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## **'Bangladesh failing minorities targeted by Islamic extremists'**

World Watch Monitor (21.11.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2gbK8Xy> - The government of Bangladesh has "singularly failed" to protect its Christian and other minority populations, a report has claimed.

The report, *Under threat: the challenges facing religious minorities in Bangladesh*, by Minority Rights Group International, said Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists, gay activists and other minorities had suffered increasingly frequent violent attacks by Islamic extremists linked to Al-Qaeda. Islamic State (IS) has claimed responsibility for many attacks carried out in Bangladesh, but the country's government denies the group has a presence there.

The 25-page report, published on 17 November, found that IS-linked militants had murdered two people who had converted from Islam to Christianity, and two other Christians, in the first half of this year. IS said the second convert, knifed to death in March, was killed as "a lesson to others".

"The authorities have not only shown a consistent failure to protect minorities but also to bring many of the perpetrators to justice," the report said. It found widespread social prejudice and religious intolerance towards non-Muslim minorities, and "clear signs of wider support among some Bangladeshis" for extremist movements.

Christians have long been subjected to discrimination and harassment, and the report described violence against minorities, such as sexual harassment, abduction and forced marriage, as "everyday" occurrences. Christian women, along with Buddhist and Hindu

women, were often specifically targeted with sexual violence “to intimidate and displace communities from their land”, it said.

The authorities have not only shown a consistent failure to protect minorities but also to bring many of the perpetrators to justice.

--Minority Rights Group International

Bangladesh has just one Christian MP, Jewel Areng, and the under-representation of non-Muslims in politics ensures that “religious minorities remain marginalised within Bangladesh’s mainstream politics”, the report said. However, last month a Catholic, Albert Costa, was elected to fill one of the highest offices of the country’s largest opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Mr. Costa will take over the presidency of the party’s youth wing.

Thomas Muller, an analyst at the World Watch Research Unit of Open Doors International, said: “Christians and ethnic minorities in Bangladesh are second-class citizens and lack any real lobby support. It is therefore all the more encouraging to see that a Christian was chosen to join the BNP leadership.”

However, on the same day the report was issued, a British newspaper quoted a senior Bangladeshi government official who argued that Islam should no longer be named as the country’s state religion.

Dr. Abdur Razzak of the ruling Awami League party said he believed Islam had been maintained as the state religion in the Bangladeshi constitution for “strategic reasons”. He declined to elaborate during a discussion at the National Press Club in the capital, Dhaka, The Independent reported.

“I have said it abroad and now I am saying it again that Islam will be dropped from Bangladesh’s constitution when the time comes,” he said.

“The force of secularism is within the people of Bangladesh. There is no such thing as a ‘minority’ in our country.”

Some commentators believe the Awami League, which counts secularism as one of its guiding principles, kept Islam as the state religion because it feared losing votes.

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## **House of Commons debate: Religious minorities in Bangladesh**

By Bob Blackman

APPG (08.09.2016) - I thank Mr Speaker for granting me the opportunity to raise the plight of religious minorities in Bangladesh. It is apposite that this debate is being held today, because it is exactly the first anniversary of the visit to Bangladesh by the UN special rapporteur Heiner Bielefeldt.

I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma) as the newly appointed Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister with responsibility for the Indian subcontinent. It is clearly a very well-deserved appointment, and I look forward to working with him over the coming years to further good relations between the UK and the countries of the Indian subcontinent.

I am chairman of the all-party group on British Hindus, and I have chaired a number of meetings at which the plight of Hindus and other religious minorities has been raised. I have also had the opportunity to visit Bangladesh on two occasions to participate in social action projects, as well as to meet the leaders of all political parties in Bangladesh and the President. At every opportunity, I have raised the plight of religious minorities and requested further action by the Government of Bangladesh to safeguard those minorities. I have seen at first hand the challenge of assisting some of the poorest people in the world to achieve their full potential, but also the determination of those people to do so.

I recently tabled early-day motion 351 on the plight of religious minorities in Bangladesh, which has so far been supported by 31 hon. Members. The UK has a very long history of assisting Bangladesh, stretching back to the battle for independence and attempts to combat the atrocities that were committed.

The widespread and persistent violations of human rights and the persecution of minority religious groups—Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and other tribal communities in Bangladesh—by the extremist armed groups are deeply worrying to all concerned within the country and in this country. Holding this debate today will highlight the deteriorating human rights situation in Bangladesh.

Religious extremism and terrorism exploit multiple societal failures in the middle east, south Asia, east Asia and the Russian Federation, but they also rely on ideologies that reject secular governance as illegitimate. The atrocities of 9/11, the Madrid bombings, the London attacks, the Bali bombings and a large number of other acts of egregious violence pose a dire and unique challenge to peace and security throughout the world. The recent ISIL-inspired jihadi attack in Bangladesh's capital of Dhaka against innocent diners at the Holey Artisan Bakery, which I had the opportunity of visiting in the past, highlights the seriousness of an enduring threat to the peace and security of the country.

The terrorists who commit such dreadful crimes are not organised as a single worldwide hierarchical group; they are small autonomous clusters or cells, whose principal common link is a millenarian ideology. They are dedicated to the destruction of secular government and the advent of a society based on an imagined model of the early 7th century. Local problems everywhere are exploited as one means to attract people to that worldview, aided by funding from wealthy patrons and the Governments of certain Islamic countries. That enables extremists to recruit devout members of society, who are discontented for various reasons, to participate in acts of terrorist violence to attain martyrdom.

The world cannot forget the scale of the suffering of the people of Bangladesh and especially the grim fate of its Hindu minority during the war of liberation in 1971. That ranks with the worst mass killings of the 20th century, alongside the holocaust, the Armenian genocide during world war one and Rwanda. Indeed, assaults on minority communities have been rife in Bangladesh since before the partition of India in 1947. The Bangladesh Government themselves estimate that during the independence struggle of 1970-71 up to 3 million people were killed and 200,000 to 400,000 individual rapes occurred, in which even the most senior Pakistani officer of the province, Lieutenant General Niazi, participated without restraint.

According to one report the mass murder of boys and young men denuded entire communities and was the world's worst gendercide in half a millennium. To quote from a report at the time, Robert Payne wrote:

"For month after month in all the regions of East Pakistan the massacres went on. They were not the small casual killings of young officers who wanted to demonstrate their efficiency, but organized massacres conducted by sophisticated staff officers, who knew

exactly what they were doing...soldiers...went about their work mechanically and efficiently, until killing defenceless people became a habit like smoking cigarettes or drinking wine...Not since Hitler invaded Russia had there been so vast a massacre."

Terrorism in contemporary Bangladesh is motivated not only by the aim of exterminating or expelling its minorities and creating an unsullied theocracy at home, but by a global agenda. That is why events in Bangladesh are of grave concern to the wider global community, and to us in the UK. Bangladesh is the fourth largest Islamic society in the world, and the deepening roots of religiously motivated terrorism there pose a significant challenge to peace and security in a world already besieged by terrorism from other sources. A handful of determined killers, influenced by intensifying extremist ideology in their country of origin and the right to visa-free travel as EU or US nationals, will create an additional nightmare for national security agencies.

I would like to put on record some key statistics relating to Bangladeshi minorities. The number of religious minorities in Bangladesh, including Hindus, has been declining rapidly. In 1947, religious minorities accounted for 34% of the population. By 1971, that figure had been reduced to 19.8%. Two years ago, it had reduced to 9%. The political parties of Bangladesh are not committed to restoring the original spirit of the liberation war of 1971 and the Bangladesh constitution of 1972. The Enemy Properties Act 1965 is still in force in the name of the Vested Property Act, enabling the seizure of Hindu properties in a blatantly discriminatory way. Since independence, Governments have failed to protect places of worship of minorities in Bangladesh. The restoration of the important religious sites of Ramna Kalibari Temple and Ma Anandamoyi Ashram is still pending. The Debottar land of Shree Shree Dhakeshwari national temple has been "grabbed" and reduced from 6.75 acres to 2.75 acres—a drastic and unjustified reduction.

Demographic changes are clearly being instigated to reduce Hindu-Buddhist-dominated districts, particularly in Chittagong Hill Tracts. Cases relating to persecution and oppression inflicted upon minorities are not being investigated by the authorities. No one is being brought to justice. There is no minority Ministry or Department to oversee the interests of religious minorities and regulate policy matters to redress sufferings and issues related to them. There is no budgetary allocation for religious minorities in the national budget and no special law to protect their specific interests. Secular political parties are under threat and secular Bangladesh is gradually turning into a land of political thugs and religious extremists. I regard the first duty of any Government to protect their own borders. The second duty is to protect the rights of the minorities who live within those borders.

I want to highlight some of the key findings of the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion and beliefs, Heiner Bielefeldt, who visited Bangladesh from 31 August to 9 September 2015. He said:

"The religious demography in Bangladesh has changed considerably in recent decades, mostly as a result of migration. When the demography changes rapidly, this can pose some challenges to the religious harmony in the country. This risk is even higher, if certain minorities feel vulnerable and insecure."

Islamic radicalisation has been on the rise in Bangladesh and has caused a mass migration of Bangladeshi minority communities, including Hindus, Christians and Buddhists, who believe their lives are in danger if they do not convert to Islam. It is a huge challenge that the Government of Bangladesh are battling every day, as the unfortunate incidents of persecution continue to be on the rise. The UN special rapporteur attributes the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the country to the growing influence of ultra-conservative interpretations of Islam stemming from the Gulf region. The atrocities carried out on the minorities, particularly on Hindus, come in many forms.

It may be useful to look at the history of them in Bangladesh. The UN special rapporteur's report says:

"Unsettled property disputes constitute challenges in many societies, including in Bangladesh. In various ways, they are closely linked with problems concerning freedom of religion or belief. One link is the salient decline of the Hindu population in Bangladesh, which has shrunk significantly since the time of independence. The Government of Pakistan initially instituted the designation of minority owned land as 'enemy property' under the provisions of the Enemy Property Act of 1965. That Act encompassed a series of discriminatory property laws targeting primarily Hindus and tribal communities in the eastern portion of the country (Bangladesh). After achieving independence from Pakistan in 1971, the newly formed Bangladesh retained the inequitable provisions of the Enemy Property Act through the 1974 Vested Property Act. Hindus remained the main target, and the Vested Property Act caused many Hindu families to emigrate to India and other countries. As in many instances, when a person left the country for any reason, whether temporarily or permanently, they were designated as an 'enemy' under the Vested Property Act and their property was 'vested' or seized by the State. Frequently, when one Hindu member of a family left the country, the family's entire property was confiscated. In reality, much of the confiscations carried out amounted to sheer land grabbing."

The increasing influence of Daesh, or ISIL, is known to us here in the UK, and our Home Office has reported as follows:

"There is a high threat from terrorism in Bangladesh. Since September 2015, Daesh has claimed responsibility for a number of terrorist attacks in Bangladesh.

In late September and early October 2015 two foreign nationals were shot and killed. Since then and as recently as July 2016, attacks against religious minority groups including the Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Shia and Ahmadiyya communities, have killed several people and injured many more. Previous methods of attack have included crude explosives, grenades, shootings and knife attacks.

On 1 July, a terrorist attack at the Holey Artisan Bakery in the Gulshan 2 district of Dhaka resulted in the death of 20 hostages, mainly foreign nationals and 2 police officers. Daesh has claimed responsibility for this attack.

Groups affiliated to Al Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent...are also active and have claimed responsibility for the murder of a number of people who they consider to have views and lifestyles contrary to Islam. Online activists, including secular bloggers and two members of the LGBTI community, have been murdered most recently in April 2016."

The global community has a stake in engaging with the Government and people of Bangladesh to combat religious extremism, which is a serious threat to our own citizens as well as those of Bangladesh. Attacks by such extremists against minorities are only the first step in intimidating and imposing their authority on communities. That is why it is vital to encourage and assist the Government of Bangladesh to act by investigating and prosecuting heinous crimes such as gang rape, frequent seizures of private property and desecration of religious places. A permanent haemorrhage of the minority population, fleeing abroad to escape grim oppression, only weakens the moral standing of established authority, and eliminates voters who support politicians committed to human rights. The final stage of the triumph of extremism is likely to be the empowerment of political authority that has a benign attitude towards it because extremists have sunk deep roots in society and can mobilise to demand acceptance of their views. That scenario will be familiar from recent experience elsewhere in the world.

Just this year, a large number of priests, preachers and followers of minority religions have been killed by Islamist militants in a series of acts, and have gone missing.

Hindu priest Jogeshwar Roy Adhikari in the Panchagarh district, Hindu priest Ananda Gopal Ganguly in the Jhenaidah district, Nityaranjan Pande in the Pabna district, Nikhil Chandra Joarder in the Gopalganj district, Sulal Chowdhury, and Hindu priest Shyamananda Das were all hacked to death. They were literally cut up before people's eyes. The veteran saint Sadhu Paramananda was murdered, and a Hindu businessman, Tarun Dutta, was beheaded in the Gaibandha district. Hindu devotee Pankaj Sarkar, of the ISKCON temple in the Satkhira district, was brutally stabbed. College lecturer Ripan Chakraborty, of the Madaripur district, was chopped to pieces in front of his class.

Several bloggers, human rights activists, atheists and authors, including foreign nationals, have been hacked to death in the past two years. I will not go through the list of those individuals but I will make it available to the House for its consideration. All those people have been murdered for a simple reason: their religious beliefs or way of life do not fit with this extremist ideology.

Hindu shrines, temples, monasteries, congregation and cremation lands in Bangladesh are now the prime targets of Islamist extremists in Bangladesh. It is apparent that all the Islamic outfits based on radicalism and onslaught, particularly those I have mentioned, in districts throughout Bangladesh are growing fast and operating armed camps to propagate hatred against non-Muslims. Their ultimate goal is to transform Bangladesh from the secular state that it was always intended to be into an ultra-conservative Islamic state. That is set out by the writer Bertil Lintner. I will not go into his report, but it is available for the Minister, should he wish to have some light reading; it is only about 500 pages long.

I therefore ask the Minister to raise the following key recommendations from the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist & Christian Unity Council with the Government of Bangladesh. Laws for the protection of minorities, such as a human rights Act and a minority protection Act, and for the protection of places of worship need to be implemented as fast as possible. A minorities rights commission should be created to safeguard minorities' rights. The discriminatory laws that exist, especially the Vested Properties Act, should be repealed. The UK Government should make a recommendation to the Bangladeshi Government for a United Nations special taskforce to investigate the disappearance between 2001 and 2011 of over 900,000 Hindus from Bangladesh, as noted in the European Parliament resolution on the situation in Bangladesh in 2013.

The Government should also publicly condemn attacks against members of the Hindu community and other minorities. Decisive action is required to protect members of minority communities against these attacks. A full, impartial and independent investigation of all such attacks should be initiated and the results of the investigation made public. All the perpetrators of the attacks should be brought to justice, regardless of their position in society or membership of a particular political party. The victims of the attacks and their families should be provided with compensation.

There should also be a crackdown by the Bangladeshi Government on all Islamist terrorist organisations in the country. An independent inquiry commission should be set up to investigate the incidents and to bring the perpetrators to justice. Action is still required to ensure representation of these minorities in every sphere of the Government and in the Bangladeshi Parliament. The UK Government should give careful consideration to minorities who are already in United Kingdom who have applied for asylum on the basis that they are seeking refugee status for their protection.

A wealth of information is available backing up what I have said in the House today—evidence of the attempt literally to purge Bangladesh of all religious minorities other than the Islamic majority. It is incumbent on us as parliamentarians to protect religious minorities, wherever they are in the world, but particularly those in Bangladesh, which

has so much potential. We have had a unique relationship with Bangladesh over the years. I look forward to the Minister giving a positive answer to the points I have made.

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## **Bangladesh, Catholic woman doused with gasoline and set on fire**

***Maya Karmokar lives with her elderly mother in the village of Kajura. Relatives report that the woman has no enemies. After the attack she was admitted to a hospital, but then returned home because has no money to pay for treatment. Local Catholics count about 4 thousand, mostly poor and needy.***

By Sumon Corraya

AsiaNews.it (12.07.2016) - <http://bit.ly/29LDMaZ> - A Catholic woman was doused with gasoline and set on fire in the village of Kajura, Jessore district (southwest Bangladesh). The woman, named Maya Karmokar, was asleep in her bed when unknown persons entered the house and attacked her.

Her desperate cries attracted the attention of relatives, who arrived just in time to save her life. Rushed to the hospital, doctors found burns over most of the body. Now, however, she has returned home and is under the care of a local doctor, because she can not afford specialized medical treatment.

The attack took place Sunday, July 9, just 15 days after the massacre in Dhaka, where five Islamic terrorists killed 20 people. Yesterday the local police returned to the place of the attack and gathered information. The criminals are still unknown.

The dynamics of the attack was so sudden that the woman herself was not able to recognize who attacked her. "I could not figure out who they were - she said - I only felt the fire burning my skin and I started crying in pain."

Maya, 45, has worked as a nurse in the medical facility operated by the diocese of Khulna. Single and childless, she lives with her elderly mother and takes care of her.

She remained hospitalized just for one day and had to return home because they can not afford better treatment. She says: "I have no enemies, I do not know why they want to kill me!".

Salomon Das, a relative, confirmed that the woman has good relations with everyone, and this is why family members are shocked by the brutal violence and demand that justice be done.

Fr. Ananda Gopal Biswas, parish priest of the Catholic church of Shimulia, which serves the Maya's village, told AsiaNews: "I heard of the attack and I strongly condemn it. I express my closeness to my parishioner".

The Catholic community of Shimulia consists of about 4 thousand faithful, mostly poor and needy. The violence against the Catholic woman is not the first incident of this kind. Recently several members of Bangladesh's minorities, Christians, Hindus and Buddhists, have been attacked but also moderate Muslims who are targeted for their liberal ideas.

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## **Mosque sermons now under control in fight against Islamic terrorism**

***The Dhaka Decision attempts to curb "hate speech" disseminated by radical preachers. One of them, Zakir Naik, has had a direct influence on Dhaka bombers. The authorities have decided to block his television channel. About 600 thousand mosques nationwide. The Islamic Foundation will distribute texts for Friday prayers.***

By Sumon Corraya

AsiaNews.it (11.07.2016) - <http://bit.ly/29vqwKY> - Bangladesh will screen Friday sermons in mosques, in an effort to control the proliferation of extremist ideas in the country. The decision was taken yesterday by senior government officials, who have also decided to implement stringent action against those preachers who spread hatred among religions.

Prime Minister Shiekh Hasina's aim is to fight against Islamic terrorism that is bloodying Bangladesh. Recent episodes include the deadly attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery Cafe in Dhaka, in which 20 people died.

Investigations have revealed a direct link between the five terrorists, all from wealthy families, apparently unsatisfied with their well-off lives, and preachers who praise the holy war against the infidels. One of these is the Indian Zakir Naik, the most popular on television. He is the founder of the Islamic Research Foundation and supports radical Islamic Salafi positions, which he disseminates through his TV channel.

While the Indian authorities have placed his sermons under observation, Dhaka yesterday decided to block his channel. Minister of Industry, Amir Hossain Amu, presided over a meeting of the Committee for public order and asked the proprietor of the Ministry of Information to render immediately enforceable the government's directive.

Bangladesh is home to 160 million inhabitants and the majority are Muslim, who worship in about 600 thousand mosques nationwide, where imams often incite young people to fight for the imposition of Islamic ideas. Citing Prime Minister Hasina, Ihsanul Karim, in charge of relations with the press, said: "We will be tough when necessary and we will uproot terrorism. These attacks take place at a time when Bangladesh is emerging as a model of development is renewing its image. We will fight the man-made disasters in the same way that we struggle against natural disasters".

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## **Bangladesh, Hindu priest beheaded. Christian community living in fear**

***Gupal Ganguli was a priest in the Hindu temple of Noldanga. His body was found this morning and investigations do not exclude the case of another murder of Islamic origin. The Christians of the village of Bonpara, where two days ago a Catholic merchant was killed, live in fear. Bishop of Rajshahi: "It is unacceptable to be forced to live in fear."***

AsiaNews.it (07.06.2016) - <http://bit.ly/25Kj5dL> - This morning Bangladesh police found the lifeless body of Gupal Ganguli, the Hindu priest of the Noldanga temple, in Jhenaidah district (in the southwestern part of the country). The priest was lying on the ground with his throat cut and his head almost severed from his body. Investigations are still ongoing, and investigators do not rule out the hypothesis that this is another murder of

Islamic origin, such as the recent murder of the Christian shop owner in Bonpara (video). Now Christians of the village live in constant fear of fresh violence.

The last attack against a member of the religious minorities in Bangladesh occurred today around 9 am (local time). The priest is the latest victim of a long trail of blood left in recent months by various groups of Islamic extremists linked to the militants of the Islamic Caliphate and al-Qaeda.

For months Islamic extremists have been targeting activists, bloggers, professors, members of the LGBT community for their liberal ideas. Only two days ago in the village of Bonpara radicals killed Sunil Gomes, 71, a Christian known among the residents for its commitment to the local Catholic church. The murder was claimed by ISIS and the police arrested Md Sabuj Ali, who is suspected of involvement.

Stalla Rozario, a neighbor of Sunil, the first to find his body, says he cannot forget the image of his murdered friend. Speaking to AsiaNews he said: "I do not want to remember, but my memory keeps returning to that moment. Now we do not open the windows of the house and we keep the door shut before nightfall. We are afraid".

Like him, other Christians of Bangladesh fear for their lives. A woman of the same village, anonymous for security reasons, said: "Who can guarantee security? As soon as we see a new person around here, we feel insecure. "

Fr. Bikash Rebeiro, the pastor of Bonpara, reports: "Police officers were guarding the church, but we do not want to live under guard. We want to live in a free country, and we want everyone to be guaranteed security against fundamentalists. "

The priest adds that "the government should be tougher with groups that seek to destroy peace". Msgr. Gervas Rozario, Bishop of Rajshahi, complains: "We Christians are in danger. It is unacceptable to feel so insecure".

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## **Buddhist monk's throat slit in Bangladesh**

CNN (16.05.2016) - <http://cnn.it/24RobBi> - A Buddhist monk was found dead with his throat slit in a monastery in Bangladesh on Saturday, police said.

Three people have been detained in relation to the attack, state media reported.

The body was discovered by someone bringing him breakfast at the monastery in Bandarban, a district that borders Myanmar.

The victim, Yu Gayinda -- born Maung Sai U Chak (monks acquire a new name at initiation) -- was in his 70s. Police said he was likely killed Friday night.

No one has claimed responsibility for the killing.

An initial investigation determined the killing does not fit the pattern of a series of religious and politically-motivated hacking deaths in Bangladesh, which have typically been carried out in public with a quick claim of responsibility by extremist groups.

Killings targeting minorities and secular thinkers have gripped the country and made headlines in recent months.

A week earlier, a Muslim Sufi spiritual leader was found hacked to death. Last month alone saw similar killings of a university professor, a Hindu tailor, an atheist blogger and two gay rights activists.

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## **Sufi spiritual leader hacked to death in Bangladesh**

CNN (07.05.2016) - <http://cnn.it/1q6IfzX> - A Sufi Muslim spiritual leader was hacked to death in Bangladesh, the latest in a flurry of similar attacks across the country, police said Saturday.

The body of 65-year-old Mohammad Shahidullah was recovered in a mango orchard in Tanore, located in the country's Rajshahi district, according to Mohammad Nisharul Arif, superintendent of the district police.

Arif said Shahidullah was murdered as he left a meeting organized by his disciples. Shahidullah calls himself a pir, a term for a Sufi spiritual guide.

His body bore the hallmarks of previous attacks carried out by radical Islamist activists, including deep cuts on the shoulder and with his throat slit.

However, police are not sure "if the murder had any link to the previous murders of bloggers, secular activists and pirs," Arif said.

### ***Hindu tailor, gay activists targeted recently***

Last week, attackers wielding machetes hacked and killed Hindu tailor Nikhil Joarder in the central district of Tangail.

Three people were detained for questioning, including one from the opposition BNP party and a local leader of Jamaat e Islami party.

ISIS has claimed responsibility for the attack, according to the non-governmental counter-terror monitoring organization SITE.

Tangail Police Superintendent Mohammed Tanvir said a complaint was filed against Joarder in 2012 for allegedly making derogatory comments about the Prophet Mohammed. Joarder was then arrested and released after spending a few weeks in jail, police said.

Despite the apparent claim of responsibility by ISIS, authorities said they didn't know "if there is a link between the murder and the comments he made in 2012," Tanvir told CNN. He said police were aware of the claim but that it was "premature" to comment on it.

The government of Bangladesh is accusing the country's two main opposition parties, the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami, of being behind the assassinations.

Also last week, two LGBT activists -- one of whom also worked for the USAID, an American government organization for poverty prevention -- were hacked to death in Dhaka.

Ansar al-Islam, the Bangladeshi division of al Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent, has claimed responsibility for the killings.

### ***A series of hacking deaths***

These killings follow the deaths of several others in Bangladesh since 2013, including bloggers and the hacking death of a professor at a bus stop April 23.

The professor, 58-year-old Rezaul Karim Siddique, was an English teacher at Rajshahi University.

ISIS claimed responsibility for Siddique's death, saying he was slain "for calling to atheism." CNN could not independently confirm either the terror outfit's claim or Siddique's religious beliefs.

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## **Bangladesh jails two Hindu teachers for insulting Islam**

Miami Herald (27.04.2016) - <http://hrlid.us/1VE1tuF> - A court has jailed two teachers in southern Bangladesh for making derogatory comments about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, invoking a rare law from the British colonial era that makes insulting any religion a crime.

The case began when students at Hijla High School in Bagerhat district complained that the assistant teacher of a science class Sunday dismissed the Quran as the word of Allah and said there was no heaven, Magistrate Anwar Parvez told the Associated Press late Tuesday.

The students, aged 17 to 18, along with others from a nearby, Islamic school became incensed when the high school's head teacher backed up his colleague. A mob including students, parents and villagers attacked the teachers with sticks, forcing them to lock themselves in a room until police intervened, Parvez said.

"The situation went out of control," Parvez said, adding the mob "wanted to take law in their hands."

The magistrate of the quick-ruling court said the assistant teacher pleaded guilty to publicly insulting religion, and the two were sentenced to six months behind bars.

The law against insulting religion, imposed when Britain ruled the Indian Subcontinent, is rarely used and aimed at preventing communal clashes and inciting violence.

The Muslim-majority country — politically fractured between secularists and those wanting Islamic rule — has been roiled by an ongoing wave of deadly attacks on atheist writers, religious minorities and activists over the last two years.

On Monday night, a gang of young men stabbed two men to death in Dhaka, including the editor of a gay rights magazine who also worked for the U.S. Agency for International Development.

It was the fifth such killing this year, after nine were cut down in 2015. International governments including the United States and aid groups have implored the Bangladeshi government to do more to safeguard free speech and protect members of civil society.

### **Recommended Reading: Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, Georgetown University**

Women and Religion in Bangladesh: Obstacles and Opportunities for Empowerment: <http://bit.ly/26x1fca>

Faith and Development in Focus: Bangladesh: <http://bit.ly/26x1hAV>

Making Pluralism Possible - The Promise and Challenge of Religious Peacebuilding in Bangladesh: <http://bit.ly/1XWYTgP>

Other papers on Bangladesh published by the Berkley Center: <http://bit.ly/1PvijWg>

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## **Bangladeshi al Qaeda wing declares war on atheists**

BBC (09.04.2016) - <http://cnn.it/1N0zrWY> - Bangladeshi officials are investigating a claim of responsibility by al Qaeda's wing in South Asia for the machete murder of a secular blogger in Dhaka.

"We are seriously looking into it," said Anisul Huq, Bangladesh's minister for law.

"Unless we are totally sure that this claim ... is authentic, I don't think we will be commenting on it."

According to the jihadist monitoring group SITE, Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) claims that the movement's Bangladesh branch "carried out an operation to slaughter" Nazimuddin Samad in the nation's capital.

Bangladesh police say the 26-year-old writer and graduate student was ambushed by attackers Wednesday night. The attackers slashed Samad with machetes and shot him before escaping the scene on a motorcycle.

Police tell CNN they have yet to make any arrests in the wake of the murder.

In its statement, al Qaeda accused Samad of being an "enemy of Allah." It lists three of Samad's posts on Facebook going back to 2013 as examples of his insults against Islam.

### ***War against atheism***

The group effectively declares war against atheist writers who dare to challenge al Qaeda's strict interpretation of Islam.

It also threatens to target judges, lawyers, engineers and doctors "who don't allow others to follow the rulings of the Islamic Shariah."

Samad is the sixth writer or publisher of atheist material to have been murdered in Dhaka in the past 14 months.

Bangladeshi authorities have previously denied that foreign groups such as al Qaeda or ISIS have taken root in the majority Muslim country.

Instead, it says the murders of secular writers in the capital, as well as a series of deadly attacks against Hindu, Christian and Shi'ite minority groups across the country, are the work of homegrown extremists.

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan echoed those sentiments on Saturday. He said the issue is not freedom of expression but tolerance of other religions.

"The bloggers, they should control their writing," he told CNN. "Our country is a secular state... I want to say that people should be careful not to hurt anyone by writing anything -- hurt any religion, any people's beliefs, any religious leaders."

The Bangladeshi government has vowed to bring killers to justice.

Law Minister Huq pointed to the December 2015 death sentence handed down to two men convicted of killing blogger Ahmed Rajib in 2013.

Asked if the government would adopt new measures to protect Bangladesh's embattled community of atheists, Huq said security forces had "intensified protective mechanisms."

Several top government officials insist security forces will provide protection to writers who feel their lives are at risk.

### ***Atheists flee Bangladesh***

But members of the besieged "free-thinker" intellectual community in Bangladesh say they do not trust the police, because in recent years authorities prosecuted several writers for "insulting religion" in their published work.

"I have not gone to the police because police actually tried to arrest me in 2013," said one atheist blogger in Bangladesh.

He asked not to be identified, due to the fact that he is on a hit list of 84 atheist writers published by a jihadi group more than a year ago. The blogger is part of a network that has helped at least a dozen colleagues flee Bangladesh.

"This community is shattered," the writer said.

To avoid being murdered, the blogger said he stopped posting comments online, changed his phone number and place of residence and regularly changed his route to and from work.

He said he felt like it was a de facto crime to admit to being an atheist in this majority Muslim country.

"I'm definitely living in fear," the writer said.

In 2015, the freedom of press watchdog organization Committee to Protect Journalists listed Bangladesh as 12th in the world on its Global Impunity Index highlighting countries "where journalists are slain and the killers go free."

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## **No, Bangladesh's high court didn't uphold Islam as state religion**

Global Voices (01.04.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1TReBea> - Bangladesh's High Court dismissed a petition filed by a citizens' group nearly three decades ago to remove Islam as the state religion of the Muslim-majority nation, a provision added to the constitution by then-President Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad in 1988.

The rejection was based on a technicality, not the merits of the case. In fact, the court quashed the petition in just two minutes, with the judges saying the citizens' group wasn't properly registered and therefore wasn't legitimate.

However, celebrations broke out throughout Bangladesh around the inaccurate idea that the court had upheld Islam as the state religion, while religious minorities and secular thinkers in Bangladesh expressed their anger and frustration. Some international media reports didn't help matters with their simplistic or sensational coverage.

Blogger Arifur Rahman tried to cut through the misinformation:

"The petition was due to be heard on the bench formed of three justices, at the beginning [sic], even before the actual content of the petition could be opened up for hearing, the judges deliberated on the admissibility.

It was found that the 'locus standi' (the right or capacity to bring an action or to appear in a court) was not met.

[...] Unfortunately, for both sides, this was kind of a draw. The battle did not even take place. The match was cancelled."

That leaves open the possibility of another petition and a real debate on the issue.

### ***Religion, politics and violence***

Bangladesh is about 90 percent Muslim and 8 percent Hindu, with Christians and other religions filling the remaining 2 percent. In 2014, a research by Pew Research Center showed that in 30 countries, the heads of state must legally belong to a certain religion. Bangladesh is not one of them, but the country is among a handful which has a state religion.

Tensions were high ahead of the court's decision. After the court announced it would hear the petition, some religious groups vowed to stall the country with protests if Islam was dropped from constitution. The religious party Jamaat-e-Islami called a nation-wide strike.

Allama Junaid Babunagari, secretary general of Hefazat-e-Islam, a radical Islamist party in Bangladesh, declared that if Islam were to be removed from the constitution, millions of Muslims would wage holy war in the country to reinstate it. He put forward this argument:

"There are a lot of flowers, but the national flower of Bangladesh is the water lily. There are a lot of fish, but the national fish is the hilsa. There are a lot of fruits, but the national fruit is the jackfruit. There are many languages, but our national language is Bengali. So, then there are a lot of religions. Why should Islam not be the state religion?"

While Bangladesh has a state religion in Islam, it also protects freedom of religion. In the third part of the Bangladesh Constitution, which covers fundamental rights, is Article 41, stating that every citizen is free to profess, practice or propagate any religion, and religious communities are free to establish and publicize their institutions.

Recently, however, the government's treatment of non-Islamic thinking hasn't lived up to that ideal. Six secular Bangladeshi writers have been killed since 2013, and authorities haven't taken any significant measures to deter extremists from targeting those who challenge Islam. Meanwhile, the last several years have seen a series of attacks against religious minorities and foreigners, the majority of which ISIS has claimed responsibility for.

### ***The long history of secularism in Bangladesh's constitution***

Secularism was actually one of the four fundamental principles of the original 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh, which was promulgated after the country's liberation from Pakistan in December 1971. A military coup in 1975 brought Chief of Army Ziaur Rahman to power, and his government did away with the secularism principle in 1979 with the

fifth amendment to the Bangladesh constitution, which proclaimed that "absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah shall be the basis of all actions".

Another military ruler, General Hussain Muhammad Ershad, who was the 10th president of Bangladesh, continued on this path. He inserted Article 2A in the eighth amendment to the constitution, which reads:

"The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal right in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions."

The military ruler used the eighth amendment and religious sentiment of people to silence a popular uprising in 1988.

A group of 15 eminent Bangladeshis calling themselves the Committee to Oppose Autocracy and Religious Communalism filed the petition that same year, questioning the constitutional provision giving Islam the status of state religion. But their petition languished for years.

In 2010, after the current Awami League government came to power, a Bangladesh court declared the fifth amendment to the constitution was illegal, restoring the secularism principle. This was further formalized with the passage of the 15th amendment to the constitution in 2011, which repealed many aspects of the fifth amendment. However, Article 2A containing the provision for state religion remained intact.

After almost two decades, the petition was brought back in 2011, but another five years would pass before the court moved on it.

### ***'This is not the end'***

Online, many defended or were indifferent to the idea of having a state religion, while others thought having an official religion was incompatible with a modern state. On Facebook, user Helal Mohiuddin argued that a state religion didn't make much of a difference:

"In the 21st century it doesn't matter whether the constitution has the stamp of state religion or the mention of secularism. "If we have state religion we will gain this", "if we have secularism in the constitution, we will lose this" — these type of fears and thoughts are just old theories and ideological hangovers. It's futile drooling over nothing."

While Blogger Nisshongo Bios argued on Choturmatrik blog:

"If the state can have a state language, then whats wrong with a state religion? If the argument is that the state religion of Islam discriminates against people of other religions, then there are also people of other ethnicities in the country other than Bengalis. So are they not discriminated against if we have Bengali as our state language? If we stamp our constitution as secular will the whole nation become secular?"

Nazia Afrin wrote in an opinion piece for NTV news portal that having a state religion while at the same time protecting freedom of religion was a way to appease folks of every religious hue:

"The issue of state religion in Bangladesh constitution is a relative matter. In it, the state religion is mentioned as Islam and it guarantees equal rights and security for the other religions. The presence of this appeases the fundamentalists

in the society, but they do not get any privilege in the rule of law. The important thing is that in spite of the presence of state religion, no religious party could come to power winning majority in popular votes. There is no indication that they will be able to do it in the future."

Blogger Mohammad Jane-e-Alam, however, said that it was only a matter of time until Bangladesh gets rid of its state religion:

"Those who are dancing on the decision of the High Court dismissing the petition, I tell you that this is not the end. If we look at the progress of society and civilisation, you will see that you can stall the wheel of progress sometimes, but that doesn't keep society from going forward. In this era if you want to build a progressive society, ensure human rights, rule of law and achieve economic progress then there is no alternative for a modern state. Without being a scientific secular nation, no nation can be a modern state."

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## **Bangladesh court upholds Islam as religion of the state**

### ***Country's top court rejects 28-year-old petition to revoke constitutional provision declaring Islam as state's religion.***

Aljazeera (28.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1PB7qjc> - Bangladesh's High Court on Monday rejected a 28-year-old petition calling for the removal of a constitutional provision recognising Islam as the official religion of the Muslim-majority South Asian nation.

The court ruled that the petitioning organisation, the Committee against Autocracy and Communalism, did not have the right to be heard in the court.

Justice Quazi Reza-Ul Hoque, one of the three judges sitting on the bench, said that the court found that "the petitioner does not have locus standi and that is why the petition will be summarily rejected".

The organisation's lawyer, Subrata Chowdhury, said that he was "100 percent disappointed" with the decision.

"Without a hearing and without giving us any chance to present our argument on the point of locus standi, the court dismissed the case," he told Al Jazeera.

Others, however, were pleased with the decision.

Lawyer Maulana MA Raquib, the president of the religious party Nezam-e-Islam who was present in court, said: "This is the decision of the highest court in the land. Islam should be the state religion. The majority of people in this country believe in Islam."

He argued that having Islam as the state religion would not affect minority religions. "Minorities will not be discriminated against as there is a guarantee in the constitution for the minorities," he said.

The petition was originally filed in 1988 after the then President Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad declared Islam as the state religion in a symbolic bid to win popular support while major political parties campaigned to oust him from power.

He resigned amid mass protests in 1990.

"We filed the petition then because Bangladesh was founded as a secular state, and having a state religion contradicts the basic structure of the constitution," Professor Anisuzzaman, one of the leaders of the petitioning organisation, told Al Jazeera.

"The founding fathers of the country wanted to have a secular nation, and all of us during our liberation war subscribed to that and Bangladesh was founded on that basis."

Bangladesh became independent from the Islamic state of Pakistan after a nine-month war in 1971 which resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths, with the government claiming as many as three million.

Further impetus to challenge the constitutional provision came in 2011 when the current Awami League government further amended the constitution by adding new provisions which retained the wording on state religion, though at the same time emphasised "secularism" and the "equal status" of other religions.

Following the 2011 amendment, the Committee for Resistance against Autocracy and Communalism filed a supplementary petition to its 1988 case and the High Court then passed an order asking the government to explain why the new provision reaffirming Islam as the state religion should not be declared.

The dismissal of this case on Monday has allowed the government to avoid setting out its position in favour of the constitutional amendment, which could have been fraught with political dangers.

"I don't know what is the position of the current government as the latest amendment brought back secularism from the first constitution but did not abolish the provision of state religion, so there is a contradiction," said Professor Anisuzzaman.

"Bangladesh is a secular country but also provides for state religion.

"The government seems to favour both concepts, so that those who are in favour of state religion do not vote against the government," he added.

Asif Nazrul, a professor of law at the University of Dhaka, said that he did not think the government was particularly concerned about secularism or Islam.

"Their only issue right now is how to stay in power, and when that requires emphasising secularism, they will do that, and when that requires supporting Islam, they will stick to that," he said.

Shireen Huq, a leading women rights activist, thinks it is all about "political expediency".

"Once wording like this [in the constitution] has been introduced, it is difficult to remove it as it could have a reaction which the government is not prepared to face," she said.

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## **Bangladeshi Islamists threaten violence if Supreme Court drops Islam as state religion**

***The Hifazat-e-Islam Bangladesh group has called for a mass strike on Friday, warning that "Millions of Muslims will come out of mosques against the Supreme Court" and punish the judges. For Catholics and Hindus, the group's threats are "immoral"***

AsiaNews.it (23.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/25mtCJI> - The Islamic fundamentalist group Hifazat-e-Islam Bangladesh has threatened retaliation and a general strike if the Supreme Court seriously considers dropping Islam as the state religion.

The judges are currently holding public hearings to decide whether to repeal the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, which makes Islam the state religion.

"Bangladesh is a country where 92 per cent of the people are Muslim. If anybody removes our religion from the constitution, we shall oppose them. If the government and the Supreme Court do it, they will offend our religious sentiment," said the Hifazat-e-Islam Bangladesh Secretary Azizul Haque Islamabadi. Huge mass protest and people will follow with dire consequences.

The leaders of the Islamist group met in Chittagong. At a press conference, they expressed their opposition to the petition brought to the Supreme Court by activists, writers and educators.

The latter base their initiative on the fact that this sectarian element was absent from the country's first constitution in 1971. The eighth amendment making Islam the state religion came only in 1988.

For their part, fundamentalists call on Muslims to join a mass strike planned for this Friday. "If we become involved in protest over this issue, this government will responsible," Islamabadi said.

"Millions Muslims will come out to protest against Supreme Court," he added, "and will punish those who want to drop Islam as the state religion."

Hifazat and Bangladesh-Islam was founded in 2010 to challenge the government's secular education policy.

"We abide by the court, but we hope it will not take any decision which will force religious people to take to the streets and cause chaos in the country," Islamabadi noted.

Others told AsiaNews that the extremists' warning is "unfortunate." For one Hindu, the Islamists "are blind; they only think of themselves. They do not respect the Supreme Court and want a State of militants."

"Their demands are immoral," said Rosaline Costa, a Catholic activist. "The party has no legal basis or recognition by the State. Since it made its first public appearance in 2013, it has aroused a lot of controversy because it is fighting against the nation's progress, development and the empowerment of women."

The activist also pointed out that the first constitution signed in 1971 was based "on four pillars. One was the secular state. The eighth amendment was approved instead under the government of the military dictatorship (led by General Hussain Muhammad Ershad), but has never been accepted by the people. Therefore, the question of the legitimacy of this amendment should be settled. The government needs to move forward in its action."

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## **Bangladesh Hindu priest beheaded 'by Islamic State'**

***The so-called Islamic State group has said it was behind the beheading of a senior Hindu priest and wounding two worshippers in northern Bangladesh.***

BBC (21.02.2016) - <http://bbc.in/1Q4TLCF> - In a statement IS said that "caliphate soldiers" carried out the assaults using "light weapons".

The IS-linked Amaq "news agency" also reported the claim.

Jogeswar Roy, 45, was attacked by two assailants armed with pistols and cleavers at his home in the temple on Sunday, police say.

While the Bangladeshi government insists that IS is not active in the country, the jihadists in November said they carried out an attack on a Shia mosque in the north-western town of Bogra in which at least one person was killed.

The militant group also claimed an October grenade attack on a Shia shrine Dhaka, which killed one and injured 80 - although their claim was dismissed by the government.

IS has in addition said it was behind the murders of an Italian aid worker in September and a Japanese citizen in October.

### ***'Blood-stained cleaver'***

In the latest violence, police said that assailants on a motorbike attacked the priest in the remote northern district of Panchagarh with a sharp weapon, injuring two devotees who tried to help him.

"The priest was preparing for morning prayers when they pounced on him and decapitated him on the veranda of his home inside the temple," government administrator Shafiqul Islam told the AFP news agency.

"We recovered a blood-stained cleaver from the spot."

There have been a series of recent attacks on bloggers and religious minorities including Shias, Sufis, Christians and Ahmadis by hard line Islamist militant groups.

While attacks on foreigners remain rare, extremists have carried out a series of high-profile attacks on secular writers, hacking to death five bloggers - one a US citizen - in 2015.

Another militant Islamist group, the Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) is believed to be responsible for an assault on an Italian Catholic priest in the northern district of Dinajpur late last year.

Hindus comprise the Muslim-majority country's largest minority - about 10% of its 160 million population.

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## **Some 500 Christians go on a hunger strike over seized Church land**

***An historic pond owned by the St Peter's Church since 1849 is the bone of contention. Initially used for baptisms, it now serves the community as an important source of drinking water. The government wants to fill it in to build a courthouse. For years, the Christian minority has endured forced evictions.***

AsiaNews.it (12.01.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1nkFpge> - More than 500 Christians, mostly Protestants, held a protest on Sunday in front of Ashwini Kumar Hall in Barisal, south-

central Bangladesh. The demonstration over an historic Church-owned pond saw participants take part in a hunger strike (pictured).

"We organised the demonstration to protest against the government's decision to construct a building that would fill the pond," Fr Shanti Mondal, representative of the Church of Bangladesh, told AsiaNews.

The peaceful protest was held on Sunday in front of Ashwini Kumar Hall in Barisal. Several Catholic priests and representatives of various religions were among the demonstrators.

Fr Mondal noted that the pond has belonged to St Peter's Church since 1849. Initially used for baptisms, it now serves the community as an important source of drinking water.

"This is an historic pond, but local lawyers want to replace it with a ten-storey building. The government has taken this decision even though we have all the legal documents, and regularly pay taxes on the land."

Protesters formed a human chain and marched through the city, shouting slogans against land seizures. Afterwards, they presented a memorandum to the Deputy Commissioner.

"The Public Works Department filled in a 150-year pond to build the Judicial Magistrate Court in Barisal," the Christian leader said. "The action is completely illegal."

"Please, do not offend our religious sentiments," he pleaded.

For years, Bangladesh's Christian minority has been subjected to forced land seizures, most of which are carried out with various forms of violence.

Just a few days ago, a Catholic tribal man was torched to death probably in connection with a land feud.

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