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2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Pakistan

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion and requires all provisions of the law to be consistent with Islam. The constitution states, “Subject to law, public order, and morality, every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice, and propagate his religion.” It also states, “A person of the Qadiani group or the Lahori group (who call themselves Ahmadis) is a non-Muslim.” The courts continued to enforce blasphemy laws, punishment for which ranges up to the death penalty. According to civil society reports, there were many individuals imprisoned on blasphemy charges, at least 35 of whom had received death sentences, as compared with 82 individuals imprisoned on blasphemy charges and 29 who received death sentences in 2019. According to the Center for Social Justice, a national nongovernmental organization (NGO), at least 199 individuals were accused of blasphemy offenses, a significant increase over 2019 and the highest number of blasphemy cases in a single year in the country’s history. The accused were mostly Shia (70 percent of cases) and Ahmadi Muslims (20 percent of cases). Other NGOs corroborated that 2020 had seen an increase in blasphemy cases. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCPP), a national NGO, expressed concern over a surge in blasphemy cases against religious minorities, particularly the Shia community, and the continued potential for sectarian violence. It stated that more than 40 cases against religious minorities were registered under the blasphemy laws in August alone. In October, the Lahore High Court acquitted a Christian of blasphemy, the first such ruling since 2018. The court acquitted a second Christian in December. Ahmadiyya Muslim community leaders continued to report they were affected by discriminatory and ambiguous legislation and court judgments that denied them basic rights, including a 2018 Islamabad High Court judgment that some government agencies continued to use to deny national identification cards to Ahmadi Muslims. In May, the Cabinet approved a proposal creating a National Commission for Minorities within the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Religious freedom activists and civil society groups said the proposal was “toothless” and raised concerns regarding the ministry’s lack of public consultation, the limited powers of the proposed body, and the fact that Ahmadi Muslims were excluded. The government of Punjab, the country’s largest province, passed a series of measures against Ahmadi Muslim beliefs. Throughout the year, some government officials and politicians engaged in anti-Ahmadi rhetoric and attended events that Ahmadi Muslims said incited violence against members of their community. Following the July killing of U.S. citizen and self-identified Ahmadi Muslim Tahir Naseem, who was standing trial for blasphemy charges, some political party leaders celebrated the killer’s actions. In December, using expanded authorities granted by the government in November, the Pakistani Telecommunications Authority publicly demanded the removal of “sacrilegious” content from the Google Play Store and Wikipedia. NGOs expressed concern that authorities often failed to intervene in instances of societal violence against religious minorities due to fear of retaliation, inadequate staff, or apathy. Perpetrators of societal violence and abuses against religious minorities often faced no legal consequences due to a lack of follow-through by law enforcement, bribes offered by the accused, and pressure on victims to drop cases. The government took some measures to protect religious minorities. On January 26, for example, a local court sentenced four boys for vandalizing a Hindu temple in Sindh’s Tharparkar District, the first attack on a Hindu temple in that area in more than 30 years; minority lawmakers and civil society activists reacted strongly to the attack. In July, religious and right-wing parties criticized the government’s plan to permit construction of a new Hindu temple in Islamabad.

Armed sectarian groups, including Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and the once-banned anti-Shia group Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), which is connected to other organizations banned by the government as extremist, and groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United States and other governments, continued to stage attacks targeting Shia Muslims, including the predominantly Shia Hazara community. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), however, the number of sectarian attacks and killings by armed groups decreased compared with previous years, corresponding with a continued overall decline in terrorist attacks. The government continued to implement the *National Action Plan* against terrorism, including countering sectarian hate speech and extremism as well as conducting military and law enforcement operations against violent groups. Multiple civil society groups and faith community leaders stated the government had increased efforts to provide enhanced security at religious minority places of worship, which had been frequent targets of attack in past years. Police and security forces throughout the country enhanced security measures during religious holidays in consultation with religious leaders.

Throughout the year, unidentified individuals targeted and killed Shia Muslims, including ethnic Hazaras, and Ahmadi Muslims in attacks believed to be religiously motivated. There were a series of additional violent incidents targeting Ahmadis following the Tahir Naseem killing in a Peshawar courtroom. An Ahmadi trader in Peshawar was

shot near his business on August 12. On October 5, also in Peshawar, Ahmadi professor Naeemuddin Khattak was shot and killed while driving home from work. On November 9, also in Peshawar, unknown gunmen killed an 82-year-old retired government worker who was a member of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community while he was waiting for a bus. The attackers’ relationship to organized terrorist groups was often unclear. Human rights activists reported numerous instances of societal violence related to allegations of blasphemy; of efforts by individuals to coerce religious minorities to convert to Islam; and of societal harassment, discrimination, and threats of violence directed at members of religious minority communities. Sunni groups held three large rallies in Karachi in September, with speakers warning Shia Muslims of dire consequences, including beheadings, if they continued to blaspheme against the Prophet Mohammed’s companions. NGOs expressed concern about what they stated was the increasing frequency of attempts to kidnap, forcibly convert, and forcibly marry young women from religious minority communities, especially young Hindu and Christian women. There continued to be reports of attacks on holy places, cemeteries, and religious symbols of Hindu, Christian, and Ahmadiyya minorities. According to Ahmadi Muslim civil society organizations, the government failed to restrict advertisements or speeches inciting anti-Ahmadi violence, as provided for in the *National Action Plan*. Civil society groups continued to express concerns about the safety of religious minorities.

Senior Department of State officials, including the Office of International Religious Freedom’s Special Advisor for Religious Minorities, the Charge d’Affaires, consuls general, and other embassy officers met with government officials and senior advisors to the Prime Minister, including the Minister for Human Rights, and officials from the Ministry of Law and Justice, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, and Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony to discuss blasphemy law reform; laws concerning Ahmadi Muslims; the need to better protect members of religious minority communities; sectarian relations; and religious respect. Embassy officers continued to engage civil society leaders, local religious leaders, religious minority representatives, and legal experts in discussing ways to combat intolerance and promote interfaith cooperation to increase religious freedom. Visiting U.S. government officials met with religious minority community representatives, parliamentarians, human rights activists, and members of the federal cabinet to highlight concerns regarding the treatment of religious minority communities, the application of blasphemy laws, and other forms of discrimination on the basis of religion. The embassy highlighted the principles of religious freedom and examples of interfaith dialogue in the United States on its social media platforms throughout the year. U.S. government cultural centers in Khairpur, Hyderabad, and Karachi held events to promote religious freedom. Following the killing of Tahir Naseem, the Department of State issued a statement expressing outrage over the killing and noting that Naseem had been lured from his home in the United States by individuals who used blasphemy laws to entrap him. The statement also called on the government to reform its blasphemy laws and court system and to ensure that the suspect in Naseem’s killing be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Following the killing of Ahmadi physician Tahir Ahmad in November, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom posted an official tweet calling upon authorities to ensure the safety of all Pakistanis.

On December 2, the Secretary of State redesignated Pakistan as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompany designation as required in the important national interests of the United States.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 234.4 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the provisional results of a national census conducted in 2017 (the most recent), 96 percent of the population is Sunni or Shia Muslim. According to government figures, the remaining 4 percent includes Ahmadi Muslims (whom national law does not recognize as Muslim); Hindus; Christians, including Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Protestants, among others; Parsis/Zoroastrians; Baha’is; Sikhs; Buddhists; Kalash; and Kihals and Jains.

Sources vary on the precise breakdown of the Muslim population between Sunni and Shia Muslims. Sunnis are generally believed to be 80-85 percent of the Muslim population, and Shia Muslims, including Hazara, Ismaili, and Bohra (a branch of Ismaili), are generally believed to make up 15-20 percent. Unofficial estimates vary widely with regard to the size of minority religious groups. Religious community representatives estimate religious groups not identifying as Sunni, Shia, or Ahmadi Muslim constitute 3 to 5 percent of the population.

According to the 2017 census results, the population is 1.6 percent Hindu, 1.6 percent Christian, 0.2 percent Ahmadi Muslim, and 0.3 percent others, to include Baha’is, Sikhs, and Zoroastrians. Taking into account the Ahmadi boycott of the official census, however, community sources put the number of Ahmadi Muslims at approximately 500,000 to 600,000. Estimates of the Zikri Muslim community, located in Balochistan, range between 500,000 and 800,000 individuals. Several minority rights advocacy groups dispute the provisional results of the 2017 census and state the numbers underrepresent their true population and their political influence, because minority seats in the national and provincial parliaments are allocated based on census figures.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion but states, “Subject to law, public order, and morality, every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice, and propagate his religion.” According to the constitution, every citizen has the right to freedom of speech, subject to “reasonable restrictions in the interest of the glory of Islam,” as

stipulated in the penal code. According to the penal code, the punishments for persons convicted of blasphemy include the death penalty for “defiling the Prophet Mohammed,” life imprisonment for “defiling, damaging, or desecrating the Quran,” and up to 10 years’ imprisonment for “insulting another’s religious feelings.” Speech or action intended to incite religious hatred is punishable by up to seven years’ imprisonment. Under the 2016 Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony is responsible for reviewing internet traffic and reporting blasphemous or offensive content to the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority for possible removal or to the Federal Investigative Agency for possible criminal prosecution.

The constitution defines “Muslim” as a person who “believes in the unity and oneness of Almighty Allah, in the absolute and unqualified finality of the Prophethood of Mohammed... the last of the prophets, and does not believe in, or recognize as a prophet or religious reformer, any person who claimed or claims to be a prophet after Mohammed.” It also states that “a person belonging to the Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, or Parsi community, a person of the Qadiani group or the Lahori group (who call themselves Ahmadis), or a Baha’i, and a person belonging to any of the scheduled castes” is a “non-Muslim.”

According to the constitution and the penal code, Ahmadis may not call themselves Muslims or assert they are adherents of Islam. The penal code bans them from “posing as Muslims,” using Islamic terms, carrying out Islamic customs, preaching or propagating their religious beliefs, proselytizing, or “insulting the religious feelings of Muslims.” The punishment for violating these provisions is imprisonment for up to three years and a fine, the amount of which is at the discretion of the sentencing judge.

The penal code does not explicitly criminalize apostasy, but renouncing Islam is widely considered by clerics to be a form of blasphemy, which can carry the death penalty.

The government may use the antiterrorism courts, established as a parallel legal structure under the 1997 Antiterrorism Act, to try cases involving violent crimes, terrorist activities, and acts or speech deemed by the government to foment religious hatred, including blasphemy.

The constitution states no person shall be required to take part in any religious ceremony or attend religious worship relating to a religion other than the person’s own.

The constitution provides for “freedom to manage religious institutions.” It states every religious denomination shall have the right to establish and maintain its own institutions. The constitution states no person shall be compelled to pay any special tax for the propagation or maintenance of a religion other than the person’s own. The government collects a mandatory, automatic 2.5 percent *zakat* (tax) from Sunni Muslims who hold savings accounts in banks. It distributes the funds through a government-run charity as stipends for poor families and students, payment for medical treatment, and support to Sunni mosques and madrassahs registered with the government. Sunni Muslims who want to distribute *zakat* themselves may request an exemption, and Shia Muslims are exempted by filling out a declaration of faith form.

The constitution mandates that the government take steps to enable Muslims, individually and collectively, to order their lives in accordance with the fundamental principles and basic concepts of Islam and to promote the observance of Islamic moral standards. It directs the state to endeavor to secure the proper organization of Islamic tithes, religious foundations, and places of worship.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony is responsible for organizing participation in the Hajj and other Islamic religious pilgrimages. Authorities also consult the ministry on matters such as blasphemy and Islamic education. The ministry’s budget covers assistance to indigent minorities, repair of minority places of worship, establishment of minority-run small development projects, celebration of minority religious festivals, and provision of scholarships for religious minority students.

The law prohibits publishing any criticism of Islam or its prophets or insults to others’ religious beliefs. The law bans the sale of Ahmadiyya religious literature.

The provincial and federal governments have legal responsibility for certain minority religious properties abandoned during the 1947 partition of British India.

The constitution states that no person attending any educational institution shall be required to attend religious instruction or take part in any religious ceremony relating to a religion other than the person’s own. It also states that no religious denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for pupils of its denomination in an educational institution maintained by the denomination.

The constitution states the government shall make Islamic studies compulsory for all Muslim students in state-run schools. Although students of other religious groups are not legally required to study Islam, schools do not always offer parallel studies in their own religious beliefs. In some schools, however, non-Muslim students may study ethics. Parents may send children to private schools, including religious schools, at the family’s expense. In Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Provinces, private schools are also required to teach Islamic studies and the Quran to Muslim students.

By law, madrassahs are prohibited from teaching or encouraging sectarian or religious hatred or violence. *Wafaqs* (independent academic boards) register seminaries, regulate curricula, and issue degrees. The five wafaqs each represent major streams of Islamic thought in the country: Bareilvi, Deobandi, Shia, Ahle Hadith, and the Jamaat-i-Islami, which is considered ultraconservative. The wafaqs operate through an umbrella group, Ittehad-e-Tanzeemat-e-Madaris Pakistan, to represent their interests to the government. The government requires all madrassahs to register with the Ministry of Education in addition to registration with one of the five wafaqs.

The constitution states, “All existing laws shall be brought into conformity with the injunctions of Islam as laid down in the Holy Quran and Sunnah [Islam’s body of traditional social and legal custom and practice].” It further states no law shall be enacted which is “repugnant” to Islam. The constitution states this requirement shall not affect the “personal laws of non-Muslim citizens” or their status as citizens. Some personal laws regulating marriage, divorce, and inheritance for minority communities date from prepartition British legislation.

The constitution establishes a Federal Shariat Court (FSC) composed of Muslim judges to examine and decide whether any law or provision is “repugnant to the injunctions of Islam.” The constitution gives the FSC the power to examine a law of its own accord or at the request of the government or a private citizen. The constitution requires the government to amend the law as directed by the court. The constitution also grants the FSC “revisional jurisdiction” (the power to review of its own accord) over criminal cases in the lower courts relating to certain crimes under the Hudood Ordinance, including rape and those linked to Islamic morality, such as extramarital sex, alcohol use, and gambling. The court may suspend or increase the sentence given by a criminal court in these cases. The FSC’s review power applies whether the cases involve Muslims or non-Muslims. Non-Muslims may not appear before the FSC. If represented by a Muslim lawyer, however, non-Muslims may consult the FSC in other matters, such as questions of sharia or Islamic practice that affect them or violate their rights. By law, decisions of the FSC may be appealed to the Supreme Court’s Shariat Appellate Bench. A full bench of the Supreme Court may grant a further appeal.

The constitution establishes a Council of Islamic Ideology to make recommendations, at the request of the parliament and provincial assemblies, as to “the ways and means of enabling and encouraging Muslims to order their lives in accordance with the principles of Islam.” The constitution further empowers the council to advise the legislative and executive branches when they choose to refer a question to the council as to whether a proposed law is or is not “repugnant to the injunctions of Islam.”

In the absence of specific language in the law authorizing civil or common law marriage, marriage certificates are signed by religious authorities and registered with the local marriage registrar. The province-level Sindh Hindu Marriage Act and the national-level Hindu Marriage Act (applying to federal territory and all other provinces) codify legal mechanisms to formally register and prove the legitimacy of Hindu marriages. In addition to addressing a legal gap by providing documentation needed for identity registration, divorce, and inheritance, the Hindu Marriage Acts allow marriages to be voided when consent “was obtained by force, coercion, or by fraud.” The acts allow for the termination of the marriage upon the conversion of one party to a religion other than Hinduism. The Sindh provincial government has legislation allowing couples to seek divorce and granting Hindu women the right to remarry six months after a divorce or a spouse’s death. The Sindh Hindu Marriage Act also applies to Sikh marriages. The Punjab Sikh Anand Karaj Marriage Act allows local government officials in that province to register marriages between a Sikh man and Sikh woman solemnized by a Sikh *Anand Karaj* marriage registrar.

Some court judgments have considered the marriage of a non-Muslim woman to a non-Muslim man dissolved if she converts to Islam, although the marriage of a non-Muslim man who converts remains recognized.

The constitution directs the state to “safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of minorities,” to secure the well-being of the people irrespective of creed, and to discourage sectarian prejudices. It forbids discrimination against any religious community in the taxation of religious institutions. The National Commission on Human Rights (NCHR), an independent government-funded agency that reports to parliament, is required to receive petitions, conduct investigations, and request remediation of human rights abuses. The NCHR is also mandated to monitor the government’s implementation of human rights and review and propose legislation. It has quasi-judicial powers and may refer cases for prosecution but does not have arrest authority. A constitutional amendment devolves responsibility for minorities’ affairs, including religious minorities, to the provinces.

According to the constitution, there shall be no discrimination on the basis of religion in appointing individuals to government service, provided they are otherwise qualified. There is a 5 percent minimum quota for hiring religious minorities (primarily Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Kalash, and Parsis but excluding Shia and Ahmadi Muslims) at the federal and provincial levels of government.

The constitution prohibits discriminatory admission based on religious affiliation to any governmental educational institution. According to regulations, the only factors affecting admission to government schools are students’ grades and home provinces, although students must declare their religious affiliation on application forms. This declaration is also required for private educational institutions, including universities. Students who identify themselves as Muslims must declare in writing they believe Mohammed is the final prophet. Non-Muslims are required to have the head of their local religious communities verify their religious affiliation. There is no provision in the law for atheists.

The National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) designates religious affiliation on passports and requires religious information in national identity card and passport applications. Those wishing to be listed as Muslims must swear they believe Mohammed is the final prophet and must denounce the Ahmadiyya movement’s founder as a false prophet and his followers as non-Muslim. There is no option to state “no religion.” National identity cards are required for all citizens upon reaching the age of 18. Identification cards are used for voting, pension disbursement, social and financial inclusion programs, and other services.

The constitution requires the President and Prime Minister to be Muslims. All senior officials, including members of parliament, must swear an oath to protect the country’s Islamic identity. The law requires elected Muslim officials to swear an oath affirming their belief that Mohammed is the final prophet of Islam. This requirement effectively prohibits Ahmadi Muslims from holding elected office, as they recognize a prophet subsequent to Mohammed.

The constitution reserves seats for non-Muslim members in both the national and provincial assemblies. The 342-member National Assembly has 10 reserved seats for non-Muslims. The 104-member Senate has four reserved seats for non-Muslims, one from each province. In the provincial assemblies, there are three such reserved seats in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; eight in Punjab; nine in Sindh; and three in Balochistan. Political parties elected by the general electorate choose the minority individuals who hold these seats; they are not elected directly by the minority constituencies they represent.

The country is party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and maintains two reservations: first, that ICCPR Article 3 regarding equal rights of men and women would be “applied as to be in conformity with Personal Law of the citizens and Qanoon-e-Shahadat Order, 1984 (Law of Evidence),” under which the in-court testimony of men in certain civil matters pertaining to contracts and financial obligations is given greater weight than that of women; and second, that ICCPR Article 25, on the equal right for citizens to take part in public service, would be subject to articles of the constitution mandating that the President and Prime Minister be Muslims.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Instances of torture and mistreatment by some police personnel were part of broader human rights concerns about police abuses against citizens of all faiths reported by local and international human rights organizations; some police agencies took steps to curb abuses by incorporating human rights curricula in training programs.

On January 29, an antiterrorism court in Lahore acquitted and ordered the release of 42 individuals accused of participating in the 2015 lynching of two Muslim men in Lahore. The killings took place during protests sparked by twin suicide bombings outside two churches there. The victims, burned to death by an angry mob, were Babar Noman and Hafiz Naeem.

According to civil society reports, there were many individuals imprisoned on blasphemy charges and at least 35 under sentences of death, compared with 82 individuals imprisoned on blasphemy charges and 29 under sentences of death in 2019. The government has never executed anyone specifically for blasphemy. According to data provided by the Center for Social Justice (CSJ), authorities accused at least 199 individuals of new blasphemy offenses during the year. Leaders in other NGOs agreed the actual number of blasphemy cases was likely higher, but uneven reporting and lack of media coverage in many areas made it difficult to identify an exact number. According to the CSJ, 2020 saw the highest number of blasphemy cases in a single year in the country’s history. Other NGOs also said that 2020 had seen an increase in blasphemy cases. Shia and Ahmadi Muslims were the most often accused, accounting respectively for 70 and 20 percent of all cases. Sunni Muslims made up 5 percent of all accused blasphemers, followed by Christians at 3.5 percent, and Hindus at 1 percent.

Courts issued two new death sentences for blasphemy and sentenced another individual to five years’ imprisonment. Other blasphemy cases continued without resolution. At least one individual was accused of spreading blasphemous content through social media under PECA. Civil society groups continued to state that the blasphemy laws disproportionately affected members of religious minority communities. Persons accused of blasphemy were often simultaneously charged with terrorism offenses.

According to NGOs and media reports, individuals convicted and sentenced to death in well-publicized blasphemy cases dating as far back as 2014 – including Nadeem James; Taimoor Raza; Junaid Hafeez; Mubasher, Ghulam, and Ehsan Ahmed; Shafqat Emmanuel; and Shagufta Kausar – remained in prison and continued to await action on their appeals. In all these cases, judges repeatedly delayed hearings, adjourned hearings without hearing arguments, or sent appeals to other judicial benches. Civil society and legal sources said judges were generally hesitant to decide blasphemy cases due to fear of violent retribution.

Human rights groups reported an increase in blasphemy cases and allegations against members of the Shia Muslim community. On September 5, the HRCP expressed concern over the surge in blasphemy cases against religious minorities, particularly the Shia community, and the potential for sectarian violence. The HRCP reported that more than 40 such cases were registered under the blasphemy laws in August alone.

On January 30, police arrested two Shia men in Tando Mohammed Khan, southern Sindh, and charged them with blasphemy. According to police, the content they posted on Facebook insulted the companions of Mohammed, which, they said, infuriated Sunni Muslims.

On April 14, police filed a blasphemy case against Shia singer Zamin Ali in Jamshoro, Sindh. The case was based on the complaint of a local shopkeeper who claimed Zamin Ali’s Facebook page contained a blasphemous song that hurt the religious sentiments of Sunni Muslims. By year’s end, police had dropped the case due to lack of evidence and pressure from activists.

On August 30, police charged Shia cleric Taqqi Jaffar with blasphemy for criticizing Mohammed’s companions during a Karachi Muharram procession. Jaffar made his remarks in Arabic, which were then aired on a popular Karachi news station, *24 News HD*. Following complaints by some Sunni groups, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority temporarily suspended *24 News* from broadcasting, citing Jaffar’s comments as “hate-inciting content.”

The blasphemy charges against Jaffar were followed by anti-Shia rallies throughout the country and at least three rallies in Karachi by Sunni groups on September 11 and 13 attended by thousands of individuals. Speakers at these rallies warned Shia of dire consequences, including beheadings, if they continued to blaspheme against the Prophet Mohammed’s companions.

On June 10, police arrested Sajid Soomro, a professor at Shah Abdul Latif University, in Khairpur, Sindh, on blasphemy charges. According to eyewitnesses, police officials in at least four police vans cordoned off the area and arrested Soomro, who initially resisted. Subsequently, Arfana Mallah, a professor at Sindh University Jamshoro who criticized Soomro’s arrest and the blasphemy laws, was herself accused of committing blasphemy and had to apologize publicly. Soomro was free on bail at year’s end, but the case was still pending in court.

NGOs, legal observers and religious minority representatives continued to raise concerns regarding the failure of lower courts to adhere to basic evidentiary standards in blasphemy cases, and the slow pace of adjudicating these cases, which led to some suspects remaining in detention for years as they waited their initial trial or appeals, and to some convicted persons spending years in prison before higher courts overturned their convictions and freed them for lack of evidence. According to legal advocacy groups, some lower courts continued to conduct proceedings in an intimidating atmosphere, with members of antiblasphemy groups, such as the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), often threatening the defendants’ attorneys, family members, and supporters. At other times, advocacy groups reported that blasphemy trials were held inside jails for security reasons, in which case the hearings were not public, resulting in a gain in immediate security but a loss of transparency. These observers said the general refusal of lower courts to hold timely hearings or acquit those accused persisted due to fear of reprisal and vigilantism. Legal observers also reported judges and magistrates often delayed or continued trials indefinitely to avoid confrontation with, or violence from, groups provoking protests.

While the law requires a senior police official to investigate any blasphemy charge before a complaint may be filed, a requirement that NGOs and legal observers stated helped contribute to an objective investigation and the dismissal of many blasphemy cases, some NGOs said police did not uniformly follow this procedure. There were some cases in which police received custody of the accused from a court for 14 days for a senior officer to carry out an investigation. At the same time, NGOs reported that sometimes lower-ranking police would file charges of blasphemy, rather than a senior police superintendent who had more authority to dismiss baseless claims, or that police would not carry out a thorough investigation. NGOs and legal observers also stated police often did not file charges against individuals who made false blasphemy accusations.

During the year, courts overturned some blasphemy convictions upon appeal and acquitted others after the accused had spent years in prison. On October 6, the Lahore High Court acquitted Sawan Masih, a Christian man sentenced to death for blasphemy in 2014, but Masih continued to face death threats and had to go into hiding with his family. His was the first acquittal for blasphemy since October 2018, when Asia Bibi, a Christian woman sentenced to death in 2010, was acquitted. On December 15, the Lahore High Court acquitted a second Christian man, Imran Ghafur Masih, who had been sentenced to death for blasphemy in 2010. Courts also penalized antiblasphemy groups. In January, an antiterrorism court sentenced 86 members of the TLP to 55-year prison terms each for taking part in violent protests following Bibi’s acquittal.

Police intervened on multiple occasions to quell mob violence directed at individuals accused of blasphemy. On September 10, police saved a Hindu trader from a mob that accused him of committing blasphemy and called for his death in Kashmore, Sindh. Several hundred protesters led by religious leaders took to the streets and chanted slogans against the alleged blasphemer. Police took him into protective custody and transferred him to a senior police officer’s office as the mob blocked the Indus Highway and demanded police hand over the alleged blasphemer. Also in September, according to law enforcement reports, Peshawar police rescued an Ahmadi family after a large mob gathered outside their home, accusing the family of preaching Ahmadi beliefs.

There were reported cases of government intervention and assistance from courts and law enforcement in situations of attempted kidnapping and forced conversion, although enforcement action against alleged perpetrators was rare. In January, after going missing, a 15-year-old Hindu girl appeared in a video with Ali Raza, a Muslim man, in which the two claimed they had willingly married and she had converted to Islam. Her family said she had been kidnapped and forcibly converted. In court proceedings, the girl retracted her video statement and said she wanted to return to her parents. In February, a court in Jacobabad, Sindh, ruled that the marriage with Raza was illegal under the 2013 Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act. On July 9, the Sindh High Court ordered that the girl could return to her Hindu parents. According to local sources, the high-profile case led to communal tensions in Jacobabad, the couple’s home district, and clerics from the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazal party publicly accused the girl of apostasy and called for her death. The girl remained in a government shelter for several months before returning to her parents.

On November 23, the Sindh High Court dissolved the marriage of an underage Christian girl to a 44-year-old Muslim man. According to her parents, the girl had been abducted and raped after being forcibly converted to Islam in Karachi. The Sindh High Court on October 27 originally upheld the validity of the marriage, citing the marriage certificate that indicated the girl was 18 years old, and ruling that she had converted to Islam and married of her own free will. Following petitions, the court reversed its decision and declared the marriage illegal under the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act and ordered the girl placed in a shelter after she refused to return to her parents. The court also barred her alleged husband and his family from meeting her and ordered police to arrest those who facilitated the marriage.

The Ministry of Interior maintained multitier schedules of religiously oriented groups it judged to be extremist or terrorist that were either banned or had their activities monitored and curtailed (Schedule 1) and individuals whose activities in the public sphere could also be curtailed, including during religious holidays such as Ashura (Schedule 4). On August 23, the Sindh provincial government barred 142 “firebrand” speakers and religious scholars from leaving their home districts for 60 days to avoid violent disturbances during Shia Muharram commemorations. These 142 individuals included both Shia and Sunni clerics who in the past had given controversial statements leading to sectarian tensions.

According to Ahmadiyya community leaders, authorities continued to target and harass Ahmadi Muslims for blasphemy, violations of “anti-Ahmadi laws,” and other crimes. Ahmadiyya leaders stated the ambiguous wording of the legal provision forbidding Ahmadis from directly or indirectly identifying themselves as Muslims enabled officials to bring charges against members of the community for using the standard Islamic greeting or for naming their children Mohammed.

Community leaders continued to report that the government hindered Ahmadis from obtaining legal documents and pressured community members to deny their beliefs by requiring individuals wishing to be listed as Muslim on identity cards and passports to swear Mohammed was the final prophet of Islam and the Ahmadiyya movement’s founder was a false prophet. Ahmadiyya community representatives reported the word “Ahmadi” was written on their passports if they identified themselves as such.

In 2018 the Islamabad High Court issued a judgment requiring citizens to declare an affidavit of faith to join the armed forces, judiciary, and civil services and directed parliament to amend laws to ensure Ahmadis did not use “Islamic” terms or have names associated with Islam. Neither the National Assembly nor the Senate had acted on the 2018 judgment by year’s end, but Ahmadiyya community representatives said that NADRA required Ahmadis to declare in an affidavit that they are non-Muslims to obtain a national identification card, another requirement of the high court judgment.

According to Ahmadiyya leaders, the government effectively disenfranchised their community by requiring voters to swear an oath affirming the “finality of the Prophethood of Mohammed,” something that they stated was against Ahmadi belief, in order to register as Muslims. Since voters who registered as Ahmadis were kept on a separate voter list, they said they were more exposed to threats and physical intimidation, and many Ahmadis continued their longstanding practice of boycotting elections.

Ahmadiyya Muslim community representatives continued to state that Ahmadi families were unable to register their marriages with local administrative bodies, known as union councils, since those councils considered Ahmadis to be outside the authority of the Muslim Family Law of 1961.

Some community representatives said Christians continued to face difficulties in registering marriages with Islamabad union councils because the councils claimed they had no authority to deal with unions recorded by Christian marriage registrars (usually church authorities). Parliament, church leaders, and advocates continued to debate the text of a draft law to govern Christian marriages nationwide, because the existing regulation dated from 1872. Members of parliament and officials of the Ministry of Human Rights and the Ministry of Law and Justice held consultations with church leaders from prominent Christian denominations and with NGO representatives, but the denominations, church leaders, and NGO representatives had not agreed on elements of the draft law pertaining to divorce and interfaith marriage by year’s end. NGOs lobbying for amendments to permit divorce in a wider range of circumstances praised the Ministry of Human Rights’ efforts to consult with stakeholders and the ministry’s overall efforts to accelerate progress on the bill.

Although the Sindh Hindu Marriage Act covers registration of Sikh marriages in that province, members of the Sikh community reportedly continued to seek a separate Sikh law so as not to be considered as Hindus for the purposes of the law. The Sindh provincial cabinet adopted regulations to implement the Sindh Hindu Marriage Act in December 2019, which provided more specific rules for implementation. In 2020, the provincial government began to implement the act, and NADRA began registering Hindu marriages in Sindh, according to Hindu community activists.

The government continued to prohibit citizens, regardless of religious affiliation, from traveling to Israel. Representatives of the Baha’i community said this policy particularly affected them because the Baha’i World Center – the spiritual and administrative center of the community – was in Haifa, Israel. Christian advocates also called on the government to allow them to travel to Israel.

According to media reports and law enforcement sources, in the weeks leading up to and during the Islamic month of Muharram – religiously significant for Shia Muslims – authorities at the federal and provincial levels again restricted the movement and activities of dozens of clerics on the Ministry of Interior’s Schedule 4 listing. According to civil society and media reports, the government restricted the movement and activities of these individuals because they were known for exacerbating sectarian tensions.

Some religious minority leaders stated the system of selecting minority parliamentarians through the internal deliberations of mainstream parties resulted in the appointment of party stalwarts or those who could afford to “buy the seats,” rather than legislators who genuinely represented minority communities. Others said parliamentarians occupying reserved seats had little influence in their parties and in the National Assembly because they did not have a voting constituency.

The requirement that Muslim elected officials swear an oath affirming their belief that Mohammed is the final prophet of Islam continued to discourage Ahmadi Muslims from seeking public office. To seek office, Ahmadis would be forced to do so because by law they are considered non-Muslims, even though they self-identify as Muslim.

The government continued to permit limited non-Muslim foreign missionary activity and to allow missionaries to proselytize as long as they did not preach against Islam and they acknowledged they were not Muslim. According to the government’s immigration website, the Ministry of Interior could grant visas to foreign missionaries invited by organizations registered in the country. The visas were valid for one year and allowed one reentry into the country per year, although it was understood by missionary sources that only “replacement” visas for those taking the place of departing missionaries were available for long-term missionaries seeking to enter the country for the first time. The website further stated extensions could be granted for two years with two reentries per year, excluding from India.

The government continued its warnings against blasphemy and other illegal content on social media through periodic print advertisements and text messages sent by the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA). The text messages stated, “Sharing of blasphemy, pornography, terrorism, and other unlawful content on social media and the internet is illegal. Users are advised to report such content on content-complaint@pta.gov.pk for action under PECA 16 (the 2016 PECA act).”

In a January press release, PTA stated it was “proactively playing its role in blocking/removal of unlawful content, with social media platforms being approached in this regard,” and it encouraged the public “to report such content directly to PTA and avoid sharing it on social media platforms and other websites.”

In February, the National Assembly introduced a draft law requiring internet and technology companies to open offices in Islamabad, locate their servers within the country, and remove “objectionable” internet content within a specified timeframe. According to technology companies and religious minority activists, the definition of objectionable content in the draft law was vague and subject to government interpretation.

On October 9, the PTA blocked the video-sharing social media application TikTok, based on what it called “immoral and indecent” content. Reactions to the PTA’s measure was mixed, with many social media users praising the decision to ban TikTok, but others concerned that the government could use this to target religious minorities. On October 19, the PTA lifted the block after the government received reassurances from the company that it would more closely regulate content, but NGOs and activists expressed concern that the government could use this authority to target religious minorities.

In November, the government finalized its Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content Rules 2020, which sought to codify the PTA’s authority to regulate content the government deemed “unlawful.” The rules not only enhanced the PTA’s ability to compel online content platforms such as Facebook, Google’s YouTube, Twitter, and Wikipedia to remove content but also extended the regulator’s purview to include local internet service providers that could also be held liable for such content. In late December, the PTA publicly used this new authority for the first time to demand the removal of “sacrilegious” content. The PTA cited public complaints against an “unauthentic version” of the Quran uploaded by the Ahmadiyya community on the Google Play Store and information that portrayed Mirza Masroor Ahmad as a Muslim on Wikipedia, which the PTA characterized as “misleading, wrong, deceptive, and deceitful.” The PTA successfully removed the same Quran application from the Apple Store in July. On December 24, the PTA issued a legal notice to two Ahmadi U.S. citizens requiring them to remove their website, trueislam.com, or face fines, sanctions, or potential prison sentences.

According to representatives of some minority religious groups, the government continued to allow most organized religious groups to establish places of worship and train members of the clergy. Similar to the previous year, some Sikh and Hindu places of worship reopened during the year. The Katas Raj Hindu temple was reopened for Hindus after renovation in the Chakwal district of Punjab. An additional six Sikh *gurdwaras* and seven Hindu temples were also reopened after renovation in Punjab.

In July, religious and right-wing parties criticized the government’s plan to permit construction of a new Hindu temple in Islamabad. Prime Minister Imran Khan gave verbal approval to build the temple following a request from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Hindu and Christian members of the National Assembly. Then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s government had granted the land to build the temple in 2016. Islamist political parties and Punjab Provincial Assembly speaker Chaudhry Elahi (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf – PTI – party) criticized the decision before

written approval was issued, however, declaring new temples should never be built in an Islamic country. Opponents filed a petition to stop construction with the Islamabad High Court on June 29, and vandals destroyed the land's boundary wall on July 5. On October 28, the Council on Islamic Ideology gave its approval for construction, ruling that Islamic law allows Hindus a place of worship, but noting there is no tradition for the government to provide funds for places of worship owned by private parties. The government announced it would seek a review from the Council on Islamic Ideology and at the end of the year it was unclear whether it still maintained its support for the temple.

On July 21, the government returned a 200-year-old Sikh gurdwara to the Sikh community in Quetta. The gurdwara had been used as a government-run girls' school since 1947. Danesh Kumar, the adviser on minority affairs to the Balochistan Chief Minister, said the government had decided to hand over sacred sites of religious minorities in Balochistan to promote interfaith harmony.

On February 7, the district administration returned a century-old Hindu temple to the Hindu community in Zhob, Balochistan. The temple had also been part of a government-run school. Hindu community representatives welcomed the decision to return the temple to the community after 70 years.

Although there continued to be no official restriction on the construction of Ahmadiyya places of worship, according to Ahmadiyya Muslim community leaders, local authorities regularly denied requisite construction permits, and Ahmadis remained forbidden to call them mosques.

Authorities provided enhanced security for Shia Muslim, Christian, and Hindu places of worship at various times throughout the year, including around particular religious holidays or in response to specific threats. In August and September, increased security was provided throughout the country for the Shia community's Muharram processions. In Islamabad, the deputy inspector general of police said as many as 15,000 police, Rangers, and Frontier Corps personnel were involved. In Peshawar, security was increased around churches ahead of Christmas after security forces arrested four militants on December 17 who were allegedly planning an attack on Christmas Day, which is also celebrated as Quaid-i-Azam Day, the birthday of Pakistan's founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Ahead of Christmas in Lahore, police deployed some 6,000 officers and officials at 623 churches. Police also deployed snipers and used closed-circuit television cameras and metal detectors to ensure the security of churches and Christmas markets. In Sindh, police provided enhanced security at churches and Hindu temples, especially in Karachi, on eves of festivals such as Christmas and Diwali.

Legal experts and NGOs continued to state that the full legal framework for minority rights remained unclear. While the Ministry of Law and Justice was officially responsible for ensuring the legal rights of all citizens, in practice, the Ministry for Human Rights continued to assume primary responsibility for the protection of the rights of religious minorities. The NCHR was also mandated to conduct investigations of allegations of human rights abuses, but legal sources said the commission had little power to enforce its requests. Since 2019, the NCHR has been without a mandate for a second four-year term and lacked newly appointed commissioners, making it effectively nonfunctional throughout the year.

Members of religious minority communities said there continued to be an inconsistent application of laws safeguarding minority rights and enforcement of protections of religious minorities at both the federal and provincial levels by the Ministry of Law and Justice, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Human Rights. Religious minority community members also stated the government was inconsistent in safeguarding against societal discrimination and neglect, and that official discrimination against Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Ahmadi Muslims persisted to varying degrees, with Ahmadi Muslims experiencing the worst treatment.

In May, the Cabinet approved a Religious Affairs Ministry proposal establishing a National Commission for Minorities housed within the ministry. The proposal named a prominent Hindu business owner and ruling PTI party leader as the commission's chair, along with other Hindu, Christian, Sikh, Parsi, and Kalash members. The commission also included two Sunni Muslim clerics and senior civil servants from the Ministries of Interior, Law and Justice, Human Rights, Federal Education and Professional Training, Religious Affairs, and the Council of Islamic Ideology.

The plan followed a 2014 Supreme Court decision that ordered the government to take steps to ensure the rights of minorities and promote a culture of religious and social tolerance, but religious freedom activists and civil society groups said the proposal was “toothless” and raised concerns regarding the Religious Affairs Ministry's lack of public consultation, the limited powers of the proposed body, and the ultimate decision to exclude Ahmadis. Information Minister Shibli Faraz's announcement that the Cabinet had decided against including an Ahmadi Muslim representative on the new commission contributed to a wave of hate speech against Ahmadis, according to community representatives. The Religious Affairs Ministry later issued a statement saying Ahmadis would not be included on the commission, “given the religious and historical sensitivity” of including Ahmadis in government institutions. Ahmadi Muslim leaders said they had never been approached about participating in the commission and would never join a body that required them to identify as non-Muslims.

The Punjab Provincial Assembly also unanimously passed a resolution in May insisting that the federal National Commission on Minorities not include a representative from the Ahmadi community until community leaders submitted in writing that they accepted their status as non-Muslims under the constitution. The resolution stated,

“This House demands that if the chief of Qadianis [a derogatory term for Ahmadis] submits in writing declaring that they accept the Constitution of Pakistan and accept their status as non-Muslims, then we will have no objection to their inclusion into the Commission.”

Speaker of the Punjab Provincial Assembly and Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q) party leader Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi made numerous statements denouncing Ahmadis and any effort to undermine the status of Mohammed as Islam’s final prophet. The Punjab provincial government adopted three anti-Ahmadi measures: in May, a resolution that Ahmadis not be permitted to join the federal government’s National Commission for Minorities unless they “acknowledge” they are not Muslims; in June, a new curriculum law that requires school textbooks to state the finality of the Prophet Mohammed; and in July, the “Protection of the Foundations of Islam” bill giving the provincial government authority to censor objectionable materials and inspect any publishing house or private home for banned Ahmadi literature.

Lawmakers from the National Assembly, the Sindh Provincial Assembly, and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Provincial Assembly also adopted resolutions requiring the title “last of the prophets” to be used when referring to Mohammed. Video footage from a National Assembly session in July showed opposition lawmakers immediately criticizing Prime Minister Khan when he failed to use the phrase after speaking the name of the Prophet Mohammed in an address to parliament.

In April, police arrested Ramzan Bibi, an Ahmadi Muslim woman, after a neighbor accused her of blasphemy against Mohammed – a crime that carries the death penalty – in an argument over Bibi’s charitable donation to a non-Ahmadi mosque. Bibi remained in custody at year’s end.

In May, the Federal Investigative Agency raided the Lahore home of Ahmadi missionary and youth worker Rohan Ahmad, arresting him on charges of cybercrime, blasphemy against the Quran, and propagating the Ahmadi faith through a WhatsApp group in September 2019. At year’s end, he was still being held at Camp Jail, Lahore, and had not been charged.

In July, the Lahore High Court Bar Association (LHCBA) demanded that the federal interior ministry prevent the Ahmadi community from sacrificing animals on Eid al-Adha. In a letter written to the Interior Minister, the LHCBA quoted the section of the constitution stating that Ahmadis are non-Muslim.

In August, a case was opened against three Ahmadi men after an official of a religious seminary approached police complaining that the men sacrificed an animal on Eid al-Adha. The complainant said the three men “hurt the belief of Muslims” by engaging in Islamic rituals as non-Muslims. No arrests were made, and no one was charged.

In October, Punjab police arrested three Ahmadis for using Islamic symbols and practices in their mosque. The charges carry up to three years’ imprisonment and a fine. A complainant filed a criminal charge against them on May 3, triggering the police investigation. As of year’s end, the case was awaiting prosecution.

Government officials and politicians attended and spoke at multiple *Khatm-e-Nabuwat* (Finality of Prophethood) conferences held in major cities and at religious sites around the country. These conferences were organized by groups that stated they were defending the teaching that Mohammed is the final prophet but were often characterized by both secular and Ahmadi critics as engaging in hate speech against Ahmadi Muslims.

On September 7, the JUI-F party held a large *Khatm-e-Nabuwat* conference in Peshawar, with party leaders and national and provincial parliamentarians in attendance. At the conference, JUI-F national leader Fazl ur Rehman praised the lawyers who were defending the teenager accused of killing U.S. citizen Tahir Naseem, a self-proclaimed Ahmadi, in Peshawar and blamed Western nations for supporting Ahmadi Muslims. That same day, a Punjab Provincial Assembly lawmaker from the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Mohammed Ilyas Chinyoti, participated in an international *Khatm-e-Nabuwat* conference in the Chanab Nagar area of Punjab near the Ahmadiyya Muslim community’s headquarters. Speakers at that conference repeatedly used anti-Ahmadi rhetoric.

The Ministry of Human Rights and the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training held consultations with minority faith representatives during the year in a review of textbooks for derogatory material.

In June, the Punjab Provincial Assembly unanimously passed the Curriculum and Text Book Board Amendment Bill, which Governor Chaudhary Muhammad Sarwar signed into law. The law requires clearance from the Muttahida Ulema Board, a Punjab-based advisory council of religious scholars from multiple Muslim schools of thought, to publish content on Islam in school textbooks, which Assembly Speaker Elahi said was necessary to “stop the publishing of blasphemous material” against Mohammed and his companions. Civil society representatives said the bill targets Ahmadis, who do not have representation on the ulema board and who are barred by the constitution and the penal code from identifying as Muslims. Some politicians acknowledged privately the bill was intended to ensure textbooks identify Mohammed as the final prophet, thereby excluding Ahmadis from the definition of Islam taught in public schools.

On July 22, the Punjab Provincial Assembly passed the Protection of Foundation of Islam Bill, which prohibits the printing and publication of objectionable material in the province. Governor Sarwar did not sign the bill, which was promoted by the PML-Q party, noting controversy about its provisions and concerns that it could be seen as anti-Shia. According to a Punjab government official, Sarwar had no intention of signing the bill until there was a consensus that it would not harm religious minorities. Other government officials, including Prime Minister Khan,

advised Sarwar against signing the bill, according to a Lahore-based journalist. Among the restrictions outlined in the bill, publishers, editors, and translators would be barred from printing or publishing any book and material containing statements or anything deemed to be of a blasphemous nature. The bill would also require the words “last of the prophets” to be written after the name of Mohammed and specific honors for his companions revered in the Shia community (“may Allah be pleased with them,” rather than “peace be upon them”). Ahmadi community leaders said they saw the requirement to designate Mohammed as last of the prophets as directly targeting them. Shia leaders, meanwhile, denounced the specific honors prescribed by the bill to Mohammed’s companions, which they said risked stoking discord between Shia and Sunnis, given their fundamental disagreements over some of the companions’ status within Islam.

The law also would make “desecration” (including physical destruction of books or symbols, along with verbal, written, or online actions perceived to be insults) of any prophet, any of the four divine books (the Quran, Torah, Psalms of David, and Gospel of Jesus), any family and companions of the Prophet Mohammed, as well as abetting or glorifying terrorists, or promoting sectarianism in any book, punishable with a maximum of a five-year jail term and a substantial fine of up to 500,000 Pakistani rupees (\$3,100). According to the bill, all publishers would be required to submit to the Directorate General Public Relations, the provincial government authority with jurisdiction over printing presses and publishing houses, four copies of every edition of each title they print. The directorate would be empowered to inspect printing presses, bookstores, and publishing houses and confiscate books before or after they are printed if they are judged to contain “objectionable” content.

While schools were required to teach Islamic studies and the Quran to Muslim students, sources reported many non-Muslim students were also required to participate because their schools did not offer parallel courses in their own religious beliefs or ethics. The government did not permit Ahmadis to teach Islamic studies in public schools. Members of religious minority communities stated public schools gave Muslim students bonus grade points for memorizing the Quran, but there were no analogous opportunities for extra academic credit available for religious minority students.

Minority religious leaders stated members of their communities continued to experience discrimination in admission to colleges and universities. Ahmadi representatives said the wording of the declaration students were required to sign on their applications for admission to universities continued to prevent Ahmadis from declaring themselves as Muslims. Their refusal to sign the statement meant they were automatically disqualified from fulfilling the admissions requirements. The government said Ahmadis could qualify for admission if they did not claim to be Muslims.

There were continued reports that some madrassahs taught violent extremist doctrine, which the government sought to curb through madrassah registration and curriculum reform.

Members of religious minorities, particularly lower-caste Hindus, complained of forceful evictions from their homes and villages by individuals desiring their land with assistance from government officials. On July 13, hundreds of members of the Bheel community, including women and children, marched and demonstrated against the demolition of their homes by revenue officials whom they said were in collusion with an influential landlord of the area in Mithi, Sindh. The protesters said that when they opposed the illegal evictions of villagers, they were charged in “fake” cases by revenue officials. They complained that Dalits, who are considered to be the lowest in the traditional Hindu caste structure, were being targeted and subjected to violence and torture in Thar and other areas. For example, in March, media reported that a woman from Meghwar committed suicide after being repeatedly raped by a man of an upper-caste Hindu clan in Deeplo, Sindh. The woman’s family said she was pregnant at the time of her suicide and that police initially refused to file charges against the man because of his caste.

Most minority religious groups said they continued to face discrimination in government hiring. According to religious minority activists, provincial governments also often failed to meet quotas for hiring religious minorities into the civil service.

Minority rights activists said most government employment advertisements for janitorial staff continued to list being non-Muslim as a requirement. Minority rights activists criticized these advertisements as discriminatory and insulting. For example, the Lahore Waste Management Company continued to employ mainly Christian street sweepers, which HRCP criticized as the result of employment advertisements continuing to specify that religious minorities should apply. Citing a sanitation job advertisement issued by the Sindh provincial government, HRCP stated such advertisements infringed on human dignity and violated the constitutional guarantee of equality of all citizens. In May, the *New York Times* reported the issue, which was subsequently raised by international human rights NGOs.

Representatives of religious minorities said a “glass ceiling” continued to prevent their promotion to senior government positions, but one NGO also stated that due to insufficient higher education opportunities compared to the majority religious community, few religious minorities met the qualifications to apply for these positions. Although there were no official obstacles to the advancement of minority religious group members in the military, they said that in practice, non-Muslims rarely rose above the rank of colonel and were not assigned to senior positions.

Print and broadcast media outlets continued to publish and broadcast anti-Ahmadi rhetoric. In May, after the government announced that Ahmadis would be excluded from the National Commission for Minorities, Religious Affairs Minister Qadri said on a popular television show, “Anyone supporting Ahmadis is not a Muslim.”

Ahmadiyya Muslim community representatives stated that the Urdu-language press frequently printed hate speech in news stories and editorials, some of which could be considered as inciting anti-Ahmadi violence. Inflammatory anti-Ahmadi rhetoric continued to exist on social media and was at times spread by senior members of mainstream political parties.

Following the killing of U.S. citizen Tahir Naseem in July, JUI-F leader Mufti Kifayatullah celebrated the accused killer for his act of “justice.” Some political figures, including the ruling PTI Party’s Sindh provincial president Haleem Adil Sheikh, who is also a member of the Sindh Provincial Assembly, changed their social media profile pictures to that of Naseem’s killer.

On January 26, a local court sentenced four young boys, who had confessed to vandalizing a Hindu temple in Sindh’s Tharparkar district, to a juvenile center in Hyderabad. The incident was the first attack on a Hindu temple in Tharparkar in more than 30 years. Minority lawmakers and civil society activists reacted strongly to the attack, stating the boys had been instigated by local Muslim clerics.

Civil society members reported authorities took no action to prevent attacks on Ahmadi mosques or punish assailants who demolished, damaged, forcibly occupied, or set fire to Ahmadi mosques. Local authorities did not allow the repair or unsealing of Ahmadi mosques damaged or demolished by rioters in previous years. In February, a crowd occupied and vandalized a 100-year-old Ahmadi mosque in Punjab. In July, residents in the Sheikpura District of Punjab damaged Ahmadi gravestones.

Community leaders continued to state the government did not take adequate action to protect its poorest citizens, including religious minorities, such as Christian and Hindu Dalits, from bonded labor practices. In May, Daniel Masih appealed to the court in the Sargodha District of Punjab, urging authorities to rescue his brother Bashir and his family from bonded labor under a Muslim landlord. Hindu Dalits remained vulnerable to human rights violations and pressure by perpetrators to withdraw police cases. On September 30, media reported that a 17-year-old girl from a Hindu Dalit community committed suicide after having been gang-raped a year earlier by Muslim men and subsequently blackmailed by them in Tharparkar, Sindh. Three suspects were arrested for the rape but were released on bail, and the girl’s family said they harassed and pressured the girl to withdraw the case.

ACTIONS OF FOREIGN FORCES AND NONSTATE ACTORS

According to civil society and media, armed sectarian groups connected to organizations banned by the government, including the LeJ, TTP, and the once-banned anti-Shia group SSP, continued to be responsible for violence and other abuses against religious minorities. Groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United States and other governments, such as ISIS, also committed violent acts. Among the targets of these attacks were Shia Muslims, particularly the predominantly Shia Hazara community.

According to the SATP, the number of sectarian attacks by armed groups continued to decrease, corresponding with an overall decline in terrorist attacks. Data on sectarian attacks varied because no standardized definition existed of what constituted a sectarian attack among reporting organizations. According to the SATP, at least 10 persons were killed and three injured in 10 incidents of sectarian violence by extremist groups during the year. These attacks targeted gatherings of Shia individuals.

There were multiple reports of targeted killings of Shia Muslims in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, although because religion and ethnicity were often closely related, it was difficult to categorize some incidents as being solely based on religious identity. In September, unidentified gunmen killed two prominent members of the local Shia community in the Kohat District of that province. This was part of an increase in anti-Shia activity that month nationwide that included the shooting of a prominent Shia religious leader in Punjab’s Mandi Bahauddin District and the shooting of a Shia employee of the National Bank of Pakistan in Islamabad. On October 11, unidentified militants abducted six Shia pilgrims near the Pakistan-Iran border region of Panjgur, in Balochistan. The six, all from Karachi, were returning from a pilgrimage in Iran; they remained missing at year’s end.

According to the SATP and media reports, antiterrorism courts convicted and sentenced several individuals affiliated with terrorist organizations and involved in past sectarian attacks and targeted killings. On June 25, an antiterrorism court sentenced five al-Qa’ida militants to 16 years’ imprisonment each for terrorist financing and possession of explosives. The militants were also convicted for running an al-Qa’ida media cell in Gujranwala. On July 27, an antiterrorism court sentenced a member of SSP to 13 years’ imprisonment for facilitating terrorist activities.

The Hindu community in Sindh and Balochistan remained vulnerable to targeted killings and kidnappings for ransom. On July 19, members of the Hindu community staged a sit-in in Khuzdar, Balochistan, to protest the July 18 killing of local Hindu trader Nanak Ram by unidentified assailants in the Wadh area of Khuzdar District. On July 31, Hindu business owner and member of the Khairpur Chamber of Commerce and Industries Raja Kishan Chand was killed by unknown gunmen in that city. In a statement, the Pakistan Hindu Council condemned the killing as well as two other July incidents of violence towards Hindu citizens in the district.

According to the nonprofit Middle East Media Research Institute, the December edition of the Urdu language TTP magazine *Journal of The Tehreek-E-Taliban Pakistan* blamed “the Jews and their puppets” for the COVID-19 pandemic and for harassing Muslims during the pandemic. The author of the article wrote that COVID-19 had been hidden since the 1960s to be “used against Muslims.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Targeted killings of Shia and Ahmadi Muslims and violence and discrimination against Christians, Hindus, and Ahmadi Muslims continued to occur. Throughout the year, unidentified individuals assaulted and killed Shia and Ahmadis in attacks sources believed to be religiously motivated. The attackers’ relationship to organized terrorist groups was often unclear.

Shia Hazaras in Quetta, Balochistan, continued to express concern about targeted killings taking place for the last several years. Although the government continued to implement elevated security measures around Hazara neighborhoods in Quetta, some Hazara community members continued to state that these measures had turned their neighborhoods into isolated ghettos.

In July, a teenager killed U.S. citizen Tahir Naseem in a Peshawar courtroom, where Naseem was on trial for blasphemy. The young man and two coconspirators were indicted, taken into government custody, and were awaiting trial at year’s end. The 16-year-old suspect was being tried as a juvenile; the two coconspirators were a prayer leader and a young lawyer involved in the blasphemy complaint against Naseem. Many social media users celebrated Naseem’s killing. At least three top Twitter trends praised the killer and called him the “savior” and “pride” of Pakistan. Twitter and WhatsApp users circulated graphic images and video footage from the courtroom, depicting Naseem slumped over a chair and crowds of men ignoring the body and seeming to congratulate the killer.

Following Naseem’s death, there were a series of additional violent incidents targeting Ahmadis, and Ahmadiyya community members said they felt in more danger than ever before. Unknown assailants shot a Peshawar trader, also an Ahmadiyya community member, near his business on August 12. Police stated they believed he was targeted because of his religious beliefs. On October 5, also in Peshawar, Professor Naeemuddin Khattak, a member of the Ahmadiyya community, died after being shot while driving home from work. Khattak’s brother, who witnessed the killing, named two suspects in his criminal complaint, including a friend of Khattak – a lecturer from the University of Agriculture in Peshawar – with whom Khattak had had a heated religious argument on October 4. On November 9, also in Peshawar, an 82-year-old retired Ahmadi government worker was killed by unknown gunmen while waiting for a bus. Ahmadiyya community leaders said he was targeted due to his religious beliefs.

On November 20 in a rural area of Punjab, a teenage boy killed Ahmadi doctor Tahir Ahmad and seriously wounded three of his family members. On November 21, Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari posted a tweet calling for the government to protect all its citizens. Ahmadiyya community members said they were surprised by this instance of a senior government official condemning anti-Ahmadi violence, but added that they do not expect it to become the new norm. The special assistant to the Prime Minister for religious harmony, Tahir Ashrafi, said it was “the responsibility of the government and court to punish” the perpetrator in a televised interview.

In its *2020 World Watch List* report, the international NGO Open Doors listed Pakistan, noting that Christians face “extreme persecution in every area of their lives, with converts from Islam facing the highest levels.” According to Open Doors, all Christians in the country “are considered second-class citizens, inferior to Muslims.” The NGO stated Christians are often given jobs “perceived as low, dirty and dishonorable, and can even be victims of bonded labor.” The NGO also said that Christian girls in the country were increasingly “at risk of abduction and rape, often forced to marry their attackers and coerced into converting to Islam.”

AsiaNews, the official press agency of the Roman Catholic Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions, reported that two members of a Christian family were shot and wounded after buying a house in a neighborhood inhabited primarily by Muslims on June 4 in the Sawati Phatak Colony of Peshawar. Police arrested several members of a neighboring Muslim family in connection with the incident. Salman Khan, the head of the Muslim family, remained at large. According to *AsiaNews*, once Khan learned the family was Christian, he ordered them to leave immediately, because “Christians are enemies of Islam.” After harassing the family for a few days, Khan gave them a 24-hour ultimatum to leave. When he and his sons returned to the house, they shot and wounded two of the Christian family members.

Civil society activists and media reported young Christian and Hindu women being abducted and raped by Muslim men. Victims said their attackers singled them out as vulnerable due to their religious minority identity. According to the NGOs Center for Legal Aid, Assistance, and Settlement (CLAAS) and the Pakistan Center for Law and Justice, there were also reports of religious minority women being physically attacked by men. On October 9, a Hindu teacher was attacked by a Muslim man with an axe on her way to her school in Mithi, Sindh. The teacher survived the attack and told media the man had been following and harassing her for days. Despite her filing a complaint, police did not open a case initially. The man was later arrested by police after the Sindh education secretary intervened in the case.

The HRCP said forced conversions of young women of minority faiths, often lower-caste Hindu girls from rural Sindh province, continued to occur. On October 13, according to local media reports, Reeta Kumari, a pregnant Dalit Hindu woman, told the Sindh High Court in Sukkur that she had been abducted by a Muslim man, Rafique Domki, in Islamkot. She said Domki had taken her to Balochistan two months earlier and held her there until police rescued her. She denied her abductor’s claim that she had willfully married him and converted to Islam, and instead asked the court to allow her to reunite with her Hindu husband and minor son. The court ordered police to hand over the woman to her Hindu husband and no police or court action was taken against Domki.

Christian activists also stated young women from their communities were vulnerable to forced conversions. On February 22, a Christian woman from Lahore fled to a shelter after a Muslim factory worker forced her to convert to Islam and marry him. The woman’s mother filed a police report against the abductor, who was subsequently arrested.

On July 22, Saeed Amanat, a Muslim man, abducted a 15-year-old Christian girl on her way to church in Faisalabad, Punjab. The girl’s family said they feared she had been forced to convert and marry a Muslim. On August 22, another teenage Christian escaped from the home of Mohamad Nakash, a Muslim who had kidnapped her in April and had been holding her since. On September 8, Mehwish Hidayat, a Christian woman, was reunited with her family after being abducted by a Muslim man and spending three months in captivity.

Also in September, a Karachi court issued an arrest warrant for Abdul Jabbar, a Muslim man who allegedly abducted, forcibly married, and converted a teenage Christian girl in Karachi in 2019. She was taken to Dera Ghazi Khan, in Punjab, to avoid Sindh provincial law, which bans marriage of girls younger than 18. At year’s end, she and her alleged husband had not appeared in court in Karachi, despite multiple court orders to do so.

International and local media, as well as Christian activists, reported that young Christian women, many of them minors, were specifically targeted by Chinese human traffickers because of their poverty and vulnerability. The traffickers told pastors and parents they would arrange marriages to Chinese men who had supposedly converted to Christianity, after which the women were taken to China, abused, and in some cases, sexually trafficked. Reports indicated parents and pastors were frequently paid by the traffickers for the women, and that some pastors were complicit in the trafficking.

Members of civil society reported that converts from Islam lived in varying degrees of secrecy for fear of violent retribution from family members or society at large.

Representatives of the Kalash, an indigenous group in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, continued to report their youth were under pressure from Muslim schoolteachers and others to convert from their traditional beliefs.

Throughout the year, Islamic organizations with varying degrees of political affiliation held conferences and rallies to support the doctrine of Khatm-e-Nabuwat. The events were often covered by English and local-language media and featured anti-Ahmadiyya rhetoric which Ahmadiyya community representatives said could incite violence against Ahmadis. In addition to the large JUI-F conference and rallies, the Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami also held a large event in September in Peshawar; both parties criticized the PTI-led national government for failing to enforce Islamic law. The TLP and Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat, a banned organization under the National Counterterrorism Authority’s Schedule-I list, also held smaller rallies. The rallies occurred days after a unanimous resolution by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Provincial Assembly condemning anti-Islam statements and the republication in France of the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoon depictions of the Prophet Mohammed.

In September, several religious groups from the Deobandi and Barelvi schools of Sunni Islam organized a series of rallies in Karachi to denounce Shia “defamation” of revered Sunni religious figures. The rallies came after police charged Shia cleric Taqi Jaffar with blasphemy on August 30 for criticizing two companions of Mohammed during a Karachi Muharram procession.

Ahmadis continued to report widespread societal harassment and discrimination against community members, including physical attacks, destruction of homes and personal property, and threats intended to force Ahmadis to abandon their jobs or towns. On August 12, armed gunmen attacked the house of Ahmadi Muslim Syed Naeem Ahmad Bashir in the Sahiwal District of Punjab, firing into the courtyard at night, where they reportedly expected the family to be sleeping. The family was in another location, however, and survived. On August 20, attackers attempted to kill Sheikh Nasir Ahmad, an Ahmadi man from the Lalamusa area of central Punjab.

In October, members of a State Youth Parliament team in Gujranwala defaced a public portrait of the country’s first Nobel laureate, physicist Dr. Abdus Salam, an Ahmadi. The group also painted slogans insulting the Ahmadiyya community. On October 22, a private business school, the Institute of Business Administration in Karachi, cancelled an online seminar that was to feature U.S.-based Ahmadi economist Dr. Atif Mian, citing pressure by “extremists.”

Christian religious freedom activists continued to report widespread discrimination against Christians in private employment. They said Christians had difficulty finding jobs other than those involving menial labor, with some advertisements for menial jobs specifying they were open only to Christian applicants. In January, two Christians, Kamran Sandhu and Nauman Aslam, applied for seats reserved for minorities in the Gujranwala Electric Power Company (GEPCO) in Punjab. Both passed the recruitment test and had successful interviews but were denied appointment by the assistant manager. CLAAS helped both file an antidiscrimination petition in the Lahore High Court. The court ordered the chief executive officer of GEPCO to hire the two Christians, but he did not do so. The CLAAS legal team filed a contempt of court application, but the Lahore High Court dismissed the plea. At the end of the year, CLAAS was planning to take the case to the Federal Ombudsman.

Observers reported that English-language media continued to cover issues facing religious minorities in an objective manner, but Urdu-language media continued to show bias in reporting on minority religious groups, including multiple instances in which media censored references to Ahmadis on talk shows, used inflammatory language, or made inappropriate references to minorities. In a September editorial, the largest Urdu daily, *Nawa-i-Waqt*,

described the 1974 legislation declaring Ahmadis officially non-Muslim as a historic day in the country’s history. The high circulation daily *Jang* also published a lengthy editorial on the struggle to declare Ahmadis as non-Muslims in a special magazine edition.

Human rights and religious freedom activists and members of minority religious groups continued to report that they exercised caution and, occasionally, self-censorship when speaking in favor of religious tolerance because of a societal climate of intolerance and fear. Some activists reported receiving death threats because of their work.

Hindu activists in Sindh reported discrimination against the Hindu community during COVID-19 food-relief efforts by private charities. In April, some members of the Hindu community in Karachi’s Lyari area were denied food packages provided by a local charity, according to local sources.

Reports continued of attacks on religious minorities’ holy places, cemeteries, and religious symbols. In July, police arrested four men for destroying a 1,700-year-old Gandharan civilization statue of Buddha in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa after a video showing one of the men hammering the statue went viral on social media. The four men were charged with defacing antiquities. On October 25, a Hindu temple was vandalized in Nagarparkar, Sindh, during the nine-day Navratri celebrations. Several statues were destroyed. Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah Imran Ismail issued a statement condemning the attacks.

On October 20, HRCF reported that an Ismaili Muslim mosque in Ghizer was attacked by unknown assailants, who opened fire on the building. No casualties were reported.

On December 30, a mob estimated at 1,000 people incited by a cleric attacked an historic Hindu temple site in Karak District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, destroying the shrine of Hindu saint Shri Paramhans Jee Maharaj and an adjacent building under construction. Police arrested more than 45 JUI-F followers and clerics involved in the destruction. Government officials condemned the incident, suspended more than 100 police officials for failure to stop the mob, and ordered the temple rebuilt.

On October 7, Dr. Qibla Ayaz, then chairman of the Council of Islamic Ideology, inaugurated a national code of conduct to promote interreligious harmony in the face of increased sectarian violence and mistreatment of religious minorities. Islamic and minority religious leaders endorsed the code. Ayaz also spoke at a seminar on interfaith harmony at the cultural center at the National Library of Pakistan in Islamabad.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Charge d’Affaires, consuls general, other embassy officers, and visiting senior U.S. officials engaged government officials and senior advisors to the Prime Minister, including the Minister for Human Rights, and officials from the Ministry of Law and Justice, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, and Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony to discuss blasphemy law reform; laws concerning Ahmadi Muslims; the need to better protect members of religious minority communities; sectarian relations; and religious respect.

During his February visit to Karachi, the Department of State Special Adviser for Religious Minorities told students and faculty at Karachi University’s Department of Islamic Studies, “An inclusive society creates more space for trade and prosperity.” The audience applauded his comments about the protection of religious freedom for Muslims in the United States. Following the address, the Special Adviser convened an interfaith roundtable discussion at Karachi University, which included Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Parsis. The event received positive coverage in local media. The Special Adviser went on to meet with federal and provincial government officials and civil society leaders in Islamabad and Lahore.

Three U.S. government cultural centers in Sindh Province and Islamabad held events to promote religious freedom. On January 21, the center in Khairpur hosted a Religious Freedom Day event at which 25 students discussed the importance of being able to practice religion freely in Pakistan. On January 22, the Hyderabad center hosted an event on educational institutions’ roles in promoting tolerance and creating peaceful communities. Sanjay Mathrani, a former participant in a U.S. government exchange program, was a featured speaker. On August 24, the Karachi center hosted a talk entitled, “How to Develop Religious Tolerance and Empathy,” with Syed Ali Hameed from the Shaor Foundation and a consulate general officer.

Embassy officers met with civil society leaders, experts, and journalists to stress the need to protect the rights of religious minorities and to continue to support measures that decrease sectarian violence. They also met with representatives of other embassies, leaders of religious communities, NGOs, and legal experts working on religious freedom issues to discuss ways to increase respect among religions and to enhance dialogue. Department of State programs, including outreach activities such as speakers and workshops, helped to promote peacebuilding among religious and community leaders. The embassy and consulates highlighted the principles of religious freedom and examples of interfaith dialogue in the United States on their social media platforms throughout the year.

In July, the Department of State issued a statement following the killing of Tahir Naseem expressing outrage over the killing and noting that Naseem had been lured from his home in the United States by individuals who used blasphemy laws to entrap him. The statement also called on the government to “immediately reform its often abused blasphemy laws and its court system, which allow such abuses to occur, and to ensure that the suspect is prosecuted to the full extent of the law.”

In an official tweet in November following the killing of Ahmadi physician Tahir Ahmad, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom said the killing was “the latest in a series of recent killings targeting the Ahmadiyya community. We call upon authorities to ensure the safety of all Pakistanis.”

On December 2, the Secretary of State redesignated Pakistan as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom, and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompany designation as required in the important national interests of the United States.

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