

## **Table of Contents**

- ***Radicalization driving discrimination and attacks against Christians***
  - ***Proposal for blasphemy law raises eyebrows in Bangladesh***
- 

## **Radicalization driving discrimination and attacks against Christians**

***With Islamist groups gaining political influence in Bangladesh, Church sources are increasingly concerned about the treatment of Christians and ongoing attacks on Catholic schools.***

[ACN](#) (14.11.2024) - In Bangladesh, Christians often struggle to find work, church construction projects are delayed, and the future of Catholic schools is under threat, according to a Church source who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons.

Speaking with Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), the unnamed source said that religious freedom, despite being guaranteed by the constitution, is not being respected.

ACN's contact added that "the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami party," which has ties to the government, "wants Islam to be the only religion in Bangladesh."

"The list of holidays has recently changed, and more Islamic feasts have become national holidays. Christians are demanding at least one day for Easter, which is not even listed properly as a holiday. During Easter, people have to go to work, and students have to sit for exams, so they cannot attend Mass and other celebrations."

The source explained that Christians cannot find employment in some parts of the country, and "the authorities are also making it difficult for us to build new chapels," by failing to issue permission on time.

ACN's contact said that Catholic schools and universities have also been targeted. A mob "controlled by Jamaat-e-Islami" torched a school, and similar mobs have been putting increasing pressure on Catholic institutions to replace the people in charge.

He said, "Their goal is to take over the administration of the school. They are demanding an Islamic dress code: the hijab for girls and the traditional *topi* for boys. They are trying to take over the school's managing committee and take control of the finances and everything else.

They are telling the schools that they don't want a particular priest, religious sister, or teacher there. In several schools, our religious administrators have been forced to resign. In one school, two sisters have been forced to step down. At a university, a priest has been forced to quit."

The source highlighted that the Church has set up an interfaith committee of legal experts and other leaders who have been instrumental in helping Christian communities “maintain a peaceful situation” and “appeal for justice.”

ACN has helped the Church in Bangladesh with the construction of schools, churches, monasteries, and convents, as well as providing vehicles for priests and supporting training programs for catechists. The source spoke about the importance of this support: “Catechists often help village leaders with public administration and management, as they are often more highly educated than the leaders themselves. We train our catechists in theology and Church teaching so that they can help run their communities well.”

He concluded, “Priests also receive Mass stipends from ACN. This is much needed, because income in many areas is very low, and Mass collections yield very little. God bless ACN for your help.”

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## **Proposal for blasphemy law raises eyebrows in Bangladesh**

***Hardline Islamic groups and political parties have been demanding a blasphemy law for years***

[UCA News](#) (22.03.2024) - Two judges of the Bangladesh High Court have triggered a national debate with their suggestion that the parliament may consider introducing a law against blasphemy with a provision for capital punishment.

On March 12, the two-judge bench of Rezaul Hasan and Fahmida Quader made the observation during the bail hearing of Selim Khan, who was accused of hurting religious sentiments.

The 20-year-old Muslim was accused of defaming Prophet Muhammad and Quran through a comment on Facebook last November. He was arrested and charged with hurting religious sentiments under the Cyber Security Act (CSA).

Hurting religious feelings was already a criminal offense under the British colonial era Penal Code of 1860 with two years of punishment and an undetermined fine.

Khan was granted bail on the condition that he must pay a bank guarantee of 2.5 million taka.

The judges recited verses from the Quran in the courtroom and rebuked Khan for his derogatory remarks, saying even some of the world’s greatest scientists never raised questions about the holy book.

“The judges wanted stricter punishment for hurting religious feelings and recommended to the parliament to introduce death and life sentences,” said AKM Amin Uddin, deputy attorney general.

“Concerned by a growing number of incidents hurting religious sentiments, the judges saw in them the potential to trigger riots,” he said.

The court also recommended making religious defamation a non-bailable offense.

Hardline Islamic groups and political parties frequently rallied on the streets demanding a stringent law against blasphemy in Bangladesh, where Muslims form some 90 percent of more than 170 million people.

It was surprising to see the judges backing such a law for the very first time, said Shahriar Kabir, a journalist and human rights activist.

“The ideology of political Islam is at the heart of the demand for a blasphemy law,” Kabir said.

Several Hindu, Christian and Buddhist leaders contacted for a reaction refused to comment, saying the issue was “too sensitive” or “risky.”

There are plenty of cases both online and offline where radical Muslim clerics and their followers publicly defamed other faiths including Hinduism and Christianity. None have been sued or punished so far.

Moreover, several [Hindu](#) and [Buddhist](#) temples and houses have been attacked and [vandalized](#) since 2012 using fake Facebook posts defaming Islam. None of the cases have delivered justice yet.

An upsurge in Islamic militancy since 2013 saw some 50 people including atheist bloggers, foreigners, liberals, academics and religious minorities brutally murdered before a government crackdown neutralized the extremists.

Observers say Bangladesh’s fall from a moderate Muslim nation in the past decades has been fueled by various factors despite a ban on religion-based politics after independence.

The change began to set in after 1975 when Bangladesh’s founding leader and first president Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated.

The military regime of Ziaur Rahman lifted the ban. Rahman later founded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the country’s second-largest political party after the ruling Awami League (AL).

Rahman also replaced the constitutional principle of “secularism” with “Absolute Trust and Faith in Almighty Allah” in 1979.

His successor and military ruler H.M. Ershad made Islam state religion as part of incentives to promote Islam to hold on to power until his ouster in a public uprising in the 1990s.

Allowing religion-based politics marked the revival of Islamic political forces, particularly Jamaat-e-Islami, the largest Islamist political party, which opposed Bangladesh’s independence and was accused of war crimes for supporting the Pakistan military by forming Islamic militia forces during the 1971 war.

Since the restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1991, BNP and AL rotated in power.

Jamaat allied with the BNP and formed the government in 1991-96 and 2001-2006.

In 1993, for the first time, former Jamaat secretary general and lawmaker Matiur Rahman Nizami placed a blasphemy bill in the parliament and proposed life sentence for defaming the Quran and the death penalty for insulting Prophet Muhammad. The bill was not eventually passed.

That same year, feminist writer Tasleema Nasreen drew the ire of Islamists after publishing a novel *Lojja* (Shame), which took a swipe at radical Islam. The book was immediately banned.

Hardline groups issued a fatwa (religious edict) against her and announced a bounty on her head. Nasreen fled to Europe and later settled in India. In 2002, a court sentenced her in absentia to one year in jail for "derogatory remarks about Islam."

In 2004, a prominent secular writer Humayun Azad was seriously wounded in a machete attack by militants near a venue of the country's largest annual book fair in Dhaka. Azad survived the attack, but he died in a hotel in Germany under mysterious circumstances.

In 2007, leading Bengali daily *Prothom Alo* suspended its weekly satire magazine, *Alpin*, after a cartoon titled "Muhammad" enraged Islamists, sparking street protests.

Meanwhile, the AL, which ruled the country from 1996-2001 and in power since 2009, has been accused of appeasing Islamic hardline groups to solidify its support base in rural Muslim electorates.

In 2011, the AL government amended the constitution to restore "secularism" as a key principle but did not change the state religion Islam despite demands from secular forces and religious minorities.

AL government also recognized a madrasa degree as equivalent to a graduate degree, a move hailed by the Islamists.

In 2013, when the militants started murdering atheist bloggers, AL ministers reprimanded bloggers by warning them "not to cross limits." A lack of security prompted dozens of atheist and liberal writers to flee the country and settle in Europe and the US.

The court's observations for a blasphemy law signifies deep-rooted political Islam in Bangladesh, said activist Kabir.