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Bangladesh: Government must protect the minority Hindu community

For anyone who has followed the news from Bangladesh since the country's 5 January elections, the last few weeks' headlines have made for grim reading. Dozens have been killed in the street protests that raged across Bangladesh during the weeks around the vote, and with the opposition boycotting the elections and questioning the legitimacy of the new government, the political crisis shows no sign of letting up.

But behind the headlines, there are hidden victims that have not gotten the attention they deserve – Bangladesh's minority Hindu community. Comprising around 10 per cent of the population, Hindus have become hostage to the political confrontation between governing and opposition party supporters. As these parties have violently fought each other in the streets, Hindus have been terrorised, their homes and shops set on fire, their belongings looted and their temples vandalised. Many have left their homes, some have fled to India.

Attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh are nothing new - especially in rural areas. In May last year, I met dozens of Hindu families in Noakhali and Satkhira – provinces in the southwest and southeast - who had seen their homes burned down and felt terrified and powerless. All told me that the attackers were mostly linked to the opposition Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) or the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), but some also to the ruling Awami League (AL) party.

All political parties deny that their supporters are behind these attacks, and instead blame their rivals. Understandably, few Hindus are prepared to name the attackers for fear of reprisals – making it all the more easy for those responsible to hide behind a blame game.

If it is difficult to establish who exactly is attacking Hindus, the reasons behind the violence are even more complex. Tension between the Hindu and Muslim communities dates back to at least the 1947 separation of Pakistan from India, then in East Pakistan and later Bangladesh (after its 1971 independence).

Historically, attacks against Hindus have been aimed at forcing them to abandon their land and livelihood. Such land has then been transferred to their Muslim neighbours or powerful land owners under the Vested Property Act of 1974, a law that in practice allows confiscation of Hindu land if claimants can prove the land has been "abandoned". The law itself, corruption and lack of justice, makes confiscation easy, and millions of Hindus have lost their properties over the years.

Hindus have also been targeted around elections, as they are seen as "safe" vote banks for the AL party. During the October 2001 elections, crowds of attackers drove hundreds of Hindu families off their land across the country, burned Hindu homes, raped dozens of women and hacked to death at least one Hindu man. The pattern repeated itself this January, when dozens of Hindu homes were vandalised or set on fire in Maloparha of Chapatola village at Abhoynagar Upazila in Jessore and other parts of the country.

Many Hindus say the attacks have been mainly by JI or BNP supporters to stop them from voting. In some cases thugs acting on behalf of a ruling party candidate unpopular with the Hindus are alleged to have attacked families in their locality to stop them from casting their votes.

But Hindus have since last year also been attacked in connection with death penalty verdicts by the International Crimes Tribunal, which, despite its name, is a Bangladeshi court looking into war crimes around the 1971 independence war.

These attacks began in February 2013 and have continued throughout the year. I visited Hindu families who had lost everything, and showed me the burnt remains of what used to be their furniture and belongings. At least 300 Hindu homes and shops and more than 60 Hindu temples were damaged or destroyed between February and April 2013. Human rights activists in the area told me these attacks appeared designed to dissuade Hindus from standing as witnesses during the war crimes trials. A large number of victims from 1971 had been Hindus.

In a second wave of attacks last year, triggered by rumours that a Hindu youth had maligned Islam on social media, scores of Hindu homes were vandalised and looted in different parts of the country.

Many within the Bangladesh human rights community say that the government has not done enough to protect Hindus. Authorities have also failed to provide justice for victims of attacks – no one is known to have been held accountable for the vicious mob violence against Hindus in recent years. This has to change, as continued impunity will only encourage more discrimination and violence.

The authorities must initiate independent and effective investigations into all these attacks, and bring to justice those found responsible, regardless of their party affiliation.

The authorities must ensure that anyone at risk, especially Hindus, are given the protection they need at this tense time. Police protection must be provided in areas where Hindu communities have come under attacks, and authorities must heed Hindus who warn that attacks against them might be imminent. Anyone responsible for past attacks must be held to account.

Any remaining laws that discriminate against the Hindu community, especially the Vested Property Act, must be repealed.

At the same time, it is crucial that all political leaders strongly condemn any human rights abuses against Hindus and other minorities, and instruct their supporters to not engage in any activities that would abuse their rights.

By Abbas Faiz, Amnesty International's Bangladesh Researcher

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