

# Democracy and Sharia in Bangladesh: Surveying Support

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## *Executive Summary*

Although Bangladeshis support democracy, many also believe that introducing *Sharia*, or Islamic law based on the Qur'an and Hadith, might be helpful in ensuring justice and fairness in governance. They strongly endorse democratic values, including the importance of elected representation, an independent judiciary, freedom of expression and association, and the security of individual property rights. However, many are dissatisfied with the effectiveness and impartiality of the government. Many citizens do not feel they are fairly governed by elected representatives. They feel their rights are being impinged on and the judiciary is not free from political interference. While many citizens indicate they do not want to return to military rule. Nevertheless, most also supported granting the military control of the government during times of crisis when elected civilian leadership appears to be failing. Many see *Sharia* as one way to ensure better governance, to ensure fairer justice and to reduce corruption. There is widespread support for the implementation of facets of *Sharia* including harsh physical punishments and modest dress codes for women. Support among non-Muslim minorities for those facets of *Sharia* to be integrated into governance is lower but still significant.

This research brief is based on a face-to-face representative survey of 4,067 households in Bangladesh conducted in April 2017. Respondents indicated overwhelming support for key democratic principles, such as elected representatives, an independent judiciary, freedoms of speech and assembly, and property rights. However, the survey also reveals a perceived gap between the theory and practice of democracy in Bangladesh. There is disappointment in the ruling class and in governance failures. Large minorities feel that they are not governed fairly by elected representatives, that their freedoms of speech and assembly are

## KEY FINDINGS

- Bangladeshis overwhelmingly support democratic principles and institutions, but do not view the current system of governance as living up to their expectations.
- Dissatisfaction with current democratic practices is driving citizens to search for alternatives, including *Sharia*, to promote good governance and prevent corruption.
- Minority populations are less likely to support *Sharia*, although a significant portion of minorities are willing to support certain aspects of it, including harsh physical punishments for crime.
- Support for democratic values in Bangladesh is higher among men, whereas support for *Sharia* is higher among rural communities and women.

increasingly restricted, and that the judiciary is subject to political interference. These findings are cause for concern among the country's democratic leaders. They demonstrate a lack of confidence in the way the current political system is operating and an ongoing search by citizens for alternatives.

For a country with a population that is more than 90 percent Muslim, it is not surprising that a vast majority of those surveyed supported some role for Islamic law in two regards: the way the country is governed, and the way the country's British colonial-era common law system is administered. There is a strong association between *Sharia* and good governance; more than 80 percent of respondents agreed with the statements that *Sharia* would ensure basic service provision, personal security, and justice, as well as discourage corruption. Respondents additionally expressed widespread support for whippings or cutting off of hands for theft and for stoning for adultery.

There are divergent views on democracy and *Sharia* among key demographics. Male respondents placed greater importance on democratic values. Support for *Sharia* was notably stronger in rural areas and among women. In the implementation of certain aspects of *Sharia* — with respect to wearing the veil, hijab, or niqab, in particular — women almost unanimously supported their right to make choices about what they wore; a significant minority of men disagreed. Support for democracy and elected leaders increased with greater educational attainment, and those with higher levels of education were less likely to support the harsh physical punishments associated with *Sharia*. Minorities were much less likely to support *Sharia* and a role for religious leaders in public life. However, significant sections of the non-Muslim community in Bangladesh were willing to support some of the aspects of *Sharia*, such as harsh punishments for violations of the law.

The survey results do not validate the common perception that support for democratic principles and practices is at odds with support for *Sharia*. Instead, the results suggest that support for both democratic principles and *Sharia* can be concurrent. In the context of the current political debates in Bangladesh, the survey shows that *Sharia* is regarded as a possible cure for some of the ailments that citizens see afflicting their democracy. Governance in Bangladesh is not living up to its citizens' democratic expectations. While this divergence deserves greater study, this survey demonstrates that citizens are beginning to look to alternative systems of governance to address what they perceive as poorly performing political representatives, judicial system corruption, and increasingly restricted fundamental rights.

## Introduction

Demands for implementing a salient role for Islamic ethos and practices in society and governance in Bangladesh are a part of the increasing political polarization that has persisted since its independence and accelerated in the past decade and a half.<sup>1</sup> After its founding, Bangladesh took a secular path and retained its British colonial-era common law-based judicial system. The country's 1972 constitution protects freedom of religion and prohibits the imposition of one religion on the adherents of another.<sup>2</sup> Today, amid growing debate about the role of Islam in the country, Islamist groups, including extremist groups, are openly advocating for the implementation of *Sharia* law.<sup>3</sup> It is important to recognize that *Sharia* has different political and cultural interpretations. For some, it is a set of harsh punitive measures to enforce compliance with religious codes, often in contradiction to secular laws. For others, the meaning is contextual and has been interpreted as a means of ensuring “good” governance and/or as an antidote to corruption. Given this debate, an important question to consider in Bangladesh is what relationship, if any, exists between support for democracy and support for *Sharia*.

Democracy remains one of the most used and contested terms in political science. There is no universally accepted definition of the concept. This briefing paper adopts a minimalist definition that perceives democracy as a system of governance with three attributes:

- Universal suffrage;
- Regular, free, competitive, multi-party elections for legislative and chief executive offices; and
- Respect for civil and political rights, such as freedom of expression, assembly, and association and rule of law.<sup>4</sup>

*Sharia* is understood as a term that incorporates a range of codified and uncodified practices relating to governance, social behavior, and personal life, in accordance with the divine precepts of the Qur'an and the Hadith. *Sharia*, itself, remains open to interpretation.

Surveys and opinion polls have consistently indicated popular support for democracy in Bangladesh. The 1996 World Values Survey recorded unequivocal support for democracy following the restoration of parliamentary democracy in the country's first inclusive free and fair general election, which occurred after a popular uprising. Nearly 98 percent of respondents stated that they thought a democratic political system was a very good or a fairly good idea.<sup>5</sup> The 2002 World Values Survey revealed similar results in terms of respondents' opinions of democratic systems.<sup>6</sup> Several other opinion polls conducted in

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Nelson and Seth Oldmixon, “Bangladesh on the Brink: Mapping the Evolving Social Geography of Political Violence,” RESOLVE Network *Bangladesh Research Report* No.1, September 2017.

<sup>2</sup> See Articles 28 and 41, Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, November 4, 1972.

<sup>3</sup> Haroon Habib, “The 13-Point Demands,” *The Hindu*, April 7, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Ali Riaz, *Bangladesh: A Political History since Independence*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 110-11.

<sup>5</sup> World Values Survey, 1996, [www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV3.jsp](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV3.jsp).

<sup>6</sup> World Values Survey, 2002, [www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV4.jsp](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV4.jsp).

the following years have documented persistent and strong endorsements of democracy among Bangladeshis.<sup>7</sup> However, these surveys also revealed that a majority of the population has difficulty understanding the essential features of democratic systems. Events in Bangladesh in the past decade have similarly demonstrated the presence of a shallow democratic culture and weak democratic institutions and practices. After an impasse resulting in widespread violence in late 2006, scheduled general elections were cancelled, and a military-backed technocratic government was installed and remained in power for two years. In a similar incident, the addition of a 15<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendment in 2011, which, among other changes, removed the provision for a nonpartisan caretaker government during election campaigns, resulted in a boycott of national polls by major opposition parties in 2014.<sup>8</sup>

Surveys and polls in Bangladesh have documented growing support for a greater role for religion in the public sphere.<sup>9</sup> The 1996 and 2002 World Values Surveys recorded that 83 and 88 percent of respondents, respectively, greatly valued the role of religion in their lives. In the 2002 survey, 59 percent strongly agreed, and 35 percent agreed that the protection of religion was one of top priorities of government. The respondents viewed strong religious affiliation as one of the key determinants of how fit politicians are for public office. This shift coincided with changes in political and social landscapes, the deletion of secularism as a state principle from the constitution in 1978, and its reinstatement in 2011. In 1979, religion-based political parties were allowed to form and began demanding the adoption of *Sharia* law. In 1988, the constitution was amended by then-President Hussain Muhammad Ershad, establishing Islam as the state religion but making no reference to *Sharia*. Islamist parties emerged as key powerbrokers in the struggle between the Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) for control of the government. The use of religious symbols and icons in political discourse also rose during that time.<sup>10</sup> The trend of an increasing presence for religion in the public sphere continues today; recent survey data show that Bangladeshis strongly support the replacement of their common law-based legal system with one founded on *Sharia*.<sup>11</sup>

To date, no publicly available, detailed studies have been conducted to gauge popular perceptions of the essential features of democracy in the country. This research brief addresses the largely unexplored link between *Sharia* and democracy. Its primary focus is to use new RESOLVE Network survey data to analyze popular perceptions of democracy and to understand how proponents of democracy perceive *Sharia*. It also explores whether demographic variables, particularly educational attainment, have any effects on citizens' views. Given that Muslims constitute over 90 percent of the population, the survey also

<sup>7</sup> See "The Daily Star-Nielsen Election Opinion Poll 2008," *The Daily Star*, November 21, 2008; Syeda Salina Aziz and Elvira Graner, *Governance Barometer Survey Bangladesh 2010*, (Dhaka: Institute of Governance Studies, BRAC University).

<sup>8</sup> Ali Riaz, "A Crisis of Democracy in Bangladesh," *Current History* 113, Issue 762: 150-56.

<sup>9</sup> Ali Riaz, "Religion in Public Life in Bangladesh," Keynote address at the Drivers of Violence and Conflict in Bangladesh: Evidence-Based Research and Understanding Roundtable, sponsored by the RESOLVE Network (Washington, DC) and BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD, Bangladesh), Dhaka, April 4, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Ali Riaz, *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh*, (Lanham, MD, Rowman and Littlefield, 2004); and Ali Riaz, *Bangladesh: A Political History since Independence*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> C. Christine Fair, Ali Hamza, and Rebecca Heller. 2017. "Who Supports Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: What the Data Say?" *Politics and Religion*: 1-40, doi:10.1017/S1755048317000347 1755-0483/17.

recorded the responses of non-Muslims. The sample was broadly representative of the Bangladeshi community; 85 percent of respondents claimed to be followers of the Islamic faith.<sup>12</sup>

The survey measured the popular understanding of democracy by gauging perceptions of core democratic values, such as judicial independence, elected representation, freedoms of speech and association, and property rights. Views on *Sharia* were measured by gauging respondents' understanding of Islamic laws and how they perceived *Sharia's* impact on governance, public services, personal security, and the administration of justice. The survey also explored respondents' attitudes on the punitive dimensions of *Sharia*, such as whipping, chopping off of hands, and stoning. Finally, the survey examined general support and opinions among Bangladeshis regarding the implementation of a *Sharia*-based legal system.

Specifically, this research brief addresses the following research questions:

- Are people supportive of democratic values in Bangladesh? If so, to what extent?
- What are the perceptions of democratic practices in the country?
- What is the general perception of a government under *Sharia* law? To what extent do people see *Sharia* as a key component in ensuring better governance? To what extent do people view *Sharia* as a punitive system?
- Do people who support democratic values believe that *Sharia* can ensure better governance in Bangladesh?
- Does educational attainment make any difference in an individual's opinion of *Sharia*?

Responses to these questions can help to advance the understanding of the depth of support for democracy among Bangladeshis, the values they attach to democracy, their perception of the current state of governance, and whether they view *Sharia* as an alternative to the common law legal system.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, "National Report Volume 1: Analytical Report," Bangladesh Population and Housing Census (Dhaka, 2011), 86.

<sup>13</sup> This research brief takes a narrow slice of a large dataset from the national survey described to look at these specific issues. Additional RESOLVE Network researchers utilized data from this survey to examine different phenomena in a separate RESOLVE Network Research Brief: C. Christine Fair and Wahid Abdallah, "Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: Public Awareness and Attitudes," RESOLVE Network *Bangladesh Research Brief* No.4, September 2017.

## *Methodology*

This research brief uses data from a face-to-face nationally representative survey of 4,067 households in Bangladesh conducted from April 12-30, 2017. During this period, there were no major domestic political events or extremist acts of violence that might have had a significant impact on respondents' attitudes. Still, several anti-militant raids were conducted by security forces during the survey period, inducing fear among citizens in some areas of the country. Due to the sensitivity generated by these events, approximately five percent of respondents asked to stop the survey when questions about religion and militancy were posed.

The survey followed a stratified random sampling design; the samples were nationally representative at division levels and maintain a ratio of 50/50 male/female and 75/25 rural/urban, following the Population Census of 2011. The division level samples were assigned following the proportionate distribution of the population of the census, including for religion. Analytical weights were used to obtain all the estimates. The overall response rate was 70 percent. Similar surveys in Bangladesh record a response rate of around 75 percent. As noted below, on some questions on religious subjects, the non-response rate for non-Muslims was around 13 percent.

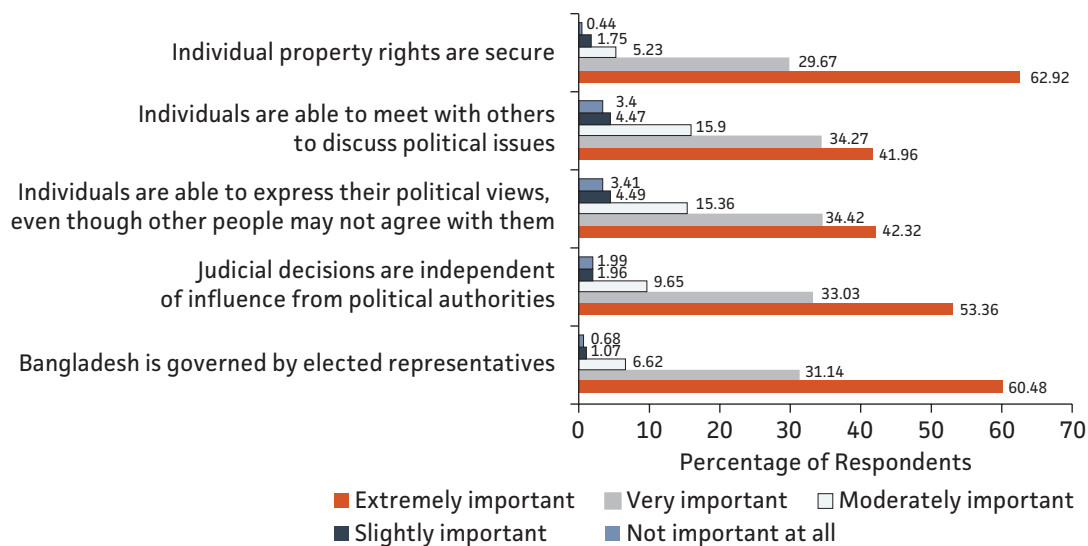
The survey size was originally planned to be 8,000 respondents. However, data collection was stopped just over halfway through fieldwork following a request from local authorities to excise some of the survey's key questions. Rather than compromise the survey, data collection was halted. The decision to halt the survey did not damage the survey's validity. When the survey was halted the sample distribution was already sourced evenly across the country and representative in terms of administrative divisions, gender, religion, and urban/rural dwellers. To continue with a revised questionnaire would, in effect, have meant conducting a second parallel, but incomparable, survey. This second survey would have contributed to neither a greater level of understanding of the issues nor a higher level of statistical accuracy in the results. The original margin of error for the sample size of 8,000 was approximately 1.10 percent at a 5 percent level of significance. With the reduced sample, the margin of error in the final dataset increased to 1.54 percent at a 5 percent level of significance.

## Perceptions about Democracy

### STRONG SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES

There is overwhelming support for the four core principles of democracy among Bangladeshis (Figure 1). The survey used the operational definition of democracy referenced previously to measure four key attributes — property rights, elected representation, independent judiciary, and freedoms of expression and association — as indicators of democracy.

**Figure 1** Support for core democratic principles



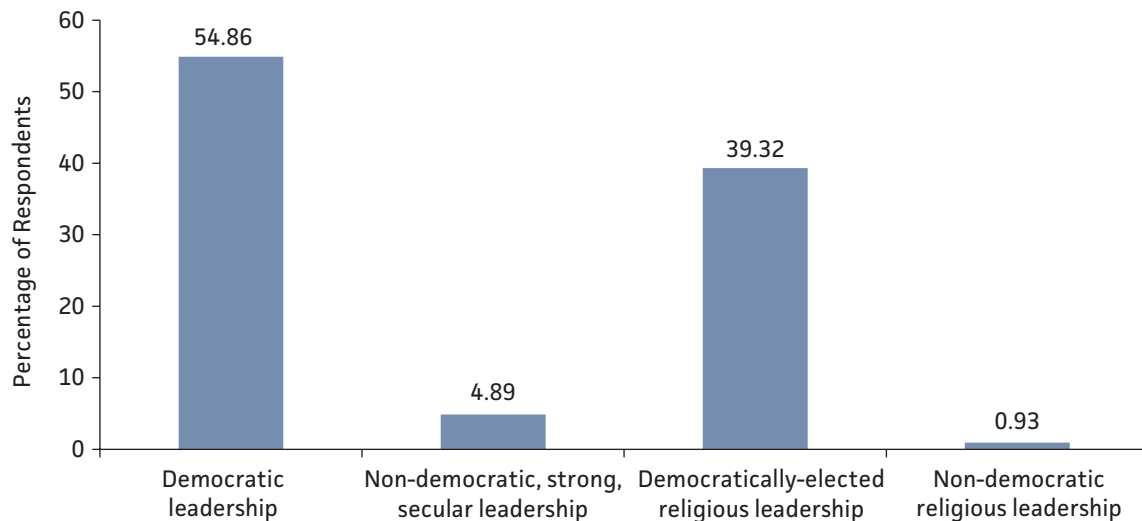
Respondents expressed the highest support for the security of individual property rights; approximately 92 percent agreed that individual property rights were either extremely important (63 percent) or very important for them (30 percent). An overwhelming 91 percent thought elected representation was a core democratic principle; more than 61 percent cited this attribute as extremely important, and 31 percent cited it as very important. When asked about the importance of the judiciary's ability to issue judgments independent of political influence, approximately 86 percent replied that it is either extremely important or very important. Among the attributes of democracy, freedom of expression and freedom of association were ranked lowest, at 76 percent and 75 percent, respectively. The survey revealed no pronounced rural/urban variation with respect to these questions; however, male respondents were found to put greater importance on democratic values.

#### *Preference for Elected Leadership*

Respondents indicated a strong preference for elected leaders. The questionnaire was designed to understand Bangladeshis' preferred form of leadership and the type of leaders they considered to be best positioned to establish order and stability in the country. In response to a question about their leadership preferences, 55 percent expressed a

strong preference for democratic, secular leadership; 39 percent voiced support for a democratically elected religious leader. Only a small minority preferred non-democratic leadership, whether secular or religious (Figure 2).

**Figure 2** Preference for leadership



#### *Views on Military versus Civilian Rule*

Bangladesh was ruled by military and pseudo-military regimes between 1975 and 1990. During this period, the country was rocked by several successful and abortive coups d'état. In the wake of the political impasse in 2006, the military intervened in the political process and remained actively engaged until an elected civilian government was installed after a fair election in December 2008.

This experience raises the question of how Bangladeshis perceive the military's role and its relationship with elected civilian leadership. In total, 72 percent of respondents said that they supported either complete or significant civilian control over the military. More specifically, 51 percent of respondents insisted that elected civilian leadership should have complete control over the military, as stipulated in the country's constitution.<sup>14</sup> Another 21 percent of respondents said that they supported elected civilian leadership's significant, but not necessarily complete, control over the military. It is noteworthy, however, that 83 percent of the respondents said they would support the military's assumption of control in times of emergency, such as when corruption leads to a failure in civilian leadership or its inability to govern. No significant variations in responses to these questions were recorded among rural and urban respondents or among men and women.

#### *Perceived Gap between Democratic Ideals and Practice*

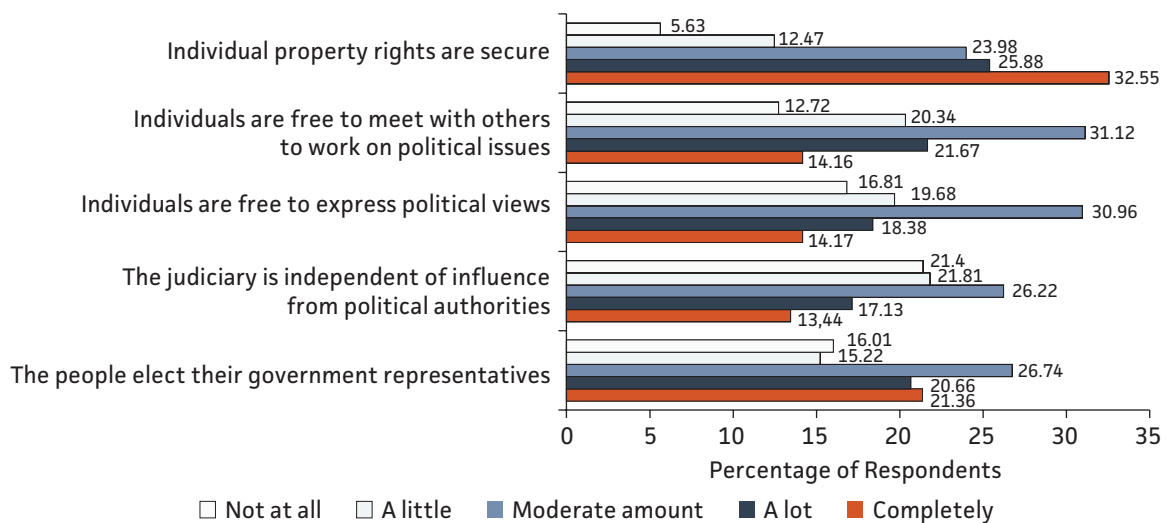
A gap exists between what Bangladeshis expect from democracy and how they experience it in practice. Public perceptions about existing democratic practices were measured using

<sup>14</sup> Article 61, The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.



a set of five indicators on property rights, freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, judicial independence, and elected representation (Figure 3). More than 36 percent of the respondents stated that individuals have limited freedom in their expression of political views or their political activities. The result is comparable to the findings of two other opinion polls conducted in 2015 and 2016; both revealed that 38 percent of those surveyed did not feel free to express their political opinions.<sup>15</sup> About 43 percent of the respondents felt that political authorities have influence over the judicial system, compromising its autonomy. However, 56 percent believed that individual property rights were secure.

**Figure 3** Democracy: Perceptions and practice

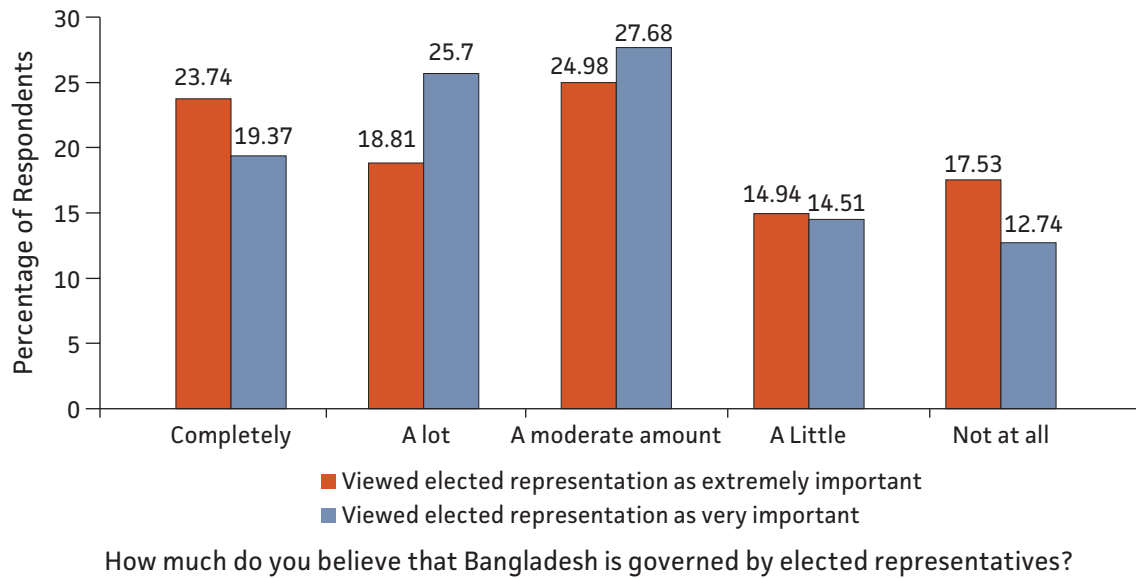


#### *Doubts about Elected Representatives and Judicial Independence*

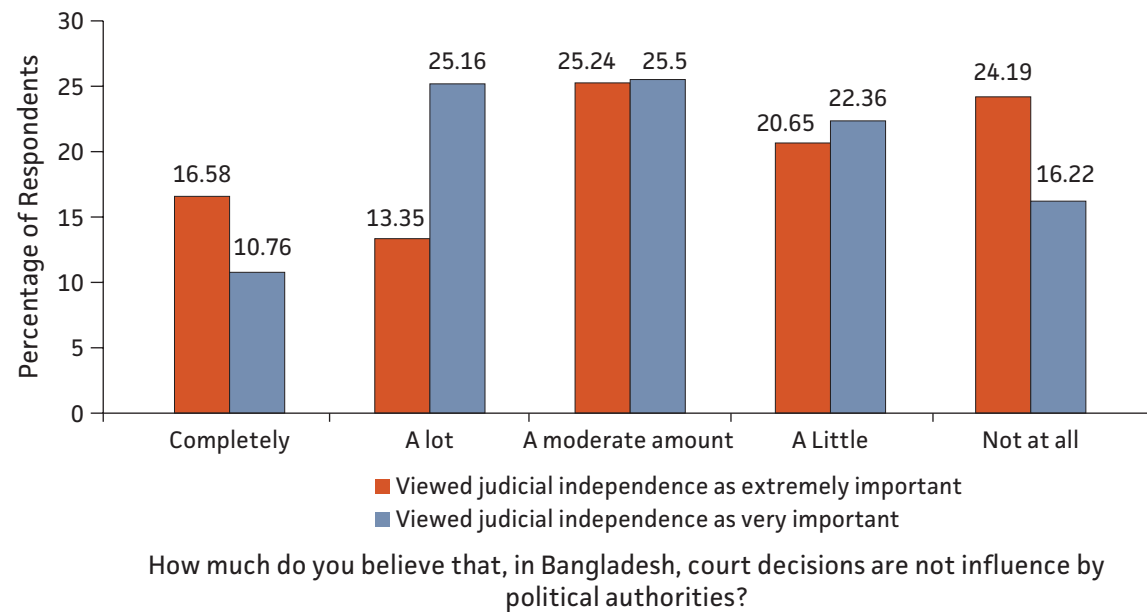
There is a striking disparity between what the respondents hold to be accepted democratic norms and what they view as the existing practices of these institutions. Nearly one-third of the respondents who valued living in a democratically governed country believed the country is not actually governed by those they elected (Figure 4). Approximately 43 percent of those who viewed judicial independence from political authorities to be extremely important or very important thought judges enjoy no or very little freedom from political influence (Figure 5). The respondents who placed extreme importance on elected representation and judicial independence as attributes of democracy expressed comparatively more dissatisfaction with the actual state of the country's democracy.

<sup>15</sup> Democracy International, "Democracy International Releases Latest Survey Data on Bangladesh at Wilson Center," press release, December 8, 2016; The Asia Foundation, "Bangladesh's Democracy: According to its People," public opinion survey, March 25, 2016.

**Figure 4** Assessment of Bangladesh’s democracy in terms of elected representation



**Figure 5** Assessment of Bangladesh’s democracy in terms of judicial independence



## Perceptions of Sharia

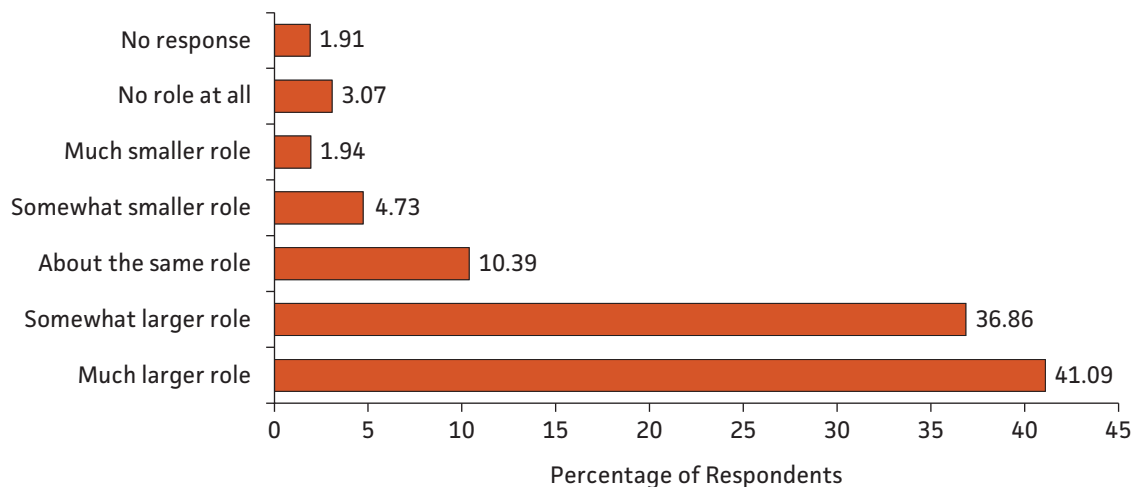
### SUPPORT FOR A LEGAL SYSTEM BASED ON SHARIA

The respondents expressed overwhelming support for a greater role for *Sharia* in the legal system of Bangladesh. Just over 77 percent agreed there should be a much larger role or a somewhat larger role for *Sharia* (Figure 6). This support is consistent among urban and rural respondents (Figure 7); it does not vary greatly between men and women (Figure 8).

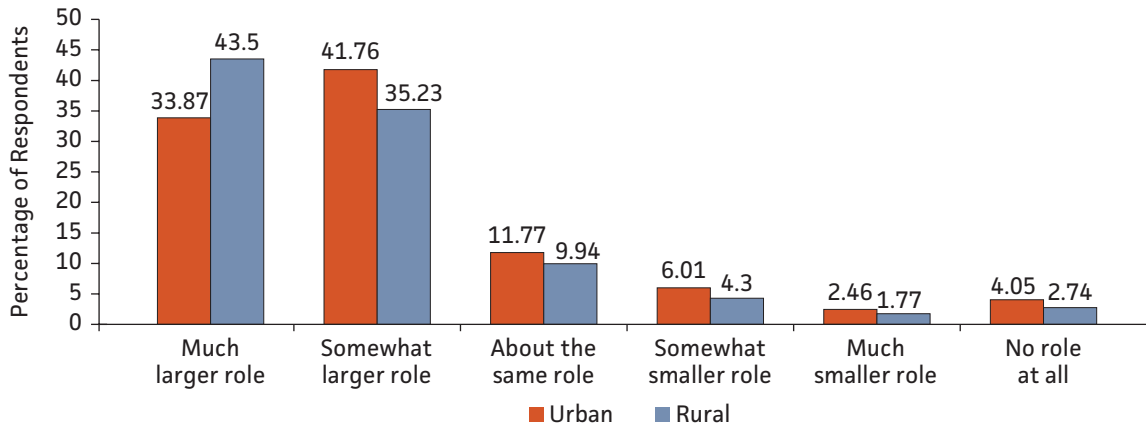
#### *Perceived Association between Sharia and Good Governance*

The survey revealed a positive association between *Sharia* and good governance (Figure 9). On average, more than 80 percent of respondents agreed with the statements that *Sharia* would ensure basic service provision, personal security, and justice as well as discourage corruption. A majority also stated that strict punitive action, such as harsh physical punishment, is a key feature of *Sharia*. On average, 70 percent of the respondents believed that *Sharia* uses harsh punishments to ensure obedience to the law. About 78 percent believed that *Sharia* would make it mandatory for women to wear a veil, hijab, or niqab. However, 46 percent disagreed with the statement that this requirement would limit the role of women in public. There was consensus, especially among the female respondents, that women should be the ultimate decision-makers in terms of whether to wear a head covering in public (Figure 10).

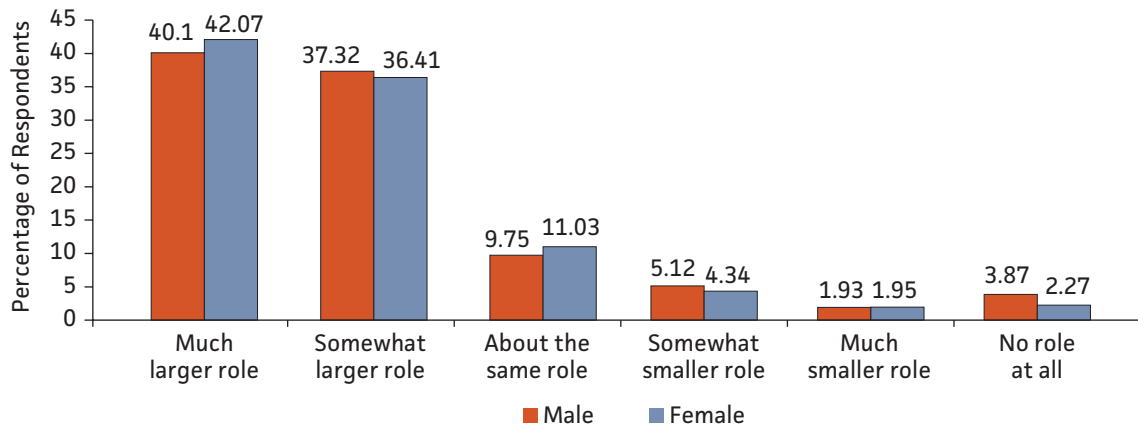
**Figure 6** Support for a larger role for *Sharia* in the legal system



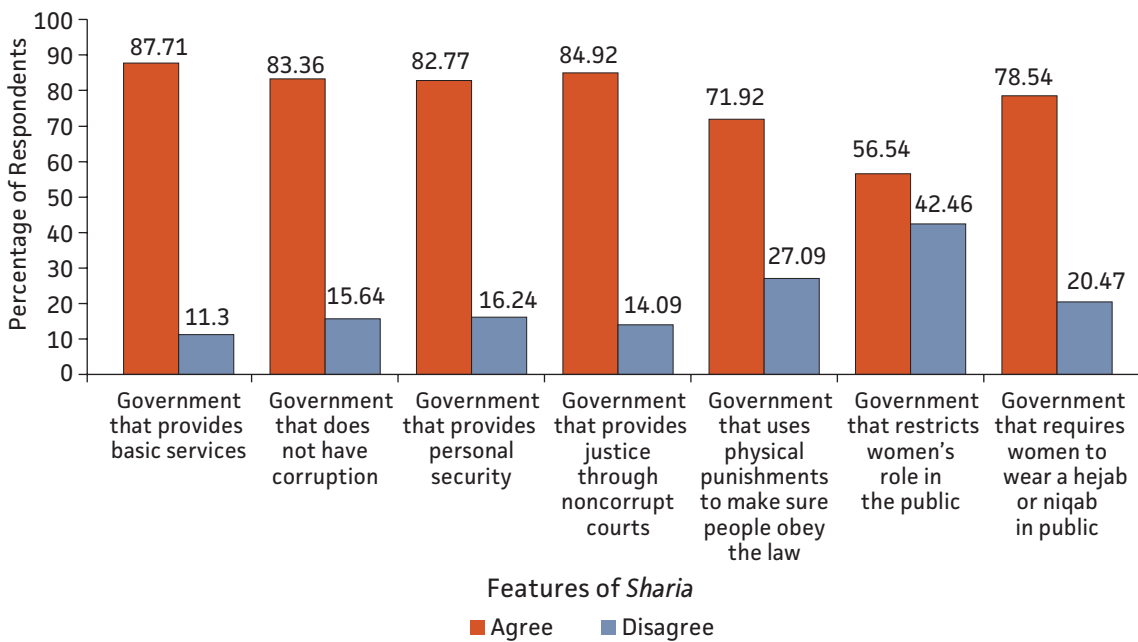
**Figure 7** Location disaggregated support for *Sharia*

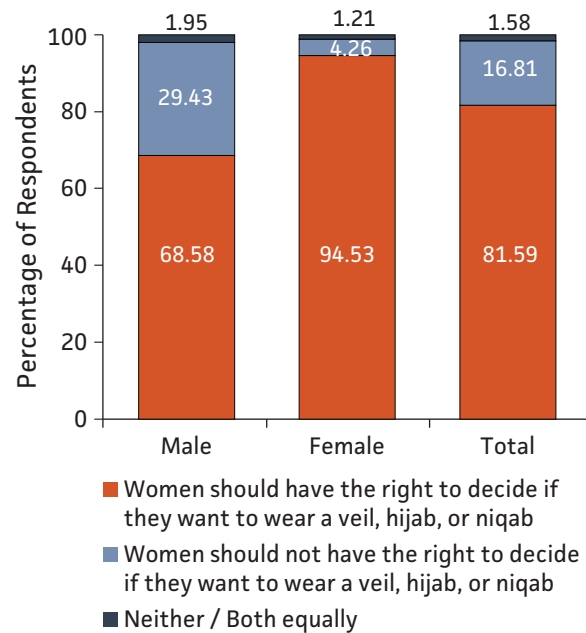


**Figure 8** Gender disaggregated support for *Sharia*



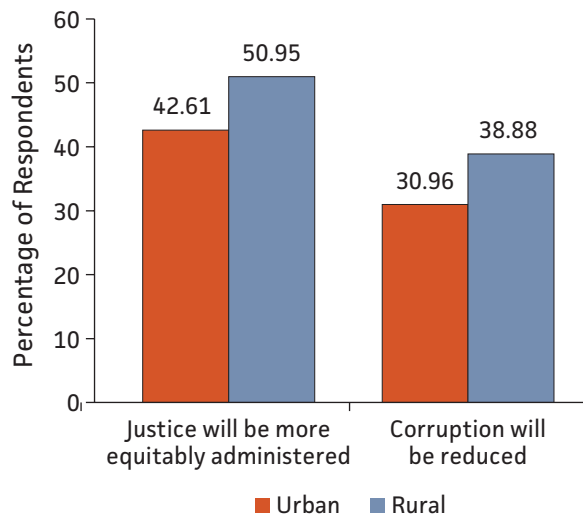
**Figure 9** Features of *Sharia*



**Figure 10** Support for women’s right to choose to wear the veil

*Perception of Sharia as a Positive Influence to Improve Justice and Reduce Corruption*

A legal system based on *Sharia* was perceived to have some positive influences on public officials. Nearly 83 percent of the respondents thought *Sharia* law would help ensure justice. If *Sharia* is given a larger role in Bangladesh, 69 percent of the respondents thought it would help reduce corruption. Nearly 52 percent believed that *Sharia* would initiate greater physical punishment to ensure obedience of the law. Nearly 81 percent said its introduction would give religious leaders greater influence in the legal system (Table 1). Urban-rural disaggregation shows that *Sharia* is regarded more positively among rural respondents than their urban counterparts (Figure 11).

**Figure 11** Urban/rural disaggregated responses regarding the perceived role of *Sharia*

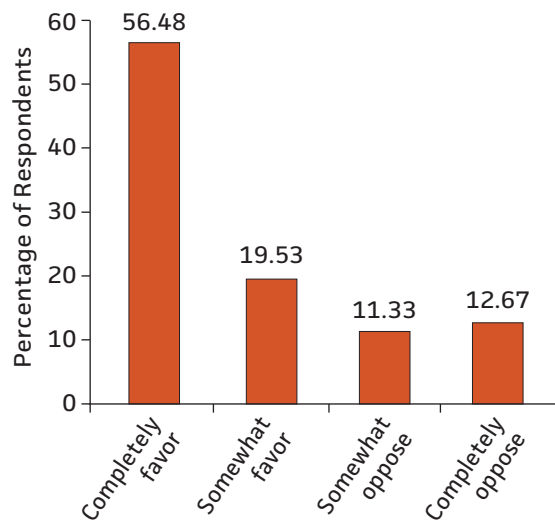
**Table 1** *Sharia's* perceived role in Bangladesh

	Would ensure fairer justice	Reduce corruption	Introduce physical punishment	Increase the influence of religious leaders in the legal system
Certain	49%	37 %	20%	41 %
Very likely	34 %	32 %	32%	40 %
Somewhat likely	8 %	8 %	28 %	11 %
Not very likely	5 %	12%	12 %	5 %
Not at all likely	3 %	9 %	7 %	2%

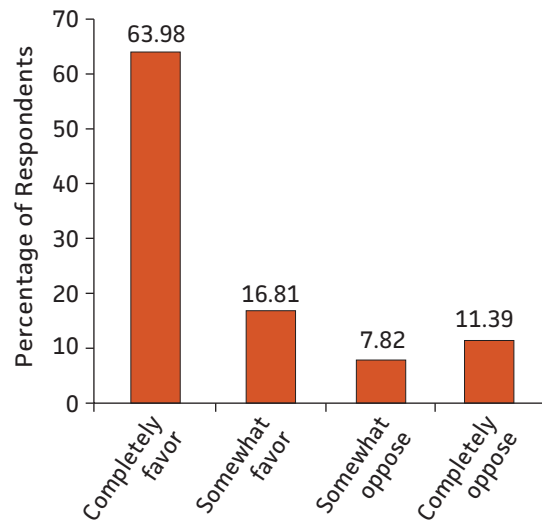
*Support for Harsh Physical Punishments*

The respondents expressed considerable support for the use of harsh physical punishments as part of *Sharia*.<sup>16</sup> More than half believed that the introduction of *Sharia* would result in a harsher system of punishments. When asked whether they supported punishments like “whipping and cutting off of hands for crimes like theft and robbery,” more than 50 percent said they completely supported such punishments; approximately 13 percent opposed them (Figure 12). More than 60 percent completely favored stoning as the punishment for adultery, and around 20 percent opposed it (Figure 13).

**Figure 12** Support for whipping and cutting off of hands as punishments for theft



**Figure 13** Support for stoning as punishments for adultery

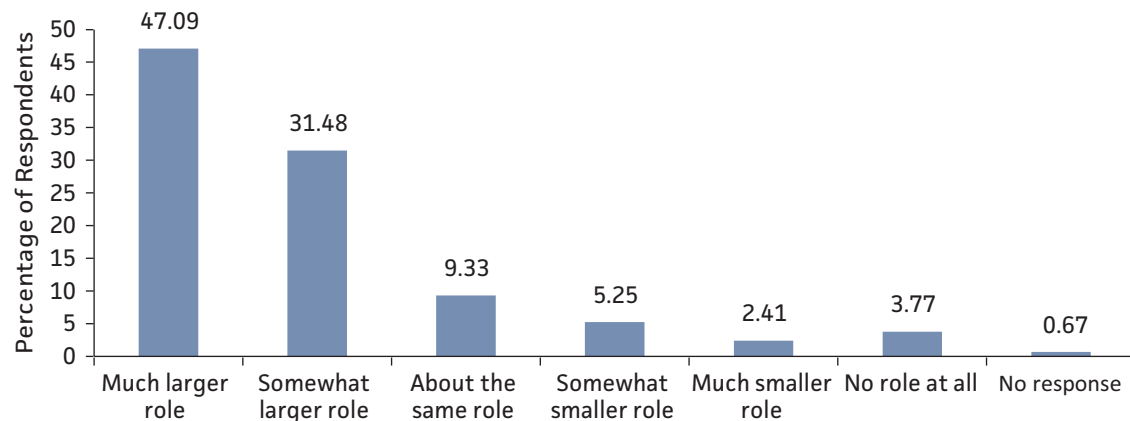


<sup>16</sup> Additional findings on Bangladeshis’ support for *Sharia* can be found in: C. Christine Fair, Ali Hamza, and Rebecca Heller, “Who Supports Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: What the Data Say?,” 1- 40.

## Democracy and Sharia

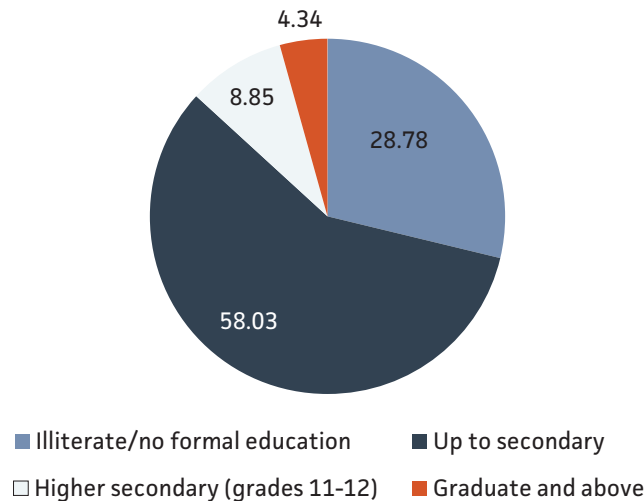
Strong democratic principles constitute one of the key aspects of the mindset of the people of Bangladesh. Respondents highly valued the security of individual property rights, elected representation, and judicial independence. These attitudes coexist with overwhelming support for a greater role for *Sharia* and religious leaders in the legal system and for harsher punishments. Do those who are more supportive of democratic values also back a larger role for *Sharia*? If so, how do they see these democratic values interacting with their belief in Islamic law? This survey showed that most of those who support democracy also support *Sharia*. Nearly 78 percent of the respondents expressed support for a greater role of *Sharia* in the common law legal system (Figure 14).

**Figure 14** Attitudes of democracy supporters toward an increased role for *Sharia*



Respondents who were more supportive of democratic values also favored harsh physical punishments. Around 73 percent were completely or somewhat in favor of whippings or cutting off of hands as punishments for theft; 81 percent supported stoning as punishment for adultery. The perception of *Sharia*'s role in Bangladesh among supporters of democracy is similar to the general perception, as revealed in the earlier section of the survey. They believe that a larger role for *Sharia* would result in more equitable administration of justice (83 percent), reduce corruption (70 percent), introduce harsher physical punishments (50 percent), and increase the influence of religious leaders in the legal system (80 percent). The survey data did not validate the common perception that support for democratic principles and practices stands in contrast to support for *Sharia*. Instead, the results suggest that support for both can be concurrent. Most respondents prefer a *Sharia*-based legal system and a larger role for religion in the justice system.

These results warrant further exploration of the profile of the respondents and whether any variation exists among them based on their demographics. Seventy-five percent of the sample was drawn from rural areas and 25 percent was drawn from urban areas. The mean age of respondents was thirty-eight years; around 40 percent was younger than thirty years. Of the respondents, 29 percent had no education, and 58 percent had education up to the secondary level (ten years of schooling). Only 9 percent had education beyond the

**Figure 15** Educational profile of respondents

secondary level (twelve years of schooling); 4 percent held a graduate level qualification (Figure 15).

Studies have shown that socio-demographic variables can be important determinants of support for religious extremism. One analysis using 2002 Pew data showed that support for terrorism is highest among the urban poor.<sup>17</sup> In Pakistan, a contrasting study found that the urban poor are more likely to oppose the role of militants than those in middle-income groups.<sup>18</sup> In terms of the relationship between education and extremism, some have argued that support for suicide bombing decreases with higher educational attainment.<sup>19</sup> Higher educational levels have also been thought to reduce outright support for violence.<sup>20</sup>

This survey explored the association between general or non-religious education, on the one hand, and support for democracy, religious leaders' involvement in government, and harsh physical punishment, on the other hand. Findings indicate that general education is negatively associated with support for an increasing role for religious leaders in political governance. As the level of educational attainment rises, support for democratic leadership increases and support for religious leaders' involvement in the political process decreases. The results suggest that the level of education and perceptions regarding punishment are inversely correlated; respondents with higher levels of education are less supportive of harsh physical punishments (Figures 16 and 17). No such pattern was found based on urban versus rural places of residence.

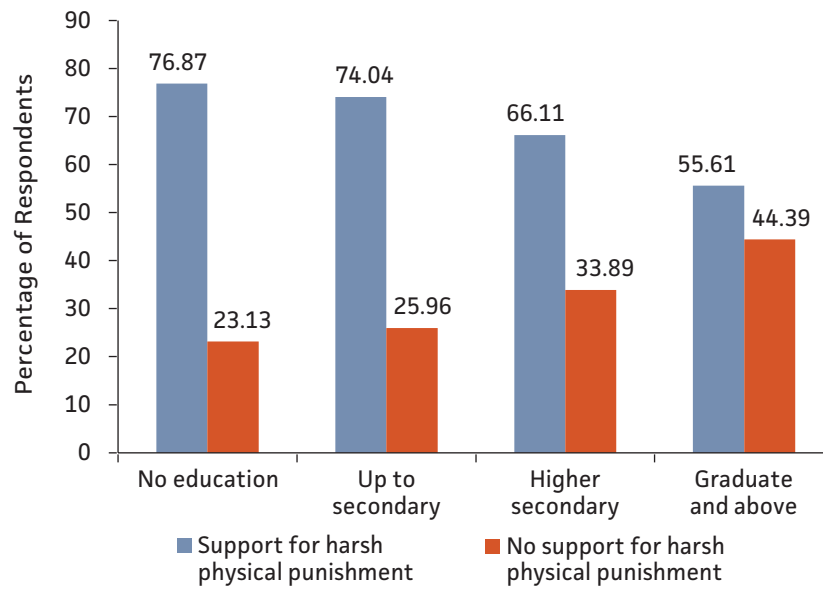
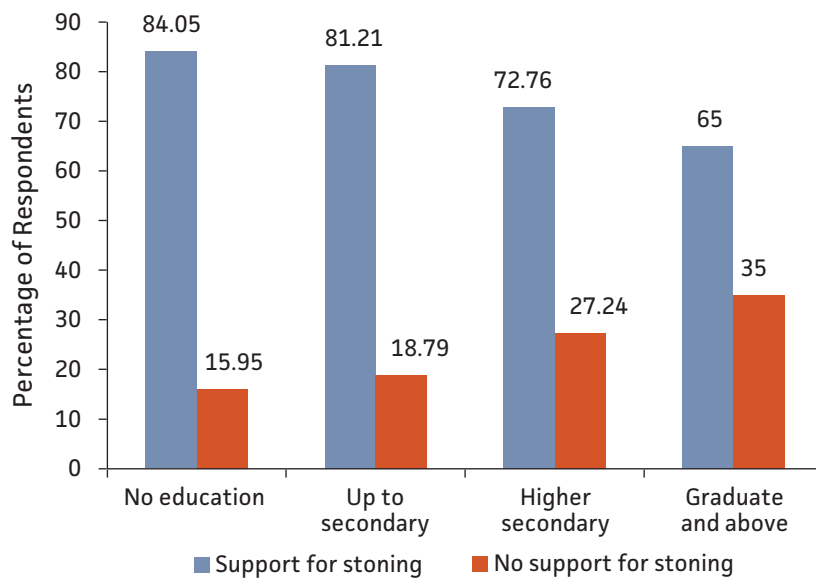
<sup>17</sup> Michael Mousseau, "Urban Poverty and Support for Islamist Terror: Survey Results of Muslims in Fourteen Countries," *Journal of Peace Research* 48 (2011): 35–47.

<sup>18</sup> Graeme Blair, C. Christine Fair, Neil Malhotra, and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Poverty and Support for Militant Politics: Evidence from Pakistan," *American Journal of Political Science* 57 (2013): 30–48.

<sup>19</sup> M. Najeem Shafiq and Abdulkader H. Sinno, "Education, Income and Support for Suicide Bombings: Evidence from Six Muslim Countries," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54 (2010): 146–78.

<sup>20</sup> C. Christine Fair, Ali Hamza, and Rebecca Heller, "Who Supports Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: What the Data Say?" 1–40.

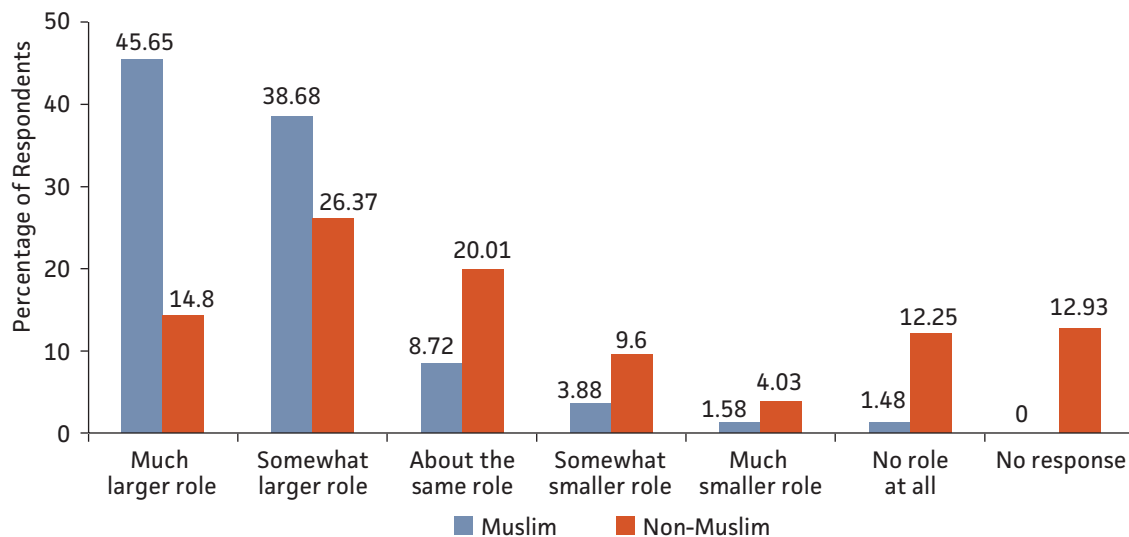


**Figure 16** Support for harsh physical punishment, by educational level**Figure 17** Support for stoning, by educational level

## Views of Non-Muslims on Sharia

Not surprisingly, the survey results showed Muslims have more positive views about *Sharia* than members of other minority faiths. However, non-Muslims expressed support for some aspects of a legal system influenced by *Sharia* (Figure 18). Disaggregation of the survey results by religion showed that nearly 46 percent of Muslim respondents supported a much larger role, and 39 percent preferred a somewhat larger role. Among non-Muslim respondents, only 15 percent supported a much larger role and 26 percent supported a somewhat larger role for *Sharia*. The response rate for Muslims was 100 percent; around 13 percent of non-Muslims choose not to respond to this question.

**Figure 18** Support for *Sharia* as a form of governance, by religion



### *Justice, Corruption, and Harsh Punishments*

Muslim respondents are more positive or express greater certainty about the possible positive impact of *Sharia* on governance and the legal system. An overwhelming number of Muslim respondents (88 percent) believed that introducing *Sharia* into the legal system would make the administration of justice more equitable, but 55 percent of non-Muslim respondents shared this optimism (Table 2). Around 73 percent of the Muslim respondents believed that corruption would be reduced in a *Sharia*-based legal system; 43 percent of non-Muslims agreed. Nevertheless, the percentage of disagreement with these statements was quite high among non-Muslims respondents; 16 percent said that the administration of justice would be less equitable, and 27 percent said that corruption would increase. Around 54 percent of Muslims and 34 percent of non-Muslims thought that if *Sharia* was adopted, harsh physical punishments would be introduced. As with the previous question, the response rate for Muslims was 100 percent; around 13 percent of non-Muslims chose not to respond.

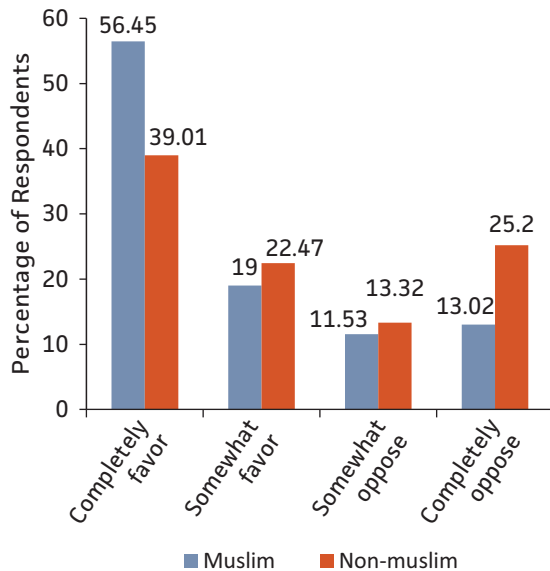
**Table 2** Perceived role of *Sharia* in Bangladesh, by religion

	Justice will be more equitably administered		Corruption will be reduced		Physical punishments will be introduced	
	Muslim	Non-Muslim	Muslim	Non-Muslim	Muslim	Non-Muslim
Certain	53.3%	23.6%	40.7%	14.9%	21.3%	53.3%
Very likely	34.4%	32.0%	32.3%	28.5%	32.9%	34.4%
Somewhat likely	6.5%	16.1%	6.0%	17.4%	28.6%	6.5%
Not very likely	3.8%	10.5%	11.6%	17.2%	11.6%	3.8%
Not at all/ Completely disagree	2.1%	5.1%	9.4%	9.4%	5.7%	2.1%
No response	0.0%	12.8%	0.0%	12.6%	0.0%	0.0%

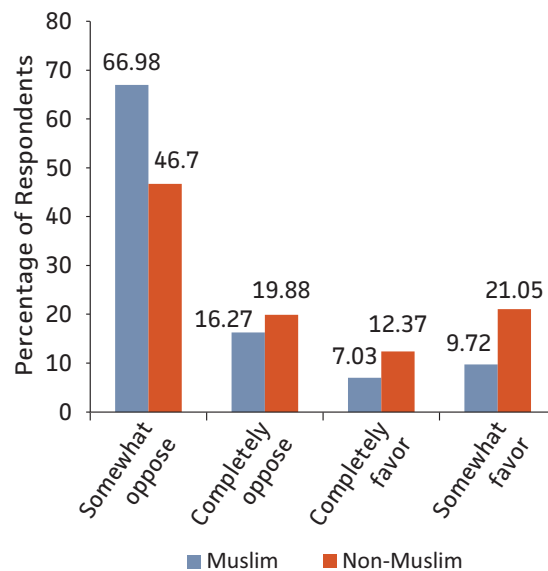
*Support for Harsh Physical Punishments*

Muslim respondents were more supportive of punitive measures than non-Muslims. Around 56 percent of Muslim respondents supported physical punishments for theft and robbery; 13 percent was completely against it. Among non-Muslims, there was some support for physical punishments. Around 39 percent of non-Muslim respondents supported a system of harsh punishments for theft, compared to 25 percent who completely opposed it. Similar responses were recorded regarding the attitude of non-Muslim respondents toward stoning for adultery. Nearly 67 percent of Muslim respondents supported stoning, and only 10 percent opposed it; among the non-Muslims, 47 percent supported stoning, and 21 percent opposed it.

**Figure 19** Support for whipping or cutting off of hands, by religion



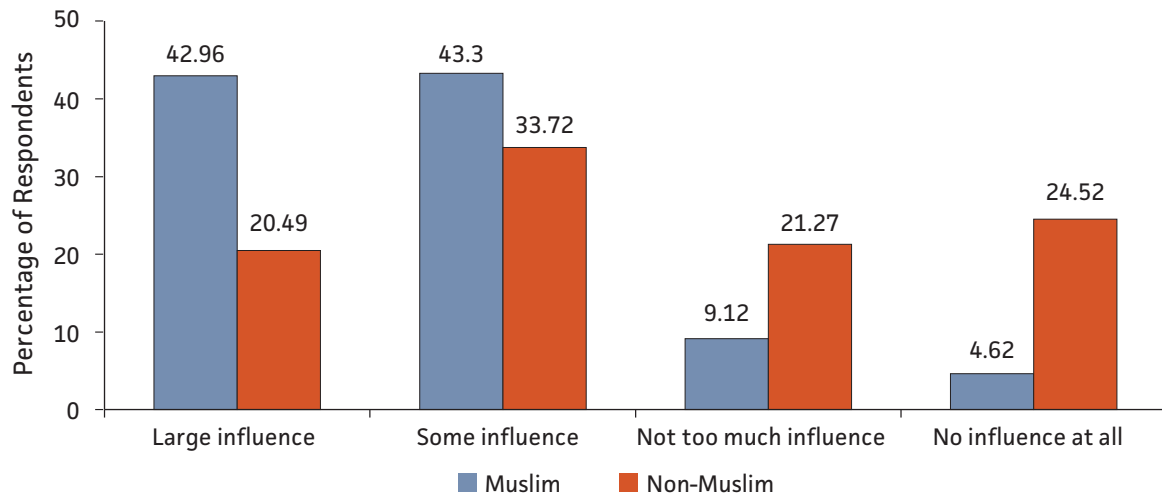
**Figure 20** Support for stoning for adultery, by religion



*Support for Increased Role for Religious Leaders in Governance Process*

Support for the involvement of religious leaders in the political process was noticeably lower among non-Muslims (Figure 21). Around 93 percent of Muslim respondents expressed their support for the idea that religious leaders should have a large degree or at least some influence in the governance process, but only 54 percent of non-Muslims agreed. Around 21 percent of non-Muslim respondents preferred that religious leaders have only have limited influence; 25 percent stated that religious leaders should have no influence on the governance process.

**Figure 21** Support for the involvement of religious leaders in the governance process



## Conclusions

Two points clearly emerged from the survey data analyzed for this research brief. First, Bangladeshis unequivocally support for democratic values; second, support for *Sharia* as a mode of good governance and as a guiding principle for the legal system is significantly high. The latter finding is hardly acknowledged in discussions on Bangladesh. Weak democratic institutions, particularly the perceived lack of judicial independence, appear to be providing opportunities for advocates to demand a greater role for *Sharia* in the country's legal system.

Although the survey often found remarkable uniformity across the demographics of respondents, a few variations are worth noting. Support for an increased role for *Sharia* was distinctly stronger in rural versus urban areas, and there was slightly more support among women than men. In the implementation of certain aspects of *Sharia* — in particular, the wearing of the veil, hijab, or niqab — women almost unanimously supported their decision to make the choices about what they wore; a significant minority of men disagreed. Support for democracy and elected leaders increased with greater educational attainment, and those with higher levels of education were less likely to support harsh physical punishments associated with *Sharia*. Minorities were significantly less likely to support *Sharia* and roles for religious leaders in public life, but significant sections of non-Muslim respondents supported some aspects associated with it, such as harsh punishments.

The discrepancy between the popular perception of the attributes of democracy and the actual state of democracy in Bangladesh, as revealed by this survey, are a source of concern. Elected representatives and an independent judiciary were regarded as important institutions by those who participated in this survey; however, large numbers of respondents believed these two crucial elements of democracy were not functioning well in Bangladesh. This gap between the theory and practice of democracy is encouraging citizens to look for alternatives to promote good governance, prevent corruption, and limit partisanship. Moving forward, the interplay between these two factors merits further study.

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The views in this report are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the RESOLVE Network, its partners, or the United States Institute of Peace.

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