



## Conflict and Peacebuilding in Bangladesh: Religious Dimensions

In recent years Bangladesh has experienced some of the worst communal violence seen since the bloody Liberation War in 1971. Hundreds have been killed and thousands injured, with much of the violence directed at religious minorities. Hindu communities have borne the brunt of attacks; however, Buddhist and Christian communities have also been targeted. Though reliable data is piecemeal, in 2013 alone, 94 major incidents of violence against religious minorities were reported, with 202 temples and shrines vandalized and burnt.<sup>1</sup> Although violence against religious minorities has complex social and historical dimensions, much of the unrest has been sparked by recent political events, including the contested 2014 elections and the ongoing war crimes trials of Islamist political leaders.

**Given the religious dimensions of communal violence in Bangladesh, it is important to explore ways to engage with faith actors to mitigate violence and build peace.** This brief is intended to provide information on recent communal violence in Bangladesh and detail existing faith-inspired peacebuilding efforts on the ground.

### RELIGION AND POLITICS IN BANGLADESH: 2014 ELECTION VIOLENCE

**Considerable violent unrest occurred around the 2014 elections in Bangladesh, highlighting the complex role religion plays in national politics.** In the months leading up to the polls, the Awami League-led government cracked down on Islamist political elements, including revoking the registration of Bangladesh's largest Islamic political party, Jamaat-e-Islami (see Box 1), which has played kingmaker in past elections. When the Awami League refused calls for a non-partisan caretaker government to oversee the elections and facilitate the transition of power, all major opposition parties, including the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), chose to boycott the elections. The BNP, Jamaat, and their allies organized country-wide strikes in the months leading up to the elections, resulting in many violent clashes with police.

### VIOLENT INCIDENTS IN BANGLADESH (1977-2013)

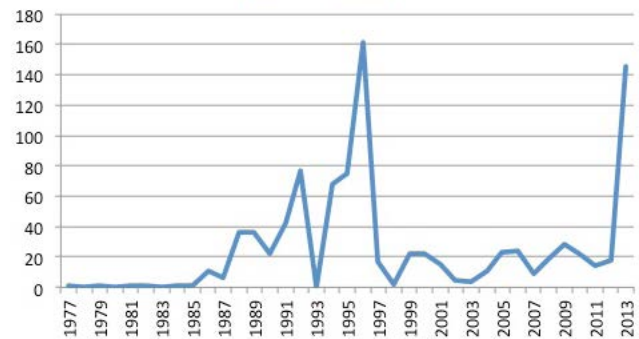


Figure 1 | Source: Global Terrorism Database, University of Maryland

### ROOTS OF CONFLICT IN BANGLADESH: DEEP DIVISIONS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

- **In post-independence Bangladesh, religion has been a central factor in entrenched political divisions between two competing national visions.** One perspective is ardently secular, advancing Bengali language and culture as the primary basis for statehood, while the other emphasizes Bangladesh's Muslim heritage and presses for an expanded role for Islam in public affairs, legal codes, and education.
- **Anxiety around societal changes that have accompanied Bangladesh's rapid economic growth has spurred the emergence of new conservative Islamic groups.** Issues such as education reform in madrassas and women's empowerment are particularly divisive.
- **Religious minorities, particularly Hindus, are often viewed by conservative political elements as reliable votes for the secular-leaning Awami League.** Historically much of the communal violence has been directed at pushing minority communities out of Bangladesh, thereby eliminating their electoral influence. Bangladesh's religious minorities have been steadily shrinking as a result of communal unrest.
- **Attacks against minorities are also motivated by property theft,** with some taking advantage of periodic instability to seize land and other assets from fleeing minorities.

**As in prior elections, Hindus and other religious minorities, because of their perceived support for the ruling Awami League, became the target of political frustration.** Hundreds of homes and shops owned by Bangladesh's minority Hindu community were vandalized in the lead-up to and aftermath of the elections. Though attacks took place across the country and estimates suggest that up to 5,000 families were affected by the elections-related communal violence.<sup>2</sup>

## THE INTERNATIONAL CRIMES TRIBUNAL (ICT) VERDICTS AND THE RELIGIOUS-SECULAR DIVIDE

**The International Crimes Tribunal was established in 2009 to try those suspected of war crimes during Bangladesh's 1971 Liberation War.** These trials have been at the center of recent unrest. The ICT was initially supported by international partners, but has come to be widely seen as a tool to purge political rivals of the ruling Awami League. To date, nine leaders of Jamaat and two members of the BNP have been indicted by the tribunals.

**The verdicts have elicited strong reactions from both politically liberal and conservative groups in Bangladesh.** On 5 February 2013 Jamaat leader Abdul Quader Mollah was sentenced to life in prison. Demonstrations began almost immediately involving leftists and secularists who considered the sentence too lenient and called for the death penalty. These demonstrations drew considerable support from youth and women and became known as the Shahbag protests for the area near the University of Dhaka where they were centered.

**Conservative and Islamist groups contended that the ICT was aimed primarily at settling political scores and staged counter protests** in the wake of the death sentence for Delwar Hossain Sayeedi on 28 February 2013. Several of these demonstrations turned violent and roughly 60 people were killed in clashes with police.<sup>3</sup> During this period several prominent secular bloggers who supported the Shahbag movement were targeted, most prominently Ahmed Rajib Haider who was killed as he left his home in Dhaka.

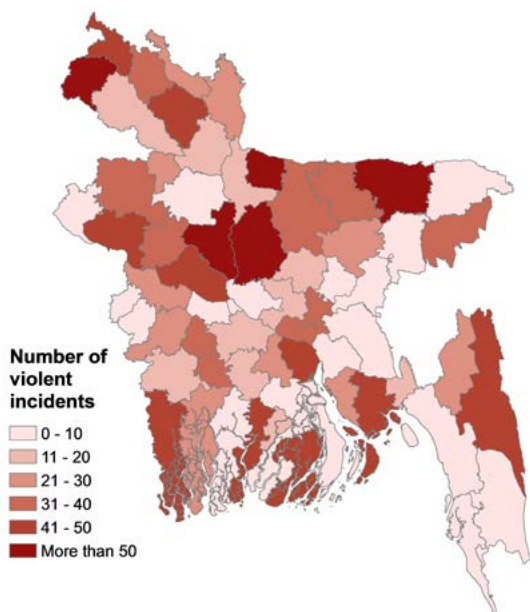
**Several new Islamist groups have arisen in response to the Shahbag movement and focused on ongoing societal changes, including madrassa reform efforts and changing economic and social roles for women.** The largest and most significant, Hefazat-e-Islami (Protectors of Islam), is an alliance of orthodox madrassa teachers and students

**JAMAAT-E-ISLAMI** is the largest Islamic political party in Bangladesh whose agenda includes the creation of an "Islamic state" and the implementation of sharia law through democratic means. Jamaat opposed Bangladesh's secession from Pakistan, and a number of its leaders are alleged to have participated in pro-Pakistan paramilitary activities during the Liberation War. After the ban on religious political parties was lifted in 1978, Jamaat successfully won seats in subsequent parliamentary elections. They entered a ruling coalition with BNP after the 2001 elections with Jamaat leaders assuming high profile cabinet positions. In August 2013, Bangladesh's Supreme Court revoked Jammata-e-Islami's registration, claiming that its charter, in placing God before state, conflicted with the country's constitution.

centered in Bangladesh's Chittagong region. The group has issued a list of 13 wide-ranging demands that include a ban on the public mixing of sexes, prosecution of atheists, and an imposition of the death penalty for blasphemy. On May 5, 2013 supporters of Hefazat-e-Islami launched a massive demonstration on the streets of Dhaka and other major cities around the country. The protest began a month earlier, when the group organized a "long march" toward Dhaka beginning in Chittagong, Sylhet, and Rajshahi in support of their 13 demands. Hefazat supporters rallied in Dhaka, in protests that became known as the "Dhaka siege." Protestors vandalized vehicles and shops and clashed with the police, with at least 50 protesters killed.<sup>4</sup> The violence spread to 20 districts in nearly every corner of the country.

**The government has responded to these events with a broad national crackdown on Islamist groups and other critics.** Human Rights Watch has documented incidents of police brutality, extrajudicial killings, and unlawful arrests of opposition activists, most of them supporters of Islamist groups, but also those associated with the Shahbag movement. They estimate that 150 people were killed and 2,000 injured by government security forces between February and October of 2013.<sup>5</sup> Several secular bloggers critical of the government were also arrested during the 2013 unrest, as were editors of opposition newspapers and the head of Odhikar, a leading human rights group.

**During late 2014, the Awami League government has taken steps to avoid future violence around the ICT by delaying verdicts and commuting some sentences despite pressure from their secular political base.** On September



**Figure 2 | Communal Violence February 2013–February 2014.**  
Source: Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council 2014

17, 2014, Bangladesh’s high court commuted the death sentence of Delwar Hossain Sayeedi to life imprisonment. Long delayed, a death sentence was handed down for Motiur Rahman Nizami, another Jamaat leader in October 2014, and Mis Kashem Ali was also sentenced to death just a few days later. Police were deployed around the country in anticipation of the verdict, and although protests took place across the country, immediate violence was minimal.

## VIOLENCE AGAINST BANGLADESH’S BUDDHIST MINORITY: THE RAMU ATTACKS

**Bangladesh’s Buddhist minority has also been a target of recent communal violence, most notably in one high profile incident in Ramu Upazilla.** The community, which comprises just 0.7 percent of the population (roughly 1 million people), is primarily located in the Chittagong region along the eastern border with India and Myanmar. In one of the worst attacks against Buddhists in recent memory, on the night of September 29th 2012, mobs burned more than 50 Buddhist-owned homes and 22 Buddhist temples.

**While hundreds of people were arrested in connection to the Ramu violence, the causes are unclear.** The violence was traced to the posting of an image on Facebook depicting the desecration of a Qur’an on a fabricated Facebook profile with a male Buddhist surname. While there were initial reports that Rohingya refugees, themselves fleeing religiously motivated violence in Myanmar, were among those involved in the attacks, these remain unproven.

## FAITH-INSPIRED PEACEBUILDING PROJECTS

**Several faith-inspired organizations have been actively engaged in peace efforts aimed at preventing communal violence and building social cohesion.** Many have been committed to supporting interfaith dialogue in Bangladesh for decades, and offer expertise and grassroots networks that could prove vital to future peacebuilding initiatives.

### Caritas: Justice and Peace Program

Bangladesh’s Catholic community has long been a leader in interfaith peacebuilding efforts. Caritas Bangladesh has designed peacebuilding components that are integrated into development projects. These components support interfaith interactions that promote greater understanding between religious communities. The Caritas Justice and Peace Program (JPP) began in 2002, and has reached about 4,000 male and 2,500 female participants, covering 623 villages in 52 districts. The program aims “to promote peace and reconciliation” in situations of violent conflict, providing human rights education for faith leaders from different faith communities, assisting victims of injustice in acquiring legal support, and ensuring care for migrants and street children. The activities associated with the project include seminars at parishes, and training for justice and peace activists.

### Mennonite Central Committee: Shanti Mitra

The Mennonites have come to be known as one of the most important “peace churches” globally because of their strong commitment to pacifism and social justice. MCC first began working in Bangladesh in 1970 in the aftermath of Cyclone Bhola, which killed nearly half a million people. In 2007 MCC launched Shanti Mitra (Friends of Peace) in partnership with Brothers of Taizé. The project is mainly volunteer-based and headquartered at Shanti Nir (The House of Peace) in Mymensingh District. Members are young and from a range of faith traditions and ethnic groups. Shanti Mitra Sangha gathers once a month to reflect on various peace-related topics and plan future projects. The meetings involve group meditation and readings from the different religious traditions. MCC also works to integrate peacebuilding and conflict transformation strategies into the daily lives of people across the country, by facilitating workshops and classes for students and employees of local NGOs. They organize events in the community that are focused on peace and justice, and work to translate and create original peacebuilding literature in the Bengali language.

## Ramkrishna Mission

Ramakrishna Mission is a society of Hindu monks founded by Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) and named for his guru, the 19th century Indian mystic Sri Ramakrishna who took a universalist outlook, declaring all religions to be true and valid means towards the same goal. Interfaith dialogue has long been a major preoccupation of the Ramakrishna Mission in Bangladesh. The Mission hosts several “Interfaith Meets” throughout the year, commemorating the births of Sri Ramakrishna, his wife Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda, which often draw hundreds of attendees. These events bring together faith leaders and scholars to explore some of the guiding ideals in their religions with the goal of contributing to better understandings within and between faith traditions. Ramakrishna Mission’s Dhaka headquarters hosted a special program of interfaith dialogue in January 2014 to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the birth of Swami Vivekananda.

## CONCLUSION

In contrast to some parts of the Muslim world, communal violence in Bangladesh is rarely inspired by radical religious ideology, but rather has roots in the country’s caustic post-independence political divisions as well as societal changes that have accompanied Bangladesh’s ongoing rapid economic transformation. Many Bangladeshis are quick to dispel any suggestion of inherent animosity or mistrust between religious communities, pointing to a long tradition of openness, tolerance, and shared traditions. Faith actors can and should play positive roles in peacebuilding in Bangladesh, both to reassert commitment to tolerance and counter the use of religion in political conflict.

There are several successful examples of faith-inspired peacebuilding in Bangladesh, some of which are profiled here. However, most are rooted in the country’s minority faith traditions and therefore have limited reach. Few influential Muslim actors are explicitly engaged in interfaith peacebuilding and this noteworthy gap will need to be addressed if lasting progress is to be made. The development community should work actively to engage ulamas and other faith leaders in strategies that seek to root the goals of peace and justice firmly in local faith traditions. Opportunities to increase grassroots inter-faith collaboration can be built upon established and trusted peacebuilding efforts already being undertaken by faith actors.

<sup>1</sup> Ain o Shalish Kendra. “Violence Against Religious Minorities: 2013 Overview.” 2014. <http://www.askbd.org/ask/2014/01/08/violence-hindu-community-2013-overview/>. Accessed 7 Nov 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Wadud, Mushfique. 2014. “Minorities targeted in Bangladesh political violence.” IRIN. <http://www.irinnews.org/report/99565/minorities-targeted-in-bangladesh-political-violence>. Accessed 3 June, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> BBC. “Bangladesh Deaths Rise as Jamaat Protest Strike Begins.” 2013. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-21646233>. Accessed 31 October 2014.

<sup>4</sup> The Economist. “Political Violence in Bangladesh: In Hot Blood.” 2013. <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21577418-killings-islamist-hardliners-promise-further-instability-hot-blood>. Accessed 31 October 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch. “Democracy in the Crossfire: Opposition Violence and Government Abuses in the 2014 Pre- and Post-Election Period in Bangladesh.” 2014.

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*THE BERKLEY CENTER FOR RELIGION, PEACE, AND WORLD AFFAIRS at Georgetown University, created within the Office of the President in 2006, is dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of religion, ethics, and public life. Through research, teaching, and service, the center explores global challenges of democracy and human rights; economic and social development; international diplomacy; and interreligious understanding. Two premises guide the center’s work: that a deep examination of faith and values is critical to address these challenges, and that the open engagement of religious and cultural traditions with one another can promote peace.*

*WORLD FAITHS DEVELOPMENT DIALOGUE (WFDD) is a not-for-profit organization working at the intersection of religion and global development. Housed within the Berkley Center in Washington, D.C., WFDD documents the work of faith-inspired organizations and explores the importance of religious ideas and actors in development contexts. WFDD supports dialogue between religious and development communities and promotes innovative partnerships, at national and international levels, with the goal of contributing to positive and inclusive development outcomes.*