

BANGLADESH

PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BANGLADESH

Head of state: Badruddoza Chowdhury (replaced Shahabuddin Ahmed in November)

Head of government: Begum Khaleda Zia (replaced Sheikh Hasina in October)

Capital: Dhaka

Population: 140.4 million

Official language: Bangla

Death penalty: retentionist

Political violence in advance of elections resulted in about 150 deaths. There were high levels of violence against minorities, particularly Hindus. Impunity for perpetrators of human rights violations was widespread. Religious groups sought to overturn a landmark High Court judgment which banned *fatwas*, religious edicts most often issued against women. Women continued to be subjected to violent attacks in their homes and communities. Three executions were carried out, the first for over three years.

Political developments

A caretaker government took power in July to organize parliamentary elections in October. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), formerly Bangladesh's main opposition party, won more than two thirds of the seats in alliance with three other parties including *Jamaat-e-Islami*. BNP leader Begum Khaleda Zia was sworn in as Prime Minister in October. The unopposed presidential nominee, Badruddoza Chowdhury, was declared President in November.

In the run-up to the elections, there were violent clashes between BNP and Awami League supporters in which about 150 people were killed and thousands injured. The former ruling party, the Awami League, alleged that the elections were rigged and boycotted Parliament.

Violence against minorities

Following the elections, hundreds of Hindu families were reportedly subjected to violent attacks, including rape, beatings and the burning of their property. They were allegedly attacked by BNP supporters because of their perceived support for the Awami League. In November, a prominent member of the Hindu community was killed while hundreds of families reportedly fled to India. The police failed to take effective measures to protect the community; some arrests were made but most assailants were not brought to justice. No information was provided about an official investigation into the atrocities, promised in November and December. In response to a petition in November by the legal aid organization, *Ain-o-Salish Kendra*, the High Court gave the government one month to explain why it did not protect Hindus. No explanation was provided by the end of the year.

On 22 November, Shahriar Kabir, a prominent writer and journalist, was detained by police on his return from India. In December, he was charged with sedition but the authorities did not make public the evidence to support the charge. His detention appeared to be solely because he had been investigating the situation of Hindus who fled persecution in Bangladesh. He was still held in Dhaka Central Jail under the Special Powers Act at the end of 2001.

Other minorities suffered attacks. In June, 10 people were killed and more than 20 wounded in a bomb explosion in a church in Baniarchar, Gopalganj district. Violent clashes between tribal inhabitants and Bengali settlers continued to be reported in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Three women from the Jumma minority were allegedly raped in May by army personnel; no one was known to have been brought to justice.

Women's rights

Women continued to be subjected to violent attacks, including rape. Dozens reportedly died in dowry-related murders. Acid attacks left many severely scarred. The authorities rarely provided adequate protection or means of redress. The failure of the police to investigate and take legal action against perpetrators of violence against women engendered a climate of impunity.

By launching an appeal to the Supreme Court, religious groups sought to overturn a landmark High Court judgment in January which banned *fatwas*, which were often used to repress women's rights.

Torture and prison conditions

Widespread beatings and other ill-treatment by the police and the armed forces persisted with impunity. At least 30 people reportedly died in custody as a result of torture. The authorities appeared to ignore torture allegations. The new government promised in October to repeal the Special Powers Act and the Public Safety Act but continued to use them to detain people for long periods without charge or trial.

Thousands of people awaited trial in overcrowded prisons. In July large numbers of people were detained during a drive to recover unlawful weapons, forcing prisoners to have to take turns to lie down to sleep.

Death penalty

Two men were hanged in February, marking a resumption of executions after more than three years. Another man was hanged in November. At least 20 people were sentenced to death in 2001.

In the latest ruling in April, the death sentences of 12 army officers, accused of the killing of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family, were upheld by the High Court. Four of those convicted were detained in Bangladesh.

AI country reports/visits

Report

- Bangladesh: Attacks on members of the Hindu minority (AI Index: ASA 13/006/2001)

Visit

AI delegates visited Bangladesh in March to take part in an AI-organized human rights defenders seminar.