jacob and Sarah Thomas

Though they are not responsible for the ultimate form or content of the reports, outside researchers who contributed invaluable and extensively to the reports include Thomas Dinham (Indonesia); Dicky Sofjan (Indonesia and Malaysia); Josiah Ponnudurai (Malaysia and Indonesia); Luke Wagner (Nepal); and Sara Singha (Pakistan). In addition, Michael Gioia worked indispensably—and indefatigably—to edit, re-write, format, and incorporate extensive feedback into all the reports over several intense weeks in the summer of 2019.

We also acknowledge the meticulous and diligent editorial work by RFI's communications team. Communications director Nathan Berkeley and communications manager Cecilia Leatherman edited, revised, and refined the country landscape reports in various versions and iterations over the last 12-18 months.

Finally, the editors of the report want to single out Matt Mills, a rising junior at Baylor University, for special gratitude. Matt served as our primary research assistant on all the landscape reports in the final six months of their drafting, redrafting, and publication. He did far more than an ordinary research assistant, contributing immeasurably to the conceptualization and drafting of the landscape report introduction as well as to the careful proofreading and formatting of the entire manuscript. His work was consistently meticulous and his demeanor unfailingly cheerful. The document could not have assumed the form that it did, when it did, without Matt's superb efforts.

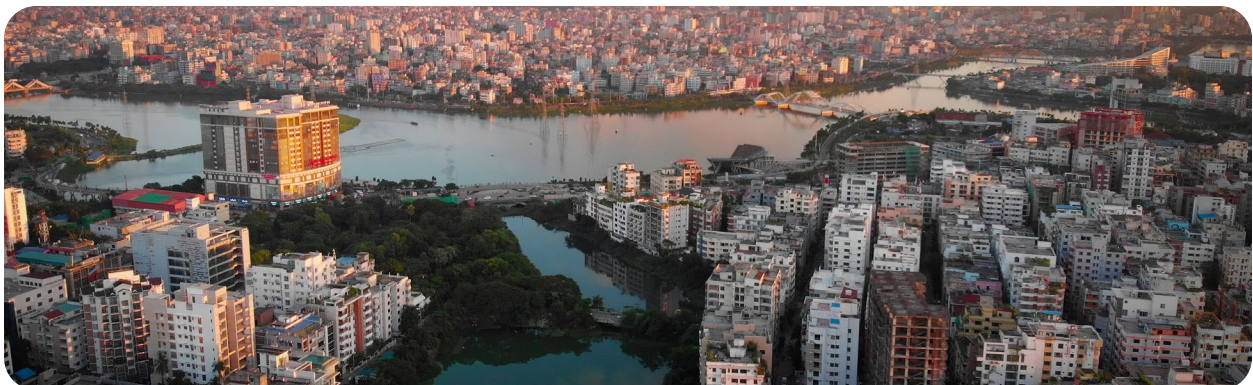


# OVERVIEW

## KEY CHALLENGES

This overwhelmingly Sunni country contains high restrictions on religious freedom at the governmental level, and extremely high levels of religious freedom violations on the societal level. The Constitution contains robust provisions for religious freedom and the state provides religious freedom in education and family law. The state has also passed formidable laws, however, restricting religious speech, exercising strong governance over Islam, banning religious parties,

condemning religious violence disproportionately, and repressing political opponents. The most acute and violent forms of religious repression, though, are conducted by Islamist militants, many of them linked to transnational networks, predominantly attacking Hindus, but also Buddhists, Christians, NGOs, and secular activists. Several civil society organizations work to promote interreligious peace, but rising Islamist militancy and violence seem to dwarf their activism.



# BACKGROUND

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY & HISTORY

### *Religious Demography*

Bangladesh's population totaled approximately 157.8 million as of July 2017 – 89% of which is Sunni Muslim and 10% of which is Hindu.<sup>8</sup> The remaining 0.5% is primarily Christian (mostly Roman Catholic) and Theravada-Hinayana Buddhist, but also includes Shia Muslims, Bahais, Ahmadis, and animists.<sup>9</sup> Ethnic and religious minority communities often overlap and are found primarily in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and northern regions. Bengali is spoken by 98% of the country, also serving as an important identifier of Bangladeshi citizenship. Buddhists are predominantly found among the indigenous (non-Bengali) populations of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.<sup>10</sup> Christians live in communities across the country, including Barisal City, Gournadi in Barisal District, Baniarchar in Gopalganj, Monipuripara in Dhaka, Christianpara in Mohakhal, Nagori in Gazipur, and

Khulna City.<sup>11</sup> Bangladesh is also home to small populations of Shia Muslims, Sikhs, Bahais, animists, and Ahmadis.

### *Brief History*

The governance of religion and religious freedom has been fiercely disputed since the country's formation in December 1971. Bangladesh gained independence through a violent secessionist struggle that pitted the Bengali people against the army of Pakistan and allied Islamist militias tied to the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI). Together, these Pakistani forces massacred between 300,000 and 3,000,000 Bangladeshis (these figures remain highly contested among governments and scholars<sup>12</sup>) in what is widely considered a genocide.<sup>13</sup> Included in the mass violence were the widespread killing of intellectuals and professionals and rape of between 200,000 and 400,000 women.<sup>14</sup>



After the war, Bangladesh was founded as a secular republic by the Awami League under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, also known as Mujib. The Constitution established four state principles: nationalism, democracy, socialism, and secularism. Secularism here meant religious freedom, which was thus enshrined in the Constitution, as well as the absence of a state religion and the prohibition of religious discrimination.<sup>15</sup> Mujib had emphasized the central tenets of nationalism, democracy, socialism, and secularism in his political philosophy. This political philosophy or ideology, also known as *Mujibism*, provided a foundation for Bangladeshi nationhood. Mujib also showcased his pride in being a Muslim, often using Islamic expressions during public appearances.<sup>16</sup> Mujib was overthrown in 1975 during a coup that resulted in military rule under General Zia (formally Zia ur Rahman). Zia legitimized his power by appealing

to popular religious sentiment created by a resurgence of Islamic devotion that reflected a global trend. Following his victory, Zia founded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which favors Islamic governance and has consistently ruled in coalition with JI.<sup>17</sup> Like other Islamist parties around the world, JI has never come close to winning a majority. Nevertheless, they have often been able to win concessions by playing kingmaker. Zia altered the Constitution in 1977 so as to remove secularism and include instead a Fifth Amendment permitting organizations and parties based on religion, which nullified a previous law. Gaining support from Muslim leaders, Zia tied Islam and the state closely together and injected Islam firmly into Bangladeshi political discourse and public policy. After Zia was assassinated in 1981, one of his successors, General Hussain Muhammad Ershad, took another step away from the principle of secularism by





pronouncing, in 1988, that Islam would be the state religion of Bangladesh. **Islamism continued to expand.** On the local level, traditional village arbitration procedures known as *salish* took on a religious purpose, often becoming forums in which clerics would issue fatwas, or religious edicts, and pass down harsh sentences for (real or alleged) behavior deemed contrary to Islamic law, especially on the part of women. Laws restricting speech and freedom of the press in the name of Islam also arose. And, as noted above, a 1988 constitutional amendment made Islam the official state religion of Bangladesh.

In 1991, national elections relaunched formal electoral democracy in the country, which has persisted to this day. Patronage and corruption have remained rife, however. Democracy has not muffled Islamism but rather has empowered it. When the BNP has been

in power, aligned with the JI, Islamism has tended to expand its reach and influence, whereas when the Awami League is in power, Islamism has tended to contract. From 2001 to 2006, under BNP-JI governance, “[p]olitical violence, acts of Islamic terror, and extra-judicial killings reached all-time highs, with the perpetrators often receiving protection from the BNP-JI government.”<sup>18</sup> Shortly after the BNP-JI victory in 2001, Islamists carried out horrific attacks on Hindu minorities; approximately 266 murders and 213 rapes were committed during October of that year alone.<sup>19</sup> In 2008, the Awami League returned to power in a landslide election, appealing to the voters’ desire to return to normalcy. Subsequently, the Awami League also won elections in 2014 and 2018. While Islamist parties continue to stand for election in Bangladeshi politics, they do so in a more secular context than during the BNP-JI dominance. Nevertheless, Islamists have had an enduring impact in that they succeeded in “making Islam an integral part of the political discourse, and creating an environment within which a menacing military can flourish.”<sup>20</sup>

Secularism has been furthered by Bangladesh’s Supreme Court, which banned fatwas in 2001, through which Muslim clerics had been promulgating harsh and cruel measures in the name of Islam, often acting by their own authority. In 2010, the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court, building on a 2005 judgment by the High Court Division (the lower division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh), further weakened General Zia’s Fifth Amendment by reinstalling the ban on religious parties and associations and thus, in a sense, reintroducing secularism.

# CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

## ***Government Hindrances to Religious Freedom***

- The Constitution established Islam as the state religion. While religious establishments do not *ipso facto* constitute or entail the undue restriction of religious freedom, the 1988 amendment lent constitutional authority to state-sponsored Islamization from above and social Islamization from below, thus legitimating and accelerating both dynamics.
- In August 2005, the High Court, which is the lower division of the Supreme Court, declared the Fifth Amendment unlawful. The government at the time, led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, appealed to the Supreme Court and

obtained a stay on the High Court's judgement. In 2009, the Awami League-led government withdrew the government's appeal, paving the way for the Supreme Court to review the issue. In February 2010, the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court ruled that the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution was unconstitutional. Ratified in 1979, the Fifth Amendment overturned a previous law banning unions, associations, or parties based on religion, and stated that all citizens have a right to form a union, association, or party for whatever purpose they desire. The 2010 Supreme Court ruling reintroduced secularism and nominally banned Islamic political parties, though officials have vowed they would not strictly enforce the ban, and many religious groups continue

to operate in civil society and public life to influence politics and policy. While this judicial decision is a direct curtailment of religious freedom, a central element of which is the right of religious groups to use non-coercive means to shape government and public policy on a footing of equality with other groups, it also serves to restrain parties and organizations that threaten the religious freedom of non-Muslim minorities.

- Government officials, including those responsible for law enforcement, have been either ineffective at protecting religious minorities or otherwise have turned a blind eye. The current government, under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, has been criticized for its limited stance on parties involved in attacks against religious minorities, attributing the violence to local groups rather than transnational actors, in spite of ISIS claiming responsibility for recent attacks.<sup>21</sup>
- The government has passed laws that are restrictive of religious speech. Under the penal code, any person who has a “deliberate” or “malicious” intention of demeaning religious sentiments is liable to fines or up to two years in prison. Courts have interpreted this intention to include insults against the Prophet Muhammad. In addition, the Code of Criminal Procedure states: “the government may confiscate all copies of a newspaper if it publishes anything that creates enmity and hatred among the citizens or denigrates religious beliefs.”<sup>22</sup> Although the government has not

publicly commented on enacting blasphemy laws, it has briefly blocked access to popular social networking sites that it deemed offensive on several occasions.<sup>23</sup>

One famous blasphemy case was that of Taslima Nasreen, a Bangladeshi feminist author exiled since 1994 due to safety concerns. Nasreen is famous for her novel, *Lajja*, about a Hindu family in Bangladesh terrorized by Muslim fundamentalists. The story criticized the lack of Hindu representation in the Bangladeshi government as well as the state of Indo-Bangladeshi relations. Both Islamists and secularists were offended by the book. The Bangladeshi government proceeded to ban the book, and Islamist groups issued fatwas against Nasreen, accusing her of blasphemy.<sup>24</sup>

Religious political parties have pledged to enact stricter blasphemy laws should they gain power. Likewise, Hefajat-e-Islam, a non-political party, is pushing to enact a death penalty for blasphemy. Prime Minister Hasina, in office since 2009, did not approve of such measures, citing that punishments are already in place for those guilty of blasphemy. While it is a positive that the death penalty has not been enacted in Bangladesh, petitions to remove Islam as the state religion have been rejected.<sup>25</sup>

- Bangladesh is still dealing with the legacy of the Vested Property Act. The Act is rooted in a series of laws passed after the partition of British India and, later, the India-

Pakistan War of 1965. It originally authorized the government of East Pakistan to confiscate the property of anyone considered an enemy of the state, and has frequently been used to confiscate the property of Hindus who fled East Pakistan during or after the 1965 war with India and, later, Hindus who fled the country during or after the 1971 war for independence.<sup>26</sup> While an act to return property was later passed, many Hindus (including the family of Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen) have been unable to recover lost landholdings. An Awami League government attempted to repeal the Vested Property Act in 2001, immediately prior to being overthrown in an election. The successor government, however, did not take any concrete steps to reverse the property seizures that occurred. Under the law – both pre- and post-independence – the government seized approximately 2.6 million acres of land, affecting almost all Hindus in the country. According to a study conducted by a professor at Dhaka University, since 2001 – the very year that the act was annulled – nearly 200,000 Hindu families lost approximately 40,667 acres of land. The Vested Property Return Act of 2011 seeks the return of seized land, but progress has been slow in settling claims. In 2016, the Coordinated Cell for Implementation of Vested Property Return Act, an organization that represents claimants, reported that 70% of claims remained unfulfilled.<sup>27</sup>

- Although the Constitution provides the right to propagate the religion of one's choice, local authorities and



communities often object to efforts related to the conversion of Muslims.

- In recent years, the Ministry of Education has implemented changes to Bengali language textbooks in an Islamist direction. For instance, positive cultural references that are non-Muslim have been removed.<sup>28</sup>
- On January 29, 2018, the Bangladeshi government approved a draft law called the Digital Security Act to replace the much-abused Information and Communication Technology Act (ICT). The ICT has been used to imprison journalists, students, and teachers.<sup>29</sup> While the government claims that it has no intention of curbing the freedom of speech, human rights activists, such as Human Rights Watch Director Brad Adams, would argue that the vagueness of the



law is “a license for wide-ranging suppression of critical voices.”<sup>30</sup>

- The government runs academies established to train imams and proclaims Islamic festival days but does not generally dictate sermon content or clergy pay. Still, the autonomy of religious institutions from government control and interference is a central feature of religious freedom. The state’s routinized controls over some religious institutions therefore represent a worrying, deep-seated feature of mosque-state relations in Bangladesh. The government has the authority to appoint or remove imams and does exercise a degree of indirect influence over sermon content in government mosques, including the national mosque, Baitul Mukarram. The government also monitors the content of

religious education in madrassahs, and has recently introduced a third madrassah school system.<sup>31</sup> While these measures are unmistakable government infringements on religious freedom, it is also true that they are not as harsh or pervasive as the state control of religion in some other Muslim-majority countries.

- The Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), an anti-terrorism unit connected to the government’s administration, targets religious extremism. Nevertheless, the unit has been accused of eliminating opposition to the government.<sup>32</sup> Although some government officials are investigating crimes of the RAB, according to Human Rights Watch, they are simultaneously and covertly permitting, if not encouraging, RAB to perpetrate the disappearance and demise of political opponents

and so-called “criminals.”<sup>33</sup> These “criminals” usually disappear and are found dead a few days later, their bodies showing signs of torture. Bangladesh law enforcement agencies have contributed to the disappearances of over 320 people, according to Odhikar, a local human rights groups, “including suspected criminals, militants, and, more recently, opposition members. Of these, 50 were killed and, and dozens remain unaccounted for.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Threats to Religious Freedom in Bangladeshi Society**

- Bangladesh’s most zealous Islamist groups are not governmental.<sup>35</sup> As is true elsewhere, these groups derive no small encouragement from current laws and policies, but their actions go well beyond these laws and policies, often taking the form of vigilante violence. In one outbreak of organized violence in 2005, Islamist militants detonated 450 bombs across the country within a single hour.<sup>36</sup> In 2004 and 2005, Islamists believed to have links with members of the BNP government carried out numerous attacks on Awami League leaders, killing several politicians and judges and nearly assassinating Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina.<sup>37</sup> Some have suggested that Bangladesh has largely succeeded in reining in organized Islamist militancy and terrorism after 2005, partly through the activities of the RAB. But the data demonstrate that Islamist violence is far from being a phenomenon of the past or a function of the era of BNP-JI dominance. Instead, the

problem appears to have worsened in the supposedly secular post-2009 era of Awami League rule. “Between January 2005 and December 2017, some 746 people have died in Islamist terrorist attacks, including 339 alleged terrorists; of those attacks, 91 percent have taken place since 2013,” notes South Asia security expert Christine Fair. “That the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) claim many of these recent attacks casts a pall over Bangladesh’s ostensible success.”<sup>38</sup>

- Bangladeshi Muslim migrant workers, who had returned from the Middle East radicalized, contributed to the violence. Such violent acts, and the groups committing them, greatly threaten religious freedom. As noted above, salish practices have resulted in harsh punishments for violations of religious law, which can be seen in cases of alleged adulterous women.
- The increasingly violent zero-sum clash between secularism and Islamism in Bangladesh has been evident since Sheikh Mujibur’s rule in the early 1970s. Mujib used secularism as the cornerstone of the Constitution, but espoused Islamic ideals as a public figure and promoted laws against alcohol and gambling. Nonetheless, those who aspired to make Islam dominant in the country’s social and political life considered Mujib and his secularism anathema. Today, polarization between secularists and Islamists is causing increased violence and deepening government dysfunction. In 2014, Muslim extremist groups like Jamaatul Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB), ISIS,

and JI,<sup>39</sup> Hefazat-e-Islami, and Ahle Sunnat – many of them transnational – increased their attacks on targets in Bangladesh. These groups aim to make Bangladesh an Islamic state, with no room for religious plurality. JMB and ISIS are spreading their interpretations of “Islam” and “Islamic law,” and asserting that their ideology is the only acceptable one.<sup>40</sup> Such groups attempt to create a culture of fear and terror among religious minorities through militant strategies and public attacks on places of worship. In recent years, Islamist militants have regularly attacked bloggers who promote secular ideas or atheism, or who criticize Islamism.<sup>41</sup> Hit lists are currently circulating in Bangladesh with names of potential targets.<sup>42</sup>

- For their part, secularists associated with the Awami League have conducted a scorched-earth assault on Islamist politicians and other opponents since returning to power in 2009. In 2010, the government created a tribunal to investigate atrocities committed during the independence war in 1971, and by 2013 major Islamist leaders were being put on trial. Though the evidence of complicity in genocide, rape, and torture was credible in some cases, the trials were widely condemned for their lack of fair procedures for the accused. Between December 2013 and September 2016, some six high-ranking Islamist leaders, including 73-year-old Motiur Rahman Nizami, former head of the Jamaat-i-Islami, were found guilty and executed by hanging.<sup>43</sup> Leading up to the 2014 national elections, which were widely criticized by

UN and Western observers, the Awami League organized a massive crackdown on opposition BNP and Islamist leaders. The government tactics led almost all opposition parties (including the BNP) to boycott the elections, guaranteeing continued Awami League dominance. The pattern essentially repeated itself in the 2018 elections, except that the Hasina government went even further, jailing BNP leader and former prime minister Khaleda Zia on corruption charges before the elections and making it difficult for the opposition to hold rallies.<sup>44</sup> Both sides, secularists and Islamists, are taking matters into their own hands to silence their opponents in what appears to be a death struggle with no recognized restraints or shared rules of the game, making healthy and peaceful pluralism impossible for the foreseeable future.

- Throughout Bangladesh’s history, secularism has been largely associated with NGOs, offering Islamists a tangible target for their attacks. Conflict between Islamists and NGOs culminated in violence during the 1990s. The most brutal attacks of this era took place in Brahmanbaria on December 7, 1998, against a coalition of NGOs.<sup>45</sup> The animosity some feel towards NGOs is rooted in their support for minority and women’s rights.<sup>46</sup> Certain development projects, for instance, threatened Islamist views on the role of women. In response, Islamists created an anti-NGO movement characterizing NGOs as outlandish and foreign. Fatwas were issued against women’s independence throughout

the country. In November 2017, Prime Minister Hasina instructed authorities to monitor NGO activities in Bangladesh.<sup>47</sup> The NGO Affairs Bureau now regularly monitors foreign-funded NGO activities.<sup>48</sup>

- Women in particular have suffered violence at the hands of Islamist groups, who inflict vigilante punishments against women charged with adultery or other alleged violations of Islamic law, which include simply chatting with a man. Women have experienced stoning, burning, flogging, acid attacks, and death.<sup>49</sup>
- Hindus, the largest religious minority, are targeted most frequently by Islamist militants. Harsh discrimination and brutal attacks against Hindus took place

during the era of East Pakistan, and continued since independence. It is estimated that 5.3 million Hindus left Bangladesh during the latter half of the 20th century, after the formation of Pakistan. While the Hindu proportion of the population of what is now Bangladesh (then, roughly, East Bengal) was about 33% around 1900, it has declined to as low as 9% in the country today.<sup>50</sup> Organized violence against Hindus began immediately after the parliamentary elections in 2001 and amounted to hundreds of incidents of plunder, rape, property damage, bomb throwing, arson, torture, and murder. Many of the attackers were members of the BNP and its allies, especially JI. Islamist militants have also attacked non-Hindu minorities, including Buddhists, Christians, and the Ahmadiyya community.





# STRENGTHS OPPORTUNITIES & NEEDS

## ***Government Support for Religious Freedom***

- The Constitution of Bangladesh contains reasonably robust provisions for religious freedom. It provides “for the right to profess, practice, or propagate all religions, subject to law, public order, and morality.”<sup>51</sup> The Constitution also states that “the state religion of the Republic is Islam,” then qualifying, “but the State shall ensure equal status and equal rights in the practice of Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions.”<sup>52</sup> This latter provision is crucial for the freedom of non-Muslim individuals and communities in Bangladeshi society. The Constitution also prohibits religious discrimination and provides for equality of all religions.
- The Constitution stipulates that no one attending any educational institution shall be required to receive instruction in – or participate in ceremonies or worship pertaining to – a religion to which he or she does not belong. Instead, students receive instruction in their own religion. There is thus religious freedom in education, a crucial dimension of this right, which is rarely found in comparison to other Muslim-majority countries.
- Following bomb attacks perpetrated by Islamist militants in 2005, the government created the Council for Interfaith Harmony-Bangladesh, an organization with delegates from all the religious faiths in Bangladesh. The group meets regularly at both national and divisional levels, and

carries out common projects, such as one to reduce HIV/AIDS. Another government-owned organization, the Christian Religious Welfare Trust, which typically has little to do with inter-faith discussion, invited Christians and Muslims to dialogue about how to reduce religious extremism. The government also began training programs for Imams and Pastors. The seminar, which took place on May 18, 2016, effectively fostered inter-religious dialogue.<sup>53</sup>

- The Vested Property Return Act of 2011 (amended in 2013) established a process through which people could apply for the return of property that the government had seized before or after Bangladeshi independence under the Vested Property Act (and its predecessor laws).<sup>54</sup> As noted above, Hindus were especially affected by the property seizures. During the period of East Pakistan, the government seized land from people whom it simply deemed as an enemy. The government acted under what was known as the Enemy Property Act, then renamed the Vested Property Act in 1974.
- Matters of family law are adjudicated according to the particular norms of religious communities. Secular courts apply provisions of Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism in matters of family law, and apply civil family law when mixed faith families, or people of other faiths or no faith, are involved. Marriage between members of different groups is permitted. This same respect for religious communities, however, may disadvantage women. For instance, Muslim men may marry

as many as four women (although the written consent of existing wives is required before marrying another), while Hindu law forbids women from inheriting property.<sup>55</sup>

### **Government Ambivalence Toward Religious Freedom**

Government policies remain ambivalent toward religious freedom and religious minorities in several areas. While not without its challenges, such ambivalence also presents opportunities to strengthen religious liberty in Bangladesh.

- In 2001, the High Court ruled all Sharia-based rulings, known as *fatwas*, to be illegal. After a lengthy judicial review, the Appellate Division of the High Court upheld the ban as part of a broader ruling against forms of extrajudicial punishment. While this is a direct curtailment of religious freedom, it is also the case that fatwas had been used repressively by Islamist clerics.
- Non-Muslim religious bodies are not required to register with the government, but all NGOs, including religious ones, are required to register with the government's NGO Affairs Bureau if they have or do receive foreign financial assistance for social development projects. The government can cancel or block foreign funds for NGOs suspected of violating their legal or fiduciary obligations, and can also take other actions.<sup>56</sup> As government restrictions on access to foreign funding are having a chilling effect on the freedom of religious and

non-religious institutions and on civil society in many parts of the world, including in neighboring India, this is a worrying development.

- Since the crackdown in Burma (Myanmar) that began August 25, 2017, more than 700,000, mostly Muslim Rohingya, have fled Burma and joined the over 400,000 Rohingya already in Bangladesh.<sup>57</sup> Bangladesh and Burma have recently come to an agreement about the repatriation of the hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to Burma. Bangladesh, with help from the international community, has struggled to accommodate the Rohingya refugees in difficult circumstances. Nevertheless, conditions in the refugee camps are poor.<sup>58</sup> Although some Rohingya desire to return, many fear returning to a country that has already engaged in what the UN described as “ethnic cleansing.”<sup>59</sup>
- In contrast to religious freedom in Burma, the Rohingya are noticeably freer to practice their faith in Bangladesh. According to a USCIRF report, Rohingya Muslims have been practicing their religion and performing religious ceremonies in the refugee camps—though religious materials such as the Quran and proper facilities to wash before prayer are not easily accessible.<sup>60</sup> The sheer number of refugees who have settled in Bangladesh, however, has raised concerns. Cox’s Bazar is already a relatively poor district and the increased strain on natural resources and the impact of a sudden influx of cheap labor could compound the range of existing problems

with infrastructure, nutrition, and sanitation, among other issues.<sup>61</sup>

### ***Support for Religious Freedom in Bangladeshi Society***

- Bangladesh is home to a strong civil society, which includes organizations that consistently speak out against human rights violations. Many bloggers, secularists, and activists continue to maintain a presence in society both on and offline, despite receiving death threats.
- Several organizations are making efforts to foster peace among religions. One is the Commission for Dialogue and Ecumenism, which has facilitated interreligious dialogue among Muslims, Christians, and Hindus.<sup>62</sup> Alhaj Nazrul Islam Molla, a Bangladeshi Islamic leader, even promised to protect persecuted Christians and Hindus. Another organization that carries out important work for peace is the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council.
- Sharia (Islamic law) plays an influential role in civil matters in the Muslim community. Fortunately, however, there is no formal implementation of any particular form of Sharia, and Sharia is not imposed on non-Muslims. Also, alternative dispute resolution is available to settle family arguments and other civil matters not related to land ownership. With the consent of both parties, arbitrators may rely on principles found in Sharia to settle disputes.





# BANGLADESH

## SWOT ANALYSIS

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) Analysis is a structured planning method that evaluates a given organization, program, or a project in each of these areas. What follows is a SWOT analysis for religious freedom for Bangladesh.

### STRENGTHS

*What does the country do well with regard to religious freedom?*

*What areas are vibrant, positive, and healthy when it comes to religious freedom in the country?*

- ◆ The Constitution contains robust religious freedom provisions.
- ◆ Numerous civil society organizations speak out against and work to reduce religious violence.
- ◆ The government has demonstrated a significant will to arrest and prosecute perpetrators of terrorism.
- ◆ The state provides religious freedom in education and family law.
- ◆ The government has established the Council for Interfaith Harmony-Bangladesh.

### WEAKNESSES

*What does the country do less well when it comes to religious freedom?*

*What areas of weakness does the country encounter with religious freedom?*

- ◆ Islam is enshrined in the Constitution in ways that are used to discriminate against non-Muslim minorities.
- ◆ Islamist militants carry out extensive violence, most significantly against Hindus, but also against “deviant” Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, activist NGOs, and secular activists.
- ◆ The government prosecutes terrorism disproportionately, even turning a blind eye to it at times, and allows human rights violations against members of the opposition.

# BANGLADESH

## SWOT ANALYSIS

### OPPORTUNITIES

*What are the needs of the people in the country who wish to exercise their right to faith?  
What trends can the country take advantage of to promote religious freedom?  
What is changing in the country's communities that can be harnessed to promote religious freedom?*

- ◆ An ideology of positive secularism, calling for a reasonable level of religious freedom, is espoused among the greater population and by many politicians. The governance of the pro-Islam party, and the accompanying Islamist militant violence of the 2000s, has given way to governance that is more respectful of religious minorities.
- ◆ Numerous NGOs working for economic development, minority rights, and women's rights and advancement, are active in Bangladesh despite sometimes being attacked.

### THREATS

*Are there any threats or regulations with regard to religious freedom in the country?  
What is challenging in the country that will impact religious freedom?*

- ◆ Islamist militant groups continue to be numerous and carry out violence, are often linked with transnational networks, and are sustained by radicalized migrant workers who return from the Middle East.
- ◆ Secularists associated with the increasingly authoritarian regime of the Awami League have conducted a scorched-earth assault on Islamist politicians and other opponents since returning to power in 2009. They have pursued a punitive policy vis-à-vis the Jamaat-i-Islami and are squeezing Islamist groups in general, making it difficult for Muslims to organize peacefully in civil society and contend for their views in political life. Under the auspices of the Awami League government, RAB continues to exist to target opposition figures and to carry out extrajudicial killings.
- ◆ The result is a destructive, zero-sum conflict between uncompromising, authoritarian secularists and uncompromising, militant Islamists that radically undermines the prospects for national reconciliation and the construction of a peaceful and principled pluralism in Bangladesh in the foreseeable future.

# PEW RESEARCH CENTER REPORT

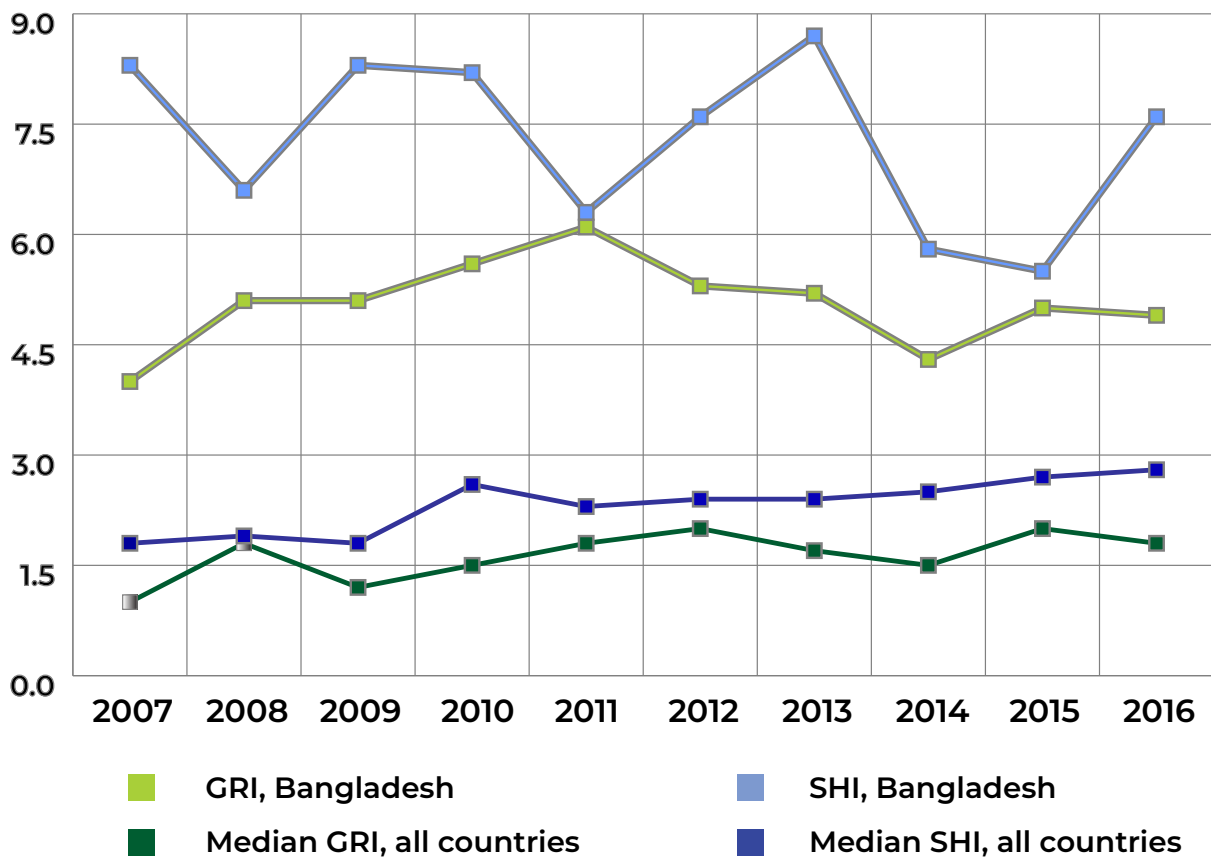
## RESTRICTIONS ON RELIGION AMONG 198 COUNTRIES, 2007-2016

Since 2009, the Pew Research Center has released an annual report<sup>63</sup> on restrictions of religious freedom around the world. The Pew report uses a 10-point index to rate 198 countries and self-governing territories based on Government Restrictions Index (GRI) and Social Hostilities Index (SHI).

The GRI measures government restrictions on religious actors ranging from favoring one religion over another to outright bans on a particular religion. Bangladesh scored “high” on the GRI in 2016, ranking 48th worst among 198 countries.<sup>64</sup>

The SHI measures hostilities towards religion by non-state actors ranging from harassment to terrorist attacks in the name of religion. In 2016, Bangladesh’s SHI ranked “very high” with the 8th highest (worst) SHI rating among the 198 countries surveyed.<sup>65</sup>

**Figure 1: Restrictions on Religion in Bangladesh (GRI & SHI) 2007-2016**







# ENDNOTES

1 Timothy Samuel Shah et al., *Religious Freedom: Why Now? Defending an Embattled Human Right* (Princeton, New Jersey: Witherspoon Institute, 2012), pp. 13-16. See also Timothy Samuel Shah and Jack Friedman, eds., *Homo Religiosus?: Exploring the Roots of Religion and Religious Freedom in Human Experience* (New York & Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

2 Country population figures are 2020 projections according to UNdata. Derived from “Total population, both sexes combined,” *World Population Prospects: The 2019 Revision*, United Nations Population Division, accessed June 17, 2020, <https://data.un.org/Data.aspx?q=population&d=PopDiv&f=variableID%3a12>.

3 Pew Research Center, *The Future of the Global Muslim Population*, January 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110209094904/http://www.pewforum.org/The-Future-of-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx>; Pew Research Center, *The Global Religious Landscape*, December 2012, <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-hindu/>.

4 Religious affiliation proportions are 2020 projections derived from the country profiles of *Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project*, Pew Research Center, accessed June 17, 2020, <http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries>. The proportions were applied to the UNdata population projections to obtain the figures for total population by religious affiliation.

5 United Nations, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, December 10, 1948, <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>.

6 That figure was 75 percent of the global population, more than 5 billion people, in 2010: Pew Research Center, *Rising Tide of Restrictions on Religion*, September 20, 2012, <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/09/20/rising-tide-of-restrictions-on-religion-findings/>. Subsequent annual reports confirmed that this number is only increasing: Pew Research Center, *A Closer Look at How Religious Restrictions Have Risen Around the World*, July 15, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/15/a-closer-look-at-how-religious-restrictions-have-risen-around-the-world/>.

7 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights begins with a reference to the “inherent dignity” of all human beings as the implicit foundation of human equality and human rights; the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany makes its cornerstone proposition that “[h]uman dignity shall be inviolable” the basis of the immediately following acknowledgment that all human beings possess “inviolable and inalienable human rights” (Articles 1.1-1.2); and the Declaration on Religious Liberty of the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church declares that “the right to religious

freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself” (sec. 2).

8 U.S. State Department, 2017 *International Religious Freedom Report: Bangladesh*, May 29, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2017-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bangladesh/>.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 For further commentary on this vast range, see David Bergman, “The politics of Bangladesh’s genocide debate,” *The New York Times*, April 5, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/06/opinion/the-politics-of-bangladeshs-genocide-debate.html>.

13 T.H. Ali, “Four decades later, War Crimes Tribunal seeks justice for Bangladesh genocide,” *Public Radio International*, May 12, 2014, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-05-12/four-decades-later-war-crimes-tribunal-seeks-justice-bangladesh-genocide>.

14 Nilanjana S. Roy, “Bangladesh war’s toll on women still undiscussed,” *The New York Times*, August 24, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/25/world/asia/25iht-letter.html>.

15 The People’s Republic of Bangladesh, “Part II, Fundamental Principles of State Policy, Article 12,” in *The Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh*, August 3, 2013, [http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/sections\\_detail.php?id=367&sections\\_id=24560](http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/sections_detail.php?id=367&sections_id=24560).

16 Ali Riaz, *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh*, (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004).

17 K. Anis Ahmed, “Bangladesh’s creeping Islamism,” *The New York Times*, February 3, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/03/opinion/bangladeshs-creeping-islamism.html>.

18 Jalal Alamgir, “Bangladesh’s fresh start,” *Journal of Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2009): 42.

19 Riaz, 56.

20 Ali Riaz and Kh. Ali Raji, “Who Are the Islamists?” in *Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh*, eds. Ali Riaz and C. Christine Fair (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 66.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 U.S. Department of State, 2010 *International Religious Freedom Report: Bangladesh*, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/171752.pdf>.

24 Specifically, Shahaba Sainik Parishad issued a fatwa for her death, which was later retracted due to criticisms from all sectors of society and the charges were eventually dropped.

25 David Bergman, "Bangladesh court upholds Islam as religion of the state," *Al Jazeera*, March 28, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/bangladesh-court-upholds-islam-religion-state-160328112919301.html>.

26 Anbarasan Ethirajan, "Bangladesh approves Hindu property restoration act," *BBC*, November 28, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-15928541>.

27 U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2017: Bangladesh*, 2017, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Bangladesh.2017.pdf>.

28 U.S. State Department, *2017 International Religious Freedom Report: Bangladesh*, May 29, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2017-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bangladesh/>.

29 "Law Minister: Section 57 will be dropped from ICT Act," *Dhaka Tribune*, May 2, 2017, [www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/law-rights/2017/05/02/law-minister-section-57-dropped-ict-act/](http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/law-rights/2017/05/02/law-minister-section-57-dropped-ict-act/).

30 Human Rights Watch, "Bangladesh: Scrap draconian elements of Digital Security Act," February 22, 2018, [www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/22/bangladesh-scrap-draconian-elements-digital-security-act](http://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/22/bangladesh-scrap-draconian-elements-digital-security-act).

31 Shohel Mamun, Ashif Islam Shaon, "How successful will the new madrasa education system be?," *Dhaka Tribune*, January 23, 2018, [www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/special/2018/01/19/successful-will-new-madrasa-education-system/](http://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/special/2018/01/19/successful-will-new-madrasa-education-system/).

32 Meenakshi Ganguly, "No, Bangladesh, the truth is not a 'smear campaign,'" *Human Rights Watch*, July 7, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/07/no-bangladesh-truth-not-smear-campaign>.

33 U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2017: Bangladesh*, 2017, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Bangladesh.2017.pdf>.

34 Human Rights Watch, "We don't have him" - secret detentions and enforced disappearances in Bangladesh, July 6, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/07/06/we-dont-have-him/secret-detentions-and-enforced-disappearances-bangladesh>.

35 Sabir Mustafa, "Bangladesh: Lurching from secularism to sectarian terror?" *BBC*, December 1, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34966842>.

36 "459 blasts in 63 districts in 30 minutes," *The Daily Star*, August 18, 2005, <http://archive.thedailystar.net/2005/08/18/d5081801011.htm>.

37 Bruce Vaughn, "Bangladesh: Background and U.S. Relations - Congressional Research Service Report for Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, August 2, 2007, Washington, D.C., p. 4; available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33646.pdf>.

38 C. Christine Fair, “Political Islam and Islamist Terrorism in Bangladesh: What You Need to Know,” *Lawfare*, January 28, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/political-islam-and-islamist-terrorism-bangladesh-what-you-need-know>.

39 U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2017: Bangladesh*, 2017, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Bangladesh.2017.pdf>.

40 Saroj Kumar Rath, “Wolf-pack terrorism: Inspired by ISIS, made in Bangladesh,” *YaleGlobal Online*, Yale University, July 5, 2016, <https://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/wolf-pack-terrorism-inspired-isis-made-bangladesh>.

41 Committee to Protect Journalists, “Journalist arrested, others beaten during Bangladesh elections,” January 2, 2019, <https://cpj.org/2019/01/journalist-arrested-others-beaten-during-banglades.php>.

42 Katy Witkowski and IPI Staff, “Bangladesh arrest of opposition journalist raises concerns,” *International Press Institute*, April 19, 2016, <http://ipi.media/bangladesh-arrest-of-opposition-journalist-raises-concerns/>.

43 Associated Press in Dhaka, “Bangladeshi Islamist leader’s execution sparks deadly protests,” *The Guardian*, Dec. 13, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/13/bangladesh-islamist-abdul-quader-mollah-execution-protests>; “Bangladesh executes last prominent Jamaat leader, Al Jazeera, September 2016; available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/09/bangladesh-executes-prominent-jamaat-leader-160903135231345.html>.

44 Sumit Ganguly, “The World Should be Watching Bangladesh’s Election Debacle,” *Foreign Policy*, January 27, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/07/the-world-should-be-watching-bangladeshs-election-debacle-sheikh-hasina/>.

45 Riaz, 89-90.

46 Article 19, *The Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh*.

47 Safiqul Islam, “PM instructs authorities to monitor NGO activities,” *Dhaka Tribune*, November 20, 2017, [www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2017/11/20/pm-monitor-ngo-activities/](http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2017/11/20/pm-monitor-ngo-activities/).

48 Partha Pratim Bhattacharjee and Mohammad Al-Masum Molla, “Keep watch on NGOs,” *The Daily Star*, November 21, 2017, [www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/keep-watch-ngos-1494223](http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/keep-watch-ngos-1494223).

49 Riaz, 73-78.

50 Riaz, 8, 50-51, 62-65.

51 Article 41, *The Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh*.

52 Article 2A, *The Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh*.

53 Sumon Corraya, “Bangladesh, a seminar to ‘update’ priests and imams and relaunch dialogue,” *Asia News*, May 21, 2016, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Bangladesh,-a-seminar-to-update-priests-and-imams-and-relaunch-dialogue-37559.html>.

- 54 Hindu American Foundation, *Hindus in South Asia & the Diaspora: A Survey of Human Rights, 2017*, <https://www.hafsite.org/sites/default/files/HAF-HinduHumanRightsReport2017.pdf>, p. 41.
- 55 U.S. State Department, *2017 International Religious Freedom Report: Bangladesh*, May 29, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2017-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bangladesh/>.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Feliz Solomon, "Rohingya refugees: Myanmar's crisis is Bangladesh's burden," *Time*, November 23, 2017, <https://time.com/5031342/bangladesh-myanmar-rohingya-refugee-crisis/>.
- 58 "Life for the Rohingya in the world's largest refugee camp," *Thomson Reuters Foundation News*, 2019, <https://news.trust.org/packages/life-for-the-rohingya-in-the-worlds-largest-refugee-camp/>.
- 59 Ruma Paul and Yi-mou Lee, "Bangladesh agrees with Myanmar to complete Rohingya return in two years," *Reuters.com*, January 16, 2018, [www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-bangladesh/bangladesh-agrees-with-myanmar-to-complete-rohingya-return-in-two-years-idUSKBN1F50I2](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-bangladesh/bangladesh-agrees-with-myanmar-to-complete-rohingya-return-in-two-years-idUSKBN1F50I2).
- 60 U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Suspended in Time: The Ongoing Persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Burma*, December 2016, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Suspended%20in%20Time.%20The%20Ongoing%20Persecution%20of%20Rohingya%20Muslims%20in%20Burma.pdf>.
- 61 ACAPS, *Rohingya Crisis: Host Communities Review*, January 2018, [https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20180131\\_npm\\_acaps\\_rohingya\\_crisis\\_host\\_communities.pdf](https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20180131_npm_acaps_rohingya_crisis_host_communities.pdf).
- 62 Sumon Corraya, "Khulna, Islamic leader promises protection to Christians and Hindus," *Asia News*, February 21, 2017, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Khulna,-Islamic-leader-promises-protection-to-Christians-and-Hindus-39995.html>.
- 63 Pew Research Center, *Global Uptick in Government Restrictions on Religion in 2016*, June 2018, <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/21/global-uptick-in-government-restrictions-on-religion-in-2016/>.
- 64 Pew Research Center, *Global Uptick in Government Restriction on Religion in 2016*, Appendix A: Government Restrictions Index, June 2018, <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2018/06/19152148/APPENDIX-A.pdf>.
- 65 Pew Research Center, *Global Uptick in Government Restriction on Religion in 2016*. Appendix B: Social Hostilities Index, June 2018, <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2018/07/19102430/Restrictions2018appendixB.pdf>.



### **Religious Freedom Institute**

The Religious Freedom Institute is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization committed to achieving broad acceptance of religious liberty as a fundamental human right, the cornerstone of a successful society, and a source of national and international security.



### **Templeton Religion Trust**

Providing the funding that made this report possible, Templeton Religion Trust (TRT) is a global charitable trust chartered by Sir John Templeton in 1984 with headquarters in Nassau, The Bahamas, where Sir John lived until his death in 2008. TRT has been active since 2012, and supports projects and the dissemination of results from projects seeking to enrich the conversation about religion.

### **Layout and Design**

Element Media  
[www.element.ps](http://www.element.ps)

### **Photography Credits**

Cover Photo: Sk Hasan Ali / Shutterstock  
Table of Contents: StanislavBeloglazov / Shutterstock  
Page 3: Sk Hasan Ali / Shutterstock  
Page 5 (Top): Juan Alberto Casado / Shutterstock  
Page 5 (Middle): Kertu / Shutterstock  
Page 5 (Bottom): The Road Provides / Shutterstock  
Page 6 (Top): gregorioa / Shutterstock  
Page 6 (Middle): Syed Rajeeb / Shutterstock  
Page 6 (Bottom): Sk Hasan Ali / Shutterstock  
Page 12: Social Media Hub / Shutterstock  
Page 13: Lumenite / Shutterstock  
Page 15-16: Md Shohel Rana / Shutterstock  
Page 19-20: zakir hossain chowdhury / Shutterstock  
Page 23: Dietmar Temps / Pexels  
Page 27-28: Jahangir Alam Onuchcha / Pexels  
Page 32: Sk Hasan Ali / Pexels



316 Pennsylvania Ave. SE, Suite 501  
Washington, DC 20003  
Tel: 202-838-7734  
[rfi@religiousfreedominstitute.org](mailto:rfi@religiousfreedominstitute.org)  
[www.religiousfreedominstitute.org](http://www.religiousfreedominstitute.org)

