

Bangladesh

Though in theory a secular democracy, the government has frequently given into pressure from Islamist parties, and continues to threaten atheists and others on charges of “hurting religious sentiments”.

Constitution and government	Education and children’s rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
	<p><u>Religious or ideological instruction in a significant number of schools is of a coercive fundamentalist or extremist variety</u></p>	<p><u>Expression of non-religious views is severely persecuted, or is rendered almost impossible by severe social stigma, or is highly likely to be met with hatred or violence</u> <u>There is a pattern of impunity or collusion in violence by non-state actors against the nonreligious</u></p>	
<p><u>State legislation is partly derived from religious law or by religious authorities</u></p>	<p><u>Religious or ideological instruction is mandatory in all or most state-funded schools with no secular or humanist alternative</u></p>	<p><u>The non-religious are persecuted socially or there are prohibitive social taboos against atheism, humanism or secularism</u> <u>Systemic religious privilege results in significant social discrimination</u> <u>Religious control over family law or legislation on moral matters</u> <u>It is made difficult to register or operate an explicitly Humanist, atheist, secularist or other non-religious NGO or other human rights organization</u></p>	<p><u>Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom or human rights is severely restricted</u> <u>‘Blasphemy’ is outlawed or criticism of religion is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence</u></p>

Constitution and government

Education and children's rights

Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals

Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values

There is an established church or state religion

There is state funding of at least some religious schools
Religious schools have powers to discriminate in admissions or employment

There is significant social marginalisation of the non-religious or stigma associated with expressing atheism, humanism or secularism
Some religious courts rule in civil or family matters on a coercive or discriminatory basis

Legend

Constitution and government

The constitution and other laws and policies provide for freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as well as freedom of opinion and expression. However, some laws and policies restrict freedom of religion or belief, as well as freedom of expression and media freedom.

An amendment to the constitution passed in 2011 established Islam as the state religion yet reaffirmed the country is a "secular state" and guaranteed "freedom of religion".

The tension between Islamism and secularism in Bangladesh has resulted in the legal persecution of freethinkers and minority belief groups, which occasionally erupts into violence.

In 2015 there was a string of murders of humanist writers and a secular publishers (see "Atheist blogger murders" and "Highlighted cases", below). Commenting on the assassination of secular writers, on what happened to be the day before the third such killing in 2015, Sajeeb Wazed, the son of prime minister, told Reuters in May 2015: "We are walking a fine line here... We don't want to be seen as atheists. It doesn't change our core beliefs. We believe in secularism. But given that our opposition party plays that religion card against us relentlessly, we can't come out strongly for him [Avijit Roy]. It's about perception, not about reality."

<reuters.com/article/2015/05/11/us-usa-bangladesh-assassination-exclusiv-idUSKBN0NW04S20150511>

Education and children's rights

Religious studies are part of the curriculum in government schools. Students attend classes in which their assigned religious beliefs are taught. Schools with few students from minority religious groups often make arrangements with local churches or temples to hold religious studies classes outside school hours.

Outside this system, serious concerns remain that in many of the pervasive Islamic madrassa schools, the entire curriculum may be reduced to a narrowly Islamist programme, fostering extremism and bigotry.

Two of the killers of Washiqur Rahman Babu, captured at the scene of his murder, claimed to have been instructed to kill him as part of their "religious duty" by staff at their two distinct madrassas (see below).

Family, community and society

Religious involvement in state family law

Family law has separate provisions for Muslims, Hindus, and Christians.

The long out-dated and ambiguous “1872 Special Marriage Act III” allows a person of no religious faith to get married. However, both parties have to renounce their belief in front of the ‘Registrar’ as non-believers. Marriage is religiously restricted; marriage between Muslims and Hindus (or members of different religions generally) are not permitted. Couples married under this act are not allowed to adopt; succession, maintenance, custody and guardianship of children and inheritance is not clearly defined either, creating an unclear legal situation.

Social barriers, and potential outrage from religious bodies, make “secular” marriages under unsafe. In addition, the number of available ‘Registrars’ are so few that it’s almost impossible for interested parties to get married under this act.

<archive.thedailystar.net/law/2012/06/03/advocate.htm>

<[culaw.ac.bd/files/jurnal-2008/Vol.%20XIII,%202008%20\(p.117-%20139\).pdf](http://culaw.ac.bd/files/jurnal-2008/Vol.%20XIII,%202008%20(p.117-%20139).pdf)>

Islamic Sharia law plays some role in civil matters pertaining to the Muslim community. There is no formal implementation of Sharia, and it is theoretically not imposed on non-Muslims, however this is very high likelihood that some non-religious individuals would be presumed religious and socially pressured to conform to religious arbitration in family matters.

Family laws concerning marriage, divorce, and adoption differ significantly depending on the religious beliefs of the persons involved. Muslim and Hindu family laws are codified in the legal system. For example, a Muslim man may marry as many as four wives, although he must get his first wife’s signed permission before marrying an additional woman. A Christian man may marry only one woman. Under Hindu law in the country there are limited provisions for divorce, such as impotency, torture, or madness. Hindu widows can legally remarry, and marriage registration for Hindus is optional.

The family law of the religion of the two parties concerned governs their marriage rituals and proceedings; however, marriages also are registered with the state.

There are no legal restrictions on marriage between members of different religious groups.

Under the Muslim family ordinance, women and girls inherit less than males, and wives have fewer divorce rights than husbands. Laws provide some protection for women against arbitrary divorce and polygamy without the consent of the first wife, but the protections generally apply only to registered marriages. In rural areas, couples occasionally do not register their marriages. Under the law, a Muslim husband is required to pay his former wife alimony for three months, but the authorities do not always enforce this requirement.

Religious tension

Communal violence and political dysfunction remain significant problems in Bangladesh.

Violence against Ahmadi Muslims and Buddhists has increased in recent years. The Buddhists mostly belong to indigenous hill tribes in south-eastern Bangladesh (Chittagong Hill Tracts). In September 2012, following the posting of a photograph of a burnt Quran on Facebook, more than 20 Buddhist temples, along with homes and shops, were attacked and set on fire by Muslim protesters.

The mass migration of Hindus that started in 1947 from Bengal to India, is gradually depriving Bangladesh of religious minorities, and those who remain are frequently subjected to vandalism and murder.

In 2014, allegations of “hurting religious sentiment” rose. On 8 November 2014, in Lalpur village in Ashuganga district, a number of temples were destroyed by a Muslim mob following an allegation that a Hindu person had defamed Muhammad on Facebook. Abuse of the de facto “blasphemy” law to attack minority population is frequent, often in connection with content reportedly posted on social media.

<bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2014/11/08/temples-vandalised-in-brahmanbaria>

In November 2017, a ‘Hindu village’ suffered mass arson attacks after a large Muslim gathered to protest rumours that one resident in the village had made Facebook posts ‘insulting the Prophet Mohammed’. The accused was reportedly in a land dispute and there is no evidence that the posts ever existed

<independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/bangladesh-village-prophet-mohammed-insulted-facebook-post-islam-muslim-south-asia-a8051841.html>

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

Atheist blogger murders

In 2013, several atheist and freethought bloggers were the victims of physical assaults, as well as government prosecutions for crimes of “blasphemy” in all but name, with one critic of Islam murdered by machete.

In 2015, four more humanist writers were murdered in similar attacks by groups of young men using machetes, followed by twin coordinated attacks on secular publishing houses on 31 October 2015, in which one publisher was killed and others were shot and critically injured. (See “Highlighted cases” below.)

Responsibility for the attacks has been claimed by a variety of Jihadist militant groups, accusing the bloggers of “insulting Islam” or “defaming the Prophet”.

In 2017, one person was arrested on suspicion of being in the group that murdered Avijit Roy. The man is suspected to have links to the Islamic extremist group the Ansar Ullah Bangla Team.

Though several groups of arrests have been made in 2015, including the arrest of two madrassa students caught at the scene of the murder of Washiqur Rahman, no suspect in this year’s killings has yet come to trial and been found guilty.

Rafida Ahmed, the widow of Avijit Roy – herself seriously injured in the attack which took his life, receiving blows to the head and losing a finger – said in the months after he was killed, “...no one from the Bangladesh government has reached out to me. It’s as if I don’t exist, and they are afraid of the extremists. Is Bangladesh going to be the next Pakistan or Afghanistan?”

<reuters.com/article/2015/05/11/us-usa-bangladesh-assassination-exclusiv-idUSKBN0NW04S20150511>

And in a lecture to the British Humanist Association in July 2015, she said:

“The ruling political party in Bangladesh is the Awami League. They are supposed to be the largest secular political party in the country. Yet in the name of political expediency, they have repeatedly

bent their knee to religious fundamentalists, acceding to their demands and granting their wishes, in a manner that can only be described as bribery, in order to secure their votes...

...Sheikh Hasina could have slapped down the Islamists. She could have said that no, people have a right to demonstrate, to write, to question, to criticize. But instead, this is what she said: We do not need a new blasphemy law, because we already have a law against 'hurting religious sentiments' and we can prosecute the bloggers under that law! So the authorities received the list of suspect bloggers, officials promised to investigate, and then they arrested four of those bloggers from the list and pursued them through the courts. Avijit campaigned tirelessly to free these bloggers.

So, what happens when you give bullies what they want? What happens when you accede to crazy demands? Soon there were one-hundred thousand Islamists marching on the streets of Dhaka demanding not just 'death to atheist bloggers', but for the cancellation of planned new education reforms that would have helped girls into education, and yet the government again made concessions. Since 2013 Islamists have been granted demand after demand, while the attackers of those first victims - Ahmed [Rajib Haider] and Asif [Mohiuddin] - were never found."

<humanism.org.uk/fighting-machetes-with-pens-a-full-transcript-of-the-2015-voltaire-lecture/>

In November 2015 the European Parliament condemned the government response to the killings. MEPs urged the Bangladesh authorities to act to end the impunity, to prevent any further killings, and to ensure the security of all its citizens, regardless their beliefs.

<humanistfederation.eu/news-fhe.php?pages=eu-resolution-on-bangladesh>

Freethought under threat

In addition to the killings themselves, and lack of security provided to any bloggers under threat, police and government officials have threatened to arrest the bloggers for writing about "atheism". Freethinkers remain under clear threat and many bloggers have fled the country seeking asylum abroad. A toxic precedent has been set and freedom of thought and expression are under preeminent threat.

<dw.com/en/atheist-bloggers-flee-bangladesh/a-18708933>

<arif.eu/archives/424>

Earlier this year during the International Book Fair at Dhaka University, Islamists seized all printed copies of a book translation by Iranian writer Ali Dasti. Authorities took no action to defend the freedoms of the event, even in the face of death threats.

<<https://globalvoices.org/2015/02/17/bangladeshi-publisher-faces-death-threats-over-translation-of-controversial-iranian-writers-book/>>

Several "hit lists" were circulated, including by mainstream Bangla media, further entrenching the atmosphere of fear. The government has been criticised repeatedly for apparent inability to response to the threats.

<<http://uk.businessinsider.com/a-radical-islamist-group-has-put-out-a-hit-list-targeting-84-anti-extremism-writers-2015-9>>

De facto "blasphemy" laws

Section 295A of the penal code states that any person who has "deliberate" or malicious" intent to "hurt religious sentiments" can be imprisoned and this has been used in practice to prosecute and imprison atheist and secularist activists.

Similarly, the Code of Criminal Procedure includes several clauses (99a-f) that states "the

government may confiscate all copies of a newspaper if it publishes anything subversive of the state or provoking an uprising or anything that creates enmity and hatred among the citizens or denigrates religious beliefs.”

In early 2013, after tensions of the predominantly secular Shahbag protests and the trial of Jamaat-e-Islami leaders for war crimes, an estimated 100,000 Islamists took to the streets of Dhaka calling for “death to the atheist bloggers”. Jamaat called for a new “blasphemy law” with a death penalty. The prime minister Sheikh Hasina said that no such law was necessary, but only because existing laws against “insult to religion” were “enough” to prosecute the bloggers.

The Islamist protesters demanded the arrests of 84 named bloggers, and four bloggers were arrested and charged (see “Highlighted cases”).

In August 2013, following the unrest by Hefazat Islami against “atheist bloggers”, the Bangladesh government amended the Information and Communication (ICT) Act, criminalizing defamation of religion, creating further the de facto “blasphemy” laws. Any statement published or transmitted by any person if found to cause to hurt or may hurt religious belief, then that person will be regarded as committed an offence. The troubling amendment was created by presidential decree, bypassing any discussion in parliament. The amendment gives police unchecked power against the offender allowing police to act as jury and judge, all at the same time.

<voicebd.org/node/417>

<fidh.org/International-Federation-for-Human-Rights/asia/bangladesh/bangladesh-information-and-communication-technology-amendment-act-likely-13875>

<icj.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/ICT-Brief-Final-Draft-20-November-2013.pdf>

Attacks on Freedom of expression

The constitution guarantees freedom of expression, with some restrictions for “public order” concerns, and its media are vibrant and diverse. However, not only does the government show some intolerance of media criticism, but journalists continue to be threatened and attacked with impunity by political and religious groups. This in turn leads to self-censorship on some religious and political topics.

In August 2015, Probir Sikdar, a veteran journalist, was arrested for “tarnishing the image” of a government minister, reportedly after he publicly said that he had been threatened.

<cpj.org/2015/08/journalist-arrested-in-bangladesh-under-countrys-i.php>

In December 2014 the Bangladesh Telecom regulatory authority proposed that Google and Facebook should implement a locally run “Admin Panel” to control the social media inside Bangladesh. This proposal followed a refusal by both internet companies to release information about certain user accounts.

<thefinancialexpress-bd.com/2014/12/01/68756>

However, in late 2015, Facebook proved amenable to meeting with government officials after the government blocked Facebook, Vibre and a few other social networking services, supposedly in order “to stop posts on the social network that incite religious sentiment and political instability.”

<en.prothom-alo.com/bangladesh/news/88253/Successful%E2%80%99-govt-now-considering-broader-security>

Restrictions to freedom of expression have increased in Bangladesh since 2014. The authorities have been accused of failing to protect secular and other activists in the face of threats and attacks from

armed groups, increasing restrictions on the media sector and the country's legal and regulatory framework". Authorities have significantly increased efforts to interfere in the work of journalists and other media workers. The government has used a range of different tools and tactics to intimidate media and to silence critical coverage on these issues. The crackdown on freedom of expression has become one of the most potent tools of governments authorities to silence public debate and criticism. One of the more recently introduced laws, the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Act has had a particularly harmful effect on freedom of expression. The law was first passed in 2006 and amended in 2013. "The ICT Act has been used against several individuals including members of human rights NGOs, student activists, and even against a man who was jailed for seven years after sharing a song parodying Sheikh Hasina on his mobile phone". The ICT act has essentially become a 'de facto Blasphemy law' due to the vague wording of its Section 57, which criminalizes "hurting religious sentiments".

<amnesty.org/en/documents/asa13/6114/2017/en/>

Enforced disappearances

A report by Human Rights Watch published November 2017 concluded that hundreds of people have been forcibly 'disappeared' and in some cases later killed by security services since 2013. In some abductions witnesses say that the perpetrators were identifiable as belonging to the state's infamous Rapid Action Battalion. As well as the disappeared, an alarming number of people have died in detention. The targets are usually opposition activists or critics of the government and state agencies. HRW in the report urged the government, which denies knowledge or authority over the disappearances, to launch an independent investigation and to "prosecute security forces responsible for such egregious rights violations".

<hrw.org/news/2017/07/06/bangladesh-end-disappearances-and-secret-detentions>

<thedailystar.net/country/bangladesh-enforced-disappearances-human-rights-watch-slams-home-minister-1430080>

Highlighted cases

On 27 December 2017, **Asaduzzaman Noor**, known as Asad Noor on his youtube channel, was arrested at Hazrat Shahjalal airport in Dhaka as he was about to leave the country. He was accused of hurting religious feelings by mocking the Prophet and making negative comments about Islam on Facebook and on Youtube. Noor was charged with defamation of religion under the 2013 ICT act. If found guilty, he could face up to 14 years in jail.

<newsweek.com/social-media-activist14-year-jail-sentence-defaming-islam-prophet-mohammed-760019>

Attacks on humanist or freethinking authors, bloggers and secular publishers in 2015 has gained worldwide media attention. **Avijit Roy**, an author of books on humanism and science, was killed in February 2015 outside the International Book Fair at Dhaka University, his wife Rafida Ahmed also seriously hurt in the same attack; **Washiqur Rahman Babu**, a young blogger known as a "progressive freethinker", was killed in March 2015; **Ananta Bijoy Das**, who blogged against fundamentalism, in favour of science, justice, and free expression, was struck down in May 2015; **Niladri Chatterjee** (penname: Niloy Neel), a humanist known as much for his blogging on minority and women's rights as much as for his atheistic views, was killed in his own home in front of his partner in August 2015; and on 31 October 2015, coordinated gun and machete attacks on two publishing houses in Dhaka - both publishers of books by Avijit Roy and other secular authors - took the life of **Faysal Arefin Dipon** (Jagriti publishers), and seriously injured **Ahmed Rashid Tutul** (Shuddho-Shor publishers), author and blogger **Randipam Basu** and poet **Tareq Rahim**.

Rashid Tutul and his family eventually fled to Norway in January 2016, where they were granted asylum.

<humanists.international/2016/04/tutul-the-survivor-an-interview-with-the-target-of-a-bangladesh-machete-attack/>

Law student **Nazimuddin Samad** was hacked to death by multiple assailants with machetes at a traffic intersection in Dhaka. Police have yet to name any suspects or confirm whether there was a religious motive, however Al Qaeda affiliate Ansar al Islam has claimed responsibility. Mr Samad regularly spoke out against religious extremism through his Facebook page, writing 'I have no religion' on his profile, and was an organiser of the secular campaigning group Ganajagran Manch.

<bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-35983979>

<edition.cnn.com/2016/04/07/asia/secular-bangladeshi-writer-murdered/index.html>

Secularist blogger **Mohon Kumar Mondal**, an environmental activist and human rights advocate, was jailed on 26 September 2015 for expressing grief and criticism regarding the death of Hajj pilgrims in the 2015 stampede at Mecca. Mondal had criticised the Saudi authorities for failing to avert the tragedy and for not respecting the bodies of the dead. He also questioned the rationality of the ritual in which stones are cast at the devil, and was accused of "insulting Islam".

<ibtimes.co.uk/mohon-kumar-mondal-bangladesh-arrests-secularist-blogger-after-he-criticises-islam-1525243>

Atheist blogger **Julhas Uddin** was jailed for alleged "contempt of religion" on 1st August 2015.

<kalerkantho.com/print-edition/news/2015/08/01/251027>

A schoolboy named as '**Dipu Biswas**' was arrested for making "offensive remarks about Islam" on Facebook, in September 2015. His family were forced to hide as "tension" rose in the area.

<thedailystar.net/backpage/schoolboy-arrested-magura-149506>

Former minister **Latif Siddqui** was jailed in November 2014 after surrendering to police on a case filed by an opposition political party for "hurting religious sentiments". He is facing 22 different cases on 18 different counts, all for the same offence of allegedly making anti-Hajj remarks at a discussion in New York in September. He has been expelled from the ruling party and a writ has been filed to vacate his seat.

Ong Sing Marma, a student, and member of an indigenous population in Boroichhari, Kaptai upazila, was arrested on 9 October 2014 under section 57 for posts on Facebook deemed to be "hurting religious sentiment", after supposedly posting images on Facebook that were "demeaning Islam and the Holy Quran". A case was filed against him under ICT act. Local people staged a demonstration demanding the arrest of the youth, blocking Kaptai-Chittagong highway.

<dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2014/oct/09/1-held-rangamati-hurting-religious-sentiment>

On 31 March 2014, teenaged bloggers **Kazi Mahbubur Rahman Raihan** and **Ullash Das** were sent to jail for Facebook comments supposedly "insulting" to Islam and Prophet. This was only after they had been attacked and beaten by a mob. Fellow bloggers allege that an Islamist student organization distributed false propaganda material which rallied the mob against the two bloggers and led to their arrest.

<advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2014/04/01/teenage-bloggers-in-bangladesh-arrested-for-blaspheous-facebook-posts/>

In February, 2013, the atheist blogger **Ahmed Rajib Haider** (pen name: Thaba Baba), was murdered in a machete attack at his home. His head was hacked open with a machete the day after he took part in the Shahbag movement, a major rally against leaders of the country's largest Islamic

party. He was associated with secularist views in line with Shahbag.

<google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gvgXRcLgESI9K6wFCyhmT32zJswg>
<hindustantimes.com/world-news/Bangladesh/Militant-atheist-blogger-stabbed-in-Bangladesh/Article1-989966.aspx>

The month prior to the murder of Ahmed Rajib Haider, Islamist militants had attempted to murder another atheist blogger, **Asif Mohiuddin**. Mohiuddin survived that attack, thanks to emergency surgery, only to be arrested on April 3, 2013, and charged with “offending Islam and its Prophet”.

At the same time, three other secularist bloggers—**Subrata Adhikari Shuvo**, **Mashiur Rahman Biplob**, and **Rasel Parvez**—were arrested on similar charges. The arrests all came after Islamists gave the government a list of 84 bloggers they wanted charged and if possible sentenced to death (though the punishment does not exist). The blogs of all four secularists were shut down by the government. All four bloggers spent significant stretches in jail and on trial throughout 2013 and 2014.

<iheu.org/story/arrests-atheist-bloggers-shows-bangladesh-authorities-are-walking-trap-set-fundamentalists>

On January 4, 2012, the principal of a technical college, **Yunus Ali**, was arrested for keeping a copy of Taslima Nasrin’s book *Shame* in the school library. The book tells the story of a Hindu family persecuted in Bangladesh. It was deemed blasphemous and banned by the Bangladeshi government in 1993.

Nikhil Naushad were sent to jail for poetry published in the magazine *Kheya*. Naushad served 127 days, the editor received 2 years jail under section 57 of ICT Act.

The feminist author and atheist activist **Taslima Nasrin** remains in exile from Bangladesh because of the threat of death or government persecution should she return to her homeland. Taslima’s application for a passport has never been answered. Bangladesh Embassies across the globe have taken a non-cooperation stance in relation to Nasrin. Her recent request to attain a Power of Attorney document by embassy officials were denied.

Testimonies

“[The new law banning “defamation of religion”] has now become almost a fear instigating tool inside Bangladesh against any Atheist or non-believer. This is the tool Pakistan used to rapidly turn into a fundamentalist, broken nation. That we see today, Bangladesh is not far.”

— Anonymous

“If you are a true activist, you are the most vulnerable person in the country. You could be arrested by the government or be targeted by an Islamist.”

— Bangladeshi secular activist