

# BANGLADESH 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution designates Islam as the state religion but upholds the principle of secularism. It prohibits religious discrimination and provides for equality for all religions. Family law, enforced in secular courts, contains separate provisions for different religious groups. In response to widespread anti-Hindu communal violence from October 13-24 that left several persons dead, including Muslims and Hindus, the government condemned the attacks, provided aid and additional security to Hindu communities, and brought criminal charges against more than 20,000 individuals. There were three high-profile convictions tied to religious issues during the year, with tribunals sentencing to death eight Islamic militants for killing a publisher in 2015, five men for the 2015 killing of an atheist blogger, and 14 members of a banned Islamist group for a conspiracy in 2000 to assassinate the Prime Minister. In its stated effort to prevent militancy and to monitor mosques for “provocative” messaging, the government continued to provide guidance to imams throughout the country on the content of their sermons. Members of religious minorities, including Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians, who were sometimes also members of ethnic minorities, continued to say the government was ineffective in preventing forced evictions and land seizures stemming from land disputes. The government continued to deploy law enforcement personnel at religious sites, festivals, and events considered possible targets for violence.

In response to a Facebook post on October 13 showing a copy of the Quran on the lap of a Hindu god inside a temple, crowds of Muslims attacked Hindu adherents, saying the Quran had been desecrated, and killed between four and 14 individuals, according to media, activists, and official estimates. Crowds also attacked Hindu temples and property across the country, with violence continuing until October 24. National Hindu leaders said Hindus, afraid of further violence, refrained from public celebrations of Diwali on November 4 in favor of private ceremonies in their temples and homes. Worshipers covered their faces with black cloth to protest the lack of security for Hindus. In June, according to *Al-Jazeera*, activists from an indigenous (non-Bengali ethnicity) minority group killed a member of their ethnic group for converting to Islam. In May, media sources said Muslim students gravely injured four Christian students over an online video game dispute; one student later died from his injuries. That same month, local news sources reported two Bengali men attacked and seriously injured a Buddhist indigenous monk in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). In February, media sources reported a

group of Muslims destroyed and stole property from a Christian church in Lalmonirhat District. In March, local news outlets reported dozens of Muslims attacked Hindu residences in Sunamanj District regarding a Facebook post critical of an Islamic cleric. In May, actor Chanchal Chowdhury received abusive comments online after his Mother's Day Facebook post showing his mother with Hindu markings on her forehead. In September, news sources said Rohingya Muslims denied the burial of a Rohingya Christian refugee inside the Kutapalong refugee camp. Human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) continued to report harassment, communal threats of physical violence, and the social isolation of Christian converts from Hinduism or Islam. The Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC) said communal violence against minorities continued throughout the year.

In meetings with government officials, civil society members, religious leaders, and in public statements, the U.S. Ambassador, other embassy representatives, and a senior Department of State official spoke out against acts of violence in the name of religion and urged the government to uphold the rights of minority religious groups and foster a climate of tolerance. During the year, the Ambassador visited Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist places of worship to reinforce the U.S. commitment to religious diversity and interfaith tolerance. In fiscal year 2021, the United States provided \$302 million in humanitarian assistance funding for programs in the country to assist Rohingya refugees (who are overwhelmingly Muslim) from Burma and also to assist host communities. Embassy public outreach programs encouraging interfaith tolerance among religious groups continued during the year. Embassy social media messaging in support of religious tolerance reached more than 2.5 million persons.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 164.1 million (midyear 2021). According to the 2013 government census, the most recent official data available, Sunni Muslims constitute 89 percent of the population and Hindus make up 10 percent. The remainder of the population is predominantly Christian, mostly Roman Catholic, and Theravada-Hinayana Buddhist. The country also has small numbers of Shia Muslims, Ahmadi Muslims, Baha'is, animists, agnostics, and atheists. Leaders from religious minority communities estimate their respective numbers of adherents to be between a few thousand and 100,000.

Ethnic minorities concentrated in the CHT and northern districts generally practice non-Islamic faiths. The Garo in Mymensingh are predominantly Christian, as are

some of the Santal in Gaibandha. Most Buddhists are members of the indigenous populations of the CHT. Bengali and ethnic minority Christians live in communities across the country, with relatively high concentrations in Barishal City and Gournadi in Barishal District, Baniarchar in Gopalganj District, Monipuripara and Christianpara in Dhaka City, and in the cities of Gazipur and Khulna.

The largest noncitizen population is Rohingya. Human Rights Watch estimates approximately 1,500 Rohingya in the refugee settlements are Christians. A Ministry of Foreign Affairs official said approximately 400 refugees are Hindu, while activists and leaders on the ground say the number is closer to 550-600. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, more than one million Rohingya refugees have fled Burma in successive waves since the early 1990s. Since August 2017, approximately 769,000 Rohingya fleeing violence in Burma have taken refuge in the country, bringing the total to more than 918,000. Nearly all who arrived during the 2017 influx sought shelter in and around the refugee settlements of Kutupalong and Nayapara in Cox's Bazar District.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

According to the constitution, “The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal rights in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and other religions.” The constitution stipulates the state should not grant political status in favor of any religion and bans religiously based political parties. It provides for the right to profess, practice, or propagate all religions “subject to law, public order, and morality” and states religious communities or denominations have the right to establish, maintain, and manage their religious institutions. The constitution states 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.

Under the penal code, statements or acts made with a “deliberate and malicious” intent to insult religious sentiments are subject to fines or up to two years in prison. Although the code does not further define this prohibited intent, the courts have interpreted it to include insulting the Prophet Muhammad. The criminal code allows the government to confiscate all copies of any newspaper, magazine, or other publication containing language that “creates enmity and hatred among the

citizens or denigrates religious beliefs.” The law applies similar restrictions to online publications. While there is no specific blasphemy law, authorities use the penal code, as well as a section of the Information and Communication Technology Act and the Digital Security Act, to charge individuals for acts perceived to be a slight to Islam. The Information and Communication Technology Act criminalizes several forms of online expression, including “obscene material,” “expression(s) likely to cause deterioration of law and order,” and “statements hurting religious sentiments.” The Digital Security Act likewise criminalizes publication or broadcast of “any information that hurts religious values or sentiments,” by denying bail to detainees and increasing penalties on conviction of up to 10 years in prison.

The constitution prohibits freedom of association if an association is formed for the purpose of “destroying religious harmony,” the peaceful coexistence of religious communities, or creating discrimination on religious grounds.

Individual houses of worship are not required to register with the government. Religious groups seeking to form associations with multiple houses of worship, however, must register as NGOs with either the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) if they receive foreign assistance for development projects or with the Ministry of Social Welfare if they do not. The law requires the NGOAB to approve and monitor all foreign-funded projects. The NGOAB Director General has the authority to impose sanctions on NGOs for violating the law, including fines of up to three times the amount of the foreign donation, or closure of the NGO. NGOs are also subject to penalties for “derogatory” comments about the constitution or constitutional institutions (i.e., the government). Expatriate staff must receive a security clearance from the National Security Intelligence, Special Branch of Police, and Directorate General of Forces Intelligence; the standards for these clearances are not specified.

Registration requirements and procedures for religious groups are the same as for secular associations. Registration requirements with the Ministry of Social Welfare include certifying that the name being registered is not already taken, and providing the bylaws/constitution of the organization; confirmation of security clearances for leaders of the organization from the National Security Intelligence; minutes of the meeting appointing the executive committee; a list of all executive committee and general members and photographs of principal officers; a work plan; a copy of the deed or lease of the organization’s office and a list of property owned; a budget; and a recommendation by a local government representative.

Requirements to register with the NGOAB are similar.

Family law concerning marriage, divorce, and adoption contains separate provisions for Muslims, Hindus, and Christians. These laws are enforced in the same secular courts. A separate civil family law applies to mixed-faith families or those of other faiths or no faith. The family law of the religion of the two parties concerned governs their marriage rituals and proceedings. A Muslim man may have as many as four wives, although he must obtain the written consent of his existing wife or wives before marrying again. A Christian man may marry only one woman.

Hindu men may have multiple wives. Officially, Hindus have no options for divorce, although informal divorces do occur. Hindu women may not inherit property under family law. Buddhists are subject to the same laws as Hindus. Divorced Hindus and Buddhists may not legally remarry. Divorced men and women of other religions and widowed individuals of any religion may remarry. Marriage between members of different religious groups occurs only under civil law. To be legally recognized, Muslim marriages must be registered with the state by either the couple or the cleric performing the marriage; however, some Muslim marriages are not registered. Registration of marriages for Hindus and Christians is optional, and other faiths may determine their own guidelines.

Under the Muslim family ordinance, a Muslim man may marry women of any Abrahamic faith; however, a Muslim woman may not marry a non-Muslim. Under the ordinance, a widow receives one-eighth of her husband's estate if she is his only wife, and the remainder is divided among the children; each female child receives half the share of each male child. Wives have fewer divorce rights than husbands. Civil courts must approve divorces. The law requires a Muslim man to pay a former wife three months of alimony, but these protections generally apply only to registered marriages; unregistered marriages are by definition undocumented and difficult to substantiate. Authorities do not always enforce the alimony requirement even in cases involving registered marriages.

Alternative dispute resolution is available to all citizens, including Muslims, for settling out of court family arguments and other civil matters not related to land ownership. With the consent of both parties, lawyers may be identified to facilitate the arbitration, the results of which may be used in court.

Fatwas may be issued only by Muslim religious scholars, and not by local religious leaders, to settle matters of religious practice. Fatwas may not be invoked to justify meting out punishment, nor may they supersede existing secular law.

Religious studies are compulsory and are part of the curriculum for grades three through ten in all public government-accredited schools. Private schools do not have this requirement. Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian students are supposed to receive instruction in their own religious beliefs, although the teachers are not always adherents of the students' faith.

The code regulating prisons allows for observance of religious commemorations by prisoners, including access to extra food on feast days or permission to fast for religious reasons. The law does not guarantee prisoners regular access to clergy or regular religious services, but prison authorities may arrange special religious programs for them. Prison authorities are required to provide prisoners facing the death penalty access to a religious figure from a faith of their choice before execution.

The Restoration of Vested Property Act allows the government to return property confiscated from individuals, mostly Hindus, whom it formerly declared enemies of the state. In the past, authorities used the act to seize property abandoned by minority religious groups that fled the country, particularly following the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

In response to the violence and destruction that occurred in October following a Facebook post that spurred attacks against Hindus, government officials at the highest levels, including Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, condemned the attacks and called the violence and destruction of Hindu temples and property un-Islamic. The Ministry of Religious Affairs donated building supplies and food packages to Hindu families, and the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society, in conjunction with the government, provided tents to displaced victims. To stop the further spread of violence, the government took action to remove postings from social media that it considered provocative, such as fake pictures that triggered attacks on Hindus. Some human rights organizations, however, said the government's actions to arrest and charge thousands of individuals were overbroad and, in some cases, deliberately targeted political rivals. By October 26, police arrested 583 suspects

for their roles in the violence and brought 102 criminal charges against 20,619 individuals, including the local man who first publicized the supposed desecration on Facebook. Authorities charged a Hindu youth under the Digital Security Act for alleged anti-Islamic speech he posted online October 17, which they said angered Muslims and led to anti-Hindu reprisals in the northwestern city of Rangpur. On October 20, the government announced formation of a National Human Rights Commission panel to investigate October 17 attacks on Hindu establishments in the Peergang area of the northwestern district of Rangpur. The government stationed border guard forces and Rapid Action Battalion units around the country to prevent violence and successfully maintained peace during the subsequent Hindu holiday, Diwali, on November 4.

Some Hindu community leaders said the actions the government took in response to the communal violence helped calm the situation. Other Hindu organizations disagreed, saying the government took insufficient measures to quell the violence and stated the government's failure to punish perpetrators of previous periods of religious violence contributed to October's events. When the Foreign Minister stated four Muslims and two Hindus died during the violence but neither Hindu died due to communal attacks and no temples were destroyed, Hindu organizations strongly protested, noting this contradicted other official government statements. The Bangladesh Hindu Law Reform Council said the Foreign Minister's statement was an attempt to cover up anti-Hindu attacks, and some human rights activists said the Foreign Minister's statement enabled further violence. One international Hindu organization said police stood by in many locations rather than protecting Hindus from mob violence, and that the government arrested several Hindu individuals, which the organization called "prisoners of conscience," for sharing information about the ongoing violence on social media.

On February 10, a judge of the Anti-Terrorism Special Tribunal in Dhaka sentenced to death eight Islamic militants for killing a publisher in 2015. Two of the eight sentenced men remained at large at year's end. The tribunal convicted the men, members of the Islamic militant group Ansar al-Islam, of hacking to death Faisal Abedin Deepan, a publisher of books on secularism and atheism.

On February 16, a court sentenced five men to death and one to life in prison for the 2015 killing of atheist blogger Avijit Roy. The trial began in the Anti-Terrorism Tribunal in April 2019 and was delayed several times due to COVID-19.

A special tribunal in Dhaka sentenced to death 14 members of the banned Harkakul-Jihad-al-Islami Islamist group on March 23 in a case involving a conspiracy to

assassinate Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in 2000. Prosecutors alleged the defendants, members of a group that was banned in 2005, planted a bomb at a political rally where Hasina was scheduled to address supporters the following day. Of the 14 sentenced, five remained fugitives at the end of the year.

On November 23, the Supreme Court upheld the death penalty of Salauddin Salehin, a member of Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), who was convicted in the 2004 killing of Goni Gomez, a Christian convert from Islam, in Jamalpur. The Dhaka Speedy Trial Tribunal initially sentenced Salauddin to death in 2006.

On November 1, a tribunal in Rajshahi that handles cybercrimes sentenced three individuals to 10 years in prison under the Information and Communication Technology Act for sharing a satirical cartoon and comments the tribunal deemed obscene about the Prophet Muhammad in 2013 from a Facebook account. According to the prosecution, two of the convicted defendants allegedly shared a distorted picture of the Prophet on a Facebook account in the name of a Hindu man who had nothing to do with the posting. The third defendant then printed and sold copies of the cartoon to Muslim villagers. In response, local Muslims set on fire the home of the Hindu man. In addition to the three individuals sentenced to prison, authorities charged seven others in the wake of the incident, but the court acquitted them.

In April, police arrested more than 300 members of the Islamist group Hefazat-e-Islam over deadly protests around the March visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Accusing Modi of stoking religious discrimination against Muslims in India, the group led violent protests across several districts during Modi's two-day visit.

On February 25, Forest Department officials tore down a Sathirampara Seventh-day Adventist church in Bandarban District. The congregation was replacing the bamboo hut they had been using for many years with a more permanent brick building. A Forest Department official said the community did not have a permit to build on the land, and that in the village "there are only three or four Christian families; there is no need for a church."

In October, the Bangladesh Cyber Tribunal formally charged Baul folk singer Rita Dewan with blasphemy stemming from a February 2020 incident when a lawyer accused her of making derogatory comments against Allah during a musical competition, for which she issued an apology afterward. Criminal charges were



brought against Dewan that same month under the penal code and Digital Security Act, and a court issued a warrant for her arrest in December 2020. Dewan surrendered to authorities and was granted bail in January.

Human rights organizations reported an increase, compared with 2020, in the use of extrajudicial fatwas by village community leaders and local religious leaders to punish individuals for perceived “moral transgressions.” The incidence rose from eight cases in calendar year 2020, to 12 cases from January to November. One organization which closely tracked the issuance of these fatwas attributed the rise to a deterioration of law and order and unrest due to COVID-19.

Thousands of mosques, including Baitul Mukarram National Mosque in Dhaka, operated under the direct authority of the Islamic Foundation; imams and employees of those mosques were funded by the government. Mosques not overseen by the Islamic Foundation still operated with oversight from a governing committee that was dominated by local ruling party politicians and administration. Islamic leaders said the government continued to influence the appointment and removal of imams and to provide guidance on the content of sermons to imams throughout the country. This included issuing written instructions highlighting certain Quranic verses and quotations of the Prophet Muhammad. The government also instructed imams to denounce extremism. Religious community leaders said imams in all mosques usually continued the practice of avoiding sermons that contradicted government policy.

The BHBCUC said property-restitution cases were on hold, as tribunals and appellate tribunals were not in session from March 2020 to October 2021. According to the Ministry of Land’s 2018-2019 report, the most recent figures available, as of 2018, authorities had adjudicated 26,791 of 114,749 property-restitution cases filed under the Restoration of Vested Property Act. Of these judgments, the owners, primarily Hindus, won 12,190 of the cases, recovering 10,255 acres of land, while the government won the remaining 14,791 cases. Media reports and rights activists attributed the slow return of land seized under relevant legislation from Hindus who had left for India to judicial inefficiency and general government indifference.

Freedom House’s 2021 report assessed religious minorities remained underrepresented in politics and state agencies, and that members of ethnic and religious minority groups faced some discrimination under the law, as well as harassment and violations of their rights in practice.

Religious minorities continued to state that religious minority students sometimes were unable to enroll in religion classes because of an insufficient number of teachers for mandatory religious education classes for students of non-Islamic faiths. In these cases, school officials generally allowed local religious institutions, parents, or others to hold religious studies classes for such students outside school hours and sometimes exempted students from the religious education requirement.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs had a budget of 22.4 billion taka (\$260.47 million) for the 2021-2022 fiscal year, which covers July 2021-June 2022. The budget included 19.35 billion taka (\$225.0 million) allocated for development through autonomous religious bodies. The government provided the Islamic Foundation, administered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, 17.58 billion taka (\$204.42 million). The Hindu Welfare Trust received 1.724 billion taka (\$20.05 million), and the Buddhist Welfare Trust received 32 million taka (\$372,000) from the allocation. While the Christian Welfare Trust did not receive development funding from the budget, it received 10.3 million taka (\$120,000) to run its office. For comparison, in 2020, the ministry had a budget of 16.93 billion taka (\$196.86 million), including 14.25 billion taka (\$165.70 million) allocated for development through autonomous religious bodies. The government provided 8.12 billion taka (\$94.42 million) for the Islamic Foundation, 1.435 billion taka (\$16.69 million) for the Hindu Welfare Trust, 46.8 million taka (\$544,000) for the Buddhist Welfare Trust, and seven million taka (\$81,400) for the Christian Welfare Trust.

Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and members of other minority religious communities, who are also sometimes members of ethnic minority groups, continued to report property and land ownership disputes and forced evictions, including some involving the government, that remained unresolved at year's end. Some human rights activists said it was often difficult to determine whether these disputes and evictions were a result of deliberate government discrimination against religious minorities or of government inefficiency. The government continued construction projects on land traditionally owned by indigenous communities in the Moulvibazar and Modhupur forest areas. In January, more than 1,000 ethnic Garo and Koch individuals, mostly Christians, rallied at a bus stop in Tangail to protest a notice from the Forest Department ordering them to vacate their ancestral lands in the Modhupur forest. According to minority religious associations, land disputes occurred in areas near new roads or industrial development zones, where land prices had increased. They also stated local police, civil authorities, and political leaders enabled property appropriations for financial gain or shielded politically influential property appropriators from prosecution. Some human rights groups attributed the lack of resolution of some of these

disputes to ineffective judicial and land registry systems and the targeted communities' insufficient political and financial clout, rather than to government policy disfavoring religious or ethnic minorities. Indigenous groups in the CHT, in particular, have large communities of Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians. Some of these communities speak tribal languages and do not speak Bangla, making it difficult for them to access government services and further marginalizing these groups.

The government continued to place law enforcement personnel at religious sites, festivals, and events considered potential targets for violence, including during Diwali, Christmas, Easter, and the Buddhist festival of Buddha Purnima.

Due to COVID-19, President Abdul Hamid did not host his usual annual receptions to commemorate principal Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian holidays.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Freedom House in September assessed that members of religious minorities – including Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, and Shia and Ahmadi Muslims – faced harassment and violence, including mob violence against their houses of worship. According to the BHBCUC and the Hindu American Foundation (HAF), communal attacks against ethnic and religious minorities occurred throughout the year.

From October 13-24, during and after the Hindu festival of Durga Puja, national and local media reported that mobs attacked and destroyed Hindu homes and temples after a local man publicized a post on Facebook that showed the Quran on the lap of the deity Hanuman inside a Hindu temple in the city of Cumila. The post went viral and sparked violent reactions across the country. According to the World Hindu Federation (WHF) and the HAF, mobs vandalized more than 340 Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries, vandalized or burned nearly 1,650 Hindu owned houses, and looted Hindu-owned shops and businesses. Reporting about the numbers of deceased varied: *The Guardian* reported seven persons died but the WHF said more than 14 Hindus died in the violence. According to media and official estimates, at least four Muslims were also killed through clashes with police. The UN attributed four deaths to the anti-Hindu violence but said others died due to subsequent law enforcement measures to quell the violence. The BHBCUC said communal violence against minorities continued throughout the year, stating mobs destroyed 70 temples and 100 homes and businesses. Ain o Salish Kendra, a domestic human rights organization, estimated that 3,769 attacks

had taken place against Hindus since 2013, including those in the October violence. In response to the violence, there were several interfaith demonstrations throughout the country that denounced the attacks. Hindus refrained from public celebrations of Diwali on November 4 in favor of private ceremonies in their temples and homes. Hindu worshipers covered their faces with black cloth to protest the lack of security for Hindus.

According to *Al-Jazeera*, on June 19 in Bandarban in CHT, activists from an indigenous minority group killed an indigenous man because he converted to Islam.

*Asia News* reported the attack and death of Joy Haldar, a Christian student at St. Joseph's High School and College. Eleven Muslim students sent Haldar death threats by phone before later attacking him and three other Christian students on May 16. Haldar sustained blows to the head and eventually died after 22 days in the hospital. The students attacked Haldar in a dispute over Pubg, an online video game. After Haldar's brother filed a police complaint, the accused were detained and released on bail. "As Christians, we are a long way from enjoying security and justice," the brother said.

On May 31, according to various media reports, two men with machetes attacked and left for dead Augra Jyoti Mahasthabir, a Buddhist monk from an indigenous community, at a monastery in Khagrachari in the CHT. The attackers, two Bengali construction workers who worked at the monastery, also looted money from the temple. The officer-in-charge of the Panchhari police station said police opened an investigation for attempted murder in the case.

On February 10, a group of Muslims destroyed the church sign of Emmanuel Church in Lalmonirhat District in the northern part of the country, cut down trees, vandalized the entrance to the church, and stole chairs and carpets. The local pastor said Muslims in the area were angry with Christians because new members had joined their faith community as converts from Islam. Media reported the destruction was spurred by anti-Christian propaganda at a local Islamic meeting place where Muslim religious leaders engaged in hate speech. The Bangladesh Christian Association condemned both incidents of violence.

According to media reports, on March 17, a crowd of Muslims vandalized dozens of Hindu residences and temples in Noagaon village in Sunamganj District after a Hindu man criticized Hefazat-e-Islam joint secretary general Mamunul Haque on Facebook. The media reported police arrested 113 persons, including a Jubo

League (the ruling Awami League's youth wing) party leader, following the attacks, and many of were released on bail. On March 25, police filed a Digital Security Act case against the man whose Facebook post sparked the attacks. The court granted his release on bail in September.

In September, Freedom House assessed recent violent incidents were “part of a pattern in recent years in which violence against religious or other minorities appears to have been deliberately provoked through social media.” Human rights organizations and religious leaders echoed this assessment, saying social media contributed to religious polarization and an increase in attacks on religious minorities.

On May 8, numerous individuals sent abusive comments to actor Chanchal Chowdhury's Facebook account after he posted a photo with his mother to celebrate Mother's Day. In the photo, his mother is wearing a vermilion bindi mark on her forehead. Numerous followers expressed surprise at Chowdhury's religion, and some made abusive comments about his mother being Hindu. Some individuals also made negative personal comments about Chowdhury, and the comment thread was characterized by negative back and forth postings between Muslims and Hindus. In response, Chowdhury said, “What do you stand to gain or lose if I am a Hindu or Muslim? The biggest identity of everyone is that we are human beings. May these vulgar questions and embarrassing discussions stop everywhere. Come and let's become human beings.”

Human rights activists expressed concerns regarding the wellbeing of Hindu and Christian groups, including the Rohingya Christian Assembly, in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. They said the Hindu community was segregated from the rest of the camp in response to an increase in violence against the community. Hindu leaders said they struggled to hold festivals, as these were prohibited without special permission, which was rarely given. Hindu leaders said there was inadequate access to the established temple, as access was only allowed for a maximum of 24 persons. Government officials, however, said limits on gatherings or building new permanent structures were a result of overall restrictions in the refugee camps. Authorities rarely granted permission to any group in the camps to gather during the year due to COVID-19 restrictions. Camp authorities did not allow any permanent structures, such as shelters, houses of worship, or learning centers, regardless of religious affiliation.

On September 29, unknown assailants killed prominent Rohingya leader Mohammed Mohib Ullah in Cox's Bazar. Although authorities did not ascribe a

motive for his killing, Mohib Ullah was known for being an active Rohingya community defender and rights advocate, including for religious freedom. The media reported police arrested up to a dozen suspects in October and November.

In November, the *New York Times* reported Rohingya Christian refugee families relocated to the island of Bhasan Char in the Bay of Bengal due to what they reported was persecution and violence against them in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. Members of the Christian minority in the camps stated the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, a militant Rohingya group present in the camps, had temporarily abducted and tortured some Christian refugees.

Media reported that in September, Rohingya Muslims protested the burial of Mohi Uddin, a Christian Rohingya refugee, in the Kutapalong refugee camp, preventing the burial from taking place for 30 hours. According to the pastor of the Baptist church in Chattogram where Uddin was eventually interred, the burial of individuals of different faiths in the same place had not been an issue of contention at the camp in the past, but despite the intervention of the camp manager and UN staff, on this occasion Muslim Rohingya refugees formed a barrier to protest Uddin's burial.

According to media, large protests took place before and during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh on March 26. On March 19, 500 Muslims protested in the street outside the Baitul Mokarram Mosque in Dhaka and 200 student activists marched through the streets on Dhaka University's campus. The protestors said Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party were oppressing Muslims in India.

Media reported that on June 9, Christians and other religious minorities continued their annual observation of "Black Day" protests against the 1988 constitutional amendments establishing Islam as the state religion in the country.

According to local human rights organizations, a growing group of Hindu activists inside the country campaigned to reform Hindu family law to allow for greater rights for Hindu women, including female inheritance of property and provisions for divorce. According to media reports, Hindu groups they characterized as conservative protested in August the submission of a set of reform proposals to the Law Commission by the NGO Manusher Jonno Foundation (Foundation for Human Beings). The Bangladesh National Hindu Grand Alliance urged the government to take legal action against *The Daily Star* editor Mahfuz Anam and

his wife Shaheen Anam, executive director of Manusher Jonno Foundation, who advocated changes in the law, for hurting religious sentiments of the Hindu community and creating chaos in Hindu families. These tensions among different elements within the local Hindu community continued through the end of the year, without changes to the family law.

Human rights NGOs continued to report harassment and social isolation of, and physical violence against, converts to Christianity from Islam and Hinduism. The NGOs said individuals commonly associated a person's faith with his or her surname. Despite constitutional guarantees protecting an individual's right to change faiths, the NGOs stated that when someone's professed faith deviated from the faith tradition commonly linked with his or her surname, harassment, threats, and social isolation could ensue.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The Ambassador and other embassy representatives regularly met with officials from the Office of the Prime Minister, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Social Welfare, and local government representatives to underscore the importance of religious freedom and tolerance. They discussed the importance of integrating religious freedom and other human rights into security policy and stressed the importance of respecting religious minorities' viewpoints, minority religious inclusion within society, and protecting religious minorities from attacks.

Following communal anti-Hindu violence in October, the Ambassador visited several places of worship to meet with leaders of major religious communities to support interfaith harmony. He visited a Catholic church on October 26, Dhaka's Star Mosque and madrassah on November 1, and the Hindu Dhakeshwari Temple on November 2. After his visit to the Shakyamuni Buddhist Temple on November 10, the Ambassador tweeted "The United States stands with everyone, everywhere, supporting interfaith harmony and the fundamental right of freedom of religion." On November 17, a senior Department of State official met with interfaith community leaders for a discussion in which she emphasized that the United States deeply values religious tolerance and stands with Bangladeshis of all beliefs who were promoting diversity, unity, and mutual respect.

The United States provided \$302 million in fiscal year 2021 for humanitarian assistance funding for programs in the country to assist Rohingya refugees and their host communities, emphasizing U.S. support for protecting vulnerable

religious minority groups. In September, at the meeting of the UN General Assembly, the U.S. government announced nearly \$180 million in additional funding. With this new funding, the U.S. response to the Rohingya crisis has reached more than \$16 billion since August 2017.

As part of U.S.-funded training for community policing, the embassy continued to encourage law enforcement officials to protect the rights of religious minorities.

Throughout the year, the embassy continued public outreach programs encouraging interfaith tolerance among religious groups. On October 29, Department of State officials participated in a virtual meeting with Hindus and Christians, including the Bangladeshi diaspora community in the United States, to discuss communal attacks, possible causal factors, and appropriate response measures. Embassy officials attended religious festivals celebrated by the Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim communities and emphasized in these events the importance of tolerance and respect for religious minorities.

Throughout the year, the embassy published messages highlighting the U.S. government's commitment to advancing religious freedom, including amplifying the Department of State's Twitter messaging on International Religious Freedom Day. Embassy social media messages on religious tolerance reached more than 2.5 million individuals. The embassy released a statement on October 19 sending condolences to the families of victims of anti-Hindu violence and supporting freedom of religion.

Embassy and other U.S. government officials expressed support for the rights of religious minorities and emphasized the importance of their protection. Embassy officials continued to meet regularly with a wide range of religious organizations and representatives, including the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, BHBCUC, HAF, Bangladesh Christian Association, Buddhist Religious Welfare Trust, Christian Religious Welfare Trust, World Buddhist Association Bangladesh, Bangladesh Buddhist Federation, Christian Freedom International, International Buddhist Monastery of Dhaka, and the Aga Khan Foundation. In these meetings, embassy officials, other U.S. government representatives, and representatives from the groups, discussed the state of religious freedom in the country, underscored the importance of religious tolerance, and identified challenges religious minorities encountered.