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Tension rising in the country ahead of major Hindu festival

The ruling Awami League is no longer a secular party that protects minorities, Hindu leaders allege

By **[Emran Hossain](#)**

UCA News (16.10.2023) - Tension ran high in Muslim-majority Bangladesh following hate speeches and violence targeting minority Hindus led to a confrontation between community leaders and the ruling Awami League government ahead of Durga Puja, the biggest annual Hindu religious festival.

On Oct. 15, a Hindu leader filed a case against 400-500 unidentified people for an attack on a protest rally of Hindus in Cumilla district in southeast Bangladesh.

Tapan Baksi, Cumilla unit secretary of Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC), the country's largest minority forum, filed a case alleging that three Hindus were hurt in the attack.

The Hindus were reportedly protesting against what they say was a "defamatory" remark by AKM Bahauddin Bahar, a Muslim lawmaker from the ruling party, during a public program on Oct. 4.

Bahar allegedly urged Hindus to hold "an alcohol-free Durga Puja," which enraged the community.

Baksi's statement claimed the perpetrators of the violence were members of the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) and Bangladesh Jubo League (BCL), the student front and youth wing respectively of the Awami League.

The attackers allegedly carried banners asking Hindus to celebrate the festival in a "chaste manner" frustrating Hindus further.

During the rally, the protesters also expressed their anger over another comment made by a Muslim politician in late September. Mohammad Faisal Biplob, mayor of Munshiganj, a central district, called the local lawmaker, Mrinal Kanti Das, a "malaun" – a slang term for Hindus.

On Oct. 15, separate Hindu groups threatened to enforce tougher movements over hate speeches and attacks on Hindus. They also accused the government of trying to incite violence during Durga Puja.

Hindu leaders say they are frustrated with the ruling party which failed to protect them by keeping pre-election pledges amid political tension and a sense of insecurity among minorities ahead of the upcoming national election.

"The minority people have now realized that AL, the party that boasts about its secular stance, often branding its opponents Islamists, is not their protector but attacker," Bikash Saha alleged.

On Oct. 15, the BHBCUC leaders threatened to toughen the movement if the attackers were not punished.

Cumilla Kotwali police station's officer-in-charge Ahammad Sanjur Morshed confirmed the filing of the case and the arrest of two men linked to the ruling party's front organizations.

Bangladesh Puja Udjapan Parishad, an apex Hindu religious body that oversees nationwide Puja celebrations, expressed its fear during a media briefing of a repeat of the [anti-Hindu violence](#) in 2021 when about 100 Puja venues were vandalized over rumors of Quran desecration.

Hindus have made preparations to celebrate the festival at 32,168 venues during the five-day Durga Puja beginning on Oct. 20, it stated.

In a written statement, the group said the celebration honors goddess Durga, who descended on earth to eliminate evil, but they are now "surrounded by evil" referring to the spread of communalism.

The group claimed that between October 2022 to this September, a total of 35 attacks on Hindu temples and properties were reported in the media. At least six were killed in the attacks.

Bangladesh Hindu Bouddha Christian Kalyan Front, another minority group, in a press conference held in capital Dhaka on Oct. 15 alleged that the ruling party might incite violence against Hindus during Durga Puja to frame its opponents ahead of the national election to be held by next January.

About 91 percent of Bangladesh's more than 169 million people are Muslims, according to the 2022 national census. About 8 percent are Hindus and the rest belong to other faiths including Buddhism and Christianity.

Who are supportive to religious minorities in Bangladesh?

It was Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government that successfully addressed all the legal issues of the vested property law regime by the year 2013

Salim Mahmud

[Dhaka Tribune](#) (12.06.2023) - Recently, six US Congressmen wrote a letter to the US President Joe Biden accusing the Bangladesh government of human rights violations, oppression of opposition leaders, and persecution of ethnic and religious minorities in Bangladesh. These allegations are false, fabricated, and devoid of any reality. We believe that this letter is the outcome of undue influence on the part of some vested interest groups in the context of the upcoming national elections in the country.

The leaders of the religious minorities in Bangladesh condemned this letter on the ground that the allegations of persecution of ethnic and religious minorities are not only false, but also ill motivated. The following facts and figures would adequately disprove the heinous and ill motivated allegations of persecution of ethnic and religious minorities in Bangladesh during the tenure of the Awami League government.

Bangladesh Awami League has been practising non-communal politics in the subcontinent since its inception in the late 1940s. Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who led the liberation struggle of Bangladesh, took the initiative to secularize Awami League and the erstwhile socio-political culture of this land. One of the core principles of Bangabandhu's liberation struggle was the principle of secularism and non-communalism. After the independence of Bangladesh, Bangabandhu adopted 'secularism' as one of the four fundamental principles of state policy.

After the assassination of the Father of the Nation along with his family members, the unconstitutional and illegal government of General Zia unconstitutionally undid the principle of secularism from the constitution and incorporated provisions in the constitution allowing religious politics in the country, amending article 38 of the constitution for their narrow political gains. All state practices were supportive to communal politics, which had an enormous influence in the broad socio-political-cultural canvass.

Subsequently, in line with General Zia's philosophy, another extra-constitutional regime of General Ershad continued to bring religion in state affairs for their narrow political gain and to perpetuate their rule. BNP-Jamaat's two government tenures led by Begum Khaleda Zia carried the legacies of the extra-constitutional military regimes in terms of supporting communal policies at all levels.

During this period, religious minorities, especially a significant number of the Hindu population, were subjected to oppression and repression. During the so-called elections in this period, the voters belonging to the Hindu religion were customarily obstructed from casting their votes as the incumbent regimes and their allies historically think that the religious minorities, including the Hindu population, are vote banks for the Awami League.

The daughter of the Father of the Nation Sheikh Hasina, after returning to Bangladesh in May 1981, started to lead a historic movement for restoration of democracy and rule of law in the country. The protection of the rights of the people belonging to religious minorities was an important feature of her movements. Her movements for establishing fundamental rights continued till she took the state power by winning the general elections in 1996 and beyond.

The population belonging to Hindu religion had a historic grievance with regard to land rights of a significant number of people belonging to them under the Vested Properties Act. This is a controversial law enacted during Pakistan period that allowed the government to confiscate property from individuals it deemed an enemy of the state. Before the independence of Bangladesh, it was known as the Enemy Property Act. The law was an instrument for taking away the lands of the Hindu population who went to India from 1965 to 1969. It was Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government who repealed the Vested Property Law by way of enacting the Vested Properties Return Act in April 2001 in the parliament while the opposition BNP and Jamaat members boycotted the session.

However, the BNP-Jamat government from 2001-2206 did not take any initiative to enforce the provisions of the new law and address the legal issues pertaining to it. Rather, they brought two amendments in the law in the year 2002 to create impediments for the enforcement of the 2001 law made by the Awami League government and to frustrate the objectives of the law. Even after the Vested Properties Return Act in April 2001, land encroachment involving Hindu land had continued during the BNP government as evident in many writings including that of Rabindranath Trivedi published in Asian Tribune on May 29, 2007.

It was Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government that successfully addressed all the legal issues of the vested property law regime by the year 2013, by way of necessary legal enactments, amendments, and executive orders with the satisfaction of the aggrieved people belonging to Hindu population.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government in 2011 through the 15th Amendment to the Constitution reintroduced the principle of secularism in the preamble of the constitution and thereby the state brought back its secular character. The incorporation of the principle of secularism in the preamble of the constitution overrides any provision in the constitution or elsewhere which is contradictory to the principle of secularism. The reason being that under constitutional law, if there is any conflict between the preamble and any provision in the body of the constitution, the provisions of preamble shall prevail. The Bangladesh Awami League government led by Sheikh Hasina has taken numerous legislative, administrative and policy steps for the welfare of the population belonging to religious minorities. Now people of all religions in Bangladesh stand on equal footing to enjoy the freedom to practise their own religions.

From August 1975, the Hindu population in Bangladesh were subject to oppression, repression and discrimination by the leaders, members, and beneficiaries of the regimes of General Zia and General Ershad. Owing to this, a number of the Hindu population were compelled to migrate to India. This anti-Hindu trend continued during the two tenures of Khaleda Zia. Apart from various oppressive and repressive events against Hindu population during Khaleda Zia's regime, discriminatory administrative orders have been passed by the government of Khaleda Zia. In 1993, the Home Ministry asked commercial banks to regulate withdrawal of cash by Hindus and stop disbursement of loans to the Hindu community in districts bordering India.

In October 2001, just after the national elections, BNP-Jamat leaders and activists unleashed a systematic campaign of violence against Hindus that went on for about 150 days. A judicial commission constituted by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government probing this violence documented about 18,000 incidents of major crime; about 1,000 Hindu women were raped and 200 were victims of gang rape. Many people fled to India. After forming government Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina took the initiative to bring the criminals into justice. In the light of the recommendation of the judicial commission constituted by her government, criminal cases were filed against every incident. Criminals were prosecuted; a good number of accused were sentenced to jail and others are still facing trials.

The government of Sheikh Hasina has taken effective steps to bring the religious minorities to the mainstream society and state affairs in terms of access to opportunities in public service and various sectors of the state. During the non-Awami League governments, people belonging to Hindu religion were subject to discrimination and deprived of equal opportunity and equity. Like the government of the Father of the Nation, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government fairly and equitably addressed the issue. She has adopted a just and fair policy and provided equal opportunities to the religious minorities in public services and other affairs.

As a result of her initiatives, a significant number of people belonging to Hindu religion are getting employment in public service and different sectors of the economy. It is only during the Awami government when persons belonging to Hindu religion have been appointed in important portfolios in the government and judiciary. During the Awami League government, many officials belonging to Hindu religion have been appointed in the highest positions in the civil service. The highest position in the judiciary was embellished for the first time by a person belonging to Hindu religion during Awami League government. The number of Awami League leaders belonging to religious minorities in the committees of different tiers of the Party (and its affiliated and sister organizations), in the Parliament and the Cabinet are historically commendable. This always reflects the true secular character of Bangladesh Awami League. Bangladesh Awami League has created an atmosphere in the country conducive and supportive to religious minorities and peaceful and harmonious coexistence of the people of all religions in the society.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina adopted a zero-tolerance policy towards terrorism and violence against people belonging to religious minorities. "Dhormo Jaar Jaar, Utsob Shobar," (Religion as per one's own, but festivals common to all)- is not only a mere slogan adopted by Awami League, but also a depiction of religious harmony in Bengali society and culture for hundreds of years. Our government always provides adequate protections during the festivals of religious minorities.

In 2006, the last year of the rule of Khaleda Zia (BNP- Jamat government), only 19,000 Durga puja mandaps were organised in the whole country, while in October 2022 a total 32,168 Durga Puja mandaps were organized across the country and went off peacefully. The significant increase of the number of Puja Mandaps during the Awami League government period signifies the fact that Awami League has been adequately supportive to organizing the puja festivals in terms of providing security and other facilities, and also reflects the Awami League government's overall commitment and support to the religious minorities in Bangladesh.

Unfortunately, in October 2021, some heinous incidents of targeted communal violence and acts of sabotage took place in Comilla, Chandpur, Noakhali, Feni and Rangpur. On October 13, 2021, the first incident of attack in a local temple in Comilla town was reported arising out of an unexpected incident which deems to be a part of a conspiracy to start communal terrorism. At the directive of the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the

Government took the incident into serious cognizance instantly and started taking all the necessary actions. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has directed all concerned in the government to take immediate steps to identify and arrest the criminals and bring them to justice and also to take preventive measures in order to protect the religious minorities especially the Hindu population. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also ordered to provide adequate compensation speedily to the affected people. The Government deployed Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) in 22 (twenty two) districts following tensions over the Cumilla incident. But several incidents of heinous attacks on Hindu temples occurred in the next few days in Chandpur, Noakhali, Feni and Rangpur and the most serious incident occurred in Noakhali. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has urged the Awami League leaders and activists to come down to the ground to resist the attacks on Hindu Mandirs and the houses and properties belonging to religious minorities. She has already sent high-powered teams of Awami League central Committee leaders to Cumilla, Hajiganj in Chandpur, Noakhali, Bashkhali in Chittagong and Pirganj in Rangpur. Prime Minister and Awami League President Sheikh Hasina has launched a number of party programmes nationwide to combat communal terrorism. The prime minister has directed all concerned to extend all-out support towards the Hindu community.

After the Comilla incident and some other heinous incidents of targeted communal violence and acts of sabotage, 71 criminal cases were lodged and more than 500 people were arrested on charges of communal attacks and violence all over the country. The police and the law enforcing agencies worked hard and conducted operations to arrest the accused people and the suspected ones.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has dismantled the regime of impunity in Bangladesh and instead established rule of law in the country. Her government responded instantly to every incident of communal violence in the country by way of bringing the criminal to justice, while the other governments actively indulged in these kinds of heinous acts. In the incident of attack on a Buddhist temple in Ramu in the year 2012, a total 300 people were arrested in the first week of the attack including the Upazilla Chairman of Naikhongchhari Tofael Ahmed (Jamaat leader) who was suspended from his position. The trials of the accused are continuing in the regular criminal courts and the state party (government) has been working hard as prosecution to ensure punishment for the criminals. In the Nasir Nagar incident in 2016, 53 suspects were arrested in the first two days of the incident and sent to jail. Government did not exempt anyone from the prosecution. The trial is going on in the regular courts.

It should be noted that because of the number of the courts as compared to the population size of the country, trials in the courts in Bangladesh generally take a considerable period of time for final disposal. Even the trial of the killers of the Father of the Nation and his family members took many years for final disposal.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina truly believes in secular and non-communal politics. Sheikh Hasina has said that "Bangladesh Awami League does not use the term minority as a nomenclature for religious minorities in Bangladesh. She mentioned that "we all are citizens of Bangladesh standing on equal footing and our constitution, laws of the land and the culture and heritage do not discriminate among our citizens on the grounds of religion, caste, creed, gender etc."

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has given stern warning to perpetrators of communal violence.

She said: "The incidents are being thoroughly investigated. Nobody will be spared. It does not matter which religion they belong to. They will be hunted down and punished." She further said, "They must be found. We did so in the past and will do it in the future,

too. They must face due punishment. Exemplary punishment will be given so that none can dare to engage in the future.”

We have the information that some political parties have been trying to have recourse to communal terrorism in order to dismantle the current political and economic stability of the country and to tarnish the image of Bangladesh outside world. It is substantially clear who could be the potential beneficiary to this atrocity. A number of authentic reports indicate that there had been a political motive to destabilize the government behind the recent communal violence.

The reports have clearly indicated that BNP and its allies and their activists and supporters have actively participated in the communal violence. After the first incident in Comilla, many BNP leaders through their social media IDs have instigated or indulged the common people to engage in communal violence. During the last ten years, BNP and its allies have used several methods of campaign to destabilize the government. Having failed in every method, they have had recourse to communal violence for this goal. Given the sensitivity of the socio-political-cultural ethos of South Asia, playing communal card was an easy task for them. However, because of the staunch and stringent position of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government in dealing and addressing the issue, the situation is under control of the government. The government has taken effective and adequate measures, both preventive and punitive, for the protection and welfare of the people belonging to religious minorities as well as for rendering justice to the victims and their families.

Dr Salim Mahmud is the information and research secretary to the Bangladesh Awami League

Hindus live in fear of attacks

Three incidents of violent attacks on members of the minority community last week left one dead and four injured

[UCA News](#) (12.06.2023) - Three incidents of attacks on members of Bangladesh's minority Hindu community last week have left one dead and four injured, just days after its leaders gathered in the national capital Dhaka and expressed fears about a potential upsurge in violence against them ahead of national polls next January.

“We live in an area where the simplest of reasons could end lives. We are conscious of it every moment, trying to avoid picking up a fight with the majority Muslims,” said Prano Das, younger brother of the murdered fish farmer, Dulal Das, 50, from Rajganj in Naokhali district in southeastern Bangladesh.

Noakhali is a coastal district that has a history of Islamist fanaticism. The district witnessed deadly riots that saw Hindus attacked, massacred, raped and Hindu properties looted and set ablaze in 1946 when Bangladesh was part of British India.

Dulal's body was found with its throat slit, while still seated in a green plastic chair under a tree keeping a night watch on his fish farm in the wee hours of June 9.

Local police arrested a suspect, Abul Hossain, within hours of the murder. He confessed to the crime after being spotted stealing fish from a neighboring pond by Dulal, police said.

The police are also searching for a drug addict who they identified as only Badsha, for assisting Hossain in committing the crime. He would frequent Dulal's property to consume drugs there and often taunt the Hindu man and his family, police said.

"Try to imagine how it feels like living in a place where simple matters could mean death," Prano said.

The Bangladesh Hindu-Buddhist-Christian Unity Council in a June 10 statement said such murders are hard to accept in a democratic country.

Monindra Kumar Nath, joint secretary of the Council, said: "Insecurity is a mild word to be used in this context and cannot explain the whole situation. These attacks happen routinely and the perpetrators of such attacks are rarely brought to justice."

On June 7, Apu Karmaker, the Hindu owner of a gold shop, was critically injured when stabbed during a robbery in a bustling market at Lakshmipur, located 137 kilometers southeast of Dhaka.

The injured man was shifted to a Dhaka hospital and underwent surgery while his brother, Tapan Karmaker, who accompanied him, kept worrying about the safety of the women in the family back home.

In an earlier incident, Suresh Majhi from Bhagyakul in Munshiganj district in central Bangladesh had to wait for three days to file a complaint with the police after his house was stormed, vandalized, and looted on June 5 by a Muslim mob.

Majhi and his wife were not home when the attack took place but his nephew, an employee and an Indian guest who were present were beaten up.

"There was no reason behind the attack," Majhi said, naming eight of the attackers in his complaint.

Hindus account for 8 percent of Bangladesh's more than 165 million people, according to the 2022 national census.

When the British partitioned India in 1947 along religious lines, West Bengal with a Hindu majority joined India and East Bengal (now Bangladesh) became part of Muslim-majority Pakistan. At that time, Hindus in Pakistan accounted for about 21 percent.

Activists say the attack on Hindus, often politically motivated, is a major factor behind the migration of Hindus to India and the decline of Bangladesh's Hindu population.

Last month, the annual United States International Religious Freedom report accused the Bangladesh government of failing to protect its minorities amidst atrocities that continued through 2022.

The report pointed out that the perpetrators of violence continued to enjoy impunity, saying that the government's nonchalance could at times be interpreted as favors to the perpetrators of minority attacks.

Photo: Leaders and members of minority groups march in capital Dhaka on Oct. 16, 2021, to demand justice for communal attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh. (Photo supplied)

2,500 booked for clashes over 'blasphemy'

***The violence was triggered by an alleged blasphemous post on Facebook
insulting Prophet Muhammad***

By [Emran Hossain](#)

[UCA NEWS](#) (05.06.2023) - Police in the Bangladeshi capital [Dhaka](#) charged some 2,500, mostly unidentified people, on June 4 for street violence triggered by an alleged blasphemous post on Facebook.

Police also also charged a man named Mohammad Sohel under the country's stringent Digital Security Act, for a post on social media that allegedly defamed Prophet Muhammad.

Police said they rescued Sohel from a mob of Muslims lynching him in the violence-hit Kafrul area of the city and hospitalized him at the state-run Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Sohel told journalists that he knew nothing about the post and claimed that his Facebook profile was hacked.

"Sohel has been accused in the case. There is evidence indicating his involvement in insulting the prophet," said Mohammad Abdul Baten, the officer in charge of Kafrul police station.

Baten said the case against more than 2,000 people included charges such as barring police from carrying out their duties, attacking police, and destroying public property.

At least 12 policemen were injured during a clash with local people, angered by the alleged social media post, said Baten.

The clash erupted after police rescued Sohel from the mob, who allegedly attacked him for making the post.

Baten did not clarify exactly what was written in the social media post.

In a third case, police named 28 people for attacking police. The identities of the men were not disclosed immediately.

Violence over alleged blasphemy involving Islam or its Prophet Muhammad occurs often in Muslim-majority [Bangladesh](#).

The attacks often are politically motivated, observers and activists say, adding that the investigations are mostly manipulated by the police to get political opposition party leaders and activists in trouble.

On May 23, a cyber tribunal sentenced a Hindu man to 10 years in jail in Rangpur district, some 300 kilometers north of the capital, for insulting Islam through a social media post that triggered an attack by 20,000 Muslims on his village of Hindu minorities in 2017.

Reacting to the Hindu man's conviction, leaders of Muslim groups said that the attackers of the Hindu village were spared, just as in other similar cases.

In September 2022, another Hindu man was jailed for seven years for insulting the Prophet Mohammad on social media.

Earlier in 2012 and 2016 Muslim mobs torched houses, temples, monasteries, and shops of Hindus and Buddhists over social media posts that were considered blasphemous.

In May, the US International Religious Freedom Report said that religious minorities face harassment in Bangladesh because of sweeping provisions to prevent blasphemy under the Digital Security Act of 2018.

Photo: A group of Muslims protesting against the blasphemous Facebook post in the Bangladeshi capital Dhaka in this 2019 image. (Photo; AFP)
