



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

**Talking Points for Waris Husain, South Asia Policy Analyst at the US
Commission on International Religious Freedom**

Thank you to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for hosting this important discussion today: elections and human rights in Bangladesh. With the country heading to the polls near the turn of the new year, it is important to reflect on past trends concerning the treatment of religious minority groups during election periods and otherwise.

Before doing so, it is important to recognize that when it comes to the global protection of religious freedom, Bangladesh's accommodation of the Rohingya from Burma must be appreciated and applauded. The unsung heroes that I saw during my trip last year were the local citizens living near the refugee camps in Cox's Bazaar who have opened their area to the Rohingya despite personal cost and loss.

Now- to return to the domestic picture of religious freedom in Bangladesh. One of the overall trends that must first be understood is that the population of minority religious groups like Hindus have been decreasing over time in the country. Many have fled the country because of reported social, economic, and political discrimination.

Specifically looking at elections: religious minorities across South Asia have been subject to intimidation, threats, and physical violence in the lead up to elections. This happened in Bangladesh to some extent in 2014 when Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian homes and shops were destroyed by opposition party supporters.

This is perhaps why in 2018 the Hindu Bouddha Christian Oikya Parishad (or HBCOP) declared that each community was seeking additional protection from the police and assurances from political leaders that their community would not suffer again during the 2018 elections. The HBCOP explained that overall attacks against their communities have been going down: in 2016, there were nearly 1500 violent attacks, in 2017 nearly 1000, and up until August of 2018, there had been 380 attacks. This shows an annual downward trend that can in part be attributed to the counter-terrorism operations of the Bangladeshi government and security services.

Yet, there are some challenges that the new government forming in early 2019 will need to address. In 2013, the Hasina government was able to stand against calls by Islamist pressure group Hifazat-E-Islam to mandate the death penalty for blasphemy cases. Much like Pakistan, in many of these cases the law is used as a weapon against non-Muslim religious minority groups to deprive them of life, liberty and property.

Refusing to mandate the death penalty for such cases was an important step taken by the Hasina government.

Yet, in a speech that decried religious extremism generally, the Prime Minister recently stated that anyone insulting Islam or its Prophet would be punished according to the law. Further, Hifazat-E-Islam recently hosted a thanksgiving event for Prime Minister Hasina to honor her government's policy recognizing certain madrassa degrees as equivalent to master's degrees in non-religious universities and colleges. Some critics saw the prime minister's appearance at the Hifazat event as a means of drumming up electoral support among religiously conservative sections of the population. Further, in past years, Hifazat demanded alterations to school curriculum; some of which were put in place by the Hasina administration eventually.

Moving on from connections of extremist Islamist groups to political parties, one of the major trends that impact religious communities and all citizens in Bangladesh is land scarcity. In a country the size of Iowa with 160 Million people, land disputes have become major issues especially in the Chittigong Hill Tracts area. Non-Muslim groups have reported that their private property and religious land have been encroached upon or completely stolen by land mafias and people with political connections. This issues will continue to pose challenges to the new ruling regime that will come into power in early 2019.