

BANGLADESH 2022 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. On the one-year anniversary of October 2021 anti-Hindu communal violence, the government took extra security measures to ensure peaceful celebrations during the Hindu festival of Durga Puja. Minority religious groups claimed the government failed to adequately punish perpetrators of the October 2021 violence. When in July a Muslim crowd attacked a predominantly Hindu community in Narail over a Facebook post supposedly insulting Islam, minority religious groups said that security forces failed to protect Hindu victims. Courts convicted and sentenced to prison two members of the banned Islamist organization Jamaat-ul Mujahideen for attacks on the Shia community in 2015.

In February, the High Court asked the government to explain how Hindu family inheritance law, which differentiates between men and women in inheritance, was not illegal under the constitution. In June, a High Court judge said women have the constitutional right to wear a burqa or hijab. In its stated effort to prevent militancy and to monitor mosques for “provocative” messaging, the government continued to provide guidance to imams on the content of their sermons. Minority rights organizations criticized the arbitrary detention of minority community members, often without bail, on what they said were false charges of blasphemy under the Digital Security Act. 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 communal violence against minority religious communities, and did not protect minorities from forced evictions and land seizures stemming from land disputes.

Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist organizations and local human rights groups said communal violence against religious minority communities continued throughout the year. In March, a mob of hundreds of people damaged the wall of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) temple in a property

dispute over adjacent land. On January 31, unknown attackers killed a Buddhist monk in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). In March, women in Dhaka protested against discrimination they experienced for wearing head and face coverings. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Freedom House and local religious leaders said social media had contributed to an increase in attacks on religious minorities in recent years, as, they said, misinformation frequently went viral and inflamed community tensions against religious minorities. Human rights activists expressed concerns regarding the wellbeing of Hindu and Christian groups in the Muslim-majority refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. In November, the High Court granted a man bail on the condition that he refrain from spreading any more inflammatory material. The man was previously arrested in 2021 for accusing the Muslim advocacy group Hefazat-e-Islam's joint general secretary Mamunul Haque of damaging communal harmony.

In meetings with government officials, civil society members, religious leaders, and in public statements, the Ambassador, other U.S. embassy representatives, and the Ambassador-at-Large, 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 Muslim and Hindu places of worship to reinforce the U.S. commitment to religious diversity and interfaith tolerance. In April, the Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom visited Dhaka and Cox's Bazar to convey U.S. support for the protection of religious minority communities and to call for better living conditions for Rohingya refugees. In fiscal year 2022, the United States provided over \$265 million in humanitarian assistance funding for programs in the country to assist Rohingya refugees (who are overwhelmingly Muslim) from Burma and to assist local host communities. The embassy's public outreach programs encouraging interfaith tolerance among religious groups continued during the year including. Embassy social media posts in support of religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 165.7 million (midyear 2022). According to the 2022 national government census, Sunni Muslims constitute approximately 91 percent of the population and Hindus approximately 8 percent. This is a slight shift from the 2011 census, which had the percentages at 89 and 10 respectively, reflecting Hindu emigration, according to Hindu

leaders. The remainder of the population is predominantly Christian, with approximately 400,000 Roman Catholics, and approximately one million Theravada-Hinayana Buddhists. The country also has small numbers of Shia Muslims, Ahmadi Muslims, Baha'is, animists, ISKCON members, agnostics, and atheists. Leaders from these religious minority communities continued to 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. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, since 2017, approximately 774,000 Rohingya fleeing genocide in Burma have taken refuge in the country, bringing the total to more than 950,000; most live in and around the refugee settlements of Kutupalong and Nayapara in the Cox's Bazar District. The majority of Rohingya are Muslims. The NGO Human Rights Watch estimates approximately 1,500 Rohingya in the refugee settlements are Christians, although some Christian leaders estimate the total number may be closer to 3,000. A Ministry of Foreign Affairs official said approximately 400 refugees are Hindu, while some activists say the number is closer to 550-600.

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.” It denies bail to detainees and increases 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 the religious, social, and communal harmony among the citizens,” 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. Groups register with the Ministry of Social Welfare. Registration requirements include certifying that the name being registered is not already taken. Groups must also provide 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 family law of the religion of the secular courts. A separate civil family law applies to mixed-faith families or those of other faiths or no faith. 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, while Hindu men may also have multiple wives.

Officially, Hindus have no options for divorce, although informal divorces do occur. Hindu women may not inherit property under family law. 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. For example, in most cases, a woman can only seek a divorce if the right to do so was included in the couple's marriage contract, known as a *nikah nama*, or in limited cases through court intervention. A man always retains the right to initiate a divorce. 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 part of the curriculum for grades three through 10 in all public government-accredited schools. Private schools do not have this requirement. Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian students receive instruction in their own religious beliefs, although teachers are not always adherents of the students' faith. According to the representative of the Holy See in Bangladesh, the Catholic Church is the second largest provider of education after the government, with approximately 270 schools.

The code regulating prisons allows for observance of religious commemorations by prisoners, including access to extra food on certain national and religious holidays – such as Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Independence Day – or permission to fast for religious reasons. The law does not provide for prisoners to have 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 law 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 Restoration of Vested Property Act to seize property abandoned by minority religious groups that fled the country, particularly following the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War.

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

Government Practices

Ahead of the one-year anniversary of October 2021 anti-Hindu communal violence, government officials met in September to discuss security concerns and ensure safe celebrations during the 2022 Durga Puja festival. The Minister of Home Affairs announced the mandatory installation of closed-circuit television cameras at all *puja mandaps* (makeshift altars dedicated to the Hindu goddess Durga). Law enforcement officials increased their surveillance of and presence at temples in Dhaka, Comilla, and Chattogram in an attempt to dissuade repeat violence. Joining an event virtually during the festival week, the Prime Minister told citizens and residents not to “magnify” incidents that go against religion and warned that no one would be allowed to say anything that offended religious sentiments. Religious minority leaders welcomed government security measures, and religious celebrations occurred without major violence.

Minority religious groups claimed that during the year, the government failed to adequately punish perpetrators of the October 2021 violence against Hindu communities. One of the most extensive attacks during that period was an attack on the Comilla Hindu temple. The government arrested multiple individuals and filed 12 cases in the wake of the Comilla violence, but as of August, police had charged individuals in only two cases. The president of Comilla District’s Chapter of the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC) stated that “unless justice is served, these incidents will be repeated.” The newspaper *Prothom Alo* reported that only a handful of charges had been filed as of July in connection with the 2021 violence, with many investigations still ongoing. Police

headquarters officials said in September that police had filed at least 142 cases; the investigation of 105 cases was finished, with 37 cases still under investigation.

BHBCUC leadership in Noakhali District said many communities had not yet reconstructed most of the temples damaged during the 2021 violence, stating the district administration gave 50,000 taka (\$580) and five metric tons of rice for reconstruction of some damaged temples.

In July, a predominantly Hindu community in the southwestern district of Narail was the target of religiously charged attacks and vandalization by Muslim individuals after a Facebook post deemed insulting to Islam went viral. A mob targeted a temple, shops, and several homes in retaliation. After the attack, news outlets reported Hindu leaders accused the government of failing to provide security and adequate protection from violent Muslim mob attacks. A week after the attack, a 14-person delegation of members of the ruling Awami League party visited the town to distribute 10,000 taka (\$95) each to 10 victims' families and 25,000 taka (\$240) to four temples.

On March 15, the Antiterrorism Special Tribunal in Dhaka sentenced two men to seven and 10 years in jail, respectively, and fined each 10,000 taka (\$95) for their role in a 2015 attack on members of the Shia community gathered at Hoseni Dalan, in Dhaka, in which members of the banned, violent, Islamist organization Jamaat-ul Mujahideen detonated grenades during preparations for the Shia Muslim holy day of Ashura. The attack killed two persons and injuring hundreds of others. The court acquitted six other defendants in the case due to a lack of evidence.

In July, the High Court ordered a judicial probe into a June attack on Sawpan Kumar Biswas, acting principal of Mirzapur United Degree College. After rumors circulated alleging Biswas had sided with a student who posted support for an Indian politician who had made derogatory remarks about the Prophet Muhammad, a Muslim crowd beat Sawpan and set fire to three motorcycles. Local officials said the attack was politically, not religiously motivated, as community members opposing the Mirzapur United College's governing body wanted to remove the acting principal.

In April, a Ministry of Education investigative committee stated that allegations that teacher Hriday Chandra Mondal had hurt religious sentiments of students at Binodpur Ram Kumar High School in Munshiganj were false. A court cleared him of wrongdoing in August. Police arrested Mondal after he discussed the distinction between science and religion during a class on March 20. After the discussion, students and other community members demonstrated at the school calling for the teacher's punishment and attacked his house, but no arrests were reported.

Minority rights organizations criticized what they said was the arbitrary detention of minority community members under the Digital Security Act on what they said were false accusations of blasphemy. They claimed the government had arrested members of the minority community after anti-Hindu violence in 2021 in an attempt to ensure news of brutalities committed against minorities was not posted on social media.

Thousands of mosques, including the Baitul Mukarram National Mosque in Dhaka, operated under the direct authority of the Islamic Foundation; the government funded imams and employees of those mosques. 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. Muslim 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. The government issued 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.

In January, the leadership of Evangelical Holiness Protestant Church in Tangail District said local ruling party officials had halted construction on a church building and had threatened to evict them. Tensions between the church and the local Muslim community have been ongoing since construction began in 2013.

Members of the Christian community alleged local intelligence agencies questioned church leaders as to the nationality and membership status of international church attendees in an effort to dissuade attendance by Bangladeshi nationals.

Although tribunals and appellate tribunals resumed activity in 2021 following COVID-19 related closures, minority rights groups stated the government made little progress on land restitution cases during the year. The Ministry of Land had not updated since 2019 the public compendium of cases filed under the Restoration of Vested Property Act. Media reports and human 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.

On July 11, Dhaka University opened a nondenominational prayer room for Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist students in an effort to reduce religious discrimination on campus. A university official said publicly, “The university is a nonsectarian space where students of all religions have equal rights,” and it called on other educational institutions to follow the university’s example.

A February 2022 report by Freedom House assessed that religious minorities remained underrepresented in politics and state agencies, and that men and women of ethnic and religious minority groups faced discrimination under the law, as well as harassment and violations of their rights in practice.

In February, the High Court asked the government to explain why the customary laws and usages of the Dayabhaga school of Hindu thought should not be considered illegal under the constitution, since this customary law perpetuated inequality and discrimination between men and women in property inheritance. According to local human rights organizations, some Hindu activists in the country continued their campaign to reform Hindu family law to allow Hindu women greater rights, including regarding property inheritance and divorce.

In June, the High Court said women have the constitutional right to wear a burqa or hijab and issued an order directing authorities to investigate the alleged harassment of burqa-wearing students in 15 educational institutions in the country.

Religious minorities continued to state religious minority students sometimes were unable to enroll in mandatory religion classes because of an insufficient number of teachers 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.

In July, the state Minister for Religious Affairs announced the government would implement a nationwide, 250,000-taka (\$2,400), Religious Harmony and Awareness project focused on education and cultural activism involving women, youth, civil society, and community and faith leaders to promote a culture of peace, tolerance, and inclusiveness. As part of the project, media outlets would distribute leaflets, posters, and newsletters containing messages promoting religious harmony among people of different beliefs. The state minister also said the government had renovated and restored more than 2,300 Hindu temples and 65 major churches and establishments of Christian communities in the country.

In November, a Cox's Bazar court recorded the testimonies of several witnesses as part of the ongoing trial of individuals accused of killing prominent Rohingya leader Mohammad Mohib Ullah, the chairman and founder of the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights and an advocate for religious freedom, in 2021. On September 11, the government brought charges against 29 Rohingya in connection with the killing. In March, the Armed Police Battalion in Cox's Bazar arrested the commander of the militant Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army group's Ulama branch, Maulovi Zakaria, who was accused of having issued a "fatwa" against Mohib Ullah. The Ministry of Religious Affairs had a budget of 23.53 billion taka (\$224 million) for the 2022-23 fiscal year, covering July 2022 to June 2023, compared with 22.4 billion taka (\$213.3 million) in fiscal year 2021-2022. The budget included 18.84 billion taka (\$179 million) allocated for development, through autonomous religious bodies. The government provided the Islamic Foundation, administered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, 18.17 billion taka (\$173 million), compared with 17.58 billion taka (\$167 million) in fiscal 2021-2022. The Hindu Welfare Trust received 668.9 million taka (\$6.3 million), compared with 1.724 billion taka (\$16 million) in fiscal 2021-2022. While the Buddhist and Christian Welfare Trusts did not receive development funding from the budget, the Buddhist Welfare Trust received 18.3 million taka (\$174,000) and the Christian Welfare Trust received 13 million taka (\$124,000) to run their respective offices.

Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and members of other minority religious communities, who were also sometimes members of ethnic minority groups, continued to report property and land ownership disputes and forced eviction cases, 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 the 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 Madhupur Forest areas. In March, members of the ethnic Garo community, who are mostly Christian, protested against a government plan to create an artificial lake in the Madhupur Forest area of Tangail District, saying it would destroy the habitat and farmland of approximately 25,000 individuals.

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 the communities speak tribal languages and do not speak Bangla, making it difficult for them to access government services and further marginalizing them. The government continued to deploy law enforcement personnel at religious sites, festivals, and events considered potential targets for violence, including during Durga Puja, Diwali, Christmas, Easter, and the Buddhist festival of Buddha Purnima.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to media, on January 31, unknown attackers hacked a Buddhist monk to death in Khagrachari, CHT. Following the monk's death, thousands of people gathered at the Gugrachari Dharmasukh Buddhist Monastery to demand a proper investigation into the incident and punishment of those responsible. No investigation was reported to be underway as of year's end.

In its February 2022 Annual Report, Freedom House stated that members of religious minorities – including Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, and Shia and Ahmadi Muslims – continued to face harassment and violence, including mob violence directed against their houses of worship. According to the BHBCUC, communal attacks against ethnic and religious minorities occurred throughout the year.

Human rights organizations reported a decrease in village community leaders and local religious leaders using extrajudicial fatwas to punish individuals for perceived “moral transgressions,” from 12 cases in 2021 to six in 2022. The local human rights organization Ain o Salish Kendra, which monitors incidents across the country, stated 12 incidents of violence against religious minorities took place during the year. These incidents injured five persons and included attacks on both homes and places of worship. The organization did not publish specifics about each incident.

In February, the government publicized the actions of police in response to the vandalizing of Hindu idols and theft of materials used for Hindu worship in Barishal District. Officials noted that police quickly filed a case against the unknown perpetrators for injuring or defiling a place of worship with intent to insult the religion.

On March 17, a dispute concerning a piece of land adjacent to the ISKCON temple in Dhaka resulted in damage to the temple wall after hundreds of individuals attacked the temple while Hindu devotees were preparing for Holi Purnima. Local Hindu leaders claimed police reacted slowly after the initial incident, but promptly responded after Hindu advocates requested the Ministry of Home Affairs take action. Indian media reported ISKCON Bangladesh members appealed to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi for assistance following the attack, in addition to calling on Bangladesh’s Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed to take measures to address the sense of insecurity felt by religious minority groups.

In November, individuals led by the imam of a local mosque attacked the Baul community in Kushtia district and injured a Baul folk singer. Bauls are a minority religious and cultural group, best known for their songs and poems. A court granted bail to 18 of 19 individuals charged in the case.

In March, local Muslims in Khulna demonstrated outside the home of a Hindu youth over a Facebook post that they said defamed the Prophet Muhammad. According to media reporting, other residents questioned the origin of the post, saying that the accused Hindu man did not know how to use Facebook.

In its annual report, Freedom House stated that “increasingly in recent years, violence against religious minorities appears to be deliberately provoked on 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.

In April, a Muslim youth broke into a church in Joypurhat and vandalized statues of Mother Teresa. Police arrested him.

In March, women protested in Dhaka against what they said was discrimination, demanding that they be provided service in all government and private institutions while wearing head and face coverings (niqabs and burqas), and declaring, “The veil is my constitutional right.”

On June 10, thousands of individuals marched in Dhaka after two officials in India’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party made references to Islam and the Prophet Muhammad the marchers thought to be derogatory. According to news reports, many protestors chanted slogans against Indian Prime Minister Modi and criticized Bangladesh’s government for not publicly condemning the comments.

In August, police arrested a Hindu man under the Digital Security Act for inciting violence online. According to his brother, the Hindu man had posted a photo on Facebook showing a donation box of a local mosque had been placed inside a temple, which created unrest. In November, the High Court granted the man bail on the condition that he refrain from spreading any more inflammatory material. The man was previously arrested in 2021 for accusing the Muslim advocacy group Hefazat-e-Islam’s joint general secretary Mamunul Haque of damaging communal harmony.

Human rights activists expressed concerns regarding the wellbeing of Hindu and Christian groups in the Muslim-majority 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 it. While some Hindu leaders said they appreciated fencing that set their camp apart and provided additional security, other members of the community noted such fencing restricted their ability to perform religious rituals relating to deceased persons. Hindu refugees said they were free to practice their religion, although they struggled to obtain adequate funds to properly celebrate their religious festivals. Hindu leaders said they needed special permission to hold festivals, as do all religious groups within the camps, and that camp officials usually gave permission. Camp authorities did not allow any permanent structures, such as shelters, houses of worship, or learning centers, regardless of religious affiliation.

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 differed from the faith tradition commonly linked with his or her surname, that person could experience harassment, threats, and social isolation.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In April, the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom visited Dhaka and Cox's Bazar. In meetings with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, state Minister for Religious Affairs, senior secretary of the Public Security Division at the Ministry of Home Affairs, and Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner, the Ambassador-at-Large emphasized the importance of religious freedom and tolerance, supporting and protecting religious minority communities, and improving living conditions for Rohingya refugees, including providing greater livelihood, education, and movement opportunities. The Ambassador-at-Large also visited a Hindu community in Gazipur whose temple was partially destroyed during the mob violence in 2021.

Throughout the year, the Ambassador visited several places of worship to meet with leaders of major religious communities to support interfaith harmony. He visited a mosque in the Gulshan neighborhood of Dhaka in April during Ramadan and the Hindu Dhakeshwari Temple on September 25 in honor of Durga Puja.

More than 10 of the country's largest news outlets, with a combined viewership of several million, covered the Ambassador's visit to the temple. On April 19, the Ambassador hosted an iftar for attendees of different religions, where he gave remarks celebrating the religious diversity of the United States and Bangladesh. The United States provided more than \$265 million of humanitarian assistance in fiscal year 2022 to fund programs assisting Rohingya refugees and their local host communities as part of U.S. support for protecting vulnerable religious minority groups.

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. Embassy officials attended religious festivals celebrated by the Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim communities and emphasized at these events the importance of tolerance and respect for religious minorities. Embassy officials continued to meet regularly with a wide range of religious organizations and representatives, including the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, BHBCUC, Bangladesh Christian Association, Hindu Welfare Trust, Buddhist Religious Welfare Trust, Christian Religious Welfare Trust, World Buddhist Association In Bangladesh, Bangladesh Buddhist Federation, Christian Freedom International, and the International Buddhist Monastery of Dhaka. In these meetings, embassy officials and other U.S. government representatives discussed with these groups the state of religious freedom in the country, underscored the importance of religious tolerance, and identified challenges that religious minorities encountered.

The embassy posted more than 20 social media messages highlighting the U.S. government's commitment to advancing religious freedom and embassy interactions with various faith communities in the country, including on International Religious Freedom Day. Embassy social media messages on religious tolerance reached more than one million individuals. Two of the embassy's most popular videos during the year were messages congratulating Muslims and Hindus during their respective major holidays. Together these videos received tens of thousands of reactions and comments. Earlier in April, the embassy posted a photograph on social media of embassy employees wearing a Hindu bindi (known locally as a teep) after a police officer harassed a local teacher for

wearing a teep; in a message accompanying the photograph, the embassy stated it celebrated Bangladesh's diversity and stood in solidarity with all who have faced harassment.

During his visit in April, the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom gave an interview in which he expressed U.S. solidarity with the country's majority Muslim population during the holy month of Ramadan and noted appreciation for the country's response to the Rohingya crisis; the interview received wide, positive television and print coverage.