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KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Pakistan continued to deteriorate. Religious minorities were targeted for their beliefs, including accusations of blasphemy, and were subject to mob violence, lynchings, and forced conversions. Attacks on and desecration of places of worship also occurred frequently throughout the year. While the government made some positive reforms, including [approving](#) a new curriculum making Islamic studies non-compulsory for religious minorities, proposed amendments to Pakistan’s blasphemy law risk further escalating persecution against Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, and Shi’a and Ahmadiyya Muslims.

Blasphemy cases and associated mob violence remained a substantial threat to religious freedom. In the runup to national elections, political parties leveraged blasphemy laws for political gain. In January 2023, the National Assembly, the lower house of parliament, unanimously [passed](#) an amendment to strengthen punishment under the country’s blasphemy law. In February, at least 50 men [stormed](#) a police station in Punjab to kidnap and lynch a Muslim man, Muhammad Waris, accused of desecrating the Qur’an. In August, a mob of hundreds attacked the Christian community of Jaranwala, Pakistan, damaging dozens of churches and homes following accusations of blasphemy. In September, a month of protests and clashes began in Gilgit-Baltistan after a Shi’a cleric was accused of making [blasphemous](#) statements.

Terrorist attacks targeting religious minorities and places of worship significantly increased in 2023. In January, a suicide bomber [attacked](#) a mosque in Peshawar, killing at least 100, the country’s most deadly terrorist attack in recent years. In June,

the Islamic State (IS) claimed [responsibility](#) for killing a Sikh man in northwestern Peshawar, claiming he belonged to a “polytheistic” Sikh sect. In September, suicide bombings targeted two mosques in Balochistan as congregants [assembled](#) to celebrate the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday. Increasing terrorist attacks prompted authorities to justify the [expulsion](#) of 1.3 million Afghan refugees, including minority Shi’a [Hazara](#) and [Christian](#) communities. The office of the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights [emphasized](#) that these religious communities “will be at grave risk” of human rights violations by Afghanistan’s de facto Taliban authorities. Estimates [indicate](#) that 500,000 Afghan refugees were deported after the October 1st deadline.

Throughout the year, religious minorities, including Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, and Ahmadiyya Muslims, faced increased levels of harassment and violence. In total in 2023, three Sikhs were killed by vigilantes or as targets of terrorist attacks. In January, UN human rights experts expressed [concern](#) at the reported increase in forced conversions of [Christian](#) and [Hindu](#) girls in Pakistan. In July, vigilantes [attacked](#) a Hindu temple in Sindh following the news that a Pakistani Muslim woman had married a Hindu man in India. Additionally, the Ahmadiyya community recorded three dozen [attacks](#) on their places of worship throughout 2023, including vandalism, often with police complicity. These actions occurred despite a 2023 court ruling prohibiting the alteration of or damage to mosques built before 1984. Ahmadiyya Muslims also continued to face physical threats. In April, an Ahmadiyya lawyer was assaulted in court for using the religious prefix “Syed.”

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Pakistan as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Pakistani government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
- Enter into a binding agreement, under Section 405(c) of IRFA, with the Pakistani government to encourage substantial steps to address religious freedom violations with benchmarks, including but not limited to:
 - Release blasphemy prisoners and other individuals imprisoned for their religion or beliefs;
 - Repeal blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws; until such repeal, enact reforms to make blasphemy a bailable offense, require evidence by accusers, ensure proper investigation by senior police officials, allow authorities to dismiss unfounded accusations, and enforce existing penal code
- articles criminalizing perjury and false accusations;
- Remove requirements for self-identification of religion on identity documents; and
- Hold accountable individuals who incite or participate in vigilante violence, targeted killings, forced conversions, and other religiously based crimes.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Incorporate religious freedom concerns into its larger oversight of the U.S.-Pakistan bilateral relationship through hearings, letters, and congressional delegations and advocate for the release of religious prisoners of conscience in Pakistan.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [Assessing Blasphemy and Related Laws on Religious Freedom in Pakistan](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Concerned by Pakistan’s Expulsion of Refugees and Attacks against Ahmadiyya Muslims](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Pakistan](#)

Background

Pakistan's population is 96.3 percent Muslim (85–90 percent Sunni, 10–15 percent Shi'a, and 0.2 percent Ahmadiyya) with smaller populations of Hindus (1.6 percent); Christians (1.6 percent); and Sikhs, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians (<1.0 percent). Pakistan was established as an Islamic Republic in 1956, granting special status to Islam and constitutionally establishing Islam as the state religion. The constitution nominally protects religious freedom by prohibiting faith-based discrimination and guaranteeing the right to religious practices. Additionally, 10 seats are reserved for religious minorities in the National Assembly, four in the Senate, and 23 in four provincial assemblies. However, a 1974 constitutional amendment declares Ahmadis non-Muslims, excluding them from representation.

Pending Amendment to Blasphemy Law

In January 2023, Pakistan's National Assembly unanimously [passed](#) an amendment to the country's [blasphemy law](#). Introduced by a member of the religious political party, Jamaat-e-Islami, the private member's bill would expand punishable offenses and offer harsher punishments for blasphemy. Currently, individuals can be charged with blasphemy for using derogatory remarks against Muslim holy personages (Section 295-A), defiling or desecrating the Qur'an (Section 295-B), or insulting the Prophet Muhammad (Section 295-C). Those accused of blasphemy often face lengthy prison sentences on death row and solitary confinement. Blasphemy allegations are also used to settle personal vendettas, with no punishment for those who offer false accusations or perpetrate vigilante violence.

The proposed [amendment](#) seeks to expand and strengthen punishments for condescending remarks against "holy persons," including the Prophet Muhammad's family, wives, and companions and the four caliphs. It seeks to increase the possible punishment to range anywhere from a minimum sentence of three years and a fine up to life imprisonment—while simultaneously making the offense nonbailable. In August, the Senate passed the bill.

Violence against Christians

In August 2023, a mob of hundreds of individuals attacked the Christian community of Jaranwala, damaging at least 24 churches, raiding homes, and desecrating a cemetery. The attack occurred after two Christians were [accused](#) of committing blasphemy by desecrating a Qur'an. Following the accusations, members of the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) made public announcements from mosques for individuals to gather in Jaranwala. Reports indicate the mob was composed of Muslims from outside Jaranwala and that violence lasted for 10 hours without police intervention. As of November 2023, not all damaged churches had been repaired. Despite authorities arresting close to 200 people involved in the attack, reporting indicates that fear among the Christian community persists, particularly among smaller churches that are unable to provide sufficient protection.

Anti-Ahmadiyya Laws

Articles 298(b) and 298(c) of Pakistan's Penal Code prohibit Ahmadis from identifying as Muslim, forcing them to sign a declaration swearing they are non-Muslim to obtain the right to vote or receive national identification cards. They are prohibited from citing the

Qur'an or Hadith, displaying Qur'anic text, sharing their faith, printing or obtaining material related to their faith, or calling their places of worship "mosques."

In a July letter, [representatives](#) from the Lahore High Court Bar Association (LHCBA) asked the Punjab Home Department to prevent the Ahmadiyya community from performing animal sacrifices on Eid al-Adha. That same month, three Ahmadis were [arrested](#) and charged under Section 298-C with "hurting Muslim sentiment" for sacrificing animals inside their homes on Eid. A total of five First Instance Reports (FIRs) were filed against Ahmadis. These charges stand in contrast to a 2022 [judgment](#) by the Supreme Court, which ruled that obstructing "non-Muslims" from practicing their religion within their places of worship is against the constitution.

Attacks against Places of Worship

In 2023, Pakistan's Hindu and Ahmadiyya communities faced increased attacks against their places of worship. In September, the Lahore High Court [ruled](#) that Ahmadiyya mosques built before 1984 cannot be destroyed or altered. Despite this decision, several structures have been vandalized and threatened, including an April [attack](#) against the Ahmadiyya mosque in Ghooghiat, Punjab. Vigilantes demolished several minarets of the mosque, which is over a century old, in the presence of police. Similarly, in May, a mob of 150 people vandalized an Ahmadiyya mosque in Halqa Rehman, [destroying](#) four minarets. In December, members of Punjab's Hindu community claimed that two Hindu temples were [converted](#) into mosques.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States has considered Pakistan's stability and security a priority for U.S. foreign policy. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) \$150 million for programs in Pakistan. In 2023, the U.S. government continued to raise religious freedom concerns in the country. Throughout the year, U.S. government officials, including U.S. Ambassador [Donald Blome](#) and U.S. Secretary of State [Antony J. Blinken](#), condemned terrorist attacks against worshippers and religious minorities. In October, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Rashad Hussain [traveled](#) to Pakistan where he met with representatives from Jaranwala's Christian community and government officials, including the foreign minister.

Pakistan's caretaker government was formed in mid-August under the leadership of Senator Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar. In September, Kakar visited the United States to attend the 78th UN General Assembly. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Populations, Refugees, and Migration Julieta Noyes [visited](#) Pakistan following the caretaker government's announcement that it would deport undocumented Afghan refugees. In December, Pakistan Army Chief Asim Munir [traveled](#) to Washington, DC, for meetings with the U.S. secretary of defense, the secretary of state, and the White House's national security advisor.

On December 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of State [redesigned](#) Pakistan as a CPC for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations. Consistent with prior years, however, the State Department issued a national interest waiver absolving Pakistan of liability to sanctions or other penalties that otherwise accompany the CPC designation.