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2016 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 also states, "subject to law, public order, and morality, every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice, and propagate his religion." The courts continued to enforce blasphemy laws, whose punishment ranges from life in prison to the death sentence for a range of charges, including "defiling the Prophet Muhammad." In February the government carried out the execution of Mumtaz Qadri, who was convicted in 2015 of killing Punjab governor, Salman Taseer, despite Qadri's claim that his action was justified due to Taseer's public criticism of the country's blasphemy laws. After the execution, there were large protests across the country that demanded continued enforcement of blasphemy laws and voiced support for Qadri. The police arrested several individuals on charges of blasphemy and, according to data provided by civil society organizations (CSOs), police registered 18 new cases under blasphemy laws, compared to three new cases as reported in the 2015. Lower courts often failed to adhere to basic evidentiary standards in blasphemy cases. According to legal observers, police authorities sometimes protected individuals by refusing to file formal charges in unfounded accusations of blasphemy. Ahmadiyya Muslim Community leaders and human rights organizations continued to express concerns about the government's targeting of Ahmadis for blasphemy, and Ahmadis continued to be affected by discriminatory and ambiguous legislation that denied them basic rights. On December 5, Punjab Counter-Terrorism Division police raided the publications department of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community headquarters in Rabwah, arresting four individuals and charging them with publishing banned religious publications. Members of religious minority communities continued to raise concerns regarding the government's inconsistency in safeguarding minority rights, and official discrimination against religious minorities persisted.

On November 12, in an attack for which Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIL-K) later claimed responsibility, a suicide bomber at a Sufi shrine in Balochistan killed 52 people and injured more than 100 who were gathered for a ritual. The government continued to implement the National Action Plan (NAP) against terrorism, including countering sectarian hate speech and extremism as well as military and law enforcement operations against terrorist groups. Armed sectarian groups connected to organizations banned by the government as extremist, however, as well as groups designated as terrorist organizations by the U.S. and other governments, staged attacks targeting Christians, Ahmadi Muslims, Sufi Muslims, and Shia Muslims, including the predominantly Shia Hazara community.

Throughout the year, attackers targeted and killed Christians, Ahmadis, Sufis, and Shia. On March 27, Easter Sunday, a suicide bomber in Lahore's Gulshan-e-Iqbal park killed 78 people, including 29 children, and injured more than 350; many of the victims were members of Christian families who had gathered in the park for the

religious holiday, although the majority were Muslims. Throughout the year, Ahmadi community members were killed by unknown assailants in what appeared to be targeted attacks. There were reports of continued efforts by individuals to coerce religious minorities to convert to Islam, including forced conversions of young girls and continued discrimination against minorities in employment. There also continued to be reports of attacks on the holy places, cemeteries, and religious symbols of religious minorities.

Senior officials from the U.S. Department of State, including the Ambassador, the Special Advisor on Religious Minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia, the Special Representative for Muslim Communities, the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, and embassy officers met with senior advisors to the prime minister, the minister for human rights, and officials from the Ministry of Law and Justice and Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony to discuss the need to combat sectarian violence, to ensure the protection of religious minorities, and to limit the misuse of provisions of blasphemy law. Embassy officers met with civil society leaders, local religious leaders, religious minority representatives, and legal experts to discuss ways to combat intolerance and promote dialogue on interfaith cooperation to increase religious freedom. Visiting U.S. government officials met with madrassa board leaders and members of the National Counterterrorism Authority (NACTA) to discuss plans for curriculum reform in the public and madrassa education systems. They also met with minority community representatives, parliamentarians, human rights activists, and members of the Office of the Prime Minister's to highlight concerns regarding the treatment of the Shia, Ahmadiyya, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, and other minority communities, the application of blasphemy laws, and other forms of discrimination on the basis of religion. In March the Department of State condemned the Easter Sunday bombing in Lahore, and in November condemned the attack on the Sufi shrine in Balochistan; the U.S. embassy also publicly condemned both attacks. In December the Department of State expressed concerns about the police raid on Ahmadiyya Muslim Community headquarters.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 201.2 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the most recent census conducted in 1998, 95 percent of the population is Muslim (75 percent of the Muslim population is listed officially as Sunni and 25 percent as Shia). Per government figures, the remaining 5 percent includes Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Parsis/Zoroastrians, Bahais, Sikhs, Buddhists, Kalasha, Kihals, and Jains.

Unofficial estimates vary widely with regard to the size of minority religious groups. According to 2014 media accounts, although there are 2.9 million non-Muslims registered with the National Database and Registration Authority, estimates of the actual number exceed 3.5 million. Religious community representatives estimate minorities constitute 3 to 5 percent of the population, approximately six to 10 million citizens.

According to the 2014 government registration documents cited by the press, there are approximately 1.4 million Hindus, 1.3 million Christians, 126,000 Ahmadis, 34,000 Bahais, 6,000 Sikhs, and 4,000 Parsis. Taking account of the Ahmadi boycott of the official census, however, community sources put the number of Ahmadi Muslims at approximately 500,000-600,000. There are also estimates of a Zikri Muslim community, which is mainly located in Balochistan, ranging between 500,000 and 800,000 individuals. Most of the historic Jewish community has emigrated.

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 also shall have 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 sentence for "defiling Prophet Muhammad," life imprisonment for "defiling, damaging, or desecrating the Quran," and 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.

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 Muhammad...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 Muhammad...." It also states "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 Bahai, and a person belonging to any of the scheduled castes" is a "non-Muslim."

According to the constitution and the penal code, Ahmadis are not Muslims and may not call themselves Muslims or assert they are adherents of Islam. The penal code bans them from preaching or propagating their religious beliefs, proselytizing, or "insulting the religious feelings of Muslims." The punishment for violation of these provisions is imprisonment for up to three years and a fine.

The penal code criminalizes "deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs" and provides for a sentence of up to ten years in prison.

From January 2015 until the end of the year, a constitutional amendment allowed military courts to try civilians for terrorism, sectarian violence, and other charges. The government may also use special civilian terrorism courts 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 on the propagation or maintenance of a religion other than the person's own. The government collects a 2.5 percent *zakat* (tax) from Sunni Muslims and distributes the funds to Sunni mosques, madrassas, and charities.

The constitution mandates 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 Muslim 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.

On November 17, the Sindh Provincial Assembly passed a law to establish a Minorities Commission for Sindh province. The law states the 11-member commission will examine government policy and laws and make recommendations to protect better the rights of minorities in Sindh; the commission will also have inquiry powers of a civil court, including summoning witnesses and receiving evidence on affidavits.

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 no person attending any educational institution shall be required to attend classes in religious instruction or take part in any religious ceremony relating to a religion other than the person's own. It also states 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, their schools may not offer parallel studies in their own religious beliefs and the students may have no other option. 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. Private schools are free to teach or not teach religious studies.

By law, madrassas are prohibited from teaching or encouraging sectarian or religious hatred or violence. The law requires all madrassas to register with one of five *wafaqs* (independent boards) or directly with the government, to account for their sources of financing, and to accept foreign students only with valid student visas, a background check, and the consent of their governments. Security analysts and madrasa reform proponents have observed, however, that many madrassas fail to enforce such documentation requirements.

The constitution states "all existing laws shall be brought in conformity with the injunctions of Islam as laid down in the Holy Quran and Sunnah." 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. 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 court 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 empowers the court to review criminal cases relating to certain crimes, 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 court exercises “revisional jurisdiction” (the power to review of its own accord) in such cases in lower courts, a power which applies whether the cases involve Muslims or non-Muslims. Non-Muslims may consult the FSC in other matters which affect them or violate their rights if they so choose. Decisions of the court may be appealed to the Supreme Court.

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. In February the Sindh Provincial Assembly passed a law providing a formal process for registration of marriages for Hindus in Sindh as long as both parties are 18 or older, give consent to the marriage, and are not within a degree of familial relationship prohibited by Hindu custom.

The marriages of non-Muslim men remain legal upon conversion to Islam. If a non-Muslim woman converts to Islam and her marriage was performed according to her previous religious beliefs, the government considers the marriage dissolved. Children born to non-Muslim women who convert to Islam after marriage to a non-Muslim man are considered illegitimate, and ineligible for inheritance. The only way to legitimize the marriage, and the children, is for the husband also to convert to Islam. The children of a Muslim man and a Muslim woman who both convert to another religious group are considered illegitimate, and by law the government may take custody of the children.

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.

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.

The constitution prohibits discriminatory admission to any governmental educational institution based on religious affiliation. According to regulations, the only factors affecting admission to government schools are students’ grades and home provinces; however, 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 the Prophet Muhammad is the final prophet. Non-Muslims are required to have the head of their local religious communities verify their religious affiliation.

The government designates religious affiliation on passports and requests religious information in national identity card applications. Those wishing to be listed as Muslims must swear they believe the Prophet Muhammad is the final prophet, and must denounce the Ahmadiyya movement’s founder as a false prophet and his followers as non-Muslim.

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.

There are reserved seats for religious minority members in both the national and provincial assemblies. The 342-seat National Assembly has 10 seats for religious minorities. The 104-seat Senate has four reserved seats for religious minorities, one from each province. In the provincial assemblies, there are three such reserved seats in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP); 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 by the minority constituencies they represent.

The country is party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and maintains two reservations: 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 (Law of Evidence),” and that ICCPR

Article 25, of 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

The state carried out the death sentence for an individual, Mumtaz Qadri, convicted of assassinating an official over his comments criticizing the blasphemy law. Lower courts acquitted at least five persons charged with blasphemy, while other blasphemy cases continued without resolution. A court hearing for the appeal of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman sentenced to death for blasphemy, was postponed and the appeal put on hold indefinitely. According to civil society reports, there were at least 45 individuals imprisoned on blasphemy charges in the country, with at least 17 having received death sentences. Police registered more cases under blasphemy laws than the previous year, and arrested several individuals on charges of blasphemy. The government continued to prosecute counterterrorism actions under the NAP, which included an explicit goal of countering sectarian hate speech and extremism. Civil society groups expressed concern that authorities often failed to intervene in instances of societal violence against religious minorities, and police failed to arrest perpetrators of such abuses. NGOs and media outlets, however, reported that police intervention helped to prevent religiously based violence on some occasions. Several sources reported the continued practice of initiating blasphemy complaints against neighbors, peers, or business associates to intimidate them or to settle personal grievances. According to Ahmadiyya community leaders, the targeting and harassment of Ahmadi Muslims for blasphemy and other purported violations of law persisted. Legal observers said the authorities took steps to protect some individuals from unfounded accusations of blasphemy, although lower courts continued to fail to adhere to basic evidentiary standards in blasphemy cases. Members of religious minority communities stated the government was inconsistent in safeguarding minority rights, and official discrimination against Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Ahmadis persisted.

On February 29, authorities executed Mumtaz Qadri, who was convicted of killing the then-governor of Punjab Province Salman Taseer, after Taseer publicly criticized the country's blasphemy laws. In its 2015 verdict confirming Qadri's death sentence, the court stated that criticism of the blasphemy laws was not blasphemy itself and did not justify vigilante violence. The court also stated malicious persons had misused the blasphemy law. After the execution, across the country there were protests that voiced support for Qadri and demanded continued enforcement of blasphemy laws, including large demonstrations in Rawalpindi and Islamabad that continued until March 30.

Government authorities took some steps to quell further violence following a blasphemy-related killing. According to media reports, in July a Hindu man, Amar Lal, was accused of burning pages of the Quran in Sindh's Ghotki District. Riots broke out in the district because of the accusations, during which unidentified gunmen shot two other Hindu men, killing one. Sindh's then-Minister for Religious Affairs Dr. Abdul Qayoom Soomro and other local officials negotiated with local religious leaders to end the riots. Media outlets reported that the Sindh home minister and inspector general directed the Ghotki District government to hold rallies on July 28 where police, district government members, and Hindu religious leaders tried to ease religious tensions.

On December 28, Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Bajwa confirmed death sentences for eight men convicted under the military court system on a variety of terrorism-related charges. Four of the men were convicted of committing the May 2015 attacks on members of the Ismaili community traveling in a bus in Karachi, which resulted in the deaths of 45 passengers and injury to six others.

On November 23, the Lahore Anti-Terrorism Court (ATC) sentenced to death five men for their role in the November 2014 lynching of a Christian man and his pregnant wife in Kot Radha Kishan. The couple had been accused of blasphemy for desecrating the Quran. The five men were charged with inciting violence over mosque loudspeakers, leading to a large mob that lynched the couple. The court sentenced eight other men to two years in prison for their participation in the lynching.

On October 13, one of the three Supreme Court justices assigned to hear the final appeal of the Asia Bibi case unexpectedly recused himself, resulting in an indefinite postponement of the hearing. Bibi, a Christian, was arrested in June 2009 after a group of Muslim women with whom she was arguing accused her of blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad. She was convicted and sentenced to death in November 2010.

On December 5, Punjab Counter-Terrorism Division police raided the publications department of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community headquarters in Rabwah. Police arrested four individuals, and charged a total of nine Ahmadis with offenses related to publishing an Ahmadi magazine that the Punjab government banned in 2014. The Ahmadi representatives said a court order allowed them to keep publishing. Ahmadi representatives stated those arrested were tortured while in police custody. The charges carry a maximum penalty of seven years' jail time; the four arrested individuals remained in jail with their trial pending.

According to data provided by CSOs, police registered new cases against 18 individuals under blasphemy laws during the year, compared with three new cases in 2015. There were continued reports of individuals initiating

blasphemy complaints against neighbors, peers, or business associates to resolve personal disputes or to intimidate vulnerable people. While the law requires a senior police official to investigate any blasphemy charge before a complaint can be filed, human rights activists said the police did not uniformly follow this procedure.

On December 30, at the urging of the Sunni Tehreek organization, Punjab police registered a blasphemy case against an “unnamed man” for issuing a video wishing all Pakistanis a Merry Christmas and asking for prayers for those victimized by the country’s blasphemy laws. The man identified himself in the video as Shaan Taseer, an activist and son of the late Punjab Governor Salmaan Taseer, who was assassinated in January 2011 by Mumtaz Qadri after speaking out against the country’s blasphemy laws. Sunni Tehreek issued a fatwa calling Taseer “liable to death” for the video message.

According to media reports, in October a nine-year-old Christian boy and his mother were detained and interrogated by police in Quetta after being accused of burning pages of the Quran. Local civil society activists engaged with police to review the case; police confirmed no evidence of Quran desecration was found and released the boy and his mother.

On September 18, Kasur District police arrested Nabeel (Masih) Amanat, a 16-year-old Christian, on charges of blasphemy for sharing a picture of the Kaaba in Mecca on Facebook. He faced up to ten years’ imprisonment if convicted, and remained in custody at year’s end.

In July a Muslim man filed a complaint against Nadeem James, a Christian, for sending him “a derogatory poem about Islamic holy figures” on WhatsApp. James was charged with blasphemy and the police took his relatives into “protective custody” until he surrendered himself. James remained in prison and his case remained pending before a trial court in Gujrat.

On June 28, the Gujranwala ATC sentenced three individuals, two Christians (Anjum Naz and Javed Naz) and one Muslim (Jaffar Ali), to death over blasphemy and extortion charges. Anjum Naz had reported to police that Javed and Jaffar were trying to extort money from him over what his family alleged was a fraudulent mobile phone recording of blasphemous speech. All three defendants appealed their sentences, and their cases remain pending.

On June 20, the Gujranwala ATC sentenced two Christians to six years imprisonment under blasphemy and terrorism charges, and acquitted five Christians who were also accused. They were part of a group of 16 individuals against whom local police near Gujranwala had filed charges for publishing offensive material and who had been detained since August 2015. The remaining nine defendants were subsequently released on bail and their cases remained pending at year’s end.

On June 19, police in Tando Adam, Sindh, arrested Muslim shopkeeper Jahanzaib Khaskheli on blasphemy charges after accusations he was selling shoes with a Hindu symbol on the sole. Hindu community leaders had called for Khaskheli’s arrest and his case remained pending before a trial court at year’s end.

On May 24, police in Sheikhpura, Punjab, arrested a local Christian man, Usman Liaquat, on blasphemy charges. Local activists reported that a group of Muslim and Christian men alleged Liaquat had posted blasphemous text on social media, after a quarrel between Liaquat and the group. He faces the death penalty if convicted. His case remained pending before a trial court at year’s end.

According to media reports, individuals convicted in well-publicized blasphemy cases from previous years, including Sawan Masih, Shafqat Emmanuel, Shagufta Kausar, Sajjad Masih Gill, and Liaquat Ali, remained in jail and continued to await appeal.

On September 30, the Lahore ATC indicted on murder and terrorism charges 42 Christians who had been arrested in the lynching case of two Muslim men in the Youhanabad district. A large mob had burned the two men alive following bombings of two Christian churches in the area in March 2015.

According to Ahmadiyya Community leaders, authorities charged 14 Ahmadis in religion-related cases during the year. As of the end of the year, 14 Ahmadis remained in prison on religion-related charges, including 80-year-old Abdul Skahoor, who was arrested in December 2015 for selling Ahmadi religious books. On January 2, he was sentenced to five years’ imprisonment for propagating the Ahmadiyya Muslim faith and to an additional three years under the Anti-Terrorism Act for stirring up “religious hatred” and “sectarianism,” with sentences to run concurrently.

According to CSOs and media reports, in April a mob attempted to burn houses in the Christian community of Chak 44 in northern Punjab in response to reports a Christian man had blasphemous videos on his phone. Ten Christian families fled out of fear of attack; however, rapid deployment of an additional 70 police officers and the coordinated messaging of a local “peace committee” of Christians and Muslims helped to disperse the mob and diffuse tensions, according to media and NGO reports.

In May Christians near Gujrat used an emergency police hotline when a mob formed after local cleric tried to file blasphemy charges against a young Christian woman. The police and community members worked to diffuse the situation and ultimately the cleric withdrew the complaint.

In November several groups in Karachi protested after the police arrested Allama Mirza Yousuf Hussain, a prominent Shia cleric, and Faisal Raza Abidi, a Shia and former senator. Hussain was arrested under a law meant to curb the misuse of loudspeakers for hate speech for allegedly instigating violence during a speech in May at the funeral of rights activist Khurram Zaki. Hussain was released on bail a few days later. Media reported police arrested Abidi in connection with the killing of two men who belonged to the Tableeghi Jamaat (a pro-Sunni group) and for possession of an illicit weapon, but the Sindh chief minister later told reporters Abidi was arrested solely on charges of possession of an illicit weapon. Shia representatives reported the government was targeting Shia activists under the pretense of law enforcement actions. The chief minister denied these allegations.

On November 24, the Sindh Assembly passed legislation criminalizing forced conversions. The bill mandates a 21-day waiting period and a minimum age of 18 for any person wishing to convert, and establishes a minimum sentence of five years for those convicted of forcing others to convert. In December the Sindh Assembly decided to review the bill after some Muslim scholars objected to some of the bill's clauses; the bill remained pending at year's end.

On September 26, the Islamabad Capital Territory Administration (ICTA) banned 11 clerics from delivering sermons and addressing the public in Islamabad out of fears of inciting sectarian violence. The ICTA also forbade 16 clerics branded as "sectarian agitators" from entering the capital for a period of two months, covering the Islamic month of Muharram. Provincial governments also announced the deployment of hundreds of thousands of police and security personnel to protect Shia religious ceremonies across the country during the commemoration of Ashura.

In October a Rawalpindi ATC acquitted 12 men charged with attacking a Shia mosque in Rawalpindi during a 2013 riot following Ashura, ruling the police had failed to provide sufficient evidence.

According to Ahmadiyya Muslim 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 Muhammad. Representatives also stated that provincial authorities prevented Ahmadis from purchasing land near the community's headquarters in Rabwah.

According to religious organizations and human rights NGOs, religious minorities continued to be disproportionately accused of blasphemy relative to their small percentage of the population. They also stated the police continued not to file charges against many individuals who made false blasphemy accusations and if charges were filed, courts most often acquitted those accused.

In December the Senate Human Rights Committee began debate on possible procedural reforms to discourage misuse of the country's blasphemy laws. Media reported the committee would review other countries' legal frameworks for blasphemy as potential models, and reforms could require greater federal supervision of blasphemy investigations and include provisions for defendants to repent alleged blasphemy.

Legal observers continued to raise concerns regarding the failure of lower courts to adhere to basic evidentiary standards in blasphemy cases, which led to some convicted persons spending years in jail before higher courts overturned their convictions and freed them for lack of evidence. Lower courts reportedly continued to conduct proceedings in an intimidating atmosphere with members of groups labelled extremist by the government, such as the Khatm-e-Nubuwwat group, often filling courtrooms with large numbers of supporters and threatening the defendant's attorneys, family members, and supporters. According to observers, lower courts' general refusal to free defendants on bail or acquit them remained ongoing out of fear of reprisal and vigilantism. Legal observers reported judges and magistrates often delayed and continued trials indefinitely in an effort to avoid confrontation with, or violence from, groups labeled by the government as extremist.

Ahmadi representatives stated the government failed to restrict advertisements or speeches inciting anti-Ahmadi violence in television and print media despite a promise to do so in the 2014 NAP against terrorism. In September Mufti Muneeb-ur-Rehman, chairman of the country's Ruet-e-Hilal Committee (a government entity responsible for announcing the sighting of the new moon), urged the government to execute Ahmadis.

The government continued efforts to enforce its previous bans on the activities of, and membership in, some religiously oriented groups it judged to be extremist or terrorist. The Ministry of Interior declared militant groups Jamaat ul-Ahrar and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Al Alami to be banned in November. In December, however, a cleric unofficially affiliated with banned extremist group Ahle Sunnat Wal Jammāt (AWSJ) won a seat in the Punjab Assembly.

The government continued to fund and facilitate Hajj travel for most Muslims, but Ahmadis were unable to participate in the Hajj, community leaders said, because of passport application requirements to list religious affiliation and denounce the Ahmadiyya prophet.

According to representatives of minority religious groups, the government continued to allow organized religious groups to establish places of worship and train members of the clergy. Although there continued to be no official restriction on the construction of Ahmadiyya places of worship, however, local authorities regularly denied requisite construction permits and Ahmadis remained forbidden to call them mosques.

According to civil society activists and monitoring organizations, some public school textbooks continued to include derogatory statements about minority religious groups, including Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and Christians. Civil society leaders said the teaching of religious intolerance remained widespread and although multiple groups had presented recommendations for the removal of discriminatory content, the federal government had not taken the initiative to support the recommended changes. Monitoring groups said textbooks used in all four provinces for grades one to 10 continued to contain religiously intolerant and biased material against Hindus, Christians, and other religious minorities. These groups reported some provincial authorities moved to remove some discriminatory material and promote tolerance through the textbooks, such as the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board incorporating short stories promoting peace and harmony into Urdu textbooks. Authorities in KP reportedly abandoned plans to review the content of Islamic, Urdu, and social studies textbooks as a result of pressure from religious political parties. While private schools remained free to choose whether or not to offer religious instruction, they were reportedly under government pressure to teach Islamic studies. In a parliamentary hearing in November, a government secretary for education said in response to parliamentarians' questions that no Ahmadis would be allowed to teach Islamic studies.

There were reports some madrassas taught violent extremist doctrine. Increasing government supervision of madrassas remained a component of the NAP, and there was evidence of government efforts to increase regulation of the sector. According to press reports, provincial authorities continued campaigns to geotag madrassas, with Punjab authorities tagging approximately 14,000 madrassas and Sindh authorities tagging more than 7,700. Press reports also indicated provincial authorities also began shutting down madrassas with connections to terrorism, closing two in Punjab, 13 in KP, and 167 in Sindh. Media reports also stated that under the NAP, law enforcement agencies had filed almost 15,000 cases against clerics, religious teachers, and prayer leaders for hate speech and spreading sectarian material. The authorities subsequently prosecuted cases involving sectarian hate speech and restricted the movement and public sermons of some clerics accused of spreading sectarian hatred.

Members of religious minority communities said there continued to be inconsistent application of laws safeguarding minority rights and enforcement of protections of religious minorities at both the federal and provincial levels by the federal Ministry of Law, Justice, and Human Rights and its provincial counterparts. Religious minorities said they remained concerned that government action to address coerced conversions of religious minorities to Islam was inadequate. Religious minority activists, however, stated they believed the Sindh Assembly's new law criminalizing forced conversions, which passed in November but was under review by the Sindh Assembly at year's end, would be a step to restrict the practice and better protect minors belonging to religious minorities.

The National Commission for Minorities, a government committee created in 2014 with Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh representatives, met sporadically to develop a national policy for minorities. Minority activists stated the Commission's lack of a regular budget allocation and lack of an independent chairperson has inhibited its development.

In February the Ministry of Human Rights released its Action Plan for Human Rights that included nine provisions for the protection of the rights of minorities, among them enforcement of laws criminalizing incitement to religious hatred and protection for places of worship for minority religious groups.

Human rights activists reported neither the federal nor the provincial governments had made substantial progress in implementing the Supreme Court's 2014 decision directing the government to take measures to protect members of minority religious groups.

Religious minority community leaders continued to state that the government failed to take adequate action to protect minorities from bonded labor in the brick-making and agricultural sectors, an illegal practice in which victims were disproportionately Christians and Hindus. Such families, particularly on agricultural lands in Sindh Province, often lived without basic facilities and were prevented from leaving without the permission of farm landlords. On August 29, the Punjab Provincial Assembly passed a law prohibiting the use of child labor in the brick industry. Under the law, the owner of a brick kiln who employs or permits a child to work at a brick kiln faces imprisonment for up to six months and a criminal fine.

According to Hindu and Sikh leaders, the legal uncertainty surrounding the process of registering marriages for their communities continued to create difficulties for Hindu and Sikh women in obtaining their inheritances,

accessing health services, voting, obtaining a passport, and buying or selling property. Most Hindu civil society activists, however, stated they welcomed passage of marriage bills in both Sindh and the National Assembly, with the prospect that they will help regularize marriage registration and reduce forced conversions of minors in the community. The media reported some expressed concern that a provision of the national bill permitting annulment of Hindu marriages could be used to legitimize forced conversions of Hindu women. Some local administrative bodies continued to deny Christian and Ahmadi marriage registrations; advocates called for a new law governing Christian marriages, as the existing regulation dates to 1872.

The Ministry for Human Rights, reconstituted in November 2015, is responsible for “protection and promotion of human rights” as enshrined in the constitution and various international treaty obligations. In practice the Ministry took over primary responsibility for the protection of the rights of religious minorities. The Ministry of Law and Justice, from which the Ministry of Human Rights was separated, was responsible for administration of law and justice, including ensuring the legal rights of all citizens. Because the country’s 18th amendment to the constitution devolved certain authorities and responsibilities for the protection of human rights and rights of religious minorities to provincial governments, legal experts and NGO representatives said reporting structures and the full legal framework for minority rights remained unclear.

Minority religious leaders stated discrimination against Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Ahmadis in admission to higher education institutions persisted. They reported their communities continued to face restrictions in securing admissions into colleges and universities.

Ahmadi representatives said the wording of the declaration students needed to sign on their applications for admission to university 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 maintained Ahmadis could qualify for admission as long as they did not claim to be Muslims. Ahmadi community leaders reported multiple Ahmadi students had been expelled from public universities after not disclosing their religious affiliation at initial admission.

Religious minority community members stated that Muslim students in public schools were afforded bonus grade points for memorizing the Quran, but no analogous opportunities for academic credit were available for religious minority students.

Most religious minority groups continued to complain of discrimination in government hiring and admission to public colleges and universities. While there remained a 5 percent quota for hiring religious minorities at the federal level, minority organizations said government employers did not enforce it. According to religious minority members and media reports, provincial governments in Punjab, Sindh, and KP also failed to meet such quotas for hiring of religious minorities into the civil service.

Representatives of religious minorities said a “glass ceiling” continued to prevent their promotion to senior government positions. Although there were no official obstacles to advancement of minority religious group members in the military service, they said in practice non-Muslims rarely rose above the rank of colonel and were not assigned to senior positions.

Ahmadi leaders continued to report the government inhibited 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 the Prophet Muhammad was the final prophet of Islam and the Ahmadiyya movement’s founder was a false prophet. Ahmadi community representatives reported the word “Ahmadi” was written on their passports if they identified themselves as such. Ahmadi community representatives reported voters who registered as Ahmadi were kept on a separate voter list and were physically intimidated while trying to vote.

In September a TV host labeled Ahmadiyya community members as “blasphemers” and “traitors,” prompting the community to file a complaint with the Pakistan Electronic Media Authority (PEMRA). According to media reports, however, the commentator and a large mob entered the PEMRA building on the day of the complaint hearing, shouting threatening slogans; PEMRA subsequently dismissed the community’s complaint.

Religious minority leaders stated the current 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. They also stated the current system effectively precluded the election of minority women, who were rarely in a position of sufficient influence with the major political parties to contend for a seat.

According to Ahmadiyya community members, authorities continued to seal or demolish Ahmadi mosques, barred construction of new mosques, and took no action to prevent or punish assailants who demolished, damaged, forcibly occupied, or set Ahmadi mosques on fire. Ahmadi leaders reported authorities have sealed 33 of the community’s mosques to date, and that in March police in Punjab allowed anti-Ahmadi activists to occupy an Ahmadi mosque authorities had previously sealed. Ahmadi leaders reported the police ignored their

request for police protection for their mosque in Chakwal on December 12, the date of a planned procession to honor the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. On December 12, a mob of more than 1,000 attacked the mosque, resulting in the death of one Ahmadi from a heart attack and in the death of one of the attackers. The police arrested several participants in the mob, as well as four members of the Ahmadi community for allegedly killing the attacker.

The government continued not to allow citizens, regardless of religious affiliation, to travel to Israel. Representatives of the Bahai community said this policy particularly affected them because of the location of the Bahai World Center – the spiritual and administrative center of the community – in Israel.

The government continued to permit non-Muslim missionary activity and to allow missionaries to proselytize as long as they did not preach against Islam and they acknowledged they were not Muslim. The government stated on its immigration website that it continued to grant visas to foreign missionaries valid from two to five years and allowed two entries into the country per year, although only “replacement” visas for those taking the place of departing missionaries were available for missionaries seeking to enter the country for the first time. Non-Muslim missionaries, some of whom had been working in the country for many years, however, were either denied visas, only given four-month extensions, or received no response from immigration authorities before their visas expired. Others were allowed to remain in country while appeals of their denials were pending.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

There continued to be violence and abuses committed by armed sectarian groups connected to organizations banned by the government, including Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (previously referred to as Sipah-e-Sahaba), as well as abuses by individuals and groups designated as terrorist organizations by the U.S. and other governments, such as ISIL-K.

Terrorist groups continued to target Christian places of worship. On March 27, Easter Sunday, a suicide bomber in Lahore's Gulshan-e-Iqbal park killed 78 people, including 29 children, and injured more than 350; the victims included members of Christian families who had gathered in the park for the religious holiday. Jamaat-ul-Ahrar claimed responsibility for the bombing. The majority of the victims were Muslim. Authorities subsequently arrested more than 200 suspected militants in a crackdown throughout Punjab Province.

On November 12, ISIL-K claimed responsibility for a suicide attack on the Sufi shrine of Saint Shah Bilal Noorani in Balochistan that killed 52 people and injured more than 100. Media reported a suicide bomber carried out the attack during a religious activity.

Sectarian violent extremist groups targeted Shia houses of worship, religious gatherings, religious leaders, and other individuals in attacks resulting in 25 people killed and 19 others injured in 16 separate attacks throughout the country, according to a public database of attacks.

Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), a Sunni splinter faction of the TTP, claimed responsibility for two attacks in Shikarpur that injured 13 people at a Shia mosque and congregation hall on September 13. Media reported that two men on a motorbike threw a homemade explosive device at a Shia congregation hall in Karachi on October 17, killing one child and injuring 20 others. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami, a cell of the Sunni LeJ, claimed responsibility for the attack. On October 29, unidentified gunmen opened fire on a Shia gathering in Karachi's Nazimabad area, killing five and injuring six. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami claimed responsibility for the attack.

Terrorist groups also continued to target the predominantly Shia Hazara community. Suspected militants shot and killed a Hazara man in Quetta on December 8. Gunmen in Quetta killed two Hazara Shia men on August 1, with JuA claiming responsibility for the attack.

On September 2, militants attacked a Christian neighborhood in Peshawar, killing one security guard. JuA claimed responsibility for the attack.

In June Amjad Sabri, a singer of Sufi devotional music, was killed by an unknown assailant. The Pakistani Taliban claimed credit for the killing and declared Sabri a blasphemer. In November the police arrested two individuals in connection with the killing, who according to local media said they killed Sabri because he had committed blasphemy.

On October 5, unknown assailants shot and killed Zikri community spiritual leader Syed Akhtar Mullai in Turbat, Balochistan. The Baloch Liberation Front later claimed responsibility.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Throughout the year, unidentified attackers targeted and killed Shias, Hazaras, and Ahmadis in attacks believed to be religiously motivated, including multiple attacks during the Islamic month of Muharram. On November 11, three Shia students were shot by unknown gunmen on a motorbike; one of the students died from his wounds. On October 7, gunmen shot four Shia men in two separate incidents in Karachi, killing one. Prominent Shia civil society activist Syed Khurram Zaki was shot and killed in Karachi on May 7 in an apparent targeted killing. Four Shia were killed in two separate incidents on May 5 in Dera Ismail Khan in KP, prompting protests in the area. On April 8, unidentified gunmen in Karachi killed three men outside a Shia mosque in Karachi.

Unidentified assailants regularly targeted the predominantly Shia Hazara community. On November 30, unidentified assailants killed a Hazara woman in Quetta. On October 4, gunmen boarded a bus in Quetta and shot five Hazara Shia women, killing four.

There were multiple instances of what appeared to be targeted killings of Ahmadi community members. On November 27, gunmen on a motorbike killed an Ahmadi man in Karachi. On June 4, unidentified gunmen killed an Ahmadi pharmacy owner in the city of Attock in Punjab. On March 1, unidentified assailants stabbed an Ahmadi man to death near Punjab's Sheikhpura District. Assailants on motorbikes shot and killed an Ahmadi man on May 25, and an Ahmadi doctor was shot in his clinic on June 20, with no witnesses; both killings occurred in Ahmadi community neighborhoods in Karachi.

Ahmadi representatives reported extremists, including a representative from religious political party Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and a Punjab assembly member from the Pakistani Muslim League (PML-N), held a rally in Rabwah, Punjab, the Ahmadiyya community's center in Pakistan, calling for killing of Ahmadis and claiming the group was anti-Islamic and anti-Pakistan. The rally was held on September 7, which commemorated the passage of the 2nd Amendment to the constitution declaring Ahmadis were not Muslims. Various groups have held similar rallies and conferences yearly on September 7. According to media reports, members of the Ahmadiyya community who fled after the December 12 attack faced threats and a "social boycott" imposed by locals after returning to their homes in Chakwal's Dulmial area.

Reports continued of attempts to coerce religious minorities to convert to Islam. Rights activists reported victims of forced marriage and conversion were pressured and threatened into saying publicly they had entered into the marriage of their own free will. In April, according to Christian activist organizations, two armed men abducted a 23-year-old Christian woman from her family's home in Punjab's Kasur district. When her father attempted to press charges, the police responded the woman had willingly converted to Islam and married one of the abductors. In July a Hindu woman held a press conference in Thatta, Sindh, detailing a years-long ordeal prior to her escape during which she was kidnapped, raped, coerced into marrying a Muslim man in Nawabshah, and then forced into prostitution by her husband.

Christian and Hindu organizations stated that girls from their communities were particularly vulnerable to forced conversions. According to press reports, Wadia Bai Meghwar, a Hindu woman who was already married, was kidnapped and forcibly remarried in May to a Muslim man in the Thar district of Sindh. Days later, media reported that the police officer investigating Meghwar's case said she was not previously married and had married her new husband freely.

Christian activists continued to report widespread discrimination against Christians in private employment. They said Christians had difficulty finding jobs other than those involving menial labor.

Observers reported that some coverage in the English-language media of issues facing religious minorities had improved, including a major daily newspaper hiring a full-time reporter on minority faith issues. Observers reported, however, that Urdu-language media continued to show bias in reporting on minority faith issues, including multiple instances where media used inflammatory language or made inappropriate references to minorities. In separate occasions in June and September, television commentators stated Ahmadis were "deserving of death." Throughout the year editorials in certain Urdu language newspapers referred to Ahmadis as "enemies of Pakistan" and "blasphemers."

Human rights and religious freedom activists and members of minority religious groups reported they continued to be hesitant to speak in favor of religious tolerance because of the societal climate of intolerance and fear. Some activists reported receiving death threats because of their work. Police reported no further developments in the investigation into the 2014 assassination of attorney Rashid Rehman, who was defending an individual charged with blasphemy.

There continued to be reports of attacks on religious minorities' holy places, cemeteries, and religious symbols, which police failed to prevent. Human rights activists and religious leaders reported an Apostolic church in

Multan was set on fire on January 7 but no arrests were made. On June 4, unidentified gunmen opened fire on a Catholic church in Lahore. No casualties were reported in either attack.

In October the Islamic Solidarity Council, a group comprising various Muslim groups, issued a statement condemning sectarianism, fundamentalism, and religiously inspired violence, and emphasizing the importance of permitting the courts independently to decide on the case of Asia Bibi without pressure or threats.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Ambassador, consuls general, embassy officers, and visiting senior U.S. officials met with government officials, including from the Prime Minister's Office and Ministries of Human Rights and Law and Justice, to discuss blasphemy law reform, curriculum reform in the public and madrassa education systems, the need for better protection of Shia, Ahmadi, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, and other religious minority communities, pending legislation, interfaith dialogue, sectarian relations, and religious tolerance.

In March the White House and the Department of State both condemned the Easter Sunday bombing in Lahore and extended condolences to the victims and their families. During a press briefing in November, the U.S. Department of State condemned the attack on the Sufi Shrine in Balochistan and extended condolences to the victims and their families. The embassy condemned both attacks, as well as a September 16 bombing of a mosque in the Mohmand Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas during Friday prayers. During a press briefing in December, the U.S. Department of State expressed concern about the police raid on Ahmadiyya Muslim Community headquarters, emphasizing that such actions were inconsistent with Pakistan's international human rights commitments.

In February the U.S. Special Representative for Muslim Communities visited Islamabad and Karachi to meet with madrassa educational board leaders and members of the NACTA to discuss plans for madrassa reform and the evolving role of government oversight for madrassas.

In February and March the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia visited Islamabad and Karachi and met with minority community representatives, parliamentarians, and members of the Prime Minister's Office, and human rights attorneys. The Special Advisor highlighted concerns over attacks by violent extremists against members of religious minorities, the application of blasphemy laws, and other forms of discrimination on the basis of religion.

The Ambassador met with local religious leaders, including from prominent Sufi shrines, to discuss religious pluralism and efforts to promote interfaith harmony. The Ambassador and embassy officers convened groups of civil society and legal experts to discuss the impact of the country's blasphemy laws on both minority and Muslim communities, and avenues for engagement by U.S. government representatives. Embassy officers met with civil society leaders, experts, and journalists to stress the need to end sectarian violence and protect the rights of religious minorities. They also met with leaders of religious communities, NGOs, and legal experts working on religious freedom issues to discuss ways to increase religious tolerance and dialogue. U.S. Department of State programs on religious freedom helped to promote peacebuilding among religious and community leaders, enhance protections for the legal rights of religious minorities, develop more pluralistic educational materials, and counter sectarianism.