

**Bangladesh**

# *Ethnicity in Bangladesh*

## *Group selection*

Politically relevant groups in Bangladesh include **Bengali Muslims, Bengali Hindus, Tribal-Buddhists and Bihari.**

## *Power relations*

According to the 2013 US Country Report on Human Rights Practices on Bangladesh, “instances of societal violence against religious and ethnic minorities persisted, although many government and civil society leaders claimed these acts had political or economic motivations and should not be attributed wholly to religious beliefs or affiliations”. Also, while there are no laws prohibiting minorities from participating in politics, no parliamentary seats are allocated to them <sup>(252)</sup>. Instead, “political participation” is highly factional “and continues to be shaped by a very small, relatively homogeneous elite” <sup>(253)</sup>. Nevertheless, minorities do participate in politics, as was shown in the 2008 national election, which included a large proportion of minority voters <sup>(254)</sup>. On the whole, however, the general lack of improvement in the situation of minority communities suggests that politics are exclusive <sup>(255, 256, 257)</sup>.

On 5 January 2015, the first anniversary of the deeply contested 2014 elections, the most violent in Bangladesh’s history, clashes between government and opposition groups led to several deaths and scores injured. In the 2014 national elections, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and 17 allied parties boycotted the vote to protest what they said were unfair circumstances. This left the majority of elected seats (153) uncontested, ensuring an Awami League (AL) victory. The AL won 234 parliamentary seats, the Jatiya Party (JP) won 34, and independents and minority parties captured the remainder. The confrontation marks a new phase of the deadlock between the ruling Awami League (AL) and the BNP opposition, which have swapped time in government with metronomic consistency since independence. Underpinning the current crisis is the failure to agree on basic standards for multiparty democratic functioning. While the BNP claims to be the guardian of Bangladeshi nationalism, the AL has attempted to depict itself as the sole author and custodian of Bangladesh’s liberation <sup>(258)</sup>. The environment surrounding local government elections held between March and June of 2016 was similarly violent <sup>(259)</sup>. In 2016, political repression

<sup>252</sup> [US State Department, 2013]

<sup>253</sup> [Polity IV, 2010]

<sup>254</sup> [Freedom House, 2011]

<sup>255</sup> [Freedom House, 2010]

<sup>256</sup> [Freedom House, 2011]

<sup>257</sup> [Freedom House, 2013]

<sup>258</sup> [ICG, 2015]

<sup>259</sup> [Freedom House, 2017]

is reaching new highs in Bangladesh. The government's abuse of rule of law institutions for political ends has created an atmosphere of injustice that is increasingly exploited by anti-state extremist groups. The political conflict between the AL and BNP has resulted in high levels of violence and a brutal state response. The government's excesses against political opponents and critics include enforced disappearances, torture and extra-judicial killings <sup>(260)</sup>.

<sup>260</sup> [ICG, 2016]

National elections were held in Bangladesh in December 2018. The elections were not deemed free nor fair by outside observers. While the main opposition party BNP decided to participate in these elections, the opposition was intimidated and oppressed. The elections were one of the most manipulated in recent years, with the whole state apparatus set out so that the AL is reelected to power. However, the 2018 elections were less violent than its predecessor <sup>(261; 262)</sup>. The AL and its allies have won 288 seats and the opposition received only eight seats, six of which won by the BNP. The official parliamentary opposition is the Jatiya Party with 22 seats, even though the party is an ally of the AL. Thus, the polarization of the political system has persisted or even increased <sup>(263)</sup>. While the AL emphasizes a secular Bengali identity, it has been open to accommodate Islamic religious values for electoral support. The incumbent government has, for example, reached an agreement with the radical Islamist party Hefazat-e-Islam <sup>(264)</sup>. Furthermore, the Digital Security Act 2018 has severely limited the freedom of speech in Bangladesh, leading to indiscriminate detentions, disappearances, and self-censorship <sup>(265; 266)</sup>.

<sup>261</sup> [BTI, 2020]

<sup>262</sup> [Human Rights Watch, 2020]

<sup>263</sup> [BTI, 2020]

<sup>264</sup> [BTI, 2020]

<sup>265</sup> [BTI, 2020]

<sup>266</sup> [Human Rights Watch, 2020]

Bangladesh played an important and internationally commended role in the Rohingya refugee crisis. Around one million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar reside in camps in Bangladesh. Their return seems unlikely any time soon <sup>(267; 268)</sup>.

<sup>267</sup> [BTI, 2020]

<sup>268</sup> [Human Rights Watch, 2020]

### *Bengali Muslims*

The Muslims are the predominant ethnic group in Bangladesh. Nine out of ten Bangladeshis are Muslim and speak Bengali. Since independence in 1971 the head of state and all important government positions have been occupied by a Bengali Muslims. This was by no means an assurance for Bengali Muslims to enjoy all the perks of owning the state. Authoritarian spells and bitter infighting between the two major parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led to prosecution of opposition figures and/or dissidents. Nevertheless, it is clear that in comparison to all other ethnic groups, Bengali Muslims are the only group that has had unrestricted and continuous access to state power. Therefore the dominant coding is justified, even during the intermittent authoritarian spell from 2007-2008 during which the main political parties were banned. Not surprisingly, the interim military and bureaucratic "caretaker" government consisted of ethnic Bengali Muslims.

Since 2010, the political crisis (polarization and dysfunction),

and related social instability and political violence, triggered by the intense power struggles between the AL and the BNP continued unabated, or according to some sources even increased (269; 270 271; 272). Human rights abuses remained a problem, and there was a surge in political violence in 2012, especially as a result of inter- and intraparty clashes (273; 274; 275). The AL, in power since 2008, again won the 2014 and the 2018 national elections. Overall, the position of ethnic Bengali Muslims at the head of government was sustained.

### *Bengali Hindus*

Hindus are the largest minority in Bangladesh, constituting around 10% of the population but they share common links with the Muslim majority by speaking the same language (Bengali). Hindus were primary targets of the Pakistani army in the civil war of 1971 and many of them were displaced during the fighting. Already before the Bangladeshi parliament had voted to make Islam the state religion in 1988 (276), Hindus were victims of discrimination and persecution. After the war was over the Bangladesh government gave previously Hindu-owned land to Muslims. While the government denies any accusations, Hindus have been the main target of violent outbursts and riots (277) especially around election times. This is the main justification for our coding of political discrimination. The second minor motivation is the government's failure to protect Hindus from coercive displacement. Despite some efforts to protect Hindus, Freedom House (278) reports that "land rights for the Hindu minority remain tenuous despite the annulment of the Vested Property Act in 2001."

Religious minorities continue to face societal discrimination and harassment, as well as remained underrepresented in politics and state employment (279 280; 281). Land rights for the Hindu community remained vague (282; 283; 284), and they continued to suffer widespread violent attacks, as for example, in 2013 when a number of Hindus were killed/injured, and their temples, houses and businesses looted/burned by Muslim protesters. Nonetheless, 11 Jamaat supporters were arrested by the authorities in connection with these attacks (285). Further signs of improvement include the life imprisonment of 11 men in 2011 for the gang rape of a Hindu girl during anti-Hindu violence (286), and the passing of the 2012 Hindu Marriage Bill, which aims to grant legal and social protection to members of the Hindu community, especially women (287). Also, in 2011, the Vested Properties Return Act was passed, which allows Hindus to reclaim land that was seized from them by the government or other individuals. Human Rights groups have, however, emphasized that its implementation has proven extremely slow.

The election-related violence in 2014 left hundreds dead and saw hundreds of Hindu homes and shops vandalized (288). Over almost two years, radical Islamists have carried out a string of brutal attacks in Bangladesh, killing scores of bloggers, foreigners and members of religious minorities. A Hindu tailor was killed in April 2016,

<sup>269</sup> [Polity IV, 2010]

<sup>270</sup> [Freedom House, 2011]

<sup>271</sup> [Freedom House, 2012]

<sup>272</sup> [Freedom House, 2013]

<sup>273</sup> [Freedom House, 2011]

<sup>274</sup> [Freedom House, 2012]

<sup>275</sup> [Freedom House, 2013]

<sup>276</sup> [New York Times, 1988]

<sup>277</sup> [New York Times, 2001]

<sup>278</sup> [Freedom House, 2010]

<sup>279</sup> [Freedom House, 2011]

<sup>280</sup> [Freedom House, 2012]

<sup>281</sup> [Freedom House, 2013]

<sup>282</sup> [Freedom House, 2011]

<sup>283</sup> [Freedom House, 2012]

<sup>284</sup> [Freedom House, 2013]

<sup>285</sup> [US State Department, 2013]

<sup>286</sup> [Freedom House, 2012]

<sup>287</sup> [Freedom House, 2013]

<sup>288</sup> [ICG, 2015]

and a Hindu priest was hacked to death in July of the same year. A terrorist attack in Dhaka in July left 22 people dead. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her governing Awami League party have accused the Islamist opposition of fomenting this terrorism. In this context, the news that Awami League politicians may be implicated in recent attacks on Hindu homes and temples is profoundly disturbing<sup>(289)</sup>. “The variety of abuses they experience, from forced abduction and sexual assault to land grabbing and arson, have occurred within a broader climate of impunity, with many abuses appearing to be carried out with the complicity of law enforcement agencies and the judiciary”, says C. Soderbergh, Director of Policy and Communications from the Minority Rights Group<sup>(290)</sup>.

<sup>289</sup> [NY Times, 2016]

<sup>290</sup> [MRG, 2016]

The Bengali Hindu minority suffers from discrimination. Bengali Hindus are frequently victims of attacks, persecution and land grabbing<sup>(291)</sup>.

<sup>291</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2018a]

### *Tribal-Buddhists*

The Chittagong Hill Tracts are a region in Eastern Bangladesh bordering Northeastern India and Myanmar. The first Prime Minister of Bangladesh Mujibur Rahman demanded of the tribals to integrate into mainstream Bengali society. The homogenizing policies of the Bengali state led to civil war which was only partially resolved in 1997 through the Chittagong Hills Peace Accord. However, implementation has stalled, Bengali settlers continue to take away land from the tribals, and security forces continue to violate their civil rights. Thus, Freedom House<sup>(292)</sup> summarizes: “Moreover, indigenous people remain subject to physical attacks and property destruction by Bengali settlers, according to the World Organization Against Torture and other groups. In July 2009, the new government said it would immediately withdraw more than 2,000 troops from the CHT and dismantle several dozen military camps. It also announced plans to set up a commission that would allocate land to indigenous tribes.” But given the fact that the implementation of the 1997 Peace Accord has been slow at best, “tribal inhabitants continue to be displaced to make way for army camps, and returning refugees have been unable to reclaim their land.”<sup>(293)</sup>. The 2007 Human Rights report of the US State Department largely confirms the Freedom House view.

<sup>292</sup> [Freedom House, 2010]

<sup>293</sup> [Freedom House, 2010]

The re-establishment of democracy in late 2008 saw some promises to improve the situations of the tribals but Suhas Chakma, the director of the Asian Centre of Human Rights remained sceptical: “In some areas, especially in Dhaka, Chittagong and mainland Bangladesh you could see a revival of civil rights but in some areas such as the Chittagong Hill Tracts the army still has full control of the situation. The lifting of the emergency is only basically to address the concerns of the international community but on the ground its not going to change the situation.”<sup>(294)</sup>.

<sup>294</sup> [Al-Jazeera, 2008]

During the allegedly Jamaat-perpetrated attacks on the Hindu

community, religious sites, homes and businesses of Buddhists were also targeted. Furthermore, the tribal people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts experienced widespread discrimination, were still not able to effectively participate in decisions affecting their lands, and were again involved in clashes and subjected to societal violence by Bengali settlers, resulting in deaths, casualties, burned and looted homes and damaged Buddhist temples, as well as the flight of 2000 families to India. While some individuals were arrested in connection with such attacks, local religious leaders felt that authorities shielded those affiliated with the AL from prosecution. In contrast, the government failed to withdraw 1000s of false charges in relation to land use against indigenous residents <sup>(295)</sup>.

The Freedom House Reports from 2011, 2012 and 2013 <sup>(296; 297; 298)</sup> similarly emphasize the lack of control over decisions concerning their land, and that “Bengali settlers continue to illegally encroach on tribal lands in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, with the reported connivance of government officials and the army”. As such, the full implementation of the 1997 Peace Accord is still outstanding, and the promises regarding the withdrawal of troops from the CHT and the dismantling of military camps remain unfulfilled. Similarly, activities of the Commission set up to allocate land to indigenous tribes was suspended in 2011. Any protests were suppressed and political activists frequently arrested. As of 2017, religious minorities remain underrepresented in politics and state agencies, though the AL government has appointed several members of such groups to leadership positions. Violent attacks and open discrimination against minorities continue, which is why the coding is kept as “discriminated” <sup>(299)</sup>.

In 2021, the Chittagong Hill Tracts are still controlled by Bangladeshi military personnel, which have only exacerbated insecurity in the area and are not protecting the indigenous minority groups. Land grabbing persists to be a common issue. Thus, the Tribal-Buddhists continue to be coded as discriminated <sup>(300; 301; 302; 303; 304)</sup>.

### *Biharis (Urdu speakers)*

Biharis are Muslims from the Indian province of Bihar that migrated to Pakistan in the upheaval of the 1948 division of the subcontinent. After the 1971 war that separated Pakistan into two countries over 300,000 Biharis were stranded in Bangladesh. Biharis speak Urdu, the official language of Pakistan, supported Pakistan during the civil war and often held higher administrative positions in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). In Bangladesh, where Bengali is the main language, the Biharis received no citizenship, were banned from voting and participating in politics. Pakistan refused to take in such a large amount of migrants. In 2008 a Bangladeshi high court ruled that over half the Biharis, those that were minors in 1971 or not yet born, were to receive citizenship and all associated rights. However, citizens who were already adults in 1971, numbering above 150,000 people, do not receive these rights <sup>(305)</sup>.

<sup>295</sup> [US State Department, 2013]

<sup>296</sup> [Freedom House, 2011]

<sup>297</sup> [Freedom House, 2013]

<sup>298</sup> [Freedom House, 2013]

<sup>299</sup> [Freedom House, 2017]

<sup>300</sup> [BTI, 2020]

<sup>301</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2018]

<sup>302</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2018b]

<sup>303</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2018c]

<sup>304</sup> [Human Rights Watch, 2020]

<sup>305</sup> [BBC, 2008]

Freedom House (<sup>306</sup>) summarizes: “Bangladesh also hosts camp-like settlements of some 300,000 non-Bengali Muslims, often called Biharis, who had emigrated from India in 1947 and were rendered stateless at independence in 1971, as many had sided with and initially sought repatriation to Pakistan. In May 2008, a landmark court ruling granted citizenship rights to this group, enabling their access to social services and the right to vote.” Given the fact that still more than half of all Biharis are denied basic rights and restrained in their freedom of movement due to accusations of guilt for a war that dates back almost 40 years, it is adequate to extend the discrimination coding throughout.

The Freedom House Reports from 2011, 2012 and 2013 (<sup>307</sup>; <sup>308</sup>; <sup>309</sup>) have retained the same summary as above, suggesting no change in the situation of the Bihari people. According to Irin (<sup>310</sup>), despite the 2008 Court Ruling, the Urdu-speaking minority is still highly stigmatized, marginalized and discriminated against; there has been no significant improvement in their lives and they are not afforded the same rights as other Bangladeshi citizens. It remains difficult for them to enter employment, and impossible to attain a position within the government. Passport authorities refuse to issue passports. They are either denied education in state schools or drop out because they have no opportunity to study in their mother tongue. They (300,000) still live in squalid camps, and they feel strongly neglected by the government. As mentioned above, their predicament is usually associated with the accusation of them having sided with the Pakistan army during Bangladesh’s war of independence: according to CR Abrar, coordinator of the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit of Dhaka University, “Ministers and government officials often identify (the Biharis) as ‘standard Pakistanis’ despite the High Court Order. Thus there is still a lack of political will for the betterment of this community” (<sup>311</sup>). Given the persisting situation of the Bihari community, and the political reasons behind the intransigence, it appears reasonable to extend the discriminated coding throughout. Furthermore, the 2014 elections and the accompanying/subsequent waves of violence have even aggravated the situation (<sup>312</sup>; <sup>313</sup>).

The Bihari minority remains one of the most marginalized and discriminated communities in Bangladesh (<sup>314</sup>).

<sup>306</sup> [Freedom House, 2010]

<sup>307</sup> [Freedom House, 2011]

<sup>308</sup> [Freedom House, 2012]

<sup>309</sup> [Freedom House, 2013]

<sup>310</sup> [Irin, 2013]

<sup>311</sup> [Irin, 2013]

<sup>312</sup> [Freedom House, 2017]

<sup>313</sup> [ICG, 2016]

<sup>314</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2018d]

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Political status of ethnic groups in B

From 1971 until 2021

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Bengali Muslims	0.895	DOMINANT
Bengali Hindus	0.1	DISCRIMINATED
Tribal-Buddhists	0.01	DISCRIMINATED
Biharis (Urdu-Speaker)	0.002	DISCRIMINATED

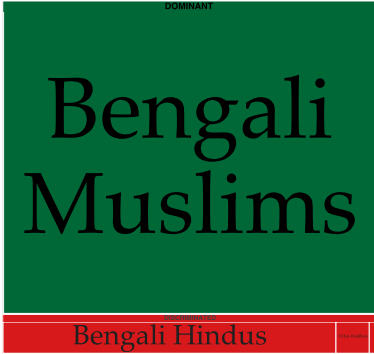


Figure 48: Political status of ethnic groups in Bangladesh during 1971-2021.

# Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Bangladesh

From 1971 until 2021

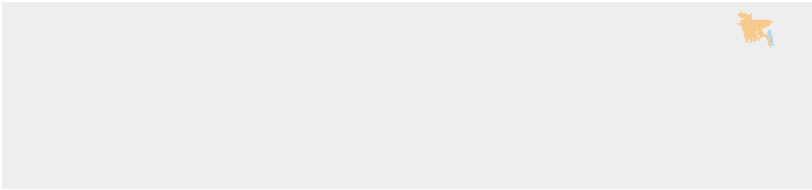


Figure 49: Map of ethnic groups in Bangladesh during 1971-2021.





Group name		Area in km <sup>2</sup>	Type
	Bengali Muslims	125 123	Regionally based
	Tribal-Buddhists	12 705	Regionally based
	Bengali Hindus	0	Dispersed
	Biharis (Urdu-Speaker)	0	Urban

Table 22: List of ethnic groups in Bangladesh during 1971-2021.

## *Conflicts in Bangladesh*

*Starting on 1975-02-27*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Bangladesh	JSS/SB	Tribal-Buddhists	1975-02-27	Explicit	Yes	Yes

*Starting on 1994-04-23*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Bangladesh	PBCP		1994-04-23			
Government of Bangladesh	PBCP-J		2004-01-14			

*Starting on 2015-11-03*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Bangladesh	IS	Bengali Muslims	2015-11-03	No	Yes	No