

OPINION

The lack of freedom for minorities is **INDICATIVE OF INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES**



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August 5 marked a significant turning point in Bangladesh's history. After years of ruling, Sheikh Hasina resigned from her position as Prime Minister, bowing to relentless pressure from public protests. The streets were flooded with people celebrating the downfall of a government that had overstayed its welcome.

Yet, amidst the chaos and jubilation, a sinister and heartbreaking reality followed with reports of multiple attacks on religious minorities. Temples, churches, and pagodas became targets of senseless vandalism. Many of these sacred spaces, representing the spiritual and cultural diversity of our nation, lie in ruins or are at risk. The very people who should be feeling the winds of change and hope are now gripped with fear. The relative silence from those who so vehemently opposed the dictatorial regime is deafening. Where is the outrage?

At the time of writing this article, there have been multiple attacks on Hindu temples, residences, and businesses across 27 districts. Communal violence has plagued our country for a long time, and perhaps we have become desensitised to it. This may explain why some people resort to social media in an effort to undermine these claims, often demanding that people don't spread rumours under reports that are frequently accompanied by videos. Some, perhaps, even perversely revel in suppression of minorities. Regardless, instead of reducing these incidents of vandalism and violence to mere rumours or conspiracies to divide us, it is high time we asked ourselves who the culprits are and why they haven't been brought to justice.

After all, true freedom is inclusive. It protects the rights and dignity of every individual, regardless of their religious or cultural background. The recent attacks on religious minorities are not isolated incidents. They are

a reflection of a deeper, systemic issue – an intolerance that has been allowed to fester for far too long. It is a stark reminder that our fight for democracy and justice is far from over. Should we really settle for a superficial change in leadership while ignoring the underlying issues that plague our society?

Freedom for religious and ethnic minorities in Bangladesh has always been akin to a two-step authentication process – unnecessarily complex, restrictive, and often exclusionary. On the surface,

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constitutional guarantees and legal frameworks promise equality and protection for all citizens. Yet, the reality is starkly different, requiring minorities themselves to validate their own existence and allegiance in a society that remains deeply intolerant. As a nation, we must confront this ugly reality head-on. We must hold ourselves accountable for the safety and well-being of all our citizens. The struggle for true

freedom and democracy must include a commitment to protect and respect our diverse religious and ethnic communities. It is time for the voices of reason and compassion to drown out the silence of indifference.

These communal attacks against minorities undermine the very essence of unity and justice that countless student protesters have sacrificed their lives for. The recent spate of violence is not only an affront to this vision but also an insult to the memory of the martyrs. The month of July has taught us to stand up for what is right, and fair, and we must use this newfound courage to raise our voices against oppression of all forms.

In the midst of this chaos, however, there is a glimmer of hope. Across the country, ordinary citizens have taken it upon themselves to guard temples, churches, and pagodas, standing as human shields against the tide of violence. These acts of solidarity offer a beacon of hope and a testament to the resilience of our shared humanity. Yet, the very necessity of such measures is deeply troubling. Why must minorities have to be protected by their fellow citizens in a land that is supposed to be their home as well? This stark reality sparks questions as to why minorities are so frequently targeted in our country. The answer lies in centuries-old prejudices and a failure to foster genuine inclusivity and respect for diversity.

Bangladesh stands at a crossroads. The path we choose now will determine the future of our nation. Will we rise above our differences and build a society that truly embodies the principles of justice and equality? Or will we continue to let intolerance and hatred tear us apart?

Reference:
The Daily Star (August 6, 2024). *Hindu houses, businesses attacked in 27 districts.*

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