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Notice: Undefined index: et_template in /home/hrwfe90/domains/hrwf.eu/public_html/wp-content/plugins/pdf-print/pdf-print.php on line 1216

BANGLADESH: Hare Krishna (ISKCON) in Bangladesh: why violence continues

Hare Krishna (ISKCON) in Bangladesh: why violence continues

Attacks against temples and murders of devotees are not the products of local mobs only. Some political forces believe they can benefit from them.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (30.03.2022) – <https://bit.ly/3LRPMw0> – Bitter Winter has already denounced the violence, which has included assaults on temples and murder, against the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), popularly known as the Hare Krishna Movement, in Bangladesh.

Unfortunately, the incidents continue. Police is currently investigating the March 17 assault of a mob of some 200 Islamic radicals against the Wari Radhakanta ISKCON temple located in Lalmohan Saha Street in Dhaka. They destroyed the southern wall of the temple, smashed statues, vandalized the premises, and looted money. A devotee was kidnapped and beaten, although he was later released. ISKCON claims that it called the police during the attack, but failed to obtain any support.

After the attack, the devotees submitted a detailed report to the police, identifying the mob leaders. The police promised to investigate, but whether effective action will be taken remains to be seen.

But why are the Hare Krishna devotees targeted in Bangladesh? After the Bangladesh genocide and India's help to establish Bangladesh as an independent state, the fact that Hindus had greatly suffered during the genocide was acknowledged. In 1972, independent Bangladesh vowed to build a state where the Muslim majority and the Hindu minority, then evaluated at around 13% of the population, would peacefully coexist. Despite decisions by courts of law the Hindus perceived as discriminatory, they trusted that the father of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, called Mujib in the country, would keep the promises made to them.

However, Mujib was assassinated during a military coup in 1975. His successors as Presidents gradually moved from secularism to a system where Islam was recognized as the state

religion. This system was opposed for obvious reasons by the Hindu minority, which was in turn targeted by the violence of Islamic extremists. The hotly contested 2001 elections brought to power a coalition that included Muslim fundamentalist parties. Hindus, who had overwhelmingly supported the coalition that lost the elections, were targeted by a campaign of violence. Hundreds of Hindu women were raped, shops owned by Hindus were looted, and dozens of Hindus were killed. Many escaped to India, reducing the Hindu population from 13% to 9%.

In 2009, Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Mujib, became Bangladesh's Prime Minister, a position she still holds today. She promised to act decisively against those who had murdered and raped Hindus. Some of them were arrested, convicted, and executed. The main Islamic fundamentalist party, Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, was banned in 2013. Hasina cultivated a warm relation with India, and reopened the files of the crimes committed during the genocide, for which leaders of the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami who had been collaborators of Pakistan in 1971 were executed in 2016.

During the COVID epidemic, however, Hasina also tried to improve the traditionally frosty relations with Pakistan, discussing with Pakistani authorities anti-COVID measures and other issues. Positions with Pakistan remain, however, distant on many issues.

ISKCON represents a brand of Hinduism whose devotees have reiterated, in face of violence and even murder, that they do not want to leave. They want to stay in Bangladesh and promote their message there. Without doubt, there are political forces that believe that fomenting sectarian hatred between Hindus and Muslims in Bangladesh would weaken the Hasina government, poison its relationship with India, and perhaps bring it closer to Pakistan or set in motion events that would lead to a different government. Attacks against ISKCON are not the product of local mobs only, and the inaction of the police

shows there are forces in Bangladesh believing they can profit from them.

Photo: Protests in the U.S. after the Wari Radhakanta ISKCON temple attack. From Twitter.

Massimo Introvigne (born June 14, 1955 in Rome) is an Italian sociologist of religions. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the author of some 70 books and more than 100 articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia* (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is a member of the editorial board for the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* and of the executive board of University of California Press' *Nova Religio*. From January 5 to December 31, 2011, he has served as the "Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions" of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). From 2012 to 2015 he served as chairperson of the *Observatory of Religious Liberty*, instituted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to monitor problems of religious liberty on a worldwide scale.

Further reading about FORB in Bangladesh on HRWF website

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Notice: Undefined index: et_footer_layout in
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