

BANGLADESH 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution designates Islam as the state religion but upholds the principle of secularism. It prohibits religious discrimination and provides for equality for all religions. On March 12, a Bangladesh Speedy Trial Tribunal convicted and sentenced to death four Muslim defendants of the group Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB), a violent extremist group accused in the 2016 killing of a Hindu priest. The government continued to provide guidance to imams throughout the country on the content of their sermons in its stated effort to prevent militancy and to monitor mosques for “provocative” messaging. Members of religious minorities, including Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians, who were sometimes also members of ethnic minorities, stated the government remained ineffective in preventing forced evictions and land seizures stemming from land disputes. The government continued to deploy law enforcement personnel at religious sites, festivals, and events considered possible targets for violence. In January, the Election Commission rescheduled local Dhaka elections after students and faith groups protested scheduling the elections during a Hindu festival.

In October, media reported a crowd of several hundred persons beat to death a Muslim visiting a mosque after a rumor spread that he desecrated a Quran in Lalmonirhat District, Rangpur Division near the country’s northern border. The man’s body was then set on fire. In July, according to press and Sufi Muslims, a Sufi follower was stalked and killed outside a Sufi shrine in Gazipur. In July, press reported local residents exhumed the body of an Ahmadi Muslim infant buried in an Islamic cemetery and dumped the body at the side of the road in protest of the infant’s burial, because they considered her family to be “infidels”; the body was later buried in a government cemetery. According to leaders in the Hindu community and media, in November, a crowd of several hundred looted, vandalized, and set on fire Hindu family homes in Cumilla District after rumors spread that local Hindu residents supported *Charlie Hebdo*’s publication in France of caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed, initially published in 2015 and reprinted in September. The Christian Welfare Trust and other human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) continued to report harassment, communal threats of physical violence, and social isolation for Christians who converted to Christianity from Hinduism and Islam. The Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC) said communal violence against

minorities continued throughout the year, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In meetings with government officials, civil society members, religious leaders, and in public statements, the U.S. Ambassador, other U.S. embassy representatives, and the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom spoke out against acts of violence in the name of religion and encouraged the government to uphold the rights of minority religious groups and foster a climate of tolerance. During the year, the United States provided nearly \$349 million in assistance for programs to assist overwhelmingly Muslim Rohingya refugees from Burma and host communities. Embassy public outreach programs encouraging interfaith tolerance among religious groups continued during the year, including an event held on November 24.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 162.7 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2013 government census, the most recent official data available, Sunni Muslims constitute 89 percent of the population and Hindus 10 percent. The remainder of the population is predominantly Christian, mostly Roman Catholic, and Theravada-Hinayana Buddhist. The country also has small numbers of Shia Muslims, Ahmadi Muslims, Baha'is, animists, agnostics, and atheists. Leaders from religious minority communities estimate their respective numbers to be between a few thousand and 100,000 adherents.

Ethnic minorities concentrated in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and northern districts generally practice a non-Islamic faith. The Garo in Mymensingh are predominantly Christian, as are some of the Santal in Gaibandha. Most Buddhists are members of the indigenous (non-Bengali) populations of the CHT. Bengali and ethnic minority Christians live in communities across the country, with relatively high concentrations in Barishal City and Gournadi in Barishal District, Baniarchar in Gopalganj District, Monipuripara and Christianpara in Dhaka City, and in the cities of Gazipur and Khulna.

The largest noncitizen population is Rohingya, nearly all Muslim. Human Rights Watch estimates approximately 1,500 Rohingya in the refugee settlements are Christians; approximately 450 are Hindu. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, more than one million Rohingya refugees fled Burma in successive waves since the early 1990s. Most recently, in August 2017, approximately 740,000 Rohingya fleeing violence in Burma took refuge in the

country. Nearly all who arrived during the 2017 influx sought shelter in and around the refugee settlements of Kutupalong and Nayapara in Cox's Bazar District.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

According to the constitution, “The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal rights in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and other religions.” The constitution also stipulates the state should not grant political status in favor of any religion. It provides for the right to profess, practice, or propagate all religions “subject to law, public order, and morality,” and states religious communities or denominations have the right to establish, maintain, and manage their religious institutions. The constitution states no one attending any educational institution shall be required to receive instruction in, or participate in ceremonies or worship pertaining to, a religion to which he or she does not belong.

Under the penal code, statements or acts made with a “deliberate and malicious” intent to insult religious sentiments are subject to fines or up to two years in prison. Although the code does not further define this prohibited intent, the courts have interpreted it to include insulting the Prophet Muhammad. The criminal code allows the government to confiscate all copies of any newspaper, magazine, or other publication containing language that “creates enmity and hatred among the citizens or denigrates religious beliefs.” The law applies similar restrictions to online publications. While there is no specific blasphemy law, authorities use the penal code, as well as a section of the Information and Communication Technology Act and the Digital Security Act, to charge individuals for acts perceived to be a slight against Islam. The Information and Communication Act criminalizes several forms of online expression, including “obscene material,” “expression(s) likely to cause deterioration of law and order,” and “statements hurting religious sentiments.” The Digital Security Act likewise criminalizes publication or broadcast of “any information that hurts religious values or sentiments,” by denying bail and increasing penalties of up to 10 years in prison.

The constitution prohibits freedom of association if an association is formed for the purpose of “destroying religious harmony”, the peaceful coexistence of religious communities, or creating discrimination on religious grounds.

Individual houses of worship are not required to register with the government. Religious groups seeking to form associations with multiple houses of worship, however, must register as NGOs with either the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) if they receive foreign assistance for development projects or with the Ministry of Social Welfare if they do not. The law requires the NGOAB to approve and monitor all foreign-funded projects. The NGOAB Director General has the authority to impose sanctions on NGOs for violating the law, including fines of up to three times the amount of the foreign donation, or closure of the NGO. NGOs are also subject to penalties for “derogatory” comments about the constitution or constitutional institutions (i.e., the government). Expatriate staff must receive a security clearance from the National Security Intelligence, Special Branch of Police, and Directorate General of Forces Intelligence, although the standards for this clearance are not transparent.

Registration requirements and procedures for religious groups are the same as for secular associations. Registration requirements with the Ministry of Social Welfare include certifying the name being registered is not taken, and providing the bylaws/constitution of the organization; a security clearance for leaders of the organization from the National Security Intelligence; minutes of the meeting appointing the executive committee; a list of all executive committee and general members and photographs of principal officers; work plan; copy of the deed or lease of the organization’s office and a list of property owned; a budget; and a recommendation by a local government representative.

Requirements to register with the NGOAB are similar.

Family law concerning marriage, divorce, and adoption contains separate provisions for Muslims, Hindus, and Christians. These laws are enforced in the same secular courts. A separate civil family law applies to mixed-faith families or those of other faiths or no faith. The family law of the religion of the two parties concerned governs their marriage rituals and proceedings. A Muslim man may have as many as four wives, although he must obtain the written consent of his existing wife or wives before marrying again. A Christian man may marry only one woman.

Hindu men may have multiple wives. Officially, Hindus have no options for divorce, although informal divorces do occur. Hindu women may inherit property under the law. Buddhists are subject to the same laws as Hindus. Divorced Hindus and Buddhists may not legally remarry. Divorced men and women of other religions and widowed individuals of any religion may remarry. Marriage

between members of different religious groups occurs under civil law. To be legally recognized, Muslim marriages must be registered with the state by either the couple or the cleric performing the marriage; however, some marriages are not. Registration of marriages for Hindus and Christians is optional, and other faiths may determine their own guidelines.

Under the Muslim family ordinance, a Muslim man may marry women of any Abrahamic faith; however, a Muslim woman may not marry a non-Muslim. Under the ordinance, a widow receives one-eighth of her husband's estate if she is his only wife, and the remainder is divided among the children; each female child receives half the share of each male child. Wives have fewer divorce rights than husbands. Civil courts must approve divorces. The law requires a Muslim man to pay a former wife three months of alimony, but these protections generally apply only to registered marriages; unregistered marriages are by definition undocumented and difficult to substantiate. Authorities do not always enforce the alimony requirement even in cases involving registered marriages.

Alternative dispute resolution is available to all citizens, including Muslims, for settling out of court family arguments and other civil matters not related to land ownership. With the consent of both parties, lawyers may be identified to facilitate the arbitration, the results of which may be used in court.

Fatwas may be issued only by Muslim religious scholars, and not by local religious leaders, to settle matters of religious practice. *Fatwas* may neither be invoked to justify meting out punishment, nor may they supersede existing secular law.

Religious studies are compulsory and are part of the curriculum for grades three through 10 in all public government-accredited schools. Private schools do not have this requirement. Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian students receive instruction in their own religious beliefs, although the teachers are not always adherents of the students' faith.

The code regulating prisons allows for observance of religious commemorations by prisoners, including access to extra food on feast days or permission to fast for religious reasons. The law does not guarantee prisoners regular access to clergy or regular religious services, but prison authorities may arrange special religious programs for them. Prison authorities are required to provide prisoners facing the death penalty access to a religious figure from a faith of their choice before execution.

The Restoration of Vested Property Act allows the government to return property confiscated from individuals, mostly Hindus, whom it formerly declared enemies of the state. In the past, authorities used the act to seize property abandoned by minority religious groups, especially Hindus, who fled the country, particularly following the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965.

According to law, if a lower court orders the death penalty, the High Court examines the verdict for confirmation of the punishment.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

On March 12, according to media reports, a Bangladeshi Speedy Trial Tribunal convicted and sentenced to death four Muslim members of JMB, a violent extremist group, for their involvement in the 2016 killing of a Hindu priest. The victim, Jogeshwar Roy, chief priest at Sri Swanta Gouria Monastery, was stabbed to death while organizing prayers at the temple.

At year's end, the death sentence of seven individuals for their roles in the July 2016 killing of 22 mostly non-Muslim individuals at the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka remained on appeal with the High Court. In November 2019, a Bangladesh Special Tribunal convicted and sentenced the seven, while acquitting an eighth defendant.

Legal proceedings against six suspects allegedly involved in the 2015 killing of atheist blogger Avijit Roy continued at year's end. The trial began in the Anti-Terrorism Tribunal in April 2019. In March, the trial proceedings stalled due to the absence of witnesses. In late March, authorities closed all courts until August due to the coronavirus outbreak, when the trial resumed. In November, two more witnesses provided testimony to the court, bringing the total witnesses to 24.

There was no progress in the court case regarding a 2016 attack on Hindu individuals, homes, and temples in Brahmanbaria District; victims expressed frustration to media over the continued investigation into the incident.

Biplob Chandra Baidya, a Hindu man, remained imprisoned since October 2019 for anti-Islam messages posted to his Facebook account, which he stated was hacked. Rioters vandalized homes and religious temples following the postings.

According to press reports, in January, local authorities arrested a Baul folk singer, Shariat Sarker, for derogatory comments against religion and “hurting religious sentiments,” criminal offenses under the law. Baul singing incorporates elements of Tantra, Sufism, Vaishnavism, and Buddhism. Authorities arrested Sarker following a protest by more than 1,000 individuals and a complaint to police by a Muslim cleric. Authorities denied Sarker bail at the first hearing of his case at the Tangail District Court on January 29. According to press reports, Sarker spent six months in jail. In February, a lawyer accused another Baul folk singer, Rita Dewan, of making derogatory comments against Allah during a musical competition. After a video recording of the song went viral, she apologized. Criminal charges were brought against Dewan that same month, and following a police investigation, a court issued a warrant for her arrest in December.

In March, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights requested the government to “urgently revise the Digital Security Act, to ensure that it is in line with international human rights laws and that it provides for checks and balances against arbitrary arrest, detention, and other undue restrictions of the rights of individuals to the legitimate exercise of their freedom of expression and opinion.”

Human rights organizations reported a decrease in the use of extrajudicial fatwas by village community leaders and local religious leaders to punish individuals for perceived “moral transgressions” during the year. In 2019, there was a reported 54 percent decrease in reported cases of fatwa and village out-of-court arbitrations overall. Media attributed the decline to civil society activism. Fatwas, however, continued throughout the year, including a November edict issued against a sculpture honoring Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the country.

Although most mosques were independent of the state, the government continued to influence the appointment and removal of imams and provide guidance on the content of their sermons to imams throughout the country through the Islamic Foundation. This included issuing written instructions highlighting certain Quranic verses and quotations of the Prophet Muhammad. Religious community leaders again said imams in all mosques usually continued the practice of avoiding sermons that contradicted government policy. The government maintained instructions to mosques to denounce extremism.

According to the Ministry of Land’s 2018-2019 report, the most recent figures available, as of 2018, authorities had adjudicated 26,791 of 114,749 property-restitution cases filed under the Restoration of Vested Property Act. Of these

judgments, the owners, primarily Hindus, won 12,190 of the cases, recovering 10,255 acres of land, while the government won the remaining 14,791 cases. Media reports, rights activists, and the BHBCUC attributed the slow return of land seized under relevant legislation from Hindus who had left for India to judicial inefficiency and general government indifference.

Freedom House's 2020 report assessed religious minorities remained underrepresented in politics and state agencies.

Religious minorities continued to state that religious minority students sometimes were unable to enroll in religion classes because of an insufficient number of religious minority teachers for mandatory religious education classes. In these cases, school officials generally allowed local religious institutions, parents, or others to hold religious studies classes for such students outside school hours and sometimes exempted students from the religious education requirement.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs had a budget of 16.93 billion *taka* (\$199.2 million) for the 2020-2021 fiscal year, which covers July 2020-June 2021. The budget included 14.25 billion *taka* (\$167.6 million) allocated for development through various autonomous religious bodies. The government provided the Islamic Foundation, administered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, 8.12 billion *taka* (\$95.5 million). The Hindu Welfare Trust received 1.435 billion *taka* (\$16.9 million), and the Buddhist Welfare Trust received 46.8 million *taka* (\$551,000) of the total development allocation. While the Christian Welfare Trust did not receive development funding from the 2020-2021 budget, it received seven million *taka* (\$82,400) to run its office.

Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and members of other minority religious communities, who are also sometimes members of ethnic minority groups, continued to report property and land ownership disputes and forced evictions, including by the government, which remained unresolved at year's end. Some human rights activists said it was often difficult to determine whether these disputes and evictions were a result of deliberate government discrimination against religious minorities or of government inefficiency. The government continued construction projects on land traditionally owned by indigenous communities in the Moulvibazar and Modhupur forest areas. According to minority religious associations, such disputes occurred in areas near new roads or industrial development zones, where land prices had recently increased. They also stated local police, civil authorities, and political leaders enabled property appropriation for financial gain or shielded politically influential property

appropriators from prosecution. Some human rights groups continued to attribute lack of resolution of some of these disputes to ineffective judicial and land registry systems and the targeted communities' insufficient political and financial clout, rather than to government policy disfavoring religious or ethnic minorities. Indigenous groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, in particular, have large communities of Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians. A portion of these communities speak tribal languages and do not speak Bangla, making it difficult to access government registrations and services and further disenfranchising these groups.

The government continued to place law enforcement personnel at religious sites, festivals, and events considered potential targets for violence, including the Hindu festival of Durga Puja, celebrations during the Christian holidays of Christmas and Easter, and the Buddhist festival of Buddha Purnima. During the year, the government assisted places of worship implement COVID-19 precautions during major festivals.

President Abdul Hamid continued to host receptions to commemorate each of the principal Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian holidays and emphasized the importance of religious freedom, tolerance, and respect for religious minorities. In January, the Election Commission rescheduled local Dhaka elections after students and faith groups protested scheduling the election during a Hindu festival.

In January, the government said it would lift education restrictions for young Rohingya refugees. According to Minister of Foreign Affairs AK Abdul Momen, "We don't want a lost generation of Rohingya. We want them to have education. They will follow Myanmar curricula." Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all schools in the country remained closed beginning in March.

In September, Minister of Education Dipu Moni participated in an interreligious gathering on education, resilience, respect, and inclusion promoting what she termed the country's history of religious harmony and tolerance for all faiths.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In October, according to police and local reports, a crowd of several hundred persons carrying sticks beat to death Abu Yunus Md Shahidunnabi Jewel and then set his body on fire. According to local press accounts, Jewel and a companion visited a mosque while away from his hometown, and while viewing the mosque's Quran and Hadith, the Quran fell to the ground. A rumor quickly spread that Jewel

had desecrated the sacred text. After a crowd attacked Jewel and his companion, officials attempted to protect them in the local government office. The crowd, however, broke into the office and grabbed Jewel. Although his companion successfully fled to the rooftop, Jewel was beaten to death. After Jewel was killed, according to eyewitnesses and video clips, the crowd burned his body while chanting, “Nara E Takbeer Allahu Akbar,” loosely translated as “Shout out loud, God is greatest.” The crowd also attacked law enforcement officers, and police opened fire in what was described as a measure to bring the situation under control, although no casualties were reported. Police authorities formed a government human rights investigation committee team that found after three days of review no evidence Jewel desecrated the Quran.

In late July, according to reports by Sufi leadership and a local media outlet, a Sufi follower named Soheil was stabbed to death in Gazipur, Dhaka. A local media report said criminals noticed Sohail outside a Sufi shrine, followed him, tied his arms and legs, then stabbed him in the stomach and disemboweled him. JMB claimed responsibility and published an online video of the killing. The following morning, the killers tied a brick to Sohail’s body and threw it over the Fakir Majnu Shah Bridge into the Shitalakhya River. While interrogating suspected JMB militants, the Dhaka Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit uncovered this incident and attempted to recover Sohail’s remains. According to Sufi leadership, Sohail was known for selling religious objects and conducting spiritual healings and had the nickname “Maizbhandar Sohail,” linking him with one of the major Sufi shrines in Bangladesh and potentially making him a target. Following the admission, the crime unit included this incident in its investigation into the JMB militants.

Also in July, major news outlets reported the exhuming and subsequent dumping of an Ahmadi Muslim infant’s body on the roadside in Brahmanbaria District. In a public statement, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community said the infant was born prematurely and died three days after birth. The bereaved family had buried the infant in a government cemetery, which according to the media reports caused local residents to become infuriated, not believing it appropriate to bury an Ahmadi Muslim’s body in a government cemetery for Muslims. After local residents exhumed the infant’s body, law enforcement responded to the incident and interviewed both the local residents and the family. Following intervention by law enforcement, the family agreed to rebury the infant in a separate Ahmadi cemetery. Human rights groups not associated with Ahmadiyya Islam termed the incident a “crude example of violence against religious minorities and abuse of human rights.”

According to the BHBCUC, communal attacks against ethnic and religious minorities occurred throughout the year, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. The BHBCUC counted 17 deaths in religious and ethnic minority communities between March and September. In June, the Bangladesh chapter of the World Hindu Federation released a press statement detailing a series of 30 incidents against Hindus in May. These included as many as four incidents in which Hindus were killed, according to the federation. The report also noted incidents of temple vandalism, forced conversion, rapes, and abductions of Hindu girls and women. In November, protesters demonstrated in Dhaka, Chattogram, and other parts of the country against communal attacks on minority religious communities. Saying government actions were not enough, protesters demanded tough action and accountability for perpetrators who they stated were harming religious harmony in the country.

In November, according to Hindu activist groups and widely reported in media, a Muslim crowd burned, looted, and vandalized Hindu family homes in Cumilla District, Chattogram Division. Local press outlets reported the crowd was incited by rumors that local Hindu residents supported the publication in the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* of caricatures of the Prophet Muhammed, initially published in 2015 and reprinted in France in September. In remarks to the press, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan promised “stern, punitive actions” against the culprits and increased police presence in the affected village following the attack. By the end of the year, police arrested 16 suspects in connection with the violence.

According to press reports, in January, unknown persons attacked several Rohingya Christian families at the Kutupalong Maga refugee camp in Cox’s Bazaar. Although the reasons for the attack were unknown, one of the Christian refugees said intolerance against the Christian faith was the cause. According to Refugee Relief and Reparation Commissioner Mahbub Alam Talukder, 25 Christian families were transferred to another camp following the attack.

According to media reports, in July, individuals destroyed and forcefully removed the bamboo fence bordering a 200-year-old Hindu temple to the god Shiva and privately owned land in Dighirjan Village of Pirojpur District, in an attempt to take possession of the land. The landowner said no arrests or charges were made in connection with this incident.

The Christian Welfare Trust and other human rights NGOs continued to report harassment, communal threats of physical violence, and social isolation for

converts to Christianity from Islam and Hinduism. The NGOs said individuals commonly associated a person's faith with his or her surname. In spite of constitutional guarantees protecting an individual's right to change faiths, according to the Christian Welfare Trust, when someone's professed faith deviated from the faith tradition commonly linked with his or her surname, particularly if the professed faith was Christianity, harassment, threats, and social isolation could ensue.

NGOs continued to report tensions in the CHT between the predominantly Muslim Bengali settlers and members of indigenous groups, primarily Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian, largely over land ownership. In October, the Mro tribe, a majority Buddhist group, protested the development of a tourist hotel on Chimbuk Hill, Bandabarban, stating the project would displace tens of thousands of Mro from their ancestral land. According to NGO and press reports, the Mro acquiesced to handing over 20 acres of land believing it would be used for cultivation purposes. However, they later discovered an agreement between the Army Welfare Trust, a fund for Bangladesh Army officials, and a private Bangladesh company to construct a high-end hotel. The Mro said they were deceived when discussing the intended use of the property and did not relinquish their rights to the land.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy representatives regularly met with officials from the Office of the Prime Minister, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Social Welfare, and local government representatives to underscore the importance of religious freedom and tolerance. They discussed the importance of integrating religious freedom and other human rights into security policy and stressed the importance of respecting religious minorities' viewpoints, minority religious inclusion within society, and protecting religious minorities from extremist attacks.

During the year, the United States provided nearly \$349 million in assistance for programs to assist Rohingya refugees and host communities in the country, emphasizing U.S. support for protecting vulnerable religious minority groups.

As part of U.S.-funded training for community policing, the embassy specifically encouraged law enforcement officials to protect the rights of religious minorities.

Public outreach programs encouraging interfaith tolerance among religious groups continued during the year, including a virtual roundtable held on November 24 that

brought together leaders from the Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Muslim faiths. During the discussion, participants discussed reports of rising communal attacks against religious minorities and how the United States could assist in protecting religious minorities. On December 18, Department of State and embassy officials participated in a virtual meeting with Hindus and Christians, including the Bangladeshi diaspora community in the United States, to similarly discuss rising communal attacks, possible causal factors, and appropriate response measures. Embassy officials attended religious festivals celebrated by the Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim communities and emphasized in these events the importance of tolerance and respect for religious minorities. On November 18, the Ambassador visited the Hindu Sri Siddeswari National Temple and met with temple leadership to discuss COVID-19 and the pandemic's impact on the Hindu community.

The embassy used social media throughout the year to promote religious freedom and tolerance. On October 27, U.S. International Religious Freedom Day, the embassy posted social media messages highlighting the U.S. government's commitment to advancing religious freedom.

Embassy and other U.S. government officials expressed support for the rights of religious minorities and emphasized the importance of their protection. Embassy officials met regularly with a wide range of religious organizations and representatives, including the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, BHBCUC, Bangladesh Christian Association, Buddhist Religious Welfare Trust, Christian Religious Welfare Trust, World Buddhist Association Bangladesh, Bangladesh Buddhist Federation, International Buddhist Monastery of Dhaka, and the Aga Khan Foundation. In these often virtual meetings, embassy and other U.S. government officials and representatives from the various groups discussed the state of religious freedom in the country, underscored the importance of religious tolerance, and identified challenges religious minorities encountered.