

World Watch Research

# Bangladesh: Background Information

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World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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## Map of country



Bangladesh: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
174,701,000	950,000	OD estimate

## Recent history

Bangladesh has a long history of unrest and is a relatively young state, achieving independence by war from Pakistan as late as 1971, meaning that it celebrated its 50th anniversary only in 2021. Since independence, civilian governments and military rule have taken turns in power. Elections are regularly accompanied by much violence, with the opposition denounced as having ties with militant Islamic groups and in recent years barely existing anymore. The general elections in January 2024 continued in this tradition and saw a [widely expected win](#) of incumbent Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, handing her the fourth consecutive term for governing the country (Benar News, 9 January 2024).

Bangladesh has been entrenched in authoritarian rule since 2015 and has not had an effective parliamentary opposition since the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) boycotted national elections in 2014. Instead of parliamentary debate, 2015 saw the BNP taking to the streets and the government (under Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina) cracking down on free expression and civil society. Key opposition leaders were arrested, accused of serious offenses, some of which were apparently trumped up. Many remained in hiding, fearing arrest. The elections in December 2018 and January 2024 were not better, as scores of opposition politicians were arrested.

Opposition leader Khaleda Zia and her son were arrested and sentenced in February and October 2018. In March 2020, Zia was [temporarily released](#) on humanitarian (i.e., health) grounds (Benar News, 25 March 2020); the release was [extended](#) several times, most recently in September 2022 (Dhaka Tribune, 18 September 2022). Nevertheless, she still has [several court cases](#) to face (Daily Star, 16 June 2022). This is to make sure she does not return to politics (assuming her state of health made that possible).

Despite its status as a developing country, Bangladesh took in almost one million Rohingya refugees in a very short period of time from 2017 onwards making Cox's Bazar the largest refugee camp in the world. This has brought many additional economic and social difficulties - see below:

Protests in December 2022 showed that there is still [sizeable opposition](#) to the government (CNN, 11 December 2022) and in partial response, the government has been accommodating many of the demands made by conservative Islamic groups, to the detriment of religious minorities such as Christians.

The security forces have committed serious abuses including killings, 'disappearances' and arbitrary arrests, with few investigations or official prosecutions being made. On 10 December 2021, the US Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) Bangladesh's elite paramilitary force, the "Rapid Action Battalion" (RAB), naming some of its officers responsible for human rights violations, a move that led to strong reactions from the government of Bangladesh (Asia Times, 17 January 2022).

The announcement of a change in the [visa process](#) for Bangladeshi nationals put additional pressure on the government and it seems that this policy has been at least partly successful (The Diplomat, 1 July 2023).

Christians are not normally active in politics and try not to get too involved in political matters, but of course they find themselves in the same polarized political situation and face the heavy-handedness of the authorities and security services like everybody else. As a religious minority, they are even more vulnerable since they lack sources of support and political ties; they are frequently [taken for granted](#) as

voters (UCA News, 26 January 2023). In addition, they are numerically insignificant and so politically ignored. Christians are not a voting bloc except in three of a total of 300 constituencies. Out of 23 parliamentarians from minority groups only two are Christian. Minority MPs are frequently more inclined to tow the party line than make efforts for their communities.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina shocked Christians across the country when she alleged in May 2024 that the Christian minority has plans to [create a Christian state](#) by taking parts of Bangladesh and Myanmar. A newspaper quoted her as saying: "Like East Timor... they will carve out a Christian country taking parts of Bangladesh [Chattogram] and Myanmar with a base in the Bay of Bengal" (UCA News, 27 May 2024). Even though it may be seen as political tactic and more rhetoric than firm belief, it illustrates that pressure on the Christian minority does not come from Islamists alone, but also from an increasing Dictatorial paranoia.

After weeks of violent rioting with almost 100 deaths, Bangladesh's prime minister [resigned](#) on 5 August 2024 and fled the country (New York Times, 6 August 2024). Sheikh Hasina had led Bangladesh since 2009. The Army has been given the task to set up an interim government.

## Political and legal landscape

Traditionally, relations between the Christian community and government have been good. Ex-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina even appointed a Catholic woman as her personal assistant in July 2014. But a series of killings of secular journalists as well as members of various religious minorities have scared the latter and made them act more cautiously. The series of killings ceased, but political violence continues, between (but also within) parties, although it rarely affects Christians. According to Human Rights organizations like [Odhikar](#), extra-judicial killings as well as lynchings are on the rise (Odhikar, Annual Report 2021, 31 January 2022). In June 2022, the NGO Affairs Bureau, which regulates charities for the Prime Minister's Office, rejected Odhikar's application to renew its registration. The human rights group was accused of publishing misleading information and of tarnishing the country's image. This reasoning is widely seen as trying to get rid of [inconvenient reporting](#) about extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances (Amnesty International, 7 June 2022). In September 2023, the founders of human rights organization Odhikar have each been [sentenced](#) to two years' imprisonment by the Dhaka Cyber Tribunal (Benar News, 14 September 2023). Their crime goes back to June 2013 when they violated a now-defunct internet law by publicizing a high death toll caused during an overnight operation by security forces to clear a demonstration by conservative Muslim activists who were blocking a commercial zone in Dhaka.

Another sign of growing authoritarianism and *Dictatorial paranoia* in Bangladesh was the [shutting down](#) of the country's largest opposition newspaper, a decision upheld by the Press Council in January 2023 (The Guardian, 20 February 2023). This was possibly in reaction to the international scrutiny the RAB has come under. [Death-threats](#) against atheist or human rights bloggers continue to be reported (DW, 24 August 2020). At the same time, observers point to a drop in the number of extrajudicial killings and disappearances and conclude that the international pressure including [sanctions](#) are helping to remind the government and security forces that they are under scrutiny and will be held accountable (Lowy Institute, 26 January 2023).

The way Bangladesh elected a [new president](#) (Benar News, 13 February 2023), shows that Ex-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was confident and her party's ranks loyal. The president was not actually

‘elected’ by the parliament, according to the constitutional procedure, but rather ‘acclaimed’. Not surprisingly, he was a close ally of Ex-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, but instead of his selection being voted in by parliament, the MPs were simply asked if they trusted the PM to pick the right candidate and this was accepted. Finally, the [unprecedented crackdown](#) against the BNP opposition with an estimated 20,000 political activists arrested and many more on trial (Crisis Group, 4 January 2024) in the wake of the parliamentary elections in January 2024 provided another example of authoritarianism and Dictatorial paranoia. Still, the opposition cannot be regarded as a spent force yet and while other sources estimate the number of opposition forces arrested at closer to 8,000, many have reportedly been [released on bail](#) (Benar News, 22 February 2024).

At the time of writing, since Sheikh Hasina's ousting on 5 August 2024 after weeks of violent protests, the army is set to install an interim government.

Prior to August 2024, the government had found itself struggling to fight the radical Islamic groups which are growing stronger in influence, adding to the general insecurity. In her previous election campaign, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina appeared to be wooing conservative Islamic circles in her speech at a gathering of madrassas in November 2018, by stating: "Anyone who pronounces offensive comments against [Islam] or against the Prophet Muhammad, will be prosecuted according to the law", and by pointing out that the [religion of the country is Islam](#) (Asia News, 5 November 2018). At the same time, she stated that there is no room for Islamic militancy in Bangladesh.

It remains to be seen how a future government will walk this tightrope in the years to come, especially as this statement was given at a meeting hosted by an association of conservative Qawmi madrassas, whose degrees the government recognizes as being the equivalent of a [Master's degree](#) (BDNews24, 13 August 2018). The [death](#) of the leader of Islamist organization Hefazat-e-Islami in September 2020 saw the group shift their political alliances taking a more radical stance against the government (Benar News, 21 September 2020). A red line was crossed when Hefazat-e-Islami called for demonstrations against the visit of India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, who came as an official guest of honor to the celebrations of Bangladesh's 50th anniversary in March 2021. Thousands clashed with police across the country and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced that the state would deal severely with all groups calling for violence. As a result, the authorities [arrested](#) almost a thousand members of Hefazat-e-Islami, among them 21 leaders (The Diplomat, 19 May 2021). At the same time, it is highly unlikely that the government will revive plans to [return to the purely secular](#) constitution of 1972, although one minister did refer to plans to do this (The Print India, 25 October 2021). Thus, the government's and society's commitment to secularism remains [shaky](#) (The Diplomat, 6 December 2021).

Although the state has had some success in its struggle against radical Islamic groups and their activities, new groups are emerging while others are going underground (see below: *Security situation*). Both the ruling Awami League and BNP have ties to [Islamist parties and groups](#) (The Diplomat, 16 November 2023). Even though this may not always be a matter of personal conviction, but of political convenience and necessity, it shows that Christians and other religious minorities can expect continued marginalization. This complicated situation leaves Christians as a religious minority vulnerable, especially converts from a Muslim background.

## **Gender perspective**

Despite its former female leadership, Bangladesh’s laws remain largely discriminatory towards women and girls. Under Muslim and Hindu laws, women and men do not enjoy the same marriage rights. For example, polygamy is permitted for men but not for women. Child marriage is an area of particular concern, with 51% of girls married by 18. Whilst the minimum legal age is 18 years for girls, the Child Marriage Restraint Act (2017) includes loopholes that allow child marriage in “special cases” ([Girls Not Brides Bangladesh](#), accessed 24 June 2024). In a [2016 Periodic Report](#), the CEDAW committee criticized Bangladesh for failing to outlaw marital rape and for not providing adequate pathways to justice for victims of crimes. Divorce laws (which vary in accordance with the religious or civil law that the marriage occurred under) largely favor men, trapping women in abusive relationships. Under Sharia law, men can divorce their wives by *talaq* – a husband's right to dissolve the marriage by a verbal or written repudiation his wife – whereas women must go to court ([Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961](#)). There is no provision for divorce under Hindu law.

## Religious landscape

Bangladesh: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	950,000	0.5
Muslim	155,361,219	88.9
Hindu	16,198,663	9.3
Buddhist	1,253,212	0.7
Ethnic religionist	748,724	0.4
Jewish	210	0.0
Bahai	12,812	0.0
Atheist	15,615	0.0
Agnostic	126,122	0.1
Other	34,423	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024 (Adapted according to OD-estimate)

Home to more than 155 million Muslims (according to WCD 2024 estimates), mostly Sunni, up until recently Bangladesh managed to stay clear of the kind of radicalism that has plagued other parts of the world and South Asia. However, there are definite signs that this is changing. The government's decision in January 2017 to make its school textbooks more suitable for conservative Islamic groups is one sign in this respect (New York Times, 22 January 2017). By having the letter ‘o’ now explained by depicting a devout Muslim girl’s “orna” (a scarf worn at the beginning of puberty) is just one example of a creeping Islamic drive beginning in textbooks for first-graders. A textbook for sixth-graders



replaced a trip report to the north of India (a neighboring country) with a report about the Nile in Egypt. Other books have changed as well, for example in no longer using Hindu or Christian-sounding first names. However, this new drive is not supporting violence: The government decided to ban chapters on jihad in secondary-school textbooks (UCA News, 27 October 2017).

In May 2018, the ruling Awami League accepted a 1 billion USD financial package from Saudi Arabia for building 560 mosques across the country (UCA News, 16 May 2018). As the funding did not materialize, the state of Bangladesh stepped in, a fact which led Catholic leaders to ask for equal funding of all religious institutions and buildings (UCA News, 11 June 2021). The building program has been marred by rising costs and delays, but the government's goal of building 564 model mosques and Islamic centers across the country was scheduled to be completed in June 2024. Up to October 2023, a total of 300 new mosques in this building program had been opened (Dhaka Tribune, 30 October 2023).

Two High Court judges triggered a national debate when they suggested parliament should consider introducing blasphemy legislation (UCA News, 16 March 2024). While blasphemy legislation has been a longstanding demand of conservative Islamic groups and some political parties and would fit the pattern of growing Islamic conservatism in the country, the demand came as a surprise and seems to not having gained political traction yet. Nevertheless, the fact that Hindu, Buddhist and Christian leaders declined to comment on the action by the High Court judges, saying the issue is too sensitive, points to a perceived and real vulnerability of religious minorities in the country. On another occasion in April 2024, the High Court stated that the recognition of Islam as state religion would not be inconsistent with the Constitution (The Daily Star, 27 April 2024).

Just over 9% of the population is Hindu and they suffer from attacks carried out by Muslim extremists as well. Buddhists and ethnic religions complete the mix of religions in Bangladesh, and although small in number, converts from these religions can come under strong pressure from their families and community. Members of the ethnic minorities and indigenous people groups claim that there has been significant undercounting of their numbers in the most recent census conducted in June 2022 (UCA News, 11 August 2022). Indigenous groups in various parts of the country complained that the enumerators 'didn't bother to visit their homes to include them'. Even if undercounted, Christians are a tiny minority, experience marginalization and, if they belong to ethnic minorities, face a double vulnerability. Christian converts from all backgrounds come quickly under pressure from either radical Islamic groups or their respective neighborhoods. They are facing much violence. Churches and all minority religions tend to stay clear of politics; however, they notice a growing Islamic conservatism and radicalization in the country and Christian and other minorities are running several lobby groups.

## Economic landscape

According to [UNDP HDR Bangladesh](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Gross National Income:** 6,511 USD (2017 PPP USD) (2022)
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** The rate of people living in multidimensional poverty is 24.6%, the rate of people vulnerable to it is 18.2%. 24.3% of the people are living below the national poverty line
- **Remittances:** These make up 6.07% of the total GDP



According to [World Bank Bangladesh data](#) (accessed 24 June 2024):

- Bangladesh is classified as a lower-middle income country
- **GDP per capita (PPP constant 2017 international USD):** 6,263
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** 7.1% (2022)
- **Poverty gap at 6.85 USD a day (2017 PPP):** 30% (2022)

As summarized by the World Bank ([Overview](#), last updated 11 April 2024):

- "Bangladesh has a strong track record of growth and development, even in times of elevated global uncertainty. A robust demographic dividend, strong ready-made garment (RMG) exports, resilient remittance inflows, and stable macroeconomic conditions have supported rapid economic growth over the past two decades. Bangladesh tells a remarkable story of poverty reduction and development. From being one of the poorest nations at birth in 1971, Bangladesh reached lower-middle income status in 2015. It is on track to graduate from the UN's Least Developed Countries (LDC) list in 2026. Poverty declined from 11.8 percent in 2010 to 5.0 percent in 2022, based on the international poverty line of \$2.15 a day (using 2017 Purchasing Power Parity and a comparable welfare series). Similarly, moderate poverty declined from 49.6 percent in 2010 to 30.0 percent in 2022, based on the international poverty line of \$3.65 a day (using 2017 PPP). Moreover, human development outcomes improved along many dimensions, like a reduction in infant mortality and stunting, and an increase in literacy rates and access to electricity. Despite these gains, inequality has slightly narrowed in rural areas and widened in urban areas."

The World Bank cautioned in its [Bangladesh](#) Development Update (2 April 2024):

- "Bangladesh's economy made a strong turnaround from the COVID-19 pandemic, but the post-pandemic recovery continues to be disrupted by high inflation, a persistent balance of payments deficit, financial sector vulnerabilities, and global economic uncertainty. ...Persistent inflation eroded consumer purchasing power, while investment was dampened by tight liquidity conditions, rising interest rates, import restrictions, and increased input costs stemming from upward revisions in administered energy prices."

Bangladesh is ranked as one of the world's most corrupt places, taking the 149th of 180 places in the [Corruption Perceptions Index 2023](#) Bangladesh. Its political system has repeatedly been jolted by instability. And yet, the country could become the only upper-middle income economy in South Asia by 2031 (the pre-COVID-19 estimations had indicated 2024). A key driver of the economy has been the country's \$26 billion clothing industry, which accounts for around 80% of its exports. As with other countries in a similar situation, Bangladesh has accepted infrastructure projects and other assistance from China, as far as can be seen without yet becoming economically dependent on the country. As the economy has grown, the number of Bangladeshis living in poverty has fallen and social indicators have improved, with the government putting money into initiatives to empower women and improve food security. A remark made by the Chinese envoy which could be read as warning Bangladesh against joining the US-led "Quad" (a strategic partnership between the USA, India, Japan and Australia) was immediately rebuked by state authorities and the country's [autonomy](#) stressed (Benar News, 11 May 2021).

But serious challenges remain: Bangladesh's territory is deeply vulnerable to the forces of nature, as could be seen by super-cyclone Amphan devastating parts of the country in May 2020 and the subsequent [heavy flooding](#), inundating a third of the country (The Guardian, 24 July 2020). The heavy flooding in May and June 2022 (affecting [more than 4.6 million people](#)) was a reminder that these challenges persist and - according to the WHO - could increase if predicted climatic changes occur (WHO, 23 June 2022). Further major flooding [occurred](#) in August 2023 in the north of the country, affecting 2.4 million people (ReliefWeb, 13 August 2023).

The COVID-19 crisis put all economic progress in jeopardy and it may take longer for Bangladesh to recover than for other countries. Millions of workers in the clothing industry and state-run mills were laid off in a country with no social security net, although the state did pour out financial assistance. The timing of natural disasters striking right after a three-month lockdown in May 2020 added to the difficulties. Christians, who often belong to the poorer parts of society, will feel these harder socio-economic times even more, especially those belonging to the ethnic minorities.

At the same time, and as a vivid reminder of how resilient Bangladesh can be, the opening of the [Padma bridge](#) on 25 June 2022 showed that the country is able to finance large infrastructure projects on its own (Voice of America, 25 June 2022). The almost 3.9 billion USD were completely financed by Bangladesh, though planned and constructed with Chinese support. The government accused Nobel laureate Mohammed Yunus to be behind the withdrawal of World Bank [financing](#), a claim that was immediately rejected (Benar News, 1 July 2022). The inauguration of South Asia's largest [tunnel project](#), the Bangabandhu tunnel, is set for September 2023 (Dhaka Tribune, 26 April 2023). In an effort to strengthen regional cooperation and potentially more important for its partner, Bangladesh announced the [opening of three of its ports](#) to be used by Bhutan to facilitate trade with other countries (Reuters, 23 March 2023).

In a groundbreaking deal, boosting regional connectivity in South Asia, Bangladesh, India and Nepal signed a contract by which [hydroelectricity](#) produced by Nepal will be exported to Bangladesh, via the Indian power grid (Nikkei Asia, 25 June 2023). This could help stabilize the country's energy demands, but it remains to be seen if it will also benefit the poorer parts of society.

A controversial law, earlier known as the Enemy Property Act, was enacted in 1965 when Bangladesh was part of Pakistan (1947-1971). The law allowed authorities to confiscate the properties of individuals deemed enemies of the state. The law to return these properties was passed in 2001 but is still not implemented fully. Many Christians have properties listed as Vested Property, but are unable to claim ownership or transfer properties due to unresolved bureaucratic and legal issues. Hundreds of tribal Christians have land disputes stemming from land grabs by Muslims dragging on for years. The disputes lead to violence and deaths.

### **Gender perspective**

Against the fragile economic background outlined above, women remain the most economically vulnerable, in part due to low education rates, patrilineal inheritance laws and fewer employment opportunities. More and more women have been empowered to join the workforce. The female [labor force participation rate](#) in Bangladesh increased from 36.3% in 2018 to 42.7% in 2022 (The Business Standard, 29 March 2023). Greater parity has been achieved in the context of education, with secondary school enrolment rising from 39% in 1998 for girls, to 93.7% in 2021 ([World Economic](#)

[Forum, March 2021](#)). This contributes towards reduced economic dependency of women on men, although experts note that these dynamics can in themselves be exploited, with male relatives taking their earnings and pressurizing them to earn more ([TRT, Nov 15 2017 broadcast, 17.15 onwards](#)). Whilst female Christian converts struggle to gain economic independence, male Christian converts (typically the primary financial provider) find themselves unable to provide at all, should they lose their job.

## Social and cultural landscape

According to [UNDP HDR Bangladesh](#) and [World Factbook Bangladesh](#) (accessed 24 June 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Bengali at least 98.9%, indigenous ethnic groups 1.1% (2011 est.). Among those groups are Meitei, Tripura, Marma, Tanchangya, Barua, Khasi, Santals, Chakma, Rakhine, Garo, Bihari, Oraon, Munda and Rohingya. The state recognizes 27 ethnic minorities, and there are estimations that up to 75 minorities may live in Bangladesh.
- **Main languages:** Bangla 98.8% (official, also known as Bengali), other 1.2% (2011 est.)
- **Urbanization rate:** 40.5%
- **Literacy rate:** 74.9% (of ages 15 and above)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 7.4 years.
- **Health and education indicators:** Per 10,000 people, Bangladesh has 5.8 physicians and 8 hospital beds. The pupil teacher ratio in elementary school is 30:1.

According to [World Bank Bangladesh data](#) (accessed 24 June 2024):

- **Population/Age:** 26% of the population is under 14 years old, 6% is above 65 (2022).
- **Education:** The completion rate for primary education is 108% (2022).
- **Unemployment:** 4.2%; the rate of vulnerable employment is 55% (modeled ILO estimate).

Other sources report:

- **IDPs/Refugees:** The [ILO](#) estimates that annually at least 400,000 people leave Bangladesh for overseas employment; other [estimates](#) are higher, ranging between 600,000 and 700,000 (The Business Standard, 20 March 2022). In Bangladesh, migration focused on the Rohingya refugees from Myanmar and - according to the 29 February 2024 [UNHCR Factsheet](#) - 976,507 Rohingya refugees are living in Bangladesh, 942,614 in Cox's Bazaar district and 33,893 in Bhasan Char.

According to [UNDP HDR Bangladesh](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a score of 0.67, Bangladesh ranks #129 out of 193 countries, in the group of countries with "medium human development". The country enjoyed a very fast growth, which only recently decreased slightly.
- **Life expectancy:** 73.7 years
- **Median age:** 27.9 years.
- **GINI coefficient:** 32.4 (2016)
- **Gender inequality:** On the Gender Inequality Index, Bangladesh has a score of 0.498 and ranks 129th of 193 listed countries. The labor force participation rate is 39.2% for women, compared to 81.4% for men.

Bangladesh is densely populated: It is the world's eighth most populous nation with almost 175 million people, the third most populous Muslim nation after Indonesia and Pakistan and has the highest population density behind some city and island states. It is still among the world's poorest, despite remarkable progress in recent years.

Despite all the economic growth, income distribution is unequal, and poverty is still a big problem. This inequality was already pronounced before the COVID-19 crisis struck, but it was feared that the consequences of the pandemic would push [more than 16 million people](#) back into poverty in 2020 (Asia News, 25 July 2020). Although numbers are still hard to come by, millions of clothing and other workers lost their employment and this put the rural areas under a double problem: Families in rural areas had normally been able to survive economically due to receiving remittances sent back by family members working in the cities - however, these funds were not available anymore.

According to the [World Bank](#) (World Bank, Results Brief, 26 October 2022):

- "By the mid-2010s, although enrollment and gender parity rates improved at both primary and secondary levels, Bangladesh still faced a persistently high adult functional illiteracy rate at over 50 percent and low education completion rates. Around five million children aged six to 13 remained out of school mostly in under-served areas and urban slums. In addition, from 2017, following an ethnic conflict in Myanmar, about a million displaced Rohingya people moved to camps in Bangladesh's southeastern Cox's Bazar district, more than 350,000 of them children requiring urgent educational and psychosocial support. The influx created further pressure on the already stretched local economy and social services, resulting in a further increase in school dropout rates and disengaged youth, especially girls and young women, in the hosting community."

Literacy and education continue to be a [major challenge](#) for Bangladesh and even when the school enrolment figures are high, so is the number of 'drop-outs', even at primary school level (18%). The drop-out rate is 30% at the secondary level (UCA News, 8 September 2020). According to a more recent report, the overall [school drop out rate](#) was 17% in 2021, and - according to the WEF - it is climbing due to climate change reasons (WEF, 17 May 2022).

The approximately one million Muslim Rohingya refugees from neighboring Myanmar had already been putting the country's economy and social fabric under enormous strain since 2018, especially in the district of Cox's Bazar (see below: *Security situation*). This pressure will not ease swiftly. In a very positive development, Bangladesh's authorities announced at the end of January 2020 that they would [provide formal education](#) for Rohingya refugee children, in cooperation with UNICEF (Reuters, 29 January 2020). But these programs were affected by the COVID-19 restrictions as well and the process of (voluntarily) [re-locating refugees](#) to a camp located on an island named Bhashan Char, which observers describe as "flood-prone", creating a lot of anxiety in the refugee community (Reuters, 4 December 2020). However, it was visited by UN officials in May 2021 and basically [endorsed](#) for relocating up to 100,000 people (Benar News, 2 June 2021). As per [ECHO Factsheet Bangladesh](#) (updated 5 February 2024) approximately 30,000 Rohingya refugees are currently hosted on the island. The more recent numbers of the UNHCR cited above show that relocation is a slow process and repatriation remains out of the question.

According to the World Christian Database (accessed May 2024), just under 89% of the country's population is Muslim. While Bangladesh is largely ethnically homogenous - with 98% of the population being Bengali - minorities like the Chakma exist as well. Additionally, there are the so called "Hill Tribe People" in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (e.g. Garo, Santal and the Bawm) who include a large number of Christians among them. The Hill Tribe People are neglected and discriminated against by the authorities and harassed by the majority community, e.g. by land-grabbing (a recurrent issue), including the destruction of houses and fields. These Christians experience double vulnerability, being tribal and Christian. Attacks from other tribes are a permanent risk as well, and this is what happened in April 2023, leaving eight Christians dead.

### Gender perspective

Men and women in Bangladesh are expected to assume traditional gender roles; reflecting this, over 50% of men in Bangladesh think it is unacceptable for women to have paid work ([Georgetown, GIWPS Bangladesh](#), accessed 24 June 2024). It is extremely challenging for both male and female converts to Christianity to find acceptance within their families and communities; conversion is viewed as a betrayal of the national religion and culture. Men often convert first and are beaten for betraying their religion and culture. Women too face physical violence and are commonly sexually assaulted. There is broad societal acceptance of gender-based violence. The 2023 UN Global Database on Violence against Women indicates that [54.2%](#) of married women have experienced some form of intimate partner abuse (dowry-related violence is particularly prevalent). Sexual violence against children is also endemic in Bangladesh. There were more than 800 incidents of sexual abuse against female children in the first eight months of 2021 ([The Daily Star, 29 August 2022](#)), and the actual number is estimated to be much higher as cases of rape, particularly against female children with disabilities, are often [underreported](#) (The Leaflet, 21 April 2023). Only 3% of victims take legal action, reflecting how notoriously difficult it is for victims to access justice and the social stigma attached to sexual violence.

### Technological landscape

According to Reportal [Digital 2024: Bangladesh](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date: January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 44.5% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 30.4% of the total population
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 108.5% of the total population

According to the GSMA Intelligence group ([Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023](#)), there is a gender gap in relation to mobile phone ownership and internet usage; 67% of women own a mobile phone compared to 84% of men (p.17). This gap is suspected to be much wider in rural areas.

Lack of family approval was identified as one of the primary barriers for women regarding phone ownership. The study further reveals that men and women have an equal awareness of mobile internet services. Social media is becoming a platform for raising awareness and calling for swift government action towards gender-based violence (GBV), exemplified in the conviction of those who killed a student who publicly accused her schoolteacher of sexual harassment ([BBC News, 24 October 2019](#)).

According to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net 2023 Bangladesh](#):

- Bangladesh registered a decline in freedom and is considered "partly free", dropping two points in the Freedom on the Net index. Describing the general situation, the report states: "Online activists and journalists encountered increasing levels of physical violence and supporters of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) faced an ongoing crackdown. Internet and communications services were throttled several times ahead of BNP rallies. Authorities continued to target opposition leaders, journalists, government critics, and ordinary users under the Digital Security Act (DSA), fueling self-censorship online. The government's control of the digital environment is expected to tighten thanks to proposed regulations and amendments to existing laws related to digital content, online news, and data protection."
- "While social media platforms, communications apps, and other digital tools generally remain accessible to users who wish to mobilize and campaign, the government has restricted connectivity and blocked platforms during protests. Enhanced surveillance, arrests, and targeted violence also limit people's willingness to mobilize online." And: "News reports indicate that Dhaka is expanding its surveillance capacity. In January 2023, Haaretz reported that the NTMC had acquired Spearhead, a vehicle-mounted surveillance system sold by Cyprus-registered firm Passitora. Spearhead can monitor targets within a radius of 500 meters, intercept encrypted messages and chats, including those on social media platforms, and inject spyware into mobile phones or computers. A unit that can reportedly intercept data, including encrypted messages and chats, was delivered to Dhaka in June 2022."
- "Despite the rapid growth of internet infrastructure in Bangladesh, disparities persist. Issues related to affordability and service quality prevent many from accessing the internet, particularly rural populations and those with fewer socio-economic opportunities. A gender gap, especially regarding mobile connectivity, remains a pressing issue. Users have complained about cost, affordability, and quality in rural areas, where about 61 percent of the population lives. According to a government survey released in November 2022, 29.7 percent of rural households had access to the internet, via fixed-line or mobile networks, compared to 63.4 percent of urban households. Among all survey participants, 48.2 percent cited the cost of service as a barrier to access, and 34.9 percent cited the specific cost of internet equipment."

According to a media report, the Digital Security Act (passed in October 2018) has enabled the authorities to [block access](#) to more than 18,000 Internet sites (UCA News, 1 March 2019). This process of blocking websites has highlighted some interesting things to note:

- It has shown what potential power lies behind this digital security law.
- It indicates how conservative the government is becoming.
- It has the welcome side-effect of acting as a tool for wooing Islamic groups into supporting the government.

Human Rights Watch reported about and [protested](#) against this government policy in January 2020 (Human Rights Watch, 8 January 2020). The [two-day blocking](#) of Radio Free Asia's sister site, Benar News, in March 2020 shows that the government is determined to control political narratives (Benar News, 4 April 2020). As of February 2020, since the Digital Security Act came into law, [more than 2000 cases](#) have been opened against alleged perpetrators, often journalists (DW, 3 March 2021). This shows



another effect of the law - it will increase levels of self-censorship and fear about reporting. An example of this occurred in March 2023 when the government arrested a journalist and filed a [case against the editor](#) of the country's leading newspaper, Prothom Alo, under the Digital Security Act, for allegedly "undermining the country's independence" (Benar News, 30 March 2023). The report, which was published on Bangladesh's Independence Day, quoted a worker as saying: "What is the meaning of independence when we cannot manage food. ...We need independence guaranteeing fish, meat and rice." At a press conference, the Information Minister confirmed that this report had indeed undermined the country's independence.

## Security situation

A dangerous challenge to the Muslim-majority nation is the threat of radical Islamic violence. Police have claimed that most of the suspects behind recent attacks have been members of Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) - a banned Islamist group. In many cases, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group (IS) have taken credit for attacks and threatened more, as in a video released in [Summer 2019](#) (Benar News, 12 August 2019).

The government of Sheikh Hasina has repeatedly played down the threat from transnational Islamic militants, blaming home-grown Islamic radicals linked to the political opposition instead. There is no clear consensus on the veracity of the claims, even amongst the region's top analysts on terrorism. It is indeed true that the opposition has had close links with right-wing Islamists in the past, but if this analysis still holds true, now that the opposition is in disarray, remains unclear. At the end of July 2020, there were reports that members of the Neo-JMB, the group which attacked Holey Artisan Café in 2016, were [planning another attack](#) for Eid al-Adha (UCA News, 28 July 2020), but this did not happen. While the authorities say the terror threat is [under control](#) five years after this major attack, not all experts are so sure about that (Benar News, 29 June 2021).

Over the course of 2021, more than 40 militants from [Ansar al-Islam Bangladesh](#) (AIB) were arrested. AIB is the official arm of al-Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent and both celebrated and supports the taking over of power by the Taliban in Afghanistan (Jamestown Foundation, 25 February 2022). There are also reports that several radical groups (or remnants of them after government action) are unifying and consolidating their [efforts](#) under the name of Jamaatul Ansar (Jamestown Foundation, 26 June 2023). New radical Islamic groups [keep emerging](#), hand in hand with new and innovative ways of funding themselves (Jamestown Foundation, 22 March 2024), meaning that the threat of Islamic extremism is here to stay, no matter if homegrown or not.

The large number of predominantly Muslim refugees from Myanmar has been a challenge for the authorities, but so far radicalization and violence has been largely confined to the refugee camps. The International Court of Justice ordered that Myanmar carry out [provisional measures](#) to protect the Rohingya minority (New York Times, 23 January 2020), but it is hardly probable that any repatriation will take place since the erstwhile ruling NLD in Myanmar was ousted by a [military coup](#) at the beginning of February 2021 (Vox, 2 February 2021) and the civil war in Myanmar is continuing unabated. Consequently, the Rohingya refugees are facing what one report called "[A long road ahead](#)" (International Crisis Group, 22 August 2022). The longer refugees are confined to the camps without any future perspectives, the more likely problems such as [organized crime and Islamic radicalization](#) will spread (Jamestown Foundation, 6 January 2023).



On the one hand, Christians benefit from the generally stronger action taken by the authorities against radical Islamic groups such as Hefazat-e-Islami (see above: Political and legal landscape) and the reduction in killings. On the other hand, security for Christians remains fragile as attacks can come from a variety of sources. Additionally, there is the situation of the tribes in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), among whom there is a significant minority of Christians. The situation can best be described by the term one observer used - "[elusive peace](#)" (International-LaCroix, 7 December 2019). In April 2023, for example, eight ethnic Bawm Christians were killed in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Some observers see the threat in the CHT as so [dangerous](#) that they are calling for regional coordination and action (South Asia Monitor, 13 April 2024). Land disputes against ethnic minority Christians continue and this can translate into violence. Christians also lose their livelihood by such attacks, as was illustrated when Betel nut fields were [destroyed](#) in June 2021 (UCA News, 2 June 2021).

Finally, the few Christians among the Rohingya refugees suffered from [attacks and abductions](#) at the end of January 2020 (Asia News, 4 February 2020). Their security situation may arguably be the worst of all Christians in Bangladesh.

### Gender perspective

The radicalization of [women in Bangladesh](#) has been used not only to spread IS propaganda but also as a weapon of attack by the JMB, as mentioned above (Jamestown Foundation, 12 February 2021). One of the reasons why women are being instrumentalized for attacks, is that they are less likely to be suspected and searched by the authorities or security personnel. This confirms a trend which has already been observed for several years in Southeast Asia, especially in attacks in the Philippines and in Indonesia, most prominently in the attacks against churches in Surabaya in 2018.

Rohingya women's and girls' experiences of displacement are particularly challenging due to societal and cultural norms which restrict their freedom, and widespread gender-based violence exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic ([International Rescue Committee, May 2020](#)). Abduction remains a significant threat for Christian women and children, including in refugee camps, according to a Human Rights Watch report ([HRW, 13 February 2020](#)). This occurs typically for the purpose of forced marriage, trafficking or sexual violence.

### Christian origins

Christianity made its first definite inroads into the region now called Bangladesh in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Portuguese traders and Roman Catholic missionaries reached its shores close to the city of Chittagong, in what was then called "Bengal Sultanate", and built its first churches. The renowned Baptist missionary, William Carey, arrived at Serampore in West Bengal in 1793. This Englishman heralded a new missionary era in Bengal, translating and printing the Bible in Bengali and the first dictionary of the Bengali language. He also helped develop Bengali typefaces for printing and established Serampore Mission and College besides publishing newspapers and periodicals. The school system in Bangladesh is indebted to William Carey's work. With Carey came the Baptist Missionary Society (British) in 1793, followed by Church Missionary Society (British) in 1805, Council for World Mission (British Presbyterian) in 1862, Australian Baptist Mission in 1882, New Zealand Baptist Mission in 1886, Oxford Mission (British Anglican) in 1895, Churches of God (American) in 1905, Seventh-Day Adventists in 1919, Assemblies of God in 1945, Santal Mission (Lutheran) in 1956, Bangladesh Mission of the Southern Baptist Convention (American) in 1957, and Association of Baptists for World

Evangelism (American) in 1958. After the War of Independence in 1971, there was an influx of more Protestant missionary societies in Bangladesh.

## Church spectrum today

Bangladesh: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox		0.0
Catholic		44.2
Protestant		38.6
Independent		29.8
Unaffiliated		0.3
Doubly-affiliated Christians		-12.9
<b>Total</b>		<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement		32.3
Pentecostal-Charismatic		35.0

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

**Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

Around half of the Christians in Bangladesh belong to the Roman Catholic Church, who have dioceses spread across the country. Protestants are also found throughout the country, but they are stronger among the ethnic minority tribal regions of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Protestant groups include Baptist, Brethren, Lutheran, Seventh Day Adventists, Assemblies of God, and the Church of Bangladesh (a union of Anglicans and Methodists).

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Bangladesh>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

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