



Activists march in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on Aug. 5 to celebrate the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. (Wikimedia Commons/Rayhan9d)



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Catholic Church-run educational institutions and Christian-run financial organizations have been upended in Bangladesh after the autocratic government was ousted in early August.

After the student uprising Aug. 5 that left hundreds of people dead, the country's prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, stepped down and fled the country. Since then, students at some of the Catholic-run schools have demanded that some of the teachers be fired, alleging that they are supporters of the Hasina government.

After the uprising, Archbishop Bejoy Nicephorus D'Cruze of Dhaka decided to close Catholic schools, Jyoti F. Gomes, secretary of the [Bangladesh Catholic Education Board](#), told National Catholic Reporter.

On Aug 18, the government reopened all schools and colleges but on Aug. 24, D'Cruze called for the indefinite closure of all Catholic-run education institutes in the Nawabganj area of Dhaka because of the unprecedented situation. Church officials also closed a few schools from the port city Chittagong, North Dinajpur and Sylhet.

[Notre Dame University Bangladesh](#), the only Catholic-run university in the Muslim-majority country, also faced problems. Students demanded the resignation of its proctor, Holy Cross Fr. Lawrence N. Das, alleging he didn't collaborate with student protest during the uprising. University authorities changed his position to faculty member.

The notice from the archbishop said the Catholic institutes would reopen after the end of "misunderstandings" and all concerned parties settled.

D'Cruze also appealed for protection to the country's education adviser, Wahiduddin Mahmud in an Aug. 25 letter, Gomes said.

He also said that some of the church-sponsored schools have problems either from the teachers themselves or from the students opportunistically creating problems after the fall of the government.

According to the Bangladesh Catholic Education Board, Christians run one university, 18 colleges, 80 secondary schools, and nearly 1,000 primary and pre-primary schools, annually serving nearly 300,000 students, mostly Muslims.

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Currently, Christians in Bangladesh are calling for reforms of Christian-run financial organizations, stressing that they need leadership reforms.

Christian activists, including young students, have called for a change in the leadership, alleging partisan politics and malpractices, including corruption by Christian leaders who maintained close ties with the former prime minister's regime, which ruled the nation for 15 years.

The top two lay-run financial organizations are the Metropolitan Christian Co-operative Housing Society Ltd. and the Christian Co-operative Credit Union Ltd. Protesters said that those organizations are hugely politicized.

Jackson Gomes, a young Catholic, told NCR that the leaders of financial institutions were "well-connected to the few ministers of ousted Hasina's government and misused the power of the autocratic government. We young Christians hate this autocracy and want unity and democracy in the state and as well as in the church and our other organizations."

While the Christian Co-operative Credit Union has about 45,000 members and total assets estimated at US\$108.3 million, the Metropolitan Christian Co-operative Housing Society has nearly 30,000 members with estimated total assets of US\$250 million.

Protesters are calling for the fix of this division in the tiny Christian community, where less than 1% of the 170 million people in the country are Christians.

D'Cruze has already set up meetings with protesters and Christian leaders of the financial institutions.

"I asked both parties to solve the problem and call for unity among the Christians. I hope they will be united shortly," he said.

According to data from Christian leaders, Bangladesh has some 1,000 cooperative credit unions and more than 250 are Christian-run.

Holy Cross Fr. Liton Hubert Gomes, secretary of the Justice and Peace Commission of Bangladesh Catholic Bishops' Conference, said some Catholic lay leaders grab power for a long time. Likening them to Hasina, he said they are also intolerant of criticism and dissenting voices.

"We are clergymen and we didn't want to be involved in any politics whatever its state or in the community, but we always talk to our lay leaders for unity and peace in the community. Our bishops are also doing dialogue with them to solve the problem," the priest said.