

# Bangladesh PM Rejects Muslim Demand for Blasphemy Law

Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has turned down the demand of **radical Islamists** to enact a blasphemy law to punish those who desecrate Islam and its Prophet Muhammad.

One hundred thousand activists belonging to Hefazat-e-Islam, an umbrella Islamic organization, had earlier rallied on Saturday in the capital Dhaka to express their demands for the government to enact a new **blasphemy law** with provisions for the death penalty.

Hasina told the BBC: "They have demanded it. Actually, we don't have any plan to [bring in the law]. We don't need it. They should know that existing laws are enough. ... This country is a secular democracy. So each and every religion has the right to practice their religion freely and fairly. But it is not fair to hurt anybody's religious feeling. Always we try to protect every religious sentiment."

Last week, four bloggers were arrested for allegedly writing defamatory and anti-Islamic elements in their blogs. According to existing Bangladeshi law, anyone convicted of defaming a religion on the Internet can be jailed for up to 10 years.

In recent weeks, Bangladesh has been rocked by a series of protests by opposition parties.

The issue of blogging became an issue after a group of online activists took to Dhaka's streets in February to demand the death penalty for the leader of Jamaat-e-Islami (the largest Islamist party) Abdul Kader Mollah. He had been given a verdict of life imprisonment on Feb. 5 for committing mass murder, rape, looting and other crimes against humanity during Bangladesh's war of liberation against Pakistan in 1971.

Tens of thousands protested in the area of Shahbagh in central Dhaka, considering this (one of the three possible verdicts) as too lenient. They demanded that all war criminals should be given the highest punishment: a death sentence.

Jamaat-e-Islami has also been holding demonstrations demanding the immediate release of its leaders who face war crimes charges. Two of its senior leaders have already been convicted by a special tribunal. Seven more still face trial.

Bloggers, in a movement that has now become known as Shahbagh, have continued to lead counter-protests against those Islamist leaders who are accused of crime against humanity, genocide and rape.

Chittagong-based radical Hefazat-e-Islam leaders gave speeches about their 13-point demands in Saturday's Dhaka mass rally. One of their demands was to reinstate the phrase "Absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah" in the Constitution, as one of the fundamental principles of state policy. Another was to enact a law providing for capital punishment for maligning Allah, Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, and any smear campaigns against Muslims. Others were to scrap anti-Islamic policies on women and education, and to make Islamic education mandatory from primary to higher secondary levels.

Manzoor Hasan, adviser of the Institute of Governance Studies in Bangladesh, expressed grave concern about these demands of the Islamic activists.

"The demands by Hefazat-e-Islam are unacceptable, given the secular nature of Bangladesh's past history and present political environment. ... They are totally contrary to the belief and traditions of Bangladeshi people. These demands are in conflict with Constitutional and existing laws of the land. Any concession to their demands will be tantamount to regressive and oppressive policy towards the minority communities," said Hasan.

But the prime minister's rejection of the need for an anti-blasphemy law will reinforce the existing traditions and religious harmony in the country, he added.

### **Stop Evangelism**

The Hefazat-e-Islam activists also demanded a stop to conversions by **Christian missionaries** in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and elsewhere in Bangladesh.

Reverend Shetu Munshi, a leader of the **Assemblies of God** Church, said practice and preaching of any religion is permitted: "Their demands are against the religious rights which are enshrined in the Constitution. ... If they are met, the religious matrix of the country will be upside down and the country will be on the slippery slope towards hatred and confrontation like Pakistan."

### **Ultimatum**

The Islamists have now given a three-week ultimatum to the government to meet their demands. They say they will go for a countrywide blockade program on May 5.

Junayed Babu Nagari, secretary general of Hefazat-e-Islam, declared in their rally that they would lay siege to the whole country and bring it to a grinding halt unless their demands were met. "We will cut off the capital Dhaka from the rest of the country on that day" he threatened.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) removed Bangladesh from its Watch List after the massive victory of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League in the 2008 general election. Her center-left party is considered to promote secular policies and to be favorable toward minority rights. Her announcement to implement **religious freedom** reforms was another cause for Bangladesh to be removed from the Watch List.

Of Bangladesh's 154 million people, Sunni Muslims constitute

90 percent and Hindus 9 percent (2001 census). The remaining 1 percent is mainly Christian and Buddhist.