

Dec. 12, 2008: Bangladesh: USCIRF Hearing Weighs Threat of Religious Extremism, Urges Greater Security for Minorities during Upcoming National Elections

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WASHINGTON—On December 4, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom held a public hearing on “Bangladesh: Religious Freedom, Extremism, Security, and the Upcoming National Elections.” As Commission Chair Felice Gaer noted, the hearing presented “a timely and important opportunity to focus on Bangladesh’s efforts to hold an election that is free, fair, and peaceful, in spite of the threats of religious militancy, chronic political violence, and growing intolerance toward religious minorities and those within the majority community. Bangladesh represents a risk of conflict but also an opportunity to establish civilian, representative government on a firmer footing. Which it will be depends on how the government—and the political parties—manage the upcoming elections.”

U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh James F. Moriarty predicted that the election scheduled for Dec. 29 would be “transformational” for Bangladesh’s suspended democracy, but warned that poverty and corruption could facilitate the expansion of religious extremism. Peter Manikas, Director for Asia Programs at the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), and Kimber Shearer, Deputy Director for Asia Programs at the International Republican Institute (IRI) discussed the election monitoring and political party capacity-building activities of their organizations.

Four other witnesses representing research and advocacy groups emphasized the tenuous status of human rights and the troubling accommodation of the caretaker government to the demands of Islamist groups. According to Dr. Ali Riaz, who has written extensively on Islamist extremism and political Islam in Bangladesh, the current caretaker government backed down publicly in the face of Islamist opposition to efforts to make equal rights for women in inheritance and equal pay a matter of national policy. He also pointed to the Islamists’ successful assault on symbols of Bengali culture, such as sculptures of traditional musicians. Dr. Riaz argued that despite the caretaker government’s reforms, the upcoming elections may result in the “return of the acrimonious, opaque, dynastic, and corrupt political practices” of the past.

Dr. Shapan Adnan, an expert on the ethnic and religious conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), described the CHT as effectively under the control of the Bangladeshi military, supported by a civil bureaucracy complicit in "a variety of measures which had constrained the rights and freedom of the ethnic and religious minorities of the region." He charged that ethnic Bengali settlers are allowed to encroach with relative impunity on the private and common lands of the indigenous inhabitants. Buddhists in the CHT also face various forms of religious discrimination, including intimidation of monks, the desecration of holy places, and the seizure of lands on which temples and monasteries are located. The two major political parties representing the region's indigenous peoples have been prevented from registering and thus from participating in the upcoming elections. Moreover, due to "threats and intimidation by vigilante groups of the [Bengali] settlers...significant proportions of the hill peoples do not feel it is safe to canvass or cast their votes."

Asif Saleh, Executive Director and founder of the Bangladeshi expatriate social-justice advocacy group Drishtipat, described the caretaker government's pattern of announcing reforms with great media "hype" but following up with little action once the media buzz [is] over. He charged that the caretaker government has "[undermined] the very institutions that it was trying to reform," in part by inadequately seeking the participation of various political parties in its reform measures. As a result, most of the reforms of the past two years "face the danger of not surviving for long." He cited as an example the caretaker government's ostensible separation of the judiciary from control of the executive, while continuing to unduly influence the judiciary to support its policies. Mr. Saleh also castigated the caretaker government for failing to return minority (typically Hindu) owned properties seized under the Vested Property Act.

Dr. Sachi Dastidar of the State University of New York, Old Westbury, described what he saw as the daily "harassment, humiliation, and institutionalized discrimination" directed toward Hindus, Buddhist, Christians, and indigenous tribal residents of Bangladesh. He also noted that members of the Hindu minority in particular are severely underrepresented and thus, effectively banned from employment in public service, the military, police, and diplomatic service.

With respect to the upcoming elections, the Commission recommends that the U.S. government:

- urge the government of Bangladesh to ensure that the elections are not marred by violence by:

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- deploying security forces to work to identify and prepare against specific threats to vulnerable localities and communities, including religious and ethnic minorities, such as residents of the Chittagong Hill Tracts region;

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- publicly ordering that the security forces undertake a maximum effort to prevent and punish election-related violence, particularly violence targeting members of minority religious communities, whether during the election campaign, on

election day, or in its aftermath; and

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- publicly condemning and swiftly responding to anti-minority violence in conjunction with the election and ensuring that all election-related violence will be thoroughly investigated and that those responsible will be brought to justice;

- send an official U.S. government delegation to observe the upcoming elections in Bangladesh, in addition to the election monitoring efforts already planned by NDI and IRI;

- urge the government of Bangladesh to permit and facilitate both international and domestic non-governmental monitoring of the upcoming elections; and

- prepare and publicize a comprehensive post-election analysis of the election process with recommendation for needed reform.

The full text of the Commission's recommendations on U.S. policy toward Bangladesh is available in our 2008 Annual Report. A summary of the December 4, 2008 hearing on Bangladesh, as well as a complete transcript are also available. For more information, please visit www.uscirf.gov.