

## [Bangladesh Declares Islam State Religion](#)

Category : [August 1988](#)

Published by Anonymous on Aug. 02, 1988

# Bangladesh Declares Islam State Religion

## 12 Million Hindus, Opposition Parties and Muslim Women's Groups Denounce New Bill

"The religion of the republic is Islam, but other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony" - so decreed the Bangladesh Parliament on June 7th. This highly controversial constitutional amendment was the handiwork of General Ershad, whose ruling Jatiya party overwhelmingly dominates the 300-member parliament. The two small opposition parties, helpless to stop the bill, boycotted the final 254-0 vote.

The 12-million minority Hindu population (about 11%) is outraged by the new bill, foreseeing that it will only further serve anti-Hindu sentiment and religious persecution. The Bengali Muslim intelligentsia, never enamored of Army General Ershad and his military rule, equally decry the bill, fearing it will stifle progressive thought. Muslim women's groups view the new bill with trepidation, knowing it portends the ushering in of Koranic Law with its restrictive taboos and extreme curtailment of women's rights and social freedoms.

But the village Muslim loves it. "The very existence of the enemies of Islam will be wiped out of Bangladesh," declared a poster at a victory celebration of the ruling party after the signing of the bill.

Open-street protests in Dacca, the capital, were led by the two anti-Ershad opposition parties who bitterly view passage of the bill a sad capitulation to Islamic dogmatism. Sheik Hasina, female head of the Awami League, quickly organized an 8-hour nationwide strike to condemn the bill. Later, this outspoken arch-rival of General Ershad told a crowd of 10,000, "We have reports that Hindus in southern Gopalganj District and non-Muslim tribals in different parts of the country are being threatened that their land will be taken away by force." Sacrilege of a Siva temple in northern Satkhira was also reported in the Bangladesh paper, Khabar. Despite several reported injuries, a small army of several thousand well-armed riot police

easily maintain Dacca's peace.

## The Money Factor

Political analysts have diagnosed two compelling reasons for Ershad's recent action, neither of them religious. First, he is courting the continued favor of Muslim nations such as Saudi Arabia, which contributes the largest share of Bangladesh's U.S. \$2-billion-dollar foreign aid relief. Second, Ershad hopes the bill will stem the wane in his popularity by pleasing the uneducated masses. The gamble may have its price. Internationally, Bangladesh's extremism may cost it the support of other large contributors like Japan (U.S. \$300 million annually). Internally, the educated and progressive elite has been alienated, the Hindus cowed and the opposition parties even more deeply committed to seeing Ershad resign.

## Once a Buddhist Dynasty

Bangladesh was not always an 88-percent Muslim homeland. Located on the northeastern border of India, this lowland area called Bengal was, until 1200 A.D., a Pali-speaking Buddhist dynasty inhabited peacefully by Buddhists, Hindus and tribal animists. Moghul/Islamic conquest and rule followed until the British took over in 1760. In 1947, when India won independence, east Bengal became the eastern province of the new, proudly Islamic country of Pakistan. Despite the common religious bond, East Pakistan felt economically used and politically abused by stronger West Pakistan and defiantly broke away from her rule in 1971 in a bloody war that employed India's mammoth army in the decisive battle. The new country called itself Bangladesh. For 17 years, wobbly military leadership with "martial law" and denial of free press has rankled Hindus and Muslims alike. Nevertheless, a solid pro-Islamic government policy became well-established.

## The Inside Story: A Secret Interview

Hinduism Today succeeded in contacting two Hindus from Bangladesh, one a revered monk and another an ex-minister of Parliament of Bangladesh, for a first-hand report. Because foreign interviews have been banned, these two men

were forced to travel to nearby Calcutta, India, where this exclusive interview was conducted on July 5th by Dr. Sujit Dhar.

HT: What was the immediate impact of the new amendment?

Ex-PM: The rural Muslims follow to the letter any decree issued by the local mullah [priest]. To them, the new constitution signifies total Islamization of Bangladesh, exactly as in the days of the Islamic rule in India. The stresses of the rural Hindu are kept behind the scenes. His worship is now limited to his home only. No sounds of bells and conches should be heard. Hindu Monk: Ershad has declared himself as the Imam [religious leader]. Teeming millions of Muslims deem it their singular privilege to torment the "kafir [heathen] Hindu." It is a regular feature that Hindus' deities of Durga or Saraswati are demolished by local ruffians everywhere in Bangladesh.

HT: Now that Islam is the state religion, will Islam's code of law also be imposed?

Ex-PM: Bangladesh cannot afford to antagonize world public opinion. They depend too much on international charity. Also, too much exposure of the plans and policies of the new law might excite passions in the adjoining non-Muslim States like India, Burma and Nepal, where the Muslims are in a hopeless minority. The progressive Muslims, too, are fearful. They are full of anxiety about the applications of the Shariat [Islamic Law] in all spheres of life.

Hindu Monk: It is clear that the authorities cannot wait any more, and Islamization is being pushed as rapidly as possible. History will not pardon the huge Hindu society of the sin it is committing by allowing 12 million of their brothers and sisters in faith be oppressed in such fashion by the sword of Islam.

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