

**City University of Hong Kong  
Research Centre for Sustainable Hong Kong<sup>1</sup>**

**Policy Paper No. 34<sup>2</sup>**

**Navigating Diversity: Challenges and Strategies for  
a Harmonious Bangladesh**

**Pranab Kumar Panday, Linda Che Lan Li<sup>3</sup>**

**October 2024**

## **1. Background**

With a population of more than 170 million, Bangladesh has a striking degree of religious, ethnic, and political diversity. Religious minorities of Hindus, Buddhists and Christians have for long co-existed with the mainstream of Islam. In ethnic terms, there are the majority Bengali population and indigenous tribes of the Santhal, Chakma, Marma and others. The country's political landscape used to be shared more or less evenly between the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Such a political environment often undermines efforts to promote diversity, as party loyalties tend to overshadow inclusive policies and marginalise minority perspectives.

In recent years, concerns about fair political representation, socio-economic inclusion, and cultural and religious differences have underlined social conflicts and governance problems. Crude diversity management has marginalised minority groups and incited community violence and discontent. Improving diversity governance is essential to achieving longer-term

---

<sup>1</sup> Established in June 2017 by a cross-disciplinary research team, the Research Centre for Sustainable Hong Kong (CSHK) is an Applied Strategic Development Centre of City University of Hong Kong (CityU). CSHK conducts impactful applied research with the mission to facilitate and enhance collaborations among the academic, industrial and professional service sectors, the community and the government for sustainable development in Hong Kong and the Region.

<sup>2</sup> This policy paper is the second part of the Bangladesh political transition 2024 Series. To view the first part, click [here](#). To comment on this policy paper, please email at [sushkhub@cityu.edu.hk](mailto:sushkhub@cityu.edu.hk)

<sup>3</sup> Pranab Kumar Panday is Professor of Department of Public Administration at the University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh, Adjunct Professor at Central Queensland University, Australia and Associate of CSHK. Linda Chelan Li is Professor at the Department of Public and International Relations and Director of Research Centre for Sustainable Hong Kong at CityU.

social stability and growth in Bangladesh. This policy brief elucidates the complicated issues underlying religious, ethnic and political diversities in Bangladesh.

## **2. Religious Diversity and Tensions**

Though religious diversity is officially protected by the constitution in Bangladesh, the subject remains contentious. While about 90% of the population are Muslims, the other smaller but notable groups of religious minorities include Hindus (about 8%), Buddhists, and Christians. Since independence in 1971, relative peace has co-existed most of the time, with intermittent outbreaks of ferocities targeting minority populations. Historical grievances, socio-economic disparities and political manipulations have deep and complex underlying causes. After the overthrow of the AL government on August 5, 2024, attacks on Hindu temples and Christian churches<sup>4</sup>, among other religious places in Bangladesh, and vandalism on minority communities and businesses have once again raised questions about the rights and safety of religious minorities.

Often prompted by local conflicts or false allegations, such attacks have been exacerbated by aggressive rhetoric on social media.<sup>5</sup> False information and hate speech disseminated on social media platforms created a hostile social environment for religious minority groups. Rather than mitigating tension, the intervention of political parties inclined to exploit communal conflicts for electoral gains often raised the heat towards religious fanaticism.<sup>6</sup> The acute uncertainty, anxiety and fear have isolated the minority populations from society, inhibiting regular day-to-day life routines – work, study and leisure – which every citizen should otherwise be entitled to enjoy.<sup>7</sup>

It is true that successive Bangladeshi governments have adopted inclusive policy measures, such as improving legislation and establishing new security systems to safeguard places of worship. Nonetheless, implementation was, at best, partial. Incidents of attacks on religious minorities often lack transparency, and perpetrators typically evade repercussions.<sup>8</sup> Civil society groups have significantly contributed to the promotion of religious minorities' rights and the awareness of violence and prejudice against them. These organisations have

---

<sup>4</sup> Retrieved from: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/minorities-faced-205-attacks-after-fall-of-sheikh-hasina-government-in-bangladesh-hindu-groups/article68508954.ece>, accessed on 22 September 2024

<sup>5</sup> Chowdhury, T. (2021). *Attacks on Hindu Temples in Bangladesh: An Overview*. Dhaka Tribune. October, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Retrieved from: <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/attacks-minorities-bbc-dismislab-debunk-fake-news-3675136>, accessed on 22 September 2024

<sup>7</sup> <https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2015/04/Ayres%20HFAC%20written%20statement%2004302015.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Chowdhury, T. (2021). *Attacks on Hindu Temples in Bangladesh: An Overview*. Dhaka Tribune. October, 14.

endeavoured to foster dialogues to mend divisions between religious groups. Despite these efforts, impacts have been limited, and substantial obstacles remain in achieving enduring peace and a culture of moderation and tolerance.

### **3. Ethnic Diversity and Indigenous Marginalisation**

An area suffering from indigenous marginalisation in Bangladesh is the region of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The CHT demonstrates considerable ethnic diversity due to the centuries-old habitation of indigenous groups in this region, like the Chakma, Marma, Tripura, and other Jumma. However, the indigenous groups have long suffered from systematic marginalisation and political and ethnic confrontations, in particular concerning land rights and cultural autonomy.<sup>9</sup>

During the British colonial period in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, governmental activities and land laws disrupted traditional land use patterns, leading to conflicts over land use between Bengali immigrants and indigenous populations.<sup>10</sup> These issues continued after independence and were aggravated by governmental policies favouring settlement and resource extraction, which increased competition for land and resources.

The 1997 CHT Peace Accord was a notable achievement towards addressing these enduring issues by granting the CHT a measure of self-governance and recognising the rights of indigenous populations. The Accord included provisions for land rights and assurances of economic growth and granting regional and district governments authority over specified local issues. The implementation of the Accord has been inconsistent; however, numerous sections remain unfulfilled, and ongoing conflicts around land rights continue. The settlement of Bengali immigrants in the CHT is a contentious issue, for example, as indigenous communities argue that it undermines their land rights and cultural autonomy.<sup>11</sup>

The ongoing land disputes and conflicting assertions regarding territory designated by the government between Bengali immigrants in the CHT and indigenous populations remain a source of tension and violent clashes. The partial implementation of the 1997 Accord has

---

<sup>9</sup> Panday, P. K., & Jamil, I. (2009). Conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh: An unimplemented accord and continued violence. *Asian Survey*, 49(6), 1052-1070.

<sup>10</sup> Siddique, S. (2021). *Implementation of the CHT Peace Accord: Progress and Challenges*. *Asian Survey*, 61(3), 462-480.

<sup>11</sup> Panday, P. K., & Jamil, I. (2009). Conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh: An unimplemented accord and continued violence. *Asian Survey*, 49(6), 1052-1070.

resulted in disappointment and frustration among the indigenous groups, who perceive that their rights and aspirations for self-governance are ignored.<sup>12</sup>

Ethnic communities residing outside the CHT, notably the Santhal and Garo populations, also suffer from significant poverty. The communities' often secluded settings with poor infrastructure and fragile government services, including healthcare and education, further exacerbate their marginalisation.<sup>13</sup> Deep-seated discriminatory attitudes against minority groups make securing employment or exercising fundamental civic rights like voting in local elections difficult for many.<sup>14</sup> Cycles of poverty are hence perpetuated.

Diverse outcomes have arisen from the initiatives of the Bangladeshi government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to tackle these concerns. Although targeted programs have been implemented to enhance infrastructure and augment service accessibility in remote areas, they have often been inadequate or poorly executed. Development programs targeting ethnic minorities frequently encounter delays, corruption, or insufficient funding, so compromising their efficacy. The advocacy for ethnic minority rights and the emphasis on addressing their needs have been significantly supported by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These organisations operate in several domains, including legal advisory, community enhancement, and cultural conservation. Their efficacy is occasionally hindered by insufficient resources and the intricate political landscape surrounding ethnic issues in Bangladesh.<sup>15</sup>

The ethnic diversity in the CHT and among minority groups outside the CHT brings opportunities and challenges. The ongoing challenges of land conflicts, socio-economic marginalisation, and cultural underrepresentation underscore the necessity for more comprehensive and effective legislation. The Bangladeshi government must consider the full implementation of the 1997 CHT Peace Accord, rectify systemic discrimination, and enhance socio-economic conditions for ethnic minorities to attain sustainable resolutions.

---

<sup>12</sup> Jamil, I., & Panday, P. K. (2008). The Elusive Peace Accord in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh and the Plight of the Indigenous People. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 46(4), 464–489.

<sup>13</sup> Bose, T. (2017). Indigeneity and the hybrid peace process in the CHT. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 12(3), 77-91.

<sup>14</sup> Siddique, S. (2021). *Implementation of the CHT Peace Accord: Progress and Challenges*. *Asian Survey*, 61(3), 462-480.

<sup>15</sup> Bose, T. (2017). Indigeneity and the hybrid peace process in the CHT. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 12(3), 77-91.

#### **4. Political Diversity and Polarisation**

Political power in Bangladesh is traditionally divided between the two dominant parties, the AL and the BNP. Founded by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the AL has consistently advocated for secular nationalism and identified itself as a proponent of inclusive and progressive policies. In contrast, under Khaleda Zia's leadership, the BNP has consistently adhered to the principles of Bangladeshi nationalism.

The schism between the AL and BNP has significantly impacted political stability in Bangladesh. Violent protests, electoral conflicts, and repressions of dissent were frequent occurrences arising from this rivalry. For example, during the 2014, 2018 and 2024 national elections, mutual allegations of widespread vote tampering and violence led to outbreaks of domestic turmoil and international censure. In addition to disrupting political processes, the ferocious conflicts have eroded public trust in democratic institutions.<sup>16</sup>

The dominance of the AL and BNP significantly crowded out alternative political voices, especially those advocating for the rights of religious and ethnic minorities. The smaller parties and independent candidates struggled to garner support within a polarised political landscape. The marginalisation of minority groups, whose demands are inadequately acknowledged by major parties, has intensified feelings of exclusion of these groups from mainstream political life. The absence of minority groups from representation significantly undermines social unity and governance.

Political leaders in Bangladesh frequently exploit their political and religious identities to advance their agendas. The AL and BNP have employed religious language and symbols to attract steadfast follower groups and enhance their political dominance. Such deliberate application of identity politics hinders societal harmony and weakens national unity. Political leaders perpetuate a cycle of polarisation as they play up contentious subjects and exploit public sentiments.

The AL's political domination for over 15 years has led to the demise of opposition forces and diminished levels of political accountability, breeding corruption, poor government performance and pervasive human rights violations. Following the recent public uprising and collapse of the AL government in August 2024<sup>17</sup>, the interim government led by Nobel

---

<sup>16</sup> Retrieved from: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/bangladesh/336-beyond-election-overcoming-bangladeshs-political-deadlock>, accessed on September 22, 2024

<sup>17</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/5/timeline-sheikh-hasinas-reign-ends-after-15-years>, accessed on September 22, 2024

Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus<sup>18</sup> initiated a campaign against corruption and pledged to implement comprehensive reforms. To address the diversity issues discussed above, for example, the voting system will need reforms to ensure equitable representation across all sectors of society.

## 5. Policy Recommendations

This section outlines several suggestions to address the main concerns highlighted in this paper.

**First:** Attacks on religious minorities, often motivated by religious or political factors, have become increasingly acute and violent.<sup>19</sup> The lack of consistent and effective law enforcement in response to these incidents has bred a culture of impunity, deepened the social marginalisation of minority groups and eroded trust in state institutions. More robust legal protections are urgently needed, and the government must demonstrate a commitment to *enforce* anti-discrimination laws to ensure that all religious communities feel secure. Law enforcement officials must be more closely monitored, and better training must be provided to improve enforcement performance. The current indifference to ‘hate crimes’ must end.

**Second:** Land disputes and indigenous rights of ethnic minorities remain unresolved despite the 1997 CHT Peace Accord, which promised greater autonomy and protection for indigenous groups like the Chakma, Marma, and Tripura. The non-implementation of the Accord, coupled with the ongoing settlement of Bengali migrants, has exacerbated tensions and led to periodic outbreaks of violence and displacement.<sup>20</sup> A lack of political will and bureaucratic delays have stalled meaningful progress in addressing these issues. The interim government must prioritise the implementation of the Peace Accord and protect indigenous land rights through an open process to settle land disputes. Indigenous leaders must be fully engaged and actively involved in this process.

**Third:** The political marginalisation of religious and ethnic minorities, excluding them from meaningful participation in local and national decision-making processes, must be ended. The past political dominance of AL and BNP had left little room for alternative voices.<sup>21</sup> This

---

<sup>18</sup> Retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/6/nobel-laureate-yunus-to-lead-bangladesh-interim-govt-presidents-office>, accessed on September 23, 2024

<sup>19</sup> Minority Rights Group (2022). *Bangladesh - Overview*. Available at: <https://minorityrights.org/country/bangladesh>, accessed on September 23, 2024

<sup>20</sup> Panday, P. K., & Jamil, I. (2009). Conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh: An unimplemented accord and continued violence. *Asian Survey*, 49(6), 1052-1070.

<sup>21</sup> Riaz, A. (2020). Three Decades of Bangladeshi Politics (1990-2019): The Emergence and Collapse of the Political Settlements. *Journal of Governance, Security & Development*, 1 (1): 2020: 109-139.

exclusionary political environment perpetuates a system where minorities have minimal representation and influence. Electoral reforms are necessary to increase minorities' political representation in the national parliament and local elected bodies.

**Fourth:** Minority groups, particularly those in remote areas such as the CHT and northern districts, face socio-economic marginalisation in the form of poverty, limited access to education, and inadequate healthcare services.<sup>22</sup> Economic exclusion, reinforced by social bias, perpetuates intergenerational poverty in these communities. Comprehensive socio-economic policies to improve access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities are crucial to breaking poverty cycles and ensuring equal opportunities for all citizens. Development initiatives must target disadvantaged communities and regions more effectively, such as the CHT and other areas with significant minority populations. The local communities should be actively involved to participate in their development programs to improve program design and execution.

**Fifth:** A culture of social divisions will not be conducive to building an inclusive political environment. The political parties and civil society organisations need to join hands to provide opportunities for new political formations and protect the civic rights of disadvantaged populations. Enhancing democratic institutions and upholding the rule of law principles are critical for ensuring ongoing stability.

## **Conclusion**

Bangladesh possesses a remarkably diverse political, religious and ethnic landscape. However, the significant cultural diversity has also resulted in conflicts and marginalised minority communities despite constitutional protection of their rights. The Government of Bangladesh must address the acute deficits in diversity management to ensure sustained social stability and equitable development for all groups in the country.

---

<sup>22</sup> Retrieved from <https://bdplatform4sdgs.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/State-of-the-Marginalised-Communities-in-Bangladesh-2016.pdf>, accessed on September 22, 2024