

# Erasing secularism

**RISHABH JAIN** explores the implications of Bangladesh's clampdown on religious minorities, in a country built on the idea of religious freedom

A YEAR HAS PASSED since Bangladesh's Awami League government was overthrown, and the anniversary in August came with an announcement from the interim government – the promise of elections, slated for February 2026. In these elections, the Awami League – whose rule came with widespread human rights abuses and silencing of critics and ended with up to 1400 protesters shot by security forces – will be banned from running. Top human rights lawyers say this will undermine democracy. The gates could instead be left wide open for the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) to take power, which could lead to deepening tensions with India and serious questions about the future for both religious freedom and free expression in Bangladesh.

These fears are not unfounded. In recent months, Bangladesh has taken a dramatic turn away from its founding ideals. In January 2025, the country's interim government, led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, proposed sweeping constitutional amendments – including the removal of secularism as a state principle – which exists to prevent the government from governing on the grounds of a single religion, or discriminating against anyone on the grounds of religion. In its place, the government promises to uphold “equality, human dignity, social justice, pluralism and democracy”. There are growing concerns that the shift signals not a renewal of constitutional values but the erosion of protections for minorities and dissenters.

Since the fall of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government in August 2024, a new wave of arrests,

intimidation and censorship has ensued. Activists, teachers and journalists who speak out against rising religious intolerance and other sensitive societal issues have increasingly found themselves harassed or detained. Journalists reporting on violence against minorities or failures of state protection have become targets, their work challenging the narrative promoted by authorities and threatening to expose the erosion of secular and pluralistic principles.

On 3 February 2025, journalist Shohag Khan Sujon from the Samakal newspaper was brutally attacked by a group of around a dozen men after he and three other reporters investigated alleged medical negligence at a hospital in Bangladesh's Shariatpur district. According to Sujon, the owner of the clinic restrained his legs while the attackers struck his ear with a hammer and stabbed him in the back. The other journalists – Nayon Das (Bangla TV), Bidhan Mojumder Oni (News 24) and Saiful Islam Akash (Desh TV) – were also beaten with hammers when they tried to intervene. The assault only ended when local residents arrived and chased the assailants away.

Reports emerged of a separate incident that same day, in Lakshmipur district, where a group of masked men armed with bamboo sticks assaulted four journalists – Md Rafiqul Islam (Khaborer Kagoj), Abdul Malak Nirob (Amar Barta), Md Alauddin (Daily Amar Somoy), and Md Foysal Mahmud (Daily Alokito Sakal) – who were on their way to cover a land dispute. The journalists say the attackers robbed them of their cameras, phones and wallets, and fired guns at the group, leaving Mahmud with injuries to his ear and leg cause by shrapnel.



ABOVE: A procession in Dhaka in 2025 marks the Bengali New Year, Pohela Boishakh, a vibrant example of secularism in Bangladesh

A recent report by the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC), a non-profit organisation established to protect the human rights of religious minorities in Bangladesh, documents this shift in disturbing detail. Between August and December 2024 alone, the Council recorded hundreds of attacks on minorities, including arson,

CREDIT: SK Hasan Ali / Alamy



looting and land grabs. Teachers from minority backgrounds were removed from their posts. Minority trainees were expelled en masse from police academies. .

Yet, this moment cannot be understood without examining what came before. Under Hasina's Awami League, secularism remained constitutionally enshrined, but in practice repression flourished. Her administration faced strong criticism from campaigning organisations

including Index, Reporters Without Borders and Human Rights Watch for using the 2018 Digital Security Act (DSA) to arrest critics and muzzle the press. Religious minorities were often caught in the crossfire of

political patronage networks and mob violence, and the state frequently failed to hold perpetrators accountable. In the name of political stability, Hasina's government did cosy up to some conservative Islamist groups, →

YouTube clerics now preach hate. Textbooks are being rewritten. Women's rights are being rolled back under religious pressure

→ including Hefazat-e-Islam, allowing them to shape education policy and public discourse.

During her tenure, the DSA emerged as a key tool for her government to suppress dissent and curtail freedom of expression, particularly online. A UK-based human rights organisation Article 19 found that, during the first five years of the Act, 736 cases had been filed, targeting more than 267 journalists. In practice, the law was frequently used to arrest those who criticised the government. In 2024, before the government was overthrown, DSA use rose even further with 232 violations levelled against 337 journalists, 13 human rights defenders and 118 civilians. And this trend does not look set to end.

“Secularism in Bangladesh was already on shaky ground long before the current changes,” S M Masum Billah, an associate professor of law at Jagannath University, told Index. “What we are witnessing now is an acceleration – not a rupture. The Awami League eroded democratic norms in the name of stability, while the interim government is doing it in the name of reform.”

These concerns extend to the media. As noted in a separate report by the Rights and Risks Analysis Group, Bangladesh has become increasingly hostile toward press freedom under Muhammad Yunus’s interim leadership. Between August 2024 and March 2025, during the first eight months of the interim government, at least 640 journalists in Bangladesh were subjected to various forms of repression. This included 182 journalists facing criminal charges, 206 subjected to physical assaults or violent attacks, 167 were denied official accreditation and 85 senior journalists were placed under investigation by the Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit – the state’s anti-terrorism and anti-money laundering agency.

Billah outlined how secularism in Bangladesh was never simply about

## When the state privileges one religion, social harmony collapses. Minority citizens become second-class by default

separating religion from the state. Instead, it was a cultural ethos – rooted in tolerance, pluralism and shared identity – that emerged from the anti-colonial and anti-authoritarian struggles of 1971, when Bangladesh won its independence.

“Secularism in South Asia is not the same as in the West,” Billah said. “Here, it’s about equal respect for all religions. In Bangladesh, it was part of our cultural DNA. But after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, the military dictator Ziaur Rahman overruled Article 12 [which promoted secularism] and began Islamising the constitution. That’s when minorities began to suffer systematically.”

Billah pointed to several consequences of this constitutional shift: the introduction of Islam as the state religion, widespread job discrimination, and the weaponisation of property laws against Hindu and other minority populations.

“When the state privileges one religion, social harmony collapses. Minority citizens become second-class by default,” he said.

The 15th Amendment in 2011 attempted to restore secularism, while still retaining Islam as the state religion – a contradiction Billah refers to as “asymmetric secularism”. It promised equal rights to Hindus, Christians and Buddhists – but failed to prevent renewed waves of religiously motivated violence. The latest round of attacks over the past year has only worsened that reality.

“The real danger,” Billah warns, “is not just legal – it’s cultural. YouTube clerics now preach hate. Textbooks are being rewritten. Women’s rights are being rolled back under religious pressure. It’s a cultural dehumanisation happening in real time.”

And while secularism is being dismissed as a foreign import or “anti-Islamic,” there’s a growing culture of denial. Political leaders routinely claim “there are no minorities in Bangladesh” and frame attacks as isolated incidents.

“This denial is what enables continued discrimination,” Billah said. “Without a constitutional safety valve like secularism, the state cannot act as an impartial referee. It becomes a tool of repression.”

The Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council and other rights organisations are now calling for urgent legal reforms: the creation of a Minority Rights Commission, an anti-discrimination law, and a Ministry for Minority Affairs.

But so far, the interim government has shown no willingness to act. The fear is that the erosion of secularism could mark the start of something much darker.

“If this trajectory continues, Bangladesh could face an Islamic revolution – not a romantic one, but a cruel, theocratic future. Secularism must be protected not just for minorities, but for the soul of the nation,” Billah said.

As Bangladesh’s political climate grows more volatile, the fate of secularism – and the rights of millions of its citizens – hangs in the balance. The question now is not just who will be silenced next, but whether the idea of a pluralistic, democratic Bangladesh can survive at all. At stake is not merely constitutional language, but the lives, identities and freedoms of communities that have shaped the nation since its birth. ✕

*Rishabh Jain is a freelance journalist based in New Delhi, India.*

54 (03) : 42/44 | DOI : 10.1177/03064220251382103