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The Hindus of Bangladesh fear for their future

Time (14.01.2014) - Subhash Ghosh was away when, early on Dec. 13, dozens of activists from Bangladesh's largest Islamist party, Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), descended on the home in which generations of his family have lived. They paid particular attention to his valuables, smashing TVs and looting gold. They gave the same treatment to the home's Hindu shrine. Then they torched the property.

On Jan. 5, Bangladesh concluded what many judge to have been the country's most violent election to date. But in the rural Satkhira district something much more substantial than ballot papers is at stake. Here, minority Hindus are targeted for their land.

"When anything happens, Hindus get attacked in Bangladesh," explains Ghosh, 63, standing in the verdant greensward at the back of his house. Even if it weren't ruined, he would be too scared to live in it. "They came at around 9:30 and suddenly set fire to the building with petrol bombs and gunpowder," he explains.

The district of Satkhira lies only a few miles from the Indian border and just north of the world's largest mangrove forest, the Sundarbans. It is spliced by creeks and tributaries that form the final reaches of the Ganges riverine plain. With a large Hindu minority, this area has seen some of Bangladesh's worst violence over the past year. Much of that violence is down to land — or rather its scarcity.

(MORE: Execution Ignites Violent Protests in Bangladesh)

With a population in excess of 160 million crammed into less than 148,000 sq km, Bangladesh is one of the world's most densely populated countries. To make matters worse, almost the entire country lies in a floodplain, with lives, farms and crops constantly hanging in the balance. The pressure on land is enormous.

"When we say it's just political, it legitimizes the violence," explains Jyotrimoy Barua, a Supreme Court lawyer in the capital Dhaka. "Most of the people's houses they are burning are [those of the] poor. If you burn their house, they will leave the country, and you get their land."

Ghosh, who fought for Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971, is determined not to give his enemies that satisfaction. "If we leave the country, then everybody will take our property," he says. "I cannot leave and be a rickshaw puller in India like a coward."

In Satkhira's isolated villages, however, there is palpable fear. Ghosh's sons, like many Hindu children, can no longer go to school. When we visit a Hindu community, dozens emerge out of the mist and huddle around us, explaining how they are unable to travel the small rural lanes alone for fear of attacks by Islamists. A local journalist we are traveling with receives threatening calls from an Islamist leader.

In parts of Satkhira, the Islamists are a law unto themselves. The village of Agordari lies just a few miles from Satkhira's main town, but the police dare not visit. Locals call it "East Pakistan," run as it now is by the JI, which supported Pakistan in the 1971 war. The authorities are trying to restore order. "People didn't come out of their houses, no vehicles, no people, no nothing, like a graveyard," is how the new chief of police for the district, Chowdhury Monzirul Kabir, describes the atmosphere after a recent crackdown that saw 90 arrests. But fear of the Islamists persists.

There clearly is a sectarian basis to attacks on Hindus. Bangladesh's ruling Awami League (AL) was voted into power in 2009 on the strength of its promise to try pro-Pakistan figures for atrocities committed during the 1971 war, and violence often accompanies attempts to mete out justice to war criminals. The hanging of JI leader Abdul Quader Mollah, on Dec. 12 last year, preceded the attack on Ghosh's house.

However, the sectarian issue is exacerbated by intense competition for usable land. After the monsoon of 2011, tens of thousands of Satkhira's small holdings — almost half the homes in the district — were ruined by waterlogging, which occurs when groundwater saturates the soil and makes agriculture extremely difficult or impossible.

The violence isn't just perpetrated by JI. In other provinces, opportunistic AL leaders have been accused of using divisive communal sentiments to enrich themselves. "In some constituencies, it's Awami League," says the lawyer Barua. Both the AL and JI, he says, "are tussling from the same group of voters — if anyone loses, he blames the Hindus."

Bangladesh between 'secularism' and fundamentalism

HRWF (06.12.2013) - On 25th November 2013, Hon. David Kilgour, JD made a presentation on the issue "**The West and the Challenge of Democracy in Bangladesh - a Canadian Perspective**" organized by the South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF) at the European Parliament in Brussels. See below an excerpt of his paper.

Secular tradition

Secularism was one of four principles enshrined in the original 1972 constitution of Bangladesh. It was removed in 1978 by the military ruler, General Ziaur Rahman, who declared Islam the state religion. The Supreme Court restored secularism in 2010 as a basic constitutional tenet.

The removal of secularism from the constitution for about three decades was described by many of the country's leaders as a betrayal of mainstream Bengali culture and

society. Both are pluralist and progressive. The army, with its close association with conservative political parties, led by the Nationalist party (BNP), insists that Bangladesh must be officially a one religion country despite the long-time diversity of faiths.

In 2008, the newly-elected (by a landslide) Awami League (AL) government announced that it would re-introduce the original four principles into the preamble of the Constitution. Bangladesh's foreign minister (until three days ago when an interim government was formed for the election now declared to be held on Jan. 5th), Dipu Moni, declared that her country is "a secular, not moderate Muslim, country". The AL also appears to respect all religions. Virtually all Bangladeshis say religion is important in their daily lives, but many appear comfortable with the absence of one religion's dominance over their government.

South Asian countries differ on the secularism issue from some in the West, which assert complete separation of church and state. Secularism in South Asia appears to mean the freedom for all to practise their faiths without being subject to any discrimination or official persecution.

Ancient rulers, especially the Pala Empire and Nawabs, were secular in this sense in making decisions. Hindu and Muslim leaders had prominent persons from every faith community assisting them. The British East India Company, arriving in the 18th century, instituted separate laws for Hindus, Muslims and Christians, laying the foundation for a civil code which remains largely unaltered to date.

Unfortunately, the British Raj also worsened relations between two Bengali groups. Hindus were accepted into the civil service, but Muslims were not-at least on an equitable participation basis. This led to several movements across East Bengal (today's Bangladesh) aimed at resisting both the British Raj and Hindus. In 1905, a division of Bengal on communal lines was proposed for the Muslim majority in East Bengal. The British accepted partition, but it was annulled in 1911 due to opposition from those demanding a unified Bengal.

In 1947, Bengal was partitioned, with most of East Bengal joining Pakistan, and West Bengal becoming part of India. Subsequent tragic events compelled many Hindus to migrate to India after the 1950 and 1964 East Bengal genocides. With the establishment of Pakistan, Bengalis faced much discrimination. The subsequent liberation war saw Bengalis, regardless of religious affiliation, fight together as brothers and sisters for freedom.

Rahman, later taking over as president, unfortunately began using religion for partisan political purposes. He also created the BNP to further his goals. In 1988, the country's second military ruler, Hussain Ershad, declared Islam the state religion. Supporters of the BNP and the military also engaged in various anti-minority activities against Hindu and tribal communities.

Since the return to democracy in 1991, there have been growing calls by civil society members to return "secularism" to the constitution. The A.L. government and freedom fighters, as well as representatives from younger generations, announced in 2009 that the constitution would be amended to reintroduce the original four principles. The fifth amendment of the constitution, removing secularism and replacing it with an Islamic declaration, was declared illegal by the High Court of Bangladesh in 2005. In 2010, the Supreme Court upheld this earlier ruling.

In 2013, a fundamentalist group, Hefajat-e-Islam, launched protests to achieve their demands. Among 13 points, it sought a stronger presence of Islam in the political system, including the cancellation of the Women's Development Policy (2009) and the secular education policy of the AL government. The ensuing campaign caused many tragic deaths.

Islam and Governance

Islam was introduced to what is now Bangladesh in the 8th century, mainly by Arab and Persian missionaries and merchants and conquest. Between the 8th and 12th century, a Buddhist dynasty known as the Pala Empire ruled Bengal. During this period, a majority of the Bengali population were Buddhists. Later, the Sena dynasty came to power, with conversion to Islam beginning in the 13th century.

Bangladesh is today predominantly a Sunni country, with many influenced by moderate Sufism. The Muslim population is approximately 88 per cent of the population. Religion has always been a strong part of the national identity, but varied at different time periods. The UN has recognized it as a "moderate Muslim and democratic country".

A modified Anglo-Indian civil and criminal legal system operates throughout Bangladesh; there are no official sharia courts. Most Muslim marriages are presided over by a traditional Muslim judge whose advice is also sought on matters, such as inheritance and divorce. In the 1980s, Muslim clerics in Bangladesh still saw their function as teaching and preserving the Islamic way of life. Some, however, favoured the establishment of an Islamic theocracy in Bangladesh and were involved in several political parties.

Current Political Issue

The Supreme Court ruled in late summer this year that the country's largest Islamist party, the Jamaat, will not be allowed to compete in the upcoming parliamentary elections because of language in its charter. The court rationale in essence was that as the charter refers to God as the highest legal power, it does not acknowledge the political sovereignty of the people of Bangladesh and is therefore unconstitutional. For context, it should be said that Islamists in Bangladesh largely opposed independence and favored remaining part of Pakistan. A leader of the Jamaat party, moreover, was quite recently sentenced to life in prison for war crimes during Bangladesh's independence war with Pakistan.

Avoiding Fundamentalism Violence

Finally, a few thoughts on the mid-November (2013) paper by SADF's Research Director, Dr. Siegfried Wolf: "Bangladesh: Drifting into Fundamentalism". Many of the points he makes seem important for the people of Bangladesh and all friendly governments to keep in mind, including these ones:

- Security analysts should stop focusing on Afghanistan and Pakistan ('AFPak') alone and should study fanaticism in other South Asian countries, such as Bangladesh. The Taliban in Pakistan, notes Wolf, "are only a facet of ...an interconnected Islamist movement sector, pushed by transnational religious extremist organizations, like...al-Qaida(which) is dramatically rising in South Asia...the major goal is to establish Islamic fundamentalist state(s)-not only in Afghanistan but also in the Maldives, Pakistan and Bangladesh.. However, in order for the US to ensure a safe withdrawal from Afghanistan, Washington will remain ignorant towards this threat."
- "...by using the strategy of general ignorance, the international community does not have to justify their reluctance to tackle this problem...(They) should be aware that the chosen tactic not only leads to the neglect of everything Bangladesh stands for, especially the idea of secular democracy...but also threatens to put the country back to square one...Bangladeshis would be controlled by jihadist organizations which emerged in or are supported by Pakistan".
- In order to stop (the drift into an Islamic fundamentalist state), "a collective national involvement of the major political actors is necessary to protect democracy, secularism and human rights, supported by a more determined and active international community. As long as this is not achieved, Bangladesh risks falling in the clutches of Islamic fundamentalism."

Conclusion

The *Economist* magazine reminds readers this week that about 1.6 billion residents of seven nations in South Asia live in civilian-led democracies. It probably strikes many in this room and around the world that only the spreading of democratic institutions is likely to offer a way out of the global conflict between modernity and those who feel aggrieved by it. Benjamin Barber, the American political scientist, posits McWorld as the universe of modernism and Jihad as that of fundamentalism in various forms. He states the essence of his book, *McWorld vs. Jihad*, thus:

"By extending the compass of democracy...civic globalization can open up opportunities for accountability, participation, [good] governance to those wishing to join the modern world...; by securing cultural diversity, a place for worship and faith... it can address the anxieties of those who fear secularist materialism and are fiercely committed to preserving their cultural and religious distinctiveness. The outcome of the cruel battle between Jihad and McWorld will depend on the capacity of the moderns to make the world safer for men and women in search of both justice and faith and can be one if democracy is the victor."

I hope that most of us can agree both in Bangladesh and here tonight to support initiatives which encourage a host of civic and democratic NGOs across Bangladesh to combat, not terrorism per se, but the social inequalities that terrorists exploit so effectively. Our democracy banners should be Distributional and Global Justice, not retributive justice, and Religious Pluralism, not militant secularism.

In short, we democrats must constantly think of the Bangladeshi people who still live in abject poverty. This means, for example, that we favour more effective policies on education, health care, public safety and justice issues, transportation, defense and social justice. One of our key goals is that children, women and men around the world will all be able to live better lives and will cease killing themselves in order to murder others.

There is a vital relationship between economic development and democracy in terms of human development. Sustainable prosperity and human dignity occur when there is freedom to work gainfully, to choose governments by universal suffrage, to worship, to speak, to write, to relocate, to practise a profession, and with the right to independent judges under a system providing the rule of law for all.

Statement from the U.S. Embassy Dhaka

U.S. Embassy (06.11.2013) - We are deeply concerned by recent attacks on Hindus in Pabna district and in Lalmonirhat. We call on all those involved in these incidents to desist from abusing the rights of minorities, and ask all parties to ensure they are stopped immediately and the perpetrators are held accountable. We ask the Government of Bangladesh to act authoritatively against those who incited and committed this violence and protect the rights of minorities.

We are also remain deeply concerned by the deaths, injuries, and ongoing violence associated with hartals. While engaging in peaceful protest is a fundamental democratic right, we firmly believe violence is never the answer. We call on all parties to ensure that their protests are peaceful and we look to the Government of Bangladesh to ensure the safety of all its citizens and encourage all Bangladeshis to peacefully express their views.

Name of the victims are Sri Nikhil Chandra Roy, Sri Paresh Chandra Roy, Sri Bakul Chandra Roy, Sri Punna Nath Roy, Sri Ukhil Chandra Roy, Sri Narayan Chandra Das. Case Number : Lalmonirhat Sadar P.S. case No.5 dated 4.11.2013 under section 143/448/323/307/385/386/427/34 of Bangladesh Penal code. Name of the perpetrators:

Mohammad Shawn Ali, 25; Mohammad Alamgir, 25; Mohammad Maznu Meah, 50; Abu Taher; Badsha, 48; Mohammad Solaiman, 70 and 10-12 more unknown. All perpetrators are from village Satpatki Majhipara, P.S. Lalmonirhat Sadar- Lalmonirhat district.

Hindu Community under attack at Lalmonirhat

The daily Star/ The daily Dhaka Tribune/ Daily Sangbad (05.11.2013) - The incident took place on 4th Nov 2013 around 12.30pm at the Satpatki Majhipara village of Mohendranagar Union in Lalmonirhat Sadar Upazila. The injured minority victims were admitted to the Lalmonirhat general hospital, but despite deployment of additional security personnel the atmosphere in the village remains electric with the villagers anticipating a repeated attack. Mr.Jamiruddin –Officer in Charge of Lalmonirhat Sadar police station confirmed the report of attack and said many men, women and children of the village had taken shelter in other households and had not returned home since. According to several victims, pro-strike activists of BNP, led by local Jatiyatibadi Dal cadre Md.Shawn Islam, launched the attack in retaliation for refusal of some Hindu fish traders to pay tolls earlier this week. They said a group of 15-18 opposition activists, armed with locally made sharp weapons, attacked the village and forcibly entered at least 40 houses, assaulted 15 individuals and looted valuables.

Narayan Chandra Das, an affected villager said, " Mohd.Shawn and his cohorts demanded a toll of Taka 5,000 from each of 15 local fish traders on Sunday night, in the name of bearing hartal expenses. But they were denied. The traders apprised local BNP leader Abdul Mazid Mondol of the matter, which infuriated Mohammed Shawn. He took revenge on them by launching the attack on the village. Assaulted Sumitra Rani Roy(65) said her son- Nikhil Chandra Roy, was beaten right before her eyes and her cries to spare him went unheeded. Nikhil was beaten mercilessly by the strike supporters in my very presence, in my own home. I cried and cried but they would not stop any thing"-said Sumitra Rani Roy.

Bangladeshi Christians told to close church, convert to Islam

Eight converts forced to recant faith under duress from local council chairman

World Watch Monitor (03.10.2013) - A local government official in central Bangladesh has halted the construction of a church, forced Christians to worship at a mosque and threatened them with eviction from their village unless they renounce their faith.

The Tangail Evangelical Holiness Church in Bilbathuagani village, Tangail district, about 100 kilometres north of Dhaka, was created Sept. 8 by a group of about 25 Christians who had been meeting secretly for three years.

However, local council chairman Rafiqul Islam Faruk joined around 200 demonstrators Sept. 13 to protest against the start of the building of the church.

The following day, the Christians were summoned to his office. More than 1,000 Muslims waited outside, following an announcement at all local mosques to gather at the chairman's office.

Ordered to embrace Islam

Mokrom Ali, 32, told World Watch Monitor he was forced to accept Islam.

"The chairman and the imams of the mosques interrogated me for accepting Christianity. They asked me why I had become a Christian. It is a great sin to become a Christian from Islam," Asli said. "If I did not accept Islam, they would beat me, burn my house, and evict me from the society.

"Their threats chilled me to the bone. That is why I pretended to accept Islam, but faith in Christ is the wellspring of my life. Now I am no longer a Muslim; I am a Christian."

Mojnu Mia, 31, told World Watch Monitor he was also forced to accept Islam against his will.

"The chairman and the imams asked me what my religion is. I said I was a Christian. Then they threatened to beat me and evict me from the village unless I recanted my faith in Christianity," Mia said.

"They had browbeaten me into accepting Islam. I accepted it only to get out from that predicament. But later, I embraced Christianity by swearing a confession in the court.

"The chairman came to know that I became a Christian again, by affidavit. He threatened that it would not be possible to practise Christianity in that area. If I stick to this religion, I must leave this place.

"The chairman is clipping the wings of our faith. I do not know how long we can grin and bear it. We want religious freedom. We want to practise our religion freely."

Eight Christians agreed to return to Islam since Sept. 14, under the chairman's orders. The chairman and his associates had already beaten some of those Christians three years ago for accepting Christianity.

'They were derailed'

Local chairman Faruk told World Watch Monitor that some Christians had been acting against Islam, due to their incorrect interpretation of the Qur'an.

"The Imams and other elders of the society called them for rectification because of their aberrant behaviour. They were derailed, so we tried to put them on the right track," he said.

"Eight people who had deviated came back to Islam. We are trying to bring back others. To change a religion, a person needs to swear his or her name, and should inform a local magistrate. If the magistrate permits, then he or she can change religion. But what they are doing is completely wrong."

World Watch Monitor asked Faruk if he would protest if any of those people filed an affidavit with the court re-affirming their Christianity.

Faruk said there would be "huge pressure from the society against it. As a representative of the local people, I cannot go against the public sentiment."

The chairman warned the Christians not to resume the construction of the church, saying it was anti-Islamic.

The Bangladesh constitution grants every citizen the right to profess, practise or propagate any religion. Every religious community or denomination has the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions.

Rev. Mrinal Kanti Baroi, the group's leader, told World Watch Monitor they had tried to show the constitution's clause on religious freedom to the chairman, to no avail.

"We took one copy of the constitution to the chairman and other elders of the society, but they did not listen to us and did not want to see it," Baroi said.

On Sept. 15, members of the congregation wrote a letter to the district administrative chief, requesting safety and protection.

Deputy commissioner Anisur Rahman of Tangail district told World Watch Monitor that necessary steps had been taken to ensure their safety and security.

A plea for harmony

Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who has been leading a secular government in the Muslim-majority country since 2009, on Sept. 3 called upon her countrymen to work together to protect the communal harmony "being nurtured in the country for thousands of years". She made her remarks after inaugurating reconstructed Buddhist temples, which had been damaged and burnt by criminals in September 2012.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom removed Bangladesh from its Watch List after the victory of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League in the 2008 general election. Her centre-left party is considered to promote secular policies and to be favourable toward minority rights. Her announcement to implement religious freedom reforms was another cause for Bangladesh to be removed from the Watch List.

Of Bangladesh's 154 million people, Sunni Muslims constitute 90% and Hindus 9%, according to the 2001 census. The remaining 1% is mainly Christian and Buddhist.

Bangladesh, four 'anti-Islam' bloggers sentenced

AsiaNews (10.09.2013) - A court in Dhaka has sentenced four bloggers for having "insulted Islam, the Prophet Muhammad and other religions" through "offensive posts" on the internet. As explained by Judge Zahurul Haque, the young people violated the Information and Communications Technology Act and risk a sentence from 7 to 14 years in prison.

[Arrested](#) in April last year, the bloggers are Asif Mohiuddin, Subrata Adhikari Shuvo, Moshir Rahman Biblop and Rasel Parvez and declare themselves atheists. At the time of their arrest, the police claimed they had "ample evidence" and seized computers, modems and external hard drives. However Jotyrmoy Barua, their lawyer says the allegations were fabricated to frame the young people.

Bangladesh authorities have been monitoring all "anti-religious activities" for months now, with a particular focus on blogs that have become very popular places of debate. In fact, they are used in particular by lay [Shahbag](#) activists, a movement that takes its name from a district of Dhaka, where it held its first peaceful demonstrations against the war crimes committed by the Islamic party Jamaat-e-Islami in 1971. The secular nature of Shahbag and the request not to use religion for political purposes has attracted the ire of supporters of the Islamist party, which is targeting the bloggers to target the government.

Tension mounted further following the murder of Asif Mohiuddin, one of the leaders of the movement, stabbed during a protest on January 14.

Two Hindu temples vandalized

Bdnews24.com (08.09.2013) - The desecrations of 'Sharbojonin Kali Mondir' at village Betati and 'Sharbojonin Mondir' at Jongolboruari village are believed to have taken place sometime during Saturday night, said Netrokona Model Police Station OC SM Mofizul Islam.

A devotee, who came to make offerings at the temple in Betati around Sunday noon, discovered the broken idol.

Netrokona Model Police Station OC SM Mofizul Islam and Nirmol Das, president of the District Pooja Celebration Committee, visited the temple.

At Jongolboruari village the idols of goddess Kali and Mahadeb were found wrecked, said Nirmol Das and Pankaj Saha Roy, secretary of Upazila Pooja Celebration Committee.

The vandal had broken into the temple and beheaded the idols and left the heads lying inside.

OC SM Mofizul said he has heard of the incident in Jongolboruari and is preparing send a police force there.

List of Temples attacked in Bangladesh in March 2013

Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian unity council, USA (10.04.2013) -

Date	Temple	Place	Upazila	District	Division
28 February 2013	Kali temple	Rajganj	Begumganj Upazila	Noakhali District	Chittagong Division
28 February 2013	Hindu temple	Bainnabari	Begumganj Upazila	Noakhali District	Chittagong Division
28 February 2013	Hindu temple	Pingjour	Morrelganj Upazila	Bagerhat District	Khulna Division
1 March 2013	Hindu temple	Gaiyarchar	Raipur Upazila	Lakshmipur District	Chittagong Division
2 March 2013	Pinglakathi Sarbajanin Durga Mandir ^[28]	Nalchira	Gaurnadi Upazila	Barisal District	Barisal Division
2 March 2013	Hindu temple	Ramchandrapur	Morrelganj Upazila	Bagerhat District	Khulna Division
3 March 2013	Kali temple	Goalimandra	Lohajang Upazila	Munshiganj District	Dhaka Division
3 March 2013	Sarbajaneen Puja Sangha Mandir ^[41]	Alidanga	Shibganj Upazila	Nawabganj District	Rajshahi Division
4 March 2013	Kali temple	Lakirpar	Kotalipara Upazila	Gopalganj District	Dhaka Division
4 March 2013	Kali temple	Ratherpar	Aditmari Upazila	Lalmonirhat District	Rangpur Division
5 March 2013	Khetrapal temple	Nathpara	Satkania Upazila	Chittagong District	Chittagong Division
5 March 2013	Guthia Sarbajanin Kali Mandir ^[22]	Guthia	Wazirpur Upazila	Barisal District	Barisal Division

5 March 2013	Hari Mandir ^[42]	Pakuria	Singra Upazila	Natore District	Rajshahi Division
6 March 2013	Hindu temple	Chapatali	Daudkandi Upazila	Comilla District	Chittagong Division
6 March 2013	Hindu temple	Bangla-Dashpara	Netrokona Sadar Upazila	Netrokona District	Dhaka Division
6 March 2013	Radha Krishna Mandir ^[38]	Batajor	Bamna Upazila	Barguna District	Barisal Division
6 March 2013	Kali Mandir ^[37]	Pakshia	Burhanuddin Upazila	Bhola District	Barisal Division
7 March 2013	Kali temple	Shashangaon	Sirajdikhan Upazila	Munshiganj District	Dhaka Division
8 March 2013	Radha Govinda temple	Amashu Kukrul Purbapara	Rangpur Sadar Upazila	Rangpur District	Rangpur Division
10 March 2013	Kali temple	Achhim Bazar	Fulbaria Upazila	Mymensingh District	Dhaka Division
11 March 2013	Shiva temple	Khalkula	Kaliganj Upazila	Jhenaidah District	Khulna Division
11 March 2013	Durga temple	Kafilabaria	Kotalipara Upazila	Gopalganj District	Dhaka Division
11 March 2013	Radha Govinda Mandir ^[40]	Amtail	Juri Upazila	Maulvi Bazar District	Sylhet Division
12 March 2013	Radha Govinda Mandir ^[40]	Kuripaika	Patuakhali Sadar Upazila	Patuakhali District	Barisal Division
15 March 2013	Madhabpur Puja Mandir ^[49]	Madhabpur	Sherpur Sadar Upazila	Sherpur District	Dhaka Division
18 March	Hari Mandir ^[31]	Bobahala	Netrokona Sadar	Netrokona District	Dhaka Division
18 March 2013	Kali Mandir ^[50]	Dakshin Marta	Sreepur Upazila	Gazipur District	Dhaka Division
19 March 2013	Hindu temple ^[43]	Sabekpara	Gabtali Upazila	Bogra District	Rajshahi Division
19 March 2013	Hindu temple ^[43]	Karmakarpara	Gabtali Upazila	Bogra District	Rajshahi Division
19 March 2013	Hindu temple ^[43]	Bamunia	Gabtali Upazila	Bogra District	Rajshahi Division
19 March 2013	Hindu temple ^[43]	Kamarchatt	Gabtali Upazila	Bogra District	Rajshahi Division
22 March 2013	Shri Shri Lakshmi Mata Mandir	Keshurita Madhyapara	Gazipur Sadar Upazila	Gazipur District	Dhaka Division

Future of minorities at stake in Bangladesh's secular-Islamist clash

Bangladesh's politics has been polarized since the nation's secession from Pakistan in 1971, but, of late, the schism between secular and Islamic groups has deepened to a fearsome level. What began as violent opposition to the ongoing trials of liberation war criminals in recent months, has now turned into Islamist demands for the nation's Islamization – at a time when parliamentary elections are due in a few months.

The Muslim-majority country of 160 million people has been witnessing violent protests since the International Crimes Tribunal awarded life imprisonment to Abdul Quader

Mollah, assistant secretary-general of the *Jamaat-e-Islami* (the largest Islamist party in the country) and sentenced *Jamaat* Vice President Delawar Hossain Sayedee to death.

The trials concern atrocities during the 1971 liberation war, when the Pakistan Army and their local collaborators who were against Bangladesh's separation from Pakistan killed more than 3 million people and raped more than 200,000 girls and women. Those who supported the liberation war saw ethnicity more important than religion. And those who were for religion-based nationalism were against the secession.

The ruling Awami League party belongs to those who supported the nation's separation. During the 2008 general election, the party promised to establish the war crime tribunals – and won the election with an unprecedented majority.

Protests were inevitable. The *Jamaat* and the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) have sponsored protests beginning December 2012, with protesters detonating small homemade bombs. While the BNP is not generally extremist, its ally, the *Jamaat*, is for the creation of an Islamic state with Sharia law, closer relations with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, and outlawing un-Islamic practices and laws.

On the other hand, progressive youth and bloggers – who do not seem to have any affiliation to any political organization or group – have held protests at the Shahbagh square in Central Dhaka, decrying leniency on part of the government in giving stricter sentences to the war convicts and calling for true secularism.

Further, protests have been held by Islamist groups like *Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh* ('Protecting Islam in Bangladesh' or HIB) to counter the Shahbagh movement. And, in turn, even secularists have formed a new group, known as *Gono Jagoron Moncho* (Platform for Mass Awakening) to counter the HIB.

Meanwhile, blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider, who played a key role organizing the Shahbagh movement, was hacked to death by members of a new Islamist outfit, *Ansarullah Bangla Team*, which is believed to have links with al Qaeda. Another blogger, Asif Mohiuddin, was earlier stabbed but survived.

Protests took a different turn on April 6, when the HIB presented the government with a 13-point demand at a Dhaka rally, which included greater change in the constitution for rule by Sharia, virtual segregation of women, and death sentence for those who insult Islam or the Prophet.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has unequivocally rejected these demands. She recently told BBC that Bangladesh "is a secular democracy, so each and every religion has a right to practise their religion freely." This has led to further violence. Most recently, on May 6, at least 27 people died in clashes between police and Islamists who were calling for an anti-blasphemy law. The protesters blocked roads, attacked a police station and set fire to at least 30 vehicles. The HIB had given time until May 5 to the government to implement their demands.

The HIB is calling for an anti-blasphemy law despite the fact that Section 295A of Penal Code (1860) provides that any person who has a "deliberate" or "malicious" intention of "hurting religious sentiments" can be subject to imprisonment – the section has been misused as a virtual anti-blasphemy law.

What is fearsome is that the HIB is linked to Quami madrassas (as opposed to the state-regulated private madrassas popularly known as Aliya madrassas). These madrassas have students from economically lower backgrounds and who are given only religious instructions. The Quami madrassas have rejected the government's call for integration

into the education system that the Aliya madrassas follow, which includes both religious and modern subjects.

Islamists had apparently been looking for an excuse to unleash violence and demand Islamization since 2010, when the country's Supreme Court declared the fifth and eighth amendments of the constitution null and void. The amendments had established Islam as the state religion and allowed religion-based politics – a departure from the spirit of the original constitution. The apex court's 2010 verdicts restored the four pillars of the state – democracy, nationalism, socialism and secularism – as was mentioned in the 1972 constitution.

However, the Awami League government in June 2011 oversaw the passing of a constitutional amendment bill (the 15th Amendment) to retain Islam as the state religion along with the use of the word "Bismillah" (an Arabic phrase meaning in the name of God), while reaffirming the country as a secular state. Secularists have questioned if secularism and Islam as the state religion can coexist. The government has also indicated that the ban on religion-based parties will not be strictly enforced.

Prime Minister Hasina appears to be treading cautiously, not wanting to take a firm stand on the issues of Islam as the state religion and banning of religion-based parties, perhaps out of fear of a major unrest by Islamists.

In the ongoing ideological clash, a lot is at stake for the future of religious minorities. While thus far, mostly Hindus and Ahmaddiyas have been persecuted, the sudden increase in Islamist assertion could soon result in targeting of minority Christians, too. Islamist violence against minorities in general has already increased.

The forthcoming general election, due in early 2014, is likely to play a key role in the future of the nation and the minorities. While currently the majority of the people, the judiciary and the ruling alliance are all for secularism and religious freedom, some opposition groups appear desperate to turn the nation into an "Islamic state."

Despite the loud Islamist voices, the mood in the nation appears to be for secularism and religious moderation. However, the task before Hasina is not easy. She will need not only to win the votes in the election, but also legitimacy at home and internationally. Some international human rights groups have turned against Hasina due to her handling of the trials and use of force against protesters.

Given that Bangladesh is no stranger to coup d'états, emergencies and political violence, an election that is not widely seen as legitimate can lead to chaos and instability. Hasina, therefore, will need to avoid heavy-handedness and violent confrontation with opposition parties, which would only weaken her chances of remaining at the helm and that of fulfilling her party's pledges to rid the country of terrorism and bring war criminals to justice.

Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina rejects blasphemy law

BBC (08.04.2013) - Bangladeshi PM Sheikh Hasina has firmly rejected demands by Islamists for a new anti-blasphemy law to punish those who defame Islam and Prophet Muhammad.

In a BBC interview, she said existing laws were sufficient to punish anyone who attempted to insult religion.

Her comments came just days after hundreds of thousands of supporters of an umbrella organisation of Islamists held a massive rally in Dhaka.

The marchers called for the death penalty for those guilty of blasphemy.

Ms Hasina said: "They have demanded it. Actually, we don't have any plan to [bring in the law]. We don't need it. They should know that existing laws are enough.

"This country is a secular democracy. So each and every religion has the right to practice their religion freely and fair. But it is not fair to hurt anybody's religious feeling. Always we try to protect every religious sentiment."

The Islamists have given a three-week ultimatum to the government to meet their demands, including tough punishment to those who they describe as atheist bloggers, who are also accused of making derogatory comments against Islam.

"We will go through all the demands and then we will see. If there is any reasonable one, we will fulfil. If it is not reasonable or not suitable for our country or society we will not accept it," the prime minister said.

She also defended her government's decision to arrest four bloggers last week on suspicion of harming religious sentiment through their work.

The arrests prompted eight blog operators to black out their websites, with liberals accusing the government of yielding to Islamist pressure.

But the prime minister dismissed those accusations.

"No, [it's] not that. If anybody tried to hurt any sentiments of any religion or any religious leader, there is a law. We can take any action."

'Under attack'

Bangladesh has been rocked by a series of protests by opposition parties in recent weeks.

The Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh's largest Islamist party, has been holding demonstrations demanding the immediate release of its leaders, who are facing war crimes charges. Two of its senior leaders have already been convicted by a special tribunal. Seven more are still facing the trial.

More than 80 people have been killed in clashes in the last few months, most of them shot by police. Human rights groups have accused the security forces of using excessive force to control the riots.

Ms Hasina defended the police action.

"Security forces are law enforcing agencies, they have to protect people and people's property. You know many police officers were killed... If police are under attack, what will they do?" Ms Hasina said.

The prime minister also rejected calls by the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to restore a neutral interim caretaker administration to oversee parliamentary polls.

The BNP has made it clear that it will not take part in any election held under the incumbent government because it says the polls will not be free or fair.

"If they don't participate in the election, as a political party they will lose their seats," Ms Hasina said.

With increasing political violence and instability, there is apprehension that the government might declare a state of emergency to bring the situation under control. But the prime minister firmly dismissed those fears, saying the government had no plans to impose emergency rule.

Bangladesh arrests three atheist bloggers

AFP (02.04.2013) - Bangladesh police have arrested three atheist bloggers for allegedly defaming Islam and the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh), police said Tuesday, amid calls from religious fundamentalists for an Internet crackdown.

The arrest of the three, who were paraded in handcuffs at a news conference, followed pressure from Islamic groups who have organised a march from all over the country to the capital to demand the death penalty for atheist bloggers.

"They have hurt the religious feelings of the people by writing against different religions and their prophets and founders including the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh)," said deputy commissioner of Dhaka police, Molla Nazrul Islam.

The three could face 10 years in jail if convicted under the country's cyber laws which outlaw "defaming" a religion, Islam said.

He denied the arrests were linked to the planned march to Dhaka set for Saturday.

Home Minister Muhiuddin Khan said the three arrested men were among 84 "atheist bloggers" named in a list handed over by an Islamist group to a government panel probing alleged blasphemy against Islam on the Internet.

"The arrests were made on primary information" and further investigation is underway, Khan said, adding the government would act toughly to prevent any attempt to upset "communal harmony" via the Internet.

There has been vociferous debate between staunch atheists and fundamentalists in Bangladesh's blogosphere and on social media for years, but it took a deadly turn in February when an atheist blogger was murdered.

The arrests came as Bangladesh has been hit by violent protests over a war crimes tribunal which is trying leading people who opposed the country's independence from Pakistan during the 1971 liberation war.

Protests encouraged by secular bloggers have seen hundreds of thousands of people take to the streets demanding the execution of leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami party, the country's largest Islamic party and key opposition.

Islamic groups have in turn held demonstrations demanding the trials be halted and have also begun targeting bloggers.

The government has blocked about a dozen websites and blogs to stem the unrest. It also set up a panel, which included intelligence chiefs, to snoop for blasphemy in the social media.

Last week the telecoms regulator ordered two sites to remove hundreds of posts of seven bloggers whose writings it said offended Muslims.

Meanwhile, a group of bloggers protested the overnight arrests of the three men and said their detention meant the government is caving in to pressure from Islamic groups.

"We demand their release. The future of Bangladesh is bleak if the freedom expression of the bloggers is curbed," Fahmidul Haq, a blogger and Dhaka University professor, said at a news conference.

Haq said the lives of the 84 bloggers who were named in the list prepared by Islamic groups now were at risk.

Scores of bloggers held hands to form a human chain in Dhaka to protest the arrests while a popular blog site, Amarblog.com, said it was shutting down until the bloggers were freed "unconditionally".

20,000-strong mob attacks, torches Ahmadi festival site

Ahmadiyya Jamaat's Bangladesh spokesman Tabshir Chowdhury alleged that despite repeated request for more security, only a few policemen were sent to protect the venue, situated 40 kilometres north of the capital.

Ahmadiyya Times (07.02.2013) - Bangladeshi Ahmadis on Thursday shifted the site for their centenary celebrations after thousands of religious rivals torched the original venue.

A mob, which witnesses said numbered around 20,000, attacked the venue at Kaliakoir, near Dhaka, late Wednesday where members of the Ahmadiyya Jamaat were due to mark 100 years since the movement began operating in what is now Bangladesh.

"They attacked the venue from all corners, shouting Allahu Akbar (God is greater). They torched the canopy, tents and stage," Sanjit Kumar, a senior police official, told AFP.

"We fired rubber bullets and tear gas at the mob, but it was so huge that we could not protect the venue," he said, adding that one person was injured after he was beaten up.

Founded in 1889 in India, Pakistan declared Ahmadis as non-Muslims after it adopted a law in 1974.

In Bangladesh, where 90 percent of the country's 153 million people are Muslims, there is no such law. But Islamic parties and top clerics have long demanded the government declare them non-Muslims.

Ahmadiyya Jamaat's Bangladesh spokesman Tabshir Chowdhury alleged that despite repeated request for more security, only a few policemen were sent to protect the venue, situated 40 kilometres north of the capital.

"We got government approval for the three-day meet where 10,000 of our members, including 200 foreign guests, were invited," he told AFP.

"When we saw mob was building up and threatening to attack the venue, we asked for more security."

He said the venue for the celebrations had been shifted to the group's headquarters in Dhaka.

The Ahmadiyya Jamaat has been the victim of several attacks in recent years, including last November when a mob in a northern district vandalised an Ahmadi place of worship and torched several houses belonging to the community.
