

Religious Minorities and Indigenous Communities in Post-July 2024 Bangladesh

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CONTENTS

TABLE OF FIGURES	
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	
INTRODUCTION	5
1. HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND INDIGENOUS GROUPS IN BANGLADESH	6
1.1 RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN BANGLADESH	
1.1.1 <i>EXISTING LEGAL FRAMEWORK</i>	
1.1.1.1 STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES AND LEGAL PROTECTION	
1.1.1.2 STATE VIOLENCE AGAINST RELIGIOUS GROUPS	
1.2 INDIGENOUS GROUPS IN CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS	
1.2.1 <i>STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES AND LEGAL PROTECTION</i>	
1.2.2 <i>DISCRIMINATION AND VIOLENCE AGAINST INDIGENOUS GROUPS</i>	
2. 2024 NATIONAL ELECTION AND ATTACKS ON MINORITIES	12
2.1 2024 ELECTIONS	
2.2 ATTACKS ON MINORITIES DURING THE 2024 ELECTIONS	
3. 2024 JULY REVOLUTION AND FALL OF SHEIKH HASINA	14
3.1 HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS DURING THE JULY REVOLUTION	
3.2 FALL OF SHEIKH HASINA	
4. RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND INDIGENOUS GROUPS AFTER THE JULY REVOLUTION	17
4.1 THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH OF THE JULY REVOLUTION	
4.1.1 <i>INTERIM GOVERNMENT</i>	
4.2 POLITICAL SHIFT AND RELIGIOUS MINORITIES	
4.2.1 <i>CONTINUED VIOLENCE ON HINDU MINORITIES</i>	
4.2.2 <i>MISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS AND RISING HINDU NATIONALISM</i>	
4.3 POLITICAL SHIFT AND INDIGENOUS GROUPS	
4.3.1 <i>COMMUNAL VIOLENCE IN THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS</i>	
4.3.2 <i>LEGAL NON-RECOGNITION AND CULTURAL ERASURE</i>	
4.4 LEGAL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND INDIGENOUS GROUPS	
CONCLUSION	29
LEGISLATION	
REFERENCES	

TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Religious Composition of Bangladesh.

Figure 2: The aftermath of the 2012 violent attacks in Ramu, Cox's Bazar, showing debris scattered around a Buddhist temple. Source: © The Daily Star, 2022/ Ashutosh Sarkar.

Figure 3: An alliance of 12 parties in support of BNP's election boycott. Source: © Mahmud Hossain Opu/Al Jazeera, 2024.

Figure 4: Tear gas was fired by the Bangladeshi Police to disperse the protesters on 18th July 2024. Source: © Munir Uz Zaman/AFP/Getty Images, 2024.

Figure 5: Bangladesh Student Protest 2024, by Fearless Collective via Flickr, 2025. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/141594748@N07/>.

Figure 6: Bangladesh Armed Forces, by Mehedi Hasan via Pexels, 2024. <https://www.pexels.com/photo/bangladesh-armed-forces-27641504/>.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Awami League	AL
The Annual Development Programme	ADP
Bangladesh Nationalist Party	BNP
Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist and Christian Unity Council	BHBCUC
Bangladesh Hindu Jagran Manch	BHJM
Chittagong Hill Tracts	CHT
International Society of Krishna Consciousness	ISKCON
International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs	IWGIA
Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh	RSS
The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights	OHCHR
The Digital Security Act	DSA
Work Group for Indigenous Affairs	IWGIA

INTRODUCTION

Since Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971, the country has witnessed a continuous struggle between democratic aspirations and autocratic resurgence. This tension reached a critical point during the 2024 national elections, marking one of the most controversial political transitions in the country's history. After 15 years of leadership, the world's longest-serving female prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, fled to India in self-imposed exile following months of protests. Her premiership, characterised by widespread repression of dissent, accusations of electoral fraud, silencing critics and systematic violations of civil liberties, catalysed national unrest, which ended with the "July Revolution". The power vacuum created by this transitional period and the absence of a functioning law enforcement system exposed minorities, particularly Hindus, Ahmadiyya Muslims, Buddhists, Christians and the indigenous groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) to widespread attacks and human rights violations (OHCHR, 2025, p. 3).

Following the July Revolution, religious minorities and indigenous groups became disproportionately affected by scapegoating, exclusion, and hate crimes. Attacks on homes, places of worship, and businesses – often driven by a combination of religious, ethnic, political (revenge violence against Awami League supporters), and communal motives – revealed both the ineffectiveness of state institutions and the enduring legacies of discrimination (OHCHR, 2025). While the interim government, led by Muhammad Yunus, has promised reforms, aimed at building an inclusive, non-sectarian democracy, issues such as the persistence of civil unrest and mob violence, the systematic impunity of state institutions, and broader geopolitical tensions with neighbouring India still require attention to drive meaningful change.

The report critically examines the status and rights of religious minorities and Indigenous communities in the wake of the July Revolution. It traces the historical processes that shaped their political marginalisation by evaluating structural inequalities and legal shortcomings both before and after the July revolution. It further examines the ongoing efforts by the interim government and situates the conditions of minority communities within the broader context of Bangladesh's prospective political change.

1. HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND INDIGENOUS GROUPS IN BANGLADESH

1.1 RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is a South Asian country with a population of approximately 165.7 million (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Around 91 percent of the people in Bangladesh are Sunni Muslims, and approximately eight percent are Hindus, which makes them the largest religious minority in the country. There are around 400,000 Roman Catholics and nearly one million Theravada-Hinayana Buddhists. In addition, Bangladesh has a small number of Shia Muslims, Ahmadi Muslims, Baha'is, animists, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), agnostics, and atheists.

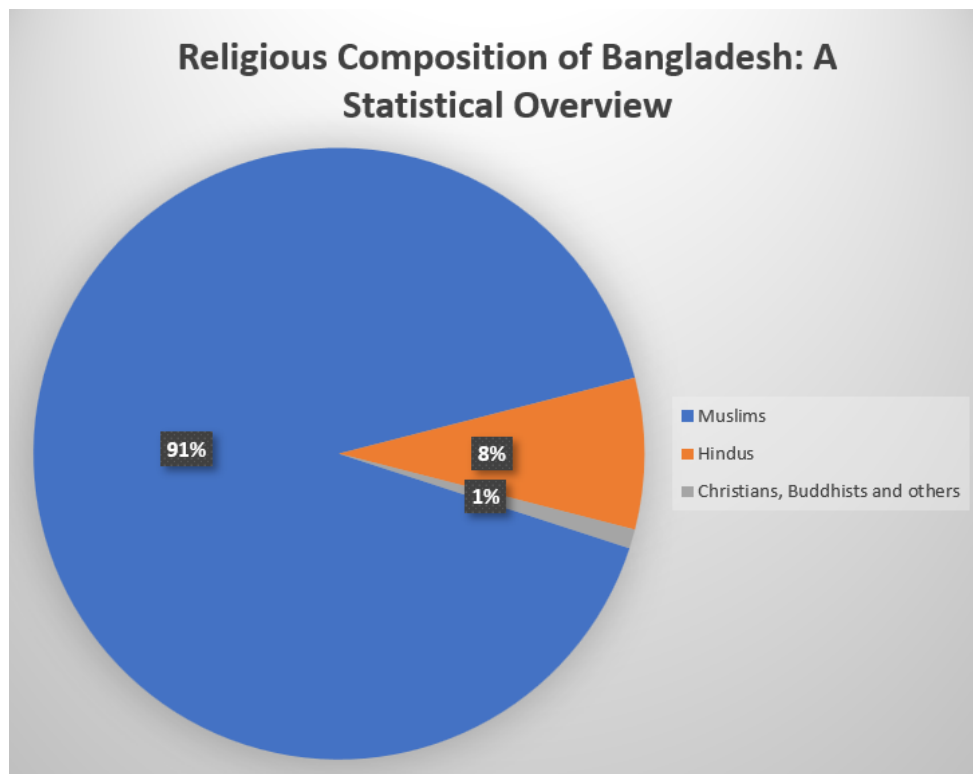


Figure 1: Religious Composition of Bangladesh

1.1.1 EXISTING LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Bangladesh has no legal definition for the terms “religious minority” or “indigenous people” (The lawyers & jurists, n.d.). Similarly, there is no single universally agreed-upon legal definition of “indigenous people” under international law. The indigenous people are commonly addressed as ‘*Adibashi*’, ‘*pahari*’, or ‘*Upazati*’. In many official documents, they are referred to as ‘Tribal’, and in government documents, they are addressed as ‘Aboriginals’. Certain laws, such as The Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council Act, 1995 (Act No. 12 of 1995) and rules 6, 34, 45, and 50 of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation, 1900 (Regulation

I of 1900), explicitly refer to them as ‘indigenous’. Additionally, in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), the government has recognised them as “ethnic minorities” (The lawyers & jurists, n.d.).

Under its constitutional framework, Bangladesh recognises Islam as the state religion while simultaneously mandating the assurance of equal standing and equivalent entitlements for the practice of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and other faiths (Nafiz, 2024). The Constitution explicitly prohibits the granting of political privileges based on religious affiliation and bans the formation of political parties grounded in religious identity (Islam & Huda, 2016, p. 2). It further enshrines the entitlement to profess, practice, or propagate any religion, subject to constraints imposed by statutory provisions, public order, and moral considerations.

Furthermore, it vests religious communities or denominations with the authority to establish, sustain, and administer their ecclesiastical institutions. The Constitution stipulates that no individual enrolled in an educational establishment shall be compelled to partake in religious instruction, ceremonies, or worship incongruent with their personal beliefs. In addition, the constitution restricts freedom of association when such association is constituted with the objective of undermining religious, social, and communal concord among the citizenry or fostering discrimination on religious grounds (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

Under Section 295A of the Penal Code, 1860, expressions or actions undertaken with a deliberate and malicious intent to offend religious sensibilities are liable to pecuniary penalties or incarceration for a term not exceeding two years. Although the penal code does not provide a precise delineation of such prohibited intent, judicial interpretation has extended it to encompass affronts to the Prophet Muhammad. Section 99 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898, empowers the state to seize all copies of any periodical, journal, or other publication containing verbiage that engenders animosity and discord among the populace or disparages religious convictions. Analogous restrictions are imposed upon digital publications.

While no discrete blasphemy statute exists, authorities have previously invoked provisions of the Penal Code, alongside sections of the Information and Communication Technology Act, 2006, and the Digital Security Act, 2018, to prosecute individuals for conduct perceived as derogatory to Islam (U.S. Department of State, 2023). The Information and Communication Technology Act, 2006, penalises various forms of online expression, including indecent content, utterances likely to precipitate a decline in law and order, and declarations affronting religious sensibilities. Similarly, the Digital Security Act, 2018, proscribes the dissemination or transmission of any data impairing religious values or sentiments, denies bail to those detained, and escalates punitive measures upon conviction to a maximum of ten years' imprisonment. Importantly, the Information and Communication Technology Act, 2006, and the Digital Security Act, 2018, have been repealed.

1.1.1.1 STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES AND LEGAL PROTECTION

Since the partition of 1947, religious minorities in Bangladesh, encompassing Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and other communities, have endured persistent marginalisation through both state-sanctioned policies and private actions (Oikya, 2020, p. 78). A unifying thread in these practices is the invocation of religion, i.e., whether to uphold the state's designated faith or to assert individual religious identity as a justification for perpetuating disorder. For instance, the Enemy Property (Custody and Registration) Order of 1965 empowered the state to seize assets from those classified as enemies of the state.

During the 1965 Indo-Pakistani conflict, the Pakistani government identified Hindus as adversaries, initiating widespread confiscation of their properties. This legislative measure not only facilitated state appropriation but also emboldened private individuals, inspired by governmental precedent, to unlawfully occupy properties belonging to religious minorities, often despite the absence of abandonment by their rightful owners. Consequently, the law precipitated an extraordinary forced exodus of the Hindu population from what was then East Pakistan, with an estimated daily displacement of approximately 600 individuals since 1964.

Discriminatory legislative measures continue to persist in the contemporary context. In 2004, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led (BNP) administration amended the Registration Act of 1908 by introducing Section 78A(b), which stipulated a nominal registration fee of 100 Bangladeshi Taka for property gifts made by Muslims, while omitting any provision for religious minorities (Oikya, 2020, p. 79). Consequently, non-Muslim communities were compelled to register such transactions based on the land's market value, incurring significantly higher fees. This disparity was later rectified in 2012 through the insertion of Section 78A(bb), which equalised the registration fee for gifts by religious minorities.

Among the various instances of systemic discrimination, the constitutional amendments of the late 20th century stand out as particularly significant. The Fifth Amendment of 1978 introduced the phrase "Bismillah-Ar-Rahman-Ar-Rahim" into the preamble, replaced the principle of secularism in Article 8 with "absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah", and excised Article 12, which had guaranteed secularism and religious freedom in the original 1972 Constitution (Oikya, 2020, p. 79). Subsequently, the Eighth Amendment of 1988 formally enshrined Islam as the state religion. These amendments marked a significant shift toward an anti-minority state policy, undermining the constitutional protections previously afforded to religious minorities.

1.1.1.2 STATE VIOLENCE AGAINST RELIGIOUS GROUPS

In 1990, the demolition of the Babri Mosque in India by Hindu extremists triggered retaliatory violence in Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka, where Muslim groups targeted temples, deities, residences, and other properties of religious minorities (Oikya, 2020, p. 78-79). Conservative estimates from that year document the destruction of approximately 28,000

homes, 2,500 commercial entities, and 3,500 religious sites, alongside the gang-rape of nearly 2,400 women and the deaths of 700 individuals as a result of the violence sustained during these attacks.

The ramifications of these foundational changes reverberated through subsequent events, such as the communal violence in Ramu in 2012 and the unrest following the January 2014 national election (Oikya, 2020, p. 79-80). In many instances, the state adopted a posture of inaction in response to private aggressions against minority communities, even in minor incidents. This confluence of state policies and private actions has precipitated a marked decline in the religious minority population. According to data published by the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist and Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC), religious minorities constituted 29.7 percent of East Pakistan's population in 1947 (Prokash, 2014, p. 5-8).

Following the 1971 liberation war, this figure decreased to 14.6 percent by 1974, and at present, only 9.6 percent of Bangladesh's population belongs to these minority groups. This demographic shift underscores the enduring impact of systemic and societal discrimination on the vitality of religious minority communities in Bangladesh.



Figure 2: The aftermath of the 2012 violent attacks in Ramu, Cox's Bazar, showing debris scattered around a Buddhist temple. Source: © The Daily Star, 2022/ Ashutosh Sarkar

1.2 INDIGENOUS GROUPS IN CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS

The ethnic minorities in the Chittagong division and the northern part of Bangladesh do not generally belong to the Muslim faith (U.S. Department of State, 2023). The indigenous people of Chittagong are mostly Buddhists. On the other hand, the Garo community in

Mymensingh and the Santal in Gaibandha are predominantly Christian. Nevertheless, Bengali and ethnic minority Christians live across the country.

A total of 49 different indigenous communities reside across Bangladesh, encompassing both hilly areas and plains (The lawyers & jurists, n.d.). The indigenous communities constitute almost 2 percent of the total population of the country and are spread across 23 districts. The communities believe in the 'Spirit' that controls nature and their lives. Religion is not a personal phenomenon for them. However, they express their religious feelings in a communal, rather than individual way. Thus, a strong interrelationship exists between their religion and social structure.

1.2.1 *STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES AND LEGAL PROTECTION*

The Constitution of Bangladesh lacks explicit provisions addressing the rights and status of indigenous peoples, despite their possession of distinct cultural identities, heritage, social customs, organisational structures, languages, rituals, norms, and beliefs, which have been present within the territory for centuries (The lawyers & jurists, n.d.). Relative to the dominant societal groups, these communities experience comparative disadvantage across social, economic, and political domains, raising questions about their national identity.

In the original 1972 Constitution, Article 6(2) designated all citizens as "Bengali", a provision later subject to amendment. During parliamentary debates in 1972, Mr. Manabendra Narayan Larma, founding leader of the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti and then member of parliament of Bangladesh, challenged this classification, questioning the identity of indigenous peoples if all citizens were uniformly labelled as Bengali (Ahmed, 2022). In response, President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman reportedly remarked, "Tora Banglai Hoye Ja" i.e. "Become Bengali" (The lawyers & jurists, n.d.). Subsequently, under General Ziaur Rahman's administration, the Constitution was amended to redefine all citizens as "Bangladeshi", a shift that, while broadening the national identity, failed to acknowledge the distinctive characteristics of indigenous groups.

The 1972 Constitution, in its original form, enshrined under Article 9 the primacy of the Bengali language and nation as foundational to the state's identity. It simultaneously incorporated secularism under Article 12 while permitting the free exercise of religion and recognising minority scripts. However, the emphasis on Bengali nationalism proved contentious for the leadership of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), who found it incompatible with their aspirations. Furthermore, Article 28(1), which imposes a negative obligation on the state to refrain from discrimination based on religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, appears inconsistent with Article 9's exclusive focus on Bengali nationalism, highlighting an internal contradiction within the constitutional framework.

Scholar Tone Bleie has argued that General Zia's reorientation of nationalism from "Bengali" to "Bangladeshi", coupled with an emphasis on Islamisation, deliberately overlooked the political sensitivities surrounding indigenous peoples' issues (The lawyers & jurists, n.d.). Certain interpretations have sought to locate recognition of indigenous groups within Articles 28(4) and 29(3)(ka), which refer to "backward sections of the population". Yet, this construction prompts critical inquiry into the concept of "backwardness". From a human rights perspective, the term carries inherently discriminatory connotations and invites further scrutiny: What constitutes "backwardness"? What criteria define it? Why are certain groups designated as such, and who possesses the authority to adjudicate this status? The label "backwardness" itself is pejorative and fails to affirmatively acknowledge the existence of indigenous peoples within the constitutional text.

Kamal Hossain, the principal drafter of the 1972 Constitution, has conceded on multiple occasions that the concerns of indigenous peoples were not given specific priority during the formulation of the Constitution. He has advocated for their explicit recognition as "Indigenous Peoples" within a designated constitutional clause (The lawyers & jurists, n.d.). Indigenous communities have long demanded such recognition, asserting that its absence impedes the government from undertaking affirmative measures to progressively address their challenges. They contend that this omission may perpetuate violations of their rights. Successive administrations, however, have demonstrated minimal inclination to amend the Constitution in this regard, nor have they issued policy papers or official declarations affirming indigenous identity. On the contrary, government representatives have frequently claimed that no indigenous peoples exist in Bangladesh, often categorising these groups in administrative records as "Upazati" or "Tribal".

Notably, an online survey indicates that 70.09 percent of respondents favour constitutional recognition of indigenous peoples, underscoring significant public support for reform (The lawyers & jurists, n.d.). Despite this, the absence of governmental action continues to marginalise these communities within the legal and political framework of Bangladesh.

1.2.2 *DISCRIMINATION AND VIOLENCE AGAINST INDIGENOUS GROUPS*

The Annual Development Programme (ADP) constitutes the primary mechanism through which governments implement developmental initiatives. Given that indigenous communities, often referred to as "Adivasis", experience pronounced disadvantages and marginalisation in the realms of social, political, and economic rights and opportunities, their integration into mainstream society and the safeguarding of their entitlements ought to be a priority for governmental policy. Addressing economic disparities between indigenous populations and their non-indigenous counterparts should emerge as a central focus of ADP resource allocation.

However, evidence suggests a pattern of discriminatory distribution, particularly when examining per capita ADP allocations for indigenous peoples residing in the plains and hill tracts relative to the national populace (The lawyers & jurists, n.d.). In the fiscal year 2007-08, the per capita ADP allocation for the general Bangladeshi population stood at 26,500.00 (original), whereas the utilisation as per IMED's Report was 18,419.03 BDT (Bangladesh Economic Relations Division, 2022). However, indigenous communities in the plains received a mere 88.17 BDT per capita (The lawyers & jurists, n.d.). This stark disparity underscores an inequitable approach to resource distribution.

Research further reveals an absence of targeted allocations within the ADP framework for critical areas such as education, the empowerment of indigenous women, or the enhancement of market access for indigenous groups (The lawyers & jurists, n.d.). Block allocations designated for plains-based indigenous communities remain negligible and lack significance. Notably, ADP documentation fails to explicitly identify these groups as "Adivasis", further obscuring their distinct needs. Despite the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) designating 23 percent of land for indigenous use, these communities consistently receive disproportionately smaller land allocations. Moreover, development assistance to the three hill districts in the 2008-09 budget reflected a reduction of 25 crore Taka compared to prior allocations, a trend that has reportedly intensified over time.

The educational attainment of indigenous populations remains markedly below the national average. While the national net enrolment rate stands at 87 percent, indigenous communities lag significantly behind (The lawyers & jurists, n.d.). However, the access to education for indigenous groups doubled during the 1990s relative to the 1980s; however, it remains significantly below optimal levels. Only 53.36 percent are enrolled between the age group of 6-10 from the Chittagong Hill Tract area. This percentage highlights the persistent barriers to educational equity. Compounding these challenges, indigenous peoples frequently encounter harassment from government officials, particularly in matters pertaining to land rights, further entrenching their socio-economic exclusion.

The legal disenfranchisement of indigenous communities is another significant concern. The failure to fully implement the CHT Peace Accord, combined with increased militarisation in the region, has led to widespread human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings (The lawyers & jurists, n.d.).

2. 2024 NATIONAL ELECTION AND ATTACKS ON MINORITIES

2.1 2024 ELECTIONS

The 2024 national elections in Bangladesh were held amidst a tense political climate marked by allegations of electoral fraud, violence, and widespread suppression of opposition voices. The ruling Awami League (AL) secured another term in power, but the elections were

marred by accusations of voter intimidation, mass arrests, and suppression of dissenting voices. Leading up to the elections, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the principal opposition party, called for a boycott, raising concerns over electoral transparency. Their demand for a neutral caretaker government was rejected, leading to widespread protests and clashes with law enforcement (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

The government responded with mass arrests of opposition leaders and activists, shutting down internet access in key regions and imposing restrictions on press freedom. International observers, including the European Union and the United States, raised concerns about the fairness of the elections. Human rights organisations reported the extensive use of force by security personnel against protestors, raising fears of state-led repression (Amnesty International, 2023). The elections not only highlighted the deep political divide within the country but also exacerbated the plight of religious and ethnic minorities, who found themselves increasingly targeted during this period.



Figure 3: An alliance of 12 parties in support of the BNP's election boycott. Source: © Mahmud Hossain Opu/Al Jazeera, 2024.

2.2 ATTACKS ON MINORITIES DURING THE 2024 ELECTIONS

Historically, Hindu communities in Bangladesh have been disproportionately affected by electoral violence, and the 2024 elections were no exception. Between January 4th and 13th, 2024, at least 13 incidents of violence targeting minorities were reported (Kamal,

2024). These attacks resulted in one death and left 37 people injured. The homes of minority community members, particularly those belonging to the Hindu community, were vandalised and looted in multiple districts. Many victims alleged that these assaults were carried out by political supporters emboldened by the post-election climate of impunity.

Further intensifying concerns, the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC) released a report documenting over 1,045 incidents of human rights violations against minority communities in the previous year alone (BHBCUC, 2025). These violations included murder, physical assault, land grabs, and desecration of places of worship. The BHBCUC report stated that at least 45 people belonging to minority groups were killed, and over 164 individuals were physically attacked. The report also mentioned that 61 temples and religious institutions were vandalised during this period.

3. 2024 JULY REVOLUTION AND FALL OF SHEIKH HASINA

3.1 HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS DURING THE JULY REVOLUTION

The government's response to the protests was marked by the excessive use of force. Security forces, including the police and military, employed live ammunition against demonstrators, resulting in significant casualties (Abid et al., 2024). The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that approximately 1,400 individuals were killed between July 1st and August 15th, 2024, with over 100 of them being children. Arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances were also prevalent during this period. Interim leader Muhammad Yunus estimated that as many as 3,500 individuals may have been forcibly abducted during Sheikh Hasina's 15-year rule, with a significant number occurring during the protests (OHCHR, 2025).



Figure 4: Tear gas fired by the Bangladeshi Police to disperse the protesters on 18th July, 2024. Source: © Munir Uz Zaman/AFP/Getty Images, 2024.

Amid the chaos, religious minorities, particularly Hindus and Christians, became targets of violence. Mobs attacked Hindu homes and temples, leading to deaths and displacement (Abid et al., 2024). Christians also faced persecution during this period. Radical groups exploited the unrest to attack Christian communities, especially converts, resulting in the burning of homes and house churches, forcing some believers to go underground.

Indigenous communities in the CHT faced renewed violence during and after the protests. In September 2024, coordinated attacks by Bengali settlers resulted in the looting and burning of homes and businesses, leading to multiple deaths and injuries among the Jumma indigenous people (Sunuwar, 2024).

3.2 FALL OF SHEIKH HASINA

Throughout her tenure, Sheikh Hasina systematically dismantled democratic institutions to consolidate power. Her government was frequently accused of suppressing political opposition, most notably targeting the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami. Opposition leaders were jailed on dubious charges, while thousands of political activists were subjected to arbitrary arrests (Abid et al., 2024). The Digital Security Act (DSA), introduced in 2018, was widely used to silence critics, journalists, and human rights activists. Many opposition members went missing, with law enforcement agencies like the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) accused of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. In 2021, the United States imposed sanctions on RAB and several senior

Bangladeshi security officials for their involvement in human rights abuses (Beddall & Chowdhury, 2021).

Hasina's administration was repeatedly accused of electoral fraud. In the 2018 general elections, international observers raised concerns about widespread vote-rigging, ballot stuffing, and voter suppression (The Daily Star, 2019). The ruling Awami League secured an overwhelming majority, winning 288 out of 300 seats in Parliament, raising suspicions of manipulation (U.S. Department of State, 2019). The 2024 elections, originally scheduled for December, were marred by allegations that Hasina was preparing to rig the polls again. These suspicions fuelled public anger, contributing to the intensity of the protests.

Corruption also plagued Hasina's government. According to the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2022, Bangladesh was ranked as the second most corrupt country in South Asia, highlighting cases of embezzlement, bribery, and nepotism involving high-ranking officials (Transparency International, 2022; Iftakharuzzaman, 2023). The 2016 Bangladesh Bank cyber heist, where \$81 million was stolen, was linked to individuals with ties to the ruling party. Additionally, members of Hasina's family were accused of amassing vast fortunes through illicit means (OHCHR, 2025).

Sheikh Hasina's tenure was also marked by gross human rights violations, including the violent suppression of minority communities and opposition groups. In 2013, her government was accused of massacring over 60 protesters during the Hefazat-e-Islam demonstrations. Security forces carried out mass detentions and used lethal force against unarmed civilians (OHCHR, 2025).

During the Rohingya refugee crisis in 2017, Bangladesh initially welcomed refugees fleeing genocide in Myanmar. However, Hasina's administration later faced accusations of mistreating Rohingyas, confining them to isolated camps with restricted movement. Reports of forced repatriation surfaced in 2022, with refugees being coerced into returning to Myanmar despite ongoing threats to their safety (OHCHR, 2025).

The July 2024 protests further exposed Hasina's disregard for human rights. Security forces killed over 1,400 demonstrators, while thousands were detained without trial (Dhaka Tribune, 2025). Testimonies from human rights organisations detailed cases of torture, sexual violence, and extrajudicial killings committed by security personnel. The UN and the International Criminal Court (ICC) began investigating allegations of crimes against humanity, with some officials calling for Hasina to be prosecuted for state-sponsored violence (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

4. RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND INDIGENOUS GROUPS AFTER THE JULY REVOLUTION

4.1 THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH OF THE JULY REVOLUTION

On August 5th, 2024, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled to India on a military aircraft after the deadly anti-government demonstrations. More than 1,000 people, including 100 children, were estimated to have been killed by her security forces during the July Revolution and subsequent attacks following her removal (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Crucially, the country's critical political upheaval left religious minorities and indigenous groups as the primary victims of targeted attacks and public scapegoating, which also continued to surge after Hasina's resignation.

According to the Bangladeshi non-governmental and minority rights group Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC, 2024), there were a total of 2,010 incidents of communal violence from August 4th to 20th that took place across 68 districts (out of 76) and metropolitan areas, resulting in nine deaths (pp. 3-4). The attacks directly affected 1,705 families, out of which 34 represented indigenous communities (p. 4). The incidents also included attacks, vandalism, and looting of 69 places of worship belonging to Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and indigenous communities, 915 attacks on houses and 953 on business establishments. Among the affected families, 157 experienced looting, vandalism, and setting fire on both their houses and business establishments, leaving them in extreme hardship (p. 4).

In order to review the Council's claims, Bangladeshi police conducted an investigation and published a report in January 2025 documenting 1,769 reported cases of attacks on minorities. Out of these cases:

- 1,234 were identified as **politically motivated** (98.4 percent).
- 20 were confirmed as **communal** in nature (1.59 percent).
- 161 claims were found to be **unsubstantiated** ("Bangladesh Minority Council", 2025).

The police report also stated that 1,452 (82.8 percent) of these cases occurred on August 5th alone, following Sheikh Hasina's fall ("Police Investigations", 2025). Based on the most recent and credible sources, the attacks on minorities and indigenous groups were driven by a combination of religious, ethnic, communal, and political biases (OHCHR, 2025). The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights's (OHCHR, 2025) report covering the period between July 1st and August 15th found that:

Different and often intersecting motives drove these attacks, ranging from religious and ethnic discrimination to perceived opportunities for revenge against Awami League supporters among

minorities, local communal disputes, including about land, and interpersonal issues [...]. The violence often involved property destruction, arson, and physical threats, compounded by insufficient police responses, suggesting systemic impunity and potential political motives (p. 55).

Some of the attacks were also carried out by perpetrators participating in “victory processions” marking the downfall of the former government (p. 56). The breakdown of the police system and opportunity for revenge violence led violent mobs to seize the opportunity to attack and loot police stations, assault journalists, and vandalise TV stations, particularly targeting AL’s presumed supporters (OHCHR, 2025). Attacks were particularly prominent in historically tense and rural areas such as Thakurgaon, Lalmonirhat, Dinajpur, Sylhet, Khulna, and Rangpur, as well as the areas considered supportive of the AL (OHCHR, 2025). As reported by OHCHR, approximately 3000 to 4000 Hindus from villages sought refuge in India; however, the affected families were turned back by India’s Border Security Forces (BSF).

Indigenous communities in the CHT became more vulnerable during this period. Despite their growing support and activism in the July uprising, the majority of Bengalis accused them of being loyal to the Hasina government. Damage to places of worship, temples, and shrines occurred in addition to increased intimidation after August 5th – some of which were linked to actions by the Bangladesh military and Bengali settlers in Chittagong Hill Tracts (OHCHR, 2025).

Despite the successful political shift from the 15-year authoritarian regime dominated by the AL, religious minorities and indigenous groups in Bangladesh have remained vulnerable. The power vacuum created by this transitional period and the absence of a functioning law enforcement system exposed minorities to human rights abuses, particularly Hindus, Ahmadiyya Muslims, Buddhists, and Christian communities, and indigenous groups in the CHT (OHCHR, 2025). In the month following the revolution, reports of continued violence, intimidation, and forced displacement persisted, raising concerns about the long-term security and rights protection of these communities (BHBCUC, 2025). While the state is still in the process of ongoing reforms, it is important to evaluate the persistent challenges and violence towards marginalised communities that still shape the political landscape in Bangladesh.

4.1.1 INTERIM GOVERNMENT

On August 8th, 2024, the interim government led by Nobel laureate Mohammad Yunus took over. Yunus received support from the student groups and claimed to represent a more democratic alternative to Hasina's 15-year authoritarian regime. Upon taking office, Yunus promised to enact democratic reforms and establish a more inclusive, non-secretariat, non-discriminatory Bangladesh. In his speech at Begum Rokeya University in Rangpur in August, Yunus condemned the ‘heinous’ attacks on minority groups and called on students to

ensure the protection of minority groups and strengthen resistance to their efforts (“Muhammad Yunus”, 2024). Yunus stated, "Are they not the people of this country? You have been able to save the country; can't you save some families?... You must say - no one can harm them. They are my brothers; we fought together, and we will stay together " (“Are They Not Citizens of this Country?”, 2024).

The interim government took several steps to restore the law enforcement system and halt the increasing civic unrest and vigilantism. On September 12th, it established six commissions to reform key sectors, including the police sector, electoral system, judiciary, anti-corruption system, public administration, and the Constitution (“Govt Forms Six Commissions”, 2024). It later also established four commissions to make policy recommendations on media, health, women’s rights, and labour rights (Human Rights Watch, 2025, p. 5).

Additionally, the interim government set up a hotline and dedicated a WhatsApp number to receive information about attacks on religious institutions, properties, and businesses and provided assurance that the perpetrators would be punished. The number of arrests was at least 100, related to 115 cases filed involving violence against minorities since August 4th, as announced by the interim government in January (OHCHR, 2025).

Nevertheless, the process of democratic transition remained complicated by the deeply ingrained politicisation of state institutions – a legacy of Sheikh Hasina’s rule – which enabled security forces to act with impunity. During the first two months of the interim government's rule, police reportedly resumed abusive practices by targeting perceived supporters of the Awami League. Over 1,000 cases were filed against them, with charges ranging from murder to corruption and other crimes (Human Rights Watch, 2025, p. 5). The interim government also faced serious challenges in maintaining law and order and protecting minorities from targeted attacks.

4.2 POLITICAL SHIFT AND RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

4.2.1 CONTINUED VIOLENCE ON HINDU MINORITIES

According to the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC, 2025), there were a total of 2,184 attacks on minorities from August 4th to December 31st 2024:

[...] 32 murders, 133 attacks on places of worship, 13 cases of sexual abuse and rape of Hindu and Indigenous women, 906 incidents of attacks, vandalism, looting, and arson on homes and businesses, 47 cases of land and business occupation, 38 incidents of physical assault, and 15 arrests on allegations of so-called religious disrespect (BHBCUC, 2025).

The Unity Council also reported 96 attacks on minorities and indigenous groups, including 11 killings, 25 attacks on temples, vandalism, and looting of businesses and homes in January and February 2025 (BHBCUC, 2025).

The situation of the Hindu minorities since the July revolution has been particularly challenging due to their perceived political affiliations with Sheikh Hasina's system. Under Hasina, the AL often leveraged pro-Hindu sentiments to secure support from India. The fall of her regime created a new set of vulnerabilities for the Hindu communities due to their stereotypical association with the previous government. Hindu minorities experienced an increased sense of insecurity and the threat of communal violence in addition to huge financial losses, displacement and concerns over rising Islamist extremism.

Following the fall of Sheikh Hasina in August, Hindu minorities organised large-scale protests in Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka, and in Chittagong, the second-largest city (Tiwari, 2024). In response to the targeted attacks, Hindu activists were demanding laws on minority protection, the allocation of 10 percent of the parliamentary seats for minorities, the establishment of tribunals to prosecute the oppressors of minorities and the establishment of minority ministries in addition to calling for a Five-day break for Durga Puja, the biggest festival for Hindu community (Marof, 2024; Tiwari, 2024). The protests were supported by Muslim communities joining demonstrations, and rallies to express solidarity with minority groups.

During the Durga Puja celebrations in October, reports indicated increasing attacks on Hindu religious institutions, homes and businesses. According to the Economic Times (2024), attackers reportedly targeted puja mandaps and an idol immersion procession, leaving three people injured in Old Dhaka. ("Durga Puja Festival", 2024). In addition, the incidents involved temple vandalism, damaging Durga Puja idols and a notable case of a crown theft from the Jeshoreshwari Kali temple in Satkhira, which was gifted by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in 2021.

The situation of Hindu minorities worsened in November 2024, prompting thousands of Hindus to rally against the interim government following the arrest of Hindu religious leader Chinmoy Krishna Das. Das is a Hindu monk who has been associated with the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), a Hindu religious organisation and served as a spokesperson for the *Bangladesh Sammilita Sanatani Jagran Jote*, a coalition advocating for the rights of the Hindu community.

Beyond his religious roles, Das has been an active advocate for Hindu minority rights, particularly in the aftermath of Hasina's resignation. He has been the centre of controversy after the arrest based on sedition charges for allegedly raising a saffron flag above Bangladesh's national flag during the Chittagong rally ("Who is Chinmoy Krishna" 2024). On November 27th, his arrest sparked widespread protests and violent clashes between the police and Das's supporters, which resulted in the death of a Muslim lawyer named Saiful Islam Alif, who worked as an assistant public prosecutor. As of January 2025, Das remains in

custody, with courts denying his bail applications. Additionally, his arrest and the subsequent legal proceedings have also drawn international attention and exacerbated Bangladesh's relations with neighbouring India over the protection and safety of Hindu minorities (Ethirajan & Farooquee, 2024). According to the Human Rights Watch (2025, p. 6), the authorities filed 19 additional sedition charges related to desecrating of the national flag, highlighting ongoing restrictions on freedom of expression.

Similarly, the attacks on Hindu minorities were concerned with the allegations of blasphemy. In December, attacks targeted villages like Monglargaon, which became a site of violence and a “microcosm of communities' deep insecurities”, with at least 20 Hindu homes being attacked (Marof, 2024). A 17-year-old man, Akash Das, became a victim of accusations of blasphemy by allegedly posting a derogatory comment about the Quran on Facebook (Marof, 2024). The spread of the post in the Muslim-majority community of Dowarabazar (270 km away from Dhaka) escalated tensions, leading to a violent mob attacking and looting his property even though he had already been arrested by the police under the “Cybersecurity Act” (Marof, 2024). The “Cybersecurity Act” has increasingly become an effective tool to disproportionately target religious minorities and particularly Hindus.

The rise in violence and persecution along with increasing charges of blasphemy and sedition, underlines the persistent cultural, social, and structural vulnerabilities and ongoing restrictions on the freedom of expression faced by Hindu minorities. The incidents reflect a broader pattern of marginalisation and systematic discrimination that persists under the interim government. Although the state is still undergoing reforms, the attacks continue to undermine the physical safety of Hindu minorities as well as their cultural and religious institutions, threatening the religious freedoms in a Muslim majority Bangladesh.

4.2.1 MISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS AND RISING HINDU NATIONALISM

According to the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC) press releases in September 2024 and January 2025, attacks on religious minorities and particularly Hindus have been rising since the July revolution. The motives behind such attacks remain the biggest point of contention. This is due to rising disinformation and misinformation campaigns, which deepen the discrimination and divergence in Bangladeshi society, increasing a sense of insecurity and fear. The historical politicisation of Hindu communities and their issues has been particularly exploited in the ongoing debates about the targeted attacks and anti-Hindu violence.

The investigations by the Unity Council into the killing of nine Hindu men in August have drawn particular scrutiny from Netra News, an independent investigative journalism platform. The outlet reported that “none of the deaths bore clear signs of religious or sectarian

motives. Instead, seven of the fatalities resulted from a mix of political retribution, mob violence, and criminal homicides” (Shatil, 2024). Religious motives in attacks on Hindu minorities were also questioned by the interim government’s chief adviser, Mohammad Yunus, asserting that the attacks have been “exaggerated” and linking them to political motives instead of communal targeting (“Attacks on Hindus, 2024).

He also highlighted the increasing misinformation campaigns and exaggerations of minority situations by Indian media and accused the Indian government of destabilising the interim government and its efforts (“India-Bangladesh Relations”, 2024). In his comment with Al Jazeera, the 29-year old Hindu Pharmacy owner stated that: “Hindus in Bangladesh are facing a twofold problem (...) On one hand, Indian media spreads disinformation and exaggerates incidents, some of which never even happened. This fuels anti-India sentiment, which, in turn, contributes to a feeling of insecurity among us, the Hindus” (Marof, 2024). A 42 years old Banker from Dhaka added that “In Bangladesh, attacks on minority groups have become common when transition in power occurs (...) But the way some particular Indian media, aligned with BJP, are twisting the ground reality and spreading a climate of fear doesn’t help us here” (Marof, 2024).

The political denial and downplaying of attacks from Yunus not only exacerbates the insecurity of the Hindu minorities but also raises issues of legal accountability of the interim government to tackle the increasing violence and marginalisation of Hindus in Bangladesh. This stance has not only worsened relations with the Indian government but also led the international community to question the government’s handling of the situation.

There is also a rise in Hindu nationalism or Hindutva ideology in Bangladesh's Hindu population. Organisations such as Bangladesh Hindu Jagran Manch (BHJM), closely associated with India’s Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) – a far-right paramilitary organisation – have surfaced to advocate for Hindu cultural nationalism (Mostofa, 2025). As reported, the organisation and its activities are very similar to India’s Hindu Jagran Manch (closely related to RSS), as indicated by the use of controversial chants and the cross-border influence of India’s Hindutva movement (“Rise of BJP’s Hindutva”, 2024).

4.3 POLITICAL SHIFT AND INDIGENOUS GROUPS

4.3.1 *COMMUNAL VIOLENCE IN THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS*

Indigenous communities in the CHT have long faced systematic issues concerning land conflicts. The violence was particularly exacerbated in the aftermath of Hasina’s fall. Despite the indigenous groups' active participation in the July revolution protests, these groups were perceived as loyal to the previous system and faced increased intimidation and harassment from Bengali settlers in the CHT.

During the July revolution and its aftermath, indigenous communities demonstrated their activism through graffiti campaigns. Their activists in the CHT mainly addressed local concerns, particularly calls for demilitarisation. In response, the military focused on removing the graffiti and arresting activists in an effort to suppress dissent, further discouraging them from broader mobilisation as the fear of harsher crackdowns rose (OHCHR, 2025). Attacks also targeted the places of worship, churches and shrines.

There have been reports of attacks, looting, vandalism, and arson in at least 20 areas across the northern region since August 5. These incidents occurred in various districts, including Rajshahi, Naogaon, Dinajpur, Thakurgaon, and Chapainawabganj. In addition, houses belonging to the Santal community were set on fire and looted in Pipalla Santal village of Birol upazila, Dinajpur. The Dinajpur district administration acknowledged the vandalism and looting of indigenous homes. However, it remains unclear whether any action has been taken against those responsible. (Dewan, 2025).

On September 18th, 2024, the death of Mohammad Mamun, a Bengali settler with a criminal history, sparked outrage against the indigenous Jumma communities in the Khagrachari and Rangamati districts. A mob of Bengali settlers subjected the Jumma communities to attacks on their homes, businesses, and shops. Bengali settlers and Bangladeshi army launched attacks resulting in 142 properties, including Buddhist temples, being looted, destroyed, and set on fire and 75 Indigenous Jumma being injured (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2025). Following the attacks, Jumma students protested and blocked the Khagrachari-Panchari road, leading to tensions with military personnel. The witnesses alleged that the military opened fire, in the death of two indigenous youths and leaving nine injured (Sunuwar, 2024).

On the February 24th, 2025 the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA, 2025) submitted a written statement to the United Nations Human Rights Council, highlighting the systematic impunity of the Bangladeshi army in the targeted attacks as well as the interim government's non-implementation of CHT accords. IWGIA emphasised the failure of a previously established high-level committee, which was intended to investigate and publish the report on the human rights violations regarding the September incidents (IWGIA, 2025). It also urged the UN Human Rights Council to intervene with regard to the interim government and to ensure that the perpetrators are held accountable. As the report states:

Dr Mohammed Yunus's government failed to make the only inquiry commission it established since it came to power public (...). As it is a matter of urgency, we urge the interim to make a clear roadmap of implementation for the elected government to carry forward. The implementation of the CHT Accord is imperative to ensure peace for the Indigenous Peoples who have suffered for too long. (IWGIA, 2025).



Figure 5: Bangladesh Student Protest 2024, by Fearless Collective via Flickr, 2025.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/141594748@N07/>



Figure 6: Bangladesh Armed Forces, by Mehedi Hasan via Pexels, 2024.
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/bangladesh-armed-forces-27641504/>

4.3.2 *LEGAL NON-RECOGNITION AND CULTURAL ERASURE*

The cultural erasure of indigenous communities persists under the interim government due to the ongoing and novel structural policies in place. On January 15th, 2025, violent attacks targeted the indigenous students and rights activists who were protesting against the removal of the term *Adivasi* (Indigenous in Bangla) from the 9th and 10th grade school textbooks. Controversy arose around an image in the textbooks depicting the word *Adivasi* together with Muslim, Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist terms on five leaves of a tree,

accompanied by the inscription ‘it is forbidden to pluck the leaves’ – symbolising the unity and diversity of Bangladesh (Corraya, 2025).

However, the picture sparked protests by the members of Students for Sovereignty, an Islamist student group, in front of the National Curriculum and Textbooks Board Office, claiming that such recognition of indigenous groups would serve the broader separatist agenda and would threaten Bangladesh’s territorial sovereignty (Corraya, 2025). The resulting removal of *Adivasi* from the textbook highlighted the sustained systematic erasure of indigenous identity and violation of the human rights commitments of the interim government.

The events were followed by protests from indigenous students’ groups and activists, demanding constitutional recognition and protection of their district’s heritage and culture (Cultural Survival, 2025). The peaceful protests turned into violent clashes between the indigenous group activists and Students for Sovereignty, leaving 20 people injured and two detained (Mizan & Rahama, 2025). Following the events, IWGIA called for the indigenous people’s right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly and urged the interim government to stop the systematic cultural erasure and the denial of the legal recognition of indigenous communities.

4.4 LEGAL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND INDIGENOUS GROUPS

The fall of Hasina’s government marked a major political shift in Bangladesh. However, this transition has yet to reflect meaningful improvements in their legal and political rights. The indigenous communities in the CHT remain vulnerable due to the ongoing communal attacks by illegal Bengali settlers and the Bengali army. The interim government’s electoral reform commission has been established to promote democratic inclusion and dismantle Bangladesh’s centralised power structures. However, issues remain regarding the legal rights and political representation of marginalised groups.

On January 15th, 2025, the Electoral Reform Commission submitted recommended reforms of institutional changes to the interim government. The commission recommended the deletion of Articles 8, 9, 10, and 12 of the Constitution, based on the fundamental principles of state policy. More specifically, the commission recommended replacing the fundamental principles of “secularism, socialism, and nationalism” with “equality, human dignity, social justice, pluralism, and democracy”. The commission’s inclusion of democracy as a guiding principle, alongside socialism and nationalism, could be seen as an attempt to shift the political landscape towards a more inclusive model.

However, given that approximately 90 percent of Bangladesh’s population is Bengali Muslims, with Islam still designated as a state religion, concerns persist about the protection

of religious minorities and their freedoms. The principle of secularism in the Bangladesh Constitution ensured non-discrimination against a particular religion (article 12) as well as the “elimination of abuse of religion for political purposes” (Article 12). ‘Secularism’, which has been in place since the 1971 liberation war, particularly aligns with major democratic principles gradually undermined by the major religion-based parties in Bangladesh.

This constitutional change is compounded by the lifting of the ban on the largest Islamist party, Jamaat-e-Islami, which has been prohibited from participating in elections under the Anti-Terrorist Act, resulting in a clear rise in Islamist radicalisation. Jamaat-e-Islami has a historical track record of violence against religious minorities and a promotion of Sharia law as the state’s guiding principle. The proposed removal of secularism, combined with the reversal of bans on a party that has previously threatened secular and democratic principles, has drawn the attention of regional observers, who warn it may foster radical ideologies and escalate internal tensions (Pratap, 2025). This development has therefore ignited debates about religious freedoms in the context of a rapidly changing environment marked by rising religious extremism.

In a country like Bangladesh, with its rich history of interfaith harmony, secularism is the bulwark against extremism and sectarianism. It ensures that all citizens, regardless of their religious affiliations, have equal rights and opportunities. Secularism also supports the idea that religion is a personal matter, and should not interfere with the functioning of the state. [...] Having a fixed state religion is contradictory to both pluralism and secularism. A state that claims to uphold pluralism but privileges, at least on paper, one religion over others inherently creates an unequal structure where minority religious communities do not have the same standing. True pluralism requires a secular foundation where no religion is given preferential treatment in the constitution or governance (Raihan, 2025).

The electoral commission also recommended the inclusion of the following provision: “Bangladesh is a pluralistic, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multilingual, and multicultural country where the coexistence and dignity of all communities” (Constitutional reform commission, n.d). The principle of plurality is crucial to the democratic transformation the country is currently undergoing. In essence, the principle of plurality guarantees equal representation of diverse voices. However, two issues arise: 1. The constitutional non-recognition of Indigenous communities; 2. The continued failure to include religious minorities and indigenous communities in decision-making processes during constitutional reforms, limiting their representation.

1. The communities in the CHT are considered ‘indigenous’ by the United Nations human rights mechanisms; however, the Bangladeshi government still rejects the term and recognises them as ‘ethnic minorities’. The term ‘Adivasi’ or ‘indigenous’ was misleadingly defined as ‘aboriginal’ by the AL. This twisted definition persistently raises hesitations over the inclusion of the term in the Bangladesh constitution and undermines Indigenous people’s right to be legally recognised, despite pluralism and inclusivity being upheld as guiding principles (Dewan, 2025). Violent attacks targeting Indigenous students and the removal of *Adivasi* from the school textbooks, combined with the Bangladeshi army’s impunity in

violating Indigenous rights, highlight the continuation of the state's long-standing inaction in recognising the rights and freedom of Indigenous communities. It further questions the interim government's promise to create an indiscriminate, pluralistic, and more democratic state.

2. The interim government's constitutional reformation processes remain concerning in terms of including religious minorities and indigenous groups. This procedure mirrors the similarly elite-driven approach of the previous government by excluding religious groups such as Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, indigenous groups in CHT, ethnic minorities such as Chakma and Garo people, and linguistic minorities such as Biharis (Khan, 2025). It also undermines the principle of plurality and reverses the exclusionary policies that have been deeply entrenched in Hasina's government, neglecting the importance of inclusive dialogue in Bangladesh's polarised political context (Khan, 2025). International human rights groups, including IWGIA, have urged the interim government to promote constructive dialogue and ensure the substantive inclusion of indigenous people in the constitutional reform processes (IWGIA, 2025).

CONCLUSION

After seven months of ruling, doubts about the legitimacy and potential democratic alternative have risen. To date, the situation of indigenous communities and religious groups in Bangladesh remains challenging. Continued cultural and social discrimination is reflected by both communal attacks on minorities and discriminatory structural policies of the interim government. Despite the ambitious recommendations provided by the electoral commission,

the interim government has not substantively included minorities in state reform processes while also limiting their political and legal representation.

Moreover, the downplaying of religious motives in targeted attacks on Hindu minorities and the removal of secularism from the state constitution raise questions about the legitimacy and potential of a democratic transition in Bangladesh. For the future of religious minorities and indigenous communities, increasing the political representation of minority groups and initiating constructive dialogue remain crucial in order to ensure the sustainable democratic transition and long-term protection of minority rights.

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The Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council Act, 1995 (Act No. 12 of 1995).

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