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2015 Report on International Religious Freedom - Pakistan

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion, and requires all provisions of the law 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." The government 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." The police arrested several individuals on charges of blasphemy. 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. Ahmadiyya Muslim community leaders expressed concern over the government's continued targeting of Ahmadis for blasphemy, and Ahmadis continued to be affected by other legislation which denied them basic rights. Members of religious minority communities stated the government was inconsistent in safeguarding minority rights, and official discrimination against religious minorities persisted. The government announced an action plan against terrorism, including countering sectarian hate speech, and said it would prosecute individuals for labeling others as "infidels." Armed sectarian groups connected to organizations banned by the government as extremist, as well as groups designated as terrorist organizations by the U.S. and other governments, staged attacks on Christians and Shia Muslims, including the predominantly Shia Hazara community, which killed hundreds of individuals and injured hundreds more.

During riots in Lahore following terrorist bombings of two churches that killed 17 persons, a group of Christians killed two Muslim individuals allegedly involved in the bombings. Throughout the year, attackers targeted and killed Shia and Ahmadi Muslims. Unknown assailants kidnapped individuals from minority religious groups, including Zikri Muslims and Hindus. There were reports of continued efforts by societal actors to coerce religious minorities to convert to Islam and continued discrimination against Christians 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, the U.S. Ambassador, and embassy officers met with the advisor to the prime minister on foreign affairs, the minister for religious affairs and interfaith harmony, and with senior representatives of the Ministry of Interior to discuss the need to combat sectarian violence, to limit the misuse of provisions of the law related to blasphemy, and to encourage religious tolerance and dialogue. U.S. government officials also discussed other issues of concern, including curriculum reform in the public and madrassah education systems, and the treatment of the Ahmadiyya, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, and other minority communities. Visiting U.S. officials and embassy officers also met with civil society leaders, religious groups, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) engaged on religious freedom issues to discuss the prevention of

sectarian violence and outreach programs to improve the protection of minority religious groups and increase religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 199.1 million (July 2015 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). The remaining 5 percent officially is made up of Hindus, Christians, Parsis/Zoroastrians, Bahais, Ahmadi Muslims, 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 3-5 percent of the population, approximately six to nine 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. There are also estimates of a Zikri Muslim community, which is mainly located in Balochistan, ranging between 500,000 and 800,000 individuals. A Pakistani Jewish activist in Karachi has received some media coverage, but 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 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.

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 constitution currently allows military courts to try civilians on counts of terrorism, sectarian violence, and other charges. The law allows the government to use special 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 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.

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 government collects a 2.5 percent *zakat* (tax) from Sunni Muslims and distributes the funds to Sunni mosques, madrassahs, and charities.

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 school 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 as they choose.

By law, madrassahs are prohibited from teaching or encouraging sectarian or religious hatred or violence. The law requires all madrassahs 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 and the consent of their governments.

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) 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. There is no specific legal framework for the government to register the marriages of Hindus and Sikhs, although a married couple's local religious council may provide a civil marriage certificate based on Hindu marriage documentation.

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.

Government Practices

The Supreme Court suspended the death sentence in one court case involving blasphemy and reaffirmed the death sentence for an individual convicted of murdering an official over his comments criticizing the blasphemy law. Lower courts dismissed at least one charge of blasphemy, while other blasphemy cases continued without resolution. Police arrested several individuals on charges of blasphemy. The government announced the National Action Plan (NAP) to combat terrorism, which included an explicit goal of countering sectarian hate speech, and said it would prosecute individuals for labeling others as "infidels." The authorities subsequently prosecuted cases involving sectarian hate speech and restricted the movement of clerics accused of spreading sectarian hatred. Police intervention stopped mobs from killing Christians on several occasions. Ahmadiyya community leaders continued to express concern over the government's targeting of Ahmadi Muslims for blasphemy and other purported violations of law. 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 discrimination against Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Ahmadis persisted.

On October 7, the Supreme Court upheld the death sentence given to Mumtaz Qadri, who assassinated Punjab Governor Salman Taseer in 2011. Qadri told the court he killed Taseer for publicly criticizing the application of the blasphemy laws in the case of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman convicted of blasphemy in 2010. The court stated in its written verdict 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.

On July 22, the Supreme Court of Pakistan suspended the death sentence of Asia Bibi, pending appeal. Bibi had been on death row since November 2010 after a district court found her guilty of making derogatory remarks about the Prophet Muhammad during an argument.

According to data provided by civil society organizations, police registered three new cases under blasphemy laws during the year, compared with 12 new cases in 2014.

On September 2, Kasur District police arrested Pervaiz Masih, a Christian, after a Muslim business rival accused him of blasphemy reportedly in retaliation for a commercial dispute, according to human rights advocates. On October 10, a local court granted Masih bail. There was no further report on the case as of the end of the year.

On October 8, police in Sargodha arrested Naveed John on blasphemy charges after residents complained he was using a sword bearing an alleged Islamic inscription during Christian faith healing ceremonies. There was no further information available on the case as of the end of the year.

Numerous individuals involved in well-publicized blasphemy cases from previous years, including Sawan Masih, Shafqat Emmanuel, Shagufta Kausar, and Liaquat Ali, remained in jail awaiting appeal, according to media reports.

The supreme court granted bail on October 16 to a Muslim woman, Waliha Ali, accused of blasphemy in 2012. No further information on her case was available as of the end of the year.

On October 5, an anti-terrorism court sentenced Mufti Tanveer Alam Farooqi to six months in jail for sectarian hate speech.

On September 9, the Counter-Terrorism Department arrested Mufti Kifayatullah for hate speech at a mosque in Punjab. There was no information available on the status of his case as of the end of the year.

According to Ahmadiyya leaders, authorities charged 11 Ahmadis in religion-related legal cases during the year, of whom six were taken into custody. One of the individuals reportedly was arrested for selling Ahmadi religious books. There were no reports on the disposition of their cases as of the end of the year.

On May 24, according to civil society organizations and media reports, Punjab police prevented a crowd of hundreds from trying to burn a Christian accused of blasphemy in Dhoop Sarri, Lahore.

Media reported Punjab police stopped a crowd from killing a Christian couple accused of blasphemy on July 2 and arrested a local Muslim cleric who had attempted to incite the crowd to violence.

Civil society organizations reported police intervened to stop the burning of a Christian pastor and three other people from Gujrat, Punjab, on August 19. Muslims in the area accused the pastor of using the word "prophet" to describe a local Christian religious leader.

During the year, individuals continued to accuse government officials and media figures of blasphemy, and courts continued to hear criminal cases based on these accusations. On May 7, several prominent religious leaders accused Federal Minister of Information Pervez Rashid of making blasphemous statements and called for his arrest. Authorities did not open a legal case against him.

A blasphemy case against Sherry Rehman, the country's former ambassador to the United States and a sitting senator, continued. Rehman was accused of making blasphemous statements during a television interview in 2010.

Ahmadiyya community leaders continued to express concern over authorities' targeting and harassment of Ahmadi Muslims for blasphemy, violations of "anti-Ahmadi laws," and other crimes. The Ahmadiyya leaders said the vague 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.

The Punjab Provincial Assembly unanimously passed a resolution on August 28 criticizing Wajid Shamsul Hasan, the former Pakistani High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, for questioning the anti-Ahmadi provisions of the law in public remarks.

Observers stated individuals continued to initiate blasphemy complaints against neighbors, peers, or business associates to settle personal grievances or to intimidate vulnerable people. While the law required a senior police official to investigate any blasphemy charge before a complaint was filed, observers said the police did not uniformly follow this procedure.

Religious organizations and human rights NGOs continued to express concern over the failure to punish persons who made false blasphemy allegations. They said religious minorities continued to be disproportionately accused of blasphemy relative to their small percentage of the population. They also said the police continued not to file charges against many persons who made false blasphemy accusations and if charges were filed, courts most often acquitted those accused.

According to media reports, government authorities took limited steps to protect individuals from unfounded accusations of blasphemy. A Punjab provincial government committee, formed after the May 2014 assassination of lawyer Rashid Rehman, announced in February a list of 50 Muslims accused of blasphemy whom the government believed had been targeted without sufficient evidence. The committee recommended the government provide legal defense for those accused of blasphemy and a faster trial process for those on the list. The government did not act on these recommendations.

Legal observers continued to report lower courts often failed 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 ordered them freed for lack of evidence. Lower courts reportedly conducted proceedings in an atmosphere of intimidation and generally refused to free defendants on bail or acquit them, observers said, for 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.

The government announced the 20-point NAP against terrorism in the wake of the 2014 Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) attack on the Army Public School of Peshawar which killed 145 people, including 132 schoolchildren. As part of the NAP, the government committed itself to countering hate speech and extremist material, taking steps against religious persecution, and dealing firmly with sectarian terrorists. Members of minority communities welcomed what they perceived as a government crackdown on sectarian hate speech. One local human rights organization praised Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan's September 7 announcement that the government would prosecute individuals who declared others to be infidels, making them targets for vigilante violence.

In early October the federal and provincial governments announced bans on the movement of hundreds of religious clerics accused of spreading sectarian hatred, in what the government said was an effort to prevent sectarian violence during 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 during the commemoration of Ashura.

The government continued to enforce its previous bans on the activities of, and membership in, religiously oriented groups it judged to be "extremist" or "terrorist."

The government continued to fund and facilitate Hajj travel for Muslims, but continued not to offer a similar program for pilgrimages by religious minorities. 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.

In April members of the Hindu community stated police at the Sindh-Balochistan border demanded bribes from Hindus performing their annual pilgrimage to the Hinglaj Mata, a Hindu temple in Balochistan.

NGOs reported the government continued to allow the publication of religious texts and the importation of sacred books for religious minorities, except for Ahmadis.

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, Ahmadis remained forbidden to call them mosques.

According to reports from the Jinnah Institute and other monitoring organizations, some public school textbooks continued to include derogatory statements about minority religious groups, including Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and Christians. The monitoring groups said the teaching of religious intolerance remained widespread. According to a representative from the National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP), textbooks used in Sindh and Punjab for grades one to 10 continued to contain discriminatory and inflammatory material directed against Hindus, Christians, and other religious minorities. Textbooks for grades eight and 10 reportedly included chapters positively portraying the role minorities played in the formation of the country. While private schools remained free to choose whether or not to teach religious studies, they were reportedly under government pressure to teach Islamic studies. There were reports some madrassahs taught violent extremist doctrine. Increasing government supervision of madrassahs was also a component of the NAP, and there was some evidence of government efforts to increase regulation of the sector.

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. Personal status laws remained uncoded and continued to be enforced by community tradition or religious authorities without recourse to civil courts.

The National Commission for Minorities, a government committee created in 2014 with Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh representatives, continued to meet throughout the year to develop a national policy for minorities.

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.

According to Hindu and Sikh leaders, the legal uncertainty surrounding the process of registering marriages for their communities created difficulties for Hindu and Sikh women in obtaining their inheritances, accessing health services, voting, obtaining a passport, and buying or selling property.

The government announced the creation of a new Ministry of Human Rights but did not specify its authority or responsibility for religious minorities. The Ministry of Law, Justice, and Human Rights continued to be responsible for protecting individuals against religiously based discrimination. Although the constitution

devolved some authority and responsibility for the protection of religious minorities to provincial governments, legal experts said the full legal framework 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 prevented 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 said they refused to be categorized as “second class citizens” through what they considered to be coercive means, and instead should be viewed as a part of the majority Muslim community.

Most religious minority groups continued to complain of discrimination in government hiring. While there remained a 5 percent quota for hiring religious minorities at the federal and provincial levels, they said government employers did not enforce this requirement.

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 continued rarely to rise 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 Muslims on identity cards 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.

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. In September the Sikh community boycotted the Sindh local government elections for this reason.

Minority religious group sources stated minority candidates could not run directly for seats explicitly reserved for religious minorities during the 2015 local government elections. Instead, the winners of the general seats selected individuals to fill the reserved seats. Representatives of the Ahmadi community reported voters who registered as Ahmadis were kept on a separate voter list and were physically intimidated while trying to vote.

According to Ahmadiyya community members, authorities continued to seal or demolish Ahmadiyya mosques, barred construction of new mosques, and took no action to prevent or punish assailants who demolished, damaged, forcibly occupied or set Ahmadiyya mosques on fire. Community members stated government authorities partially demolished two places of worship during the year at the request of local religious leaders.

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 continued to grant visas to foreign missionaries valid from two to five years and allowing them one entry 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.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Non-State 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), TTP, and the now-disbanded Sipah-e-Sahaba, as well as abuses by individuals and groups designated as terrorist organizations by the U.S. and other governments.

Sectarian violent extremist groups targeted Shia houses of worship, religious gatherings, and religious leaders in attacks resulting in hundreds of deaths during the year. A public database of attacks on Shia reported 251 people killed and 316 injured in 38 separate attacks throughout the country.

In January and February the TTP splinter group Jundullah claimed responsibility for a string of deadly bombings at Shia religious centers in Shikarpur, Peshawar, and Rawalpindi, which killed a total of 86 Shia worshippers.

On May 13, armed gunmen stopped a bus carrying members of the Ismaili Shia community in the Safoora Goth neighborhood of Karachi and killed 45 people on board. Jundullah also claimed responsibility for this attack. Seven days later, police arrested four individuals accused of planning the attack. Subsequently, two senior government prosecutors resigned from the Safoora Goth case, stating the provincial government was not providing them with adequate security and compensation to continue the prosecution.

During Muharram, LeJ claimed responsibility for two suicide bombings which killed at least 10 Shia at a mosque in Balochistan on October 22 and approximately 24 Shia at a religious procession in Jacobabad, Sindh, on October 23.

Terrorist groups continued to target the predominantly Shia Hazara community. Law enforcement officials stated LeJ and Jaish-ul-Islam were responsible for a spate of attacks on Hazaras between April and July. On April 27, armed men riding a motorcycle killed three Hazaras at a bus station in Quetta. Between May 12 and 27, armed men shot five Hazara in public places in Quetta. On June 7, gunmen opened fire on two shops near Quetta's commercial center and killed five Hazaras, sparking protests in the city. On July 6 and July 28, gunmen killed four Hazaras and a policeman in two more shootings. LeJ also claimed responsibility for a July 17 suicide bombing which targeted Hazaras but killed two others, including a security guard.

Human Rights Watch reported more than 500 Hazaras had been killed since 2008, while the World Hazara Council reported 1,500 Hazaras died in suicide bombings and targeted attacks in Balochistan since 1999. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reported nearly 30,000 Hazaras had migrated from the province since 2009 to escape the violence.

Terrorist groups also continued to target Christian places of worship. On March 15, suicide bombers attacked two churches in Lahore's predominantly Christian Youhanabad neighborhood, killing 17 and injuring 70. TTP splinter group Jamaat-ul-Ahrar claimed responsibility and police later arrested five militants who reportedly planned the attack. On September 2, three of these individuals were shot by police during an alleged escape attempt.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Throughout the year, unidentified attackers targeted and killed Shia and Ahmadi in attacks believed to be religiously motivated. On March 21, unidentified assailants in Gujranwala killed Shia religious scholar Syed Mazahir Ali Bukhari. On February 27, unidentified assailants shot and killed two Shia hospital employees in Orangi Town, Karachi. On May 9, unknown gunmen shot Shia homeopathic doctor Anwar Ali Abidi in the North Nazimabad neighborhood of Karachi. On August 28, assailants killed Shia attorney Syed Ameer Hyder Shah in his car in the Gulshan-e-Iqbal neighborhood of Karachi.

According to media accounts, a mob of Christians killed two Muslims before burning their bodies during riots in Lahore following the terrorist bombings of two churches in Lahore's predominantly Christian Youhanabad neighborhood on March 15. Christian groups claimed the targeted individuals were involved in the bombings, although the government later claimed they were innocent bystanders. Civil society groups estimated the police arrested more than 500 Christians accused of participating in the killings, as well as for rioting and damaging property. Human rights organizations reported the authorities held many of those arrested without access to legal representation and subjected some to torture. According to a legal advocacy group representing 26 of the defendants, police registered formal charges against 84 Christians, 13 of whom obtained bail for the first time on October 21. Members of the Christian community stated some of the accused were not even in Youhanabad at the time of the killings, yet remained in police custody. As of the end of the year, the authorities had released some of the individuals, but 42 Christians reportedly remained in custody.

On August 19, four unidentified gunmen on motorcycles shot and killed 37-year-old Ahmadi pharmacy owner Ikram Ullah in Taunsa Shareef in Dera Ghazi Khan District, Punjab province, in an attack the police stated was religiously motivated. On March 21, unknown attackers shot Ahmadi shopkeeper Nauman Najam in Karachi.

Unknown assailants kidnapped individuals from minority religious groups, including Zikri Muslims and Hindus. On February 2, Hindu doctor Manoj Kumar was released in Quetta after the payment of 14 million rupees (\$133,710) in ransom. On July 9, a Hindu trader was kidnapped in Balochistan. On July 26, Syed Zafar Noori, a Zikri spiritual leader, was abducted by armed men from his home in Gwadar district.

Following the July 29 killing of LeJ leader Malik Ishaq by government forces, Shia leaders reported an increase in sectarian hate speech and threats in southern Punjab, including one attempt to burn down a Shia place of worship in August, which police prevented.

Some religious leaders continued to condemn attacks on religious minorities. A wide range of religious groups, including the Sunni Ittehad Council, strongly condemned the March 15 bombings of two churches in Youhanabad, Lahore. In October the Ulema Council, an organization comprised of Pakistani Muslim religious scholars, issued a set of guidelines urging religious leaders to refrain from criticizing other Islamic groups in an effort to avoid sectarian tensions during Muharram.

Reports continued of societal actors attempting to coerce religious minorities to convert to Islam. Religious minorities said they remained concerned government action to address coerced conversions of religious minorities to Islam was absent or inadequate.

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 July the Pakistan Hindu Seva Welfare Trust reported five cases of kidnapping and forced conversion against the Hindu community in Sindh. In January the Sindh High Court heard the case of Anjali Meghwar, a Hindu girl whose parents claimed she had been kidnapped in 2014 when she was 12 years old, and forced to marry an adult Muslim man. She told the court she had not been abducted but rather had married the man of her own free will. The court ordered Anjali to stay at a shelter home until her age could be determined.

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, although the situation had improved somewhat in recent years.

Observers reported the media's coverage of issues facing religious minorities continued to improve. There remained, however, instances where the media used inflammatory language or made inappropriate references to minorities. They said journalists continued to need training on how to report on religious minorities.

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 due to a societal climate of intolerance and fear.

There continued to be reports of attacks on religious minorities' holy places, cemeteries, and religious symbols, which police failed to prevent. This included vandalism of two Christian churches, one under construction in Okara in March and another in Chakwal in May.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In April the Department of State Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor visited the country and raised concerns about sectarian violence and the rights of religious minorities with the advisor to the prime minister on foreign affairs, and with senior representatives of the Ministry of Interior.

Also in April the Department of State Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom visited Islamabad and Karachi to meet with government officials, including the advisor to the prime minister on foreign affairs, and the minister for religious affairs and interfaith harmony, to discuss the need to combat sectarian violence, to limit the misuse of blasphemy laws, and to make religious freedom concerns, such as the protection of members of religious minorities from violence and from discrimination by the government and societal actors, a higher priority for the government. The Ambassador at Large emphasized the importance of implementing former Chief Justice of Pakistan Tassaduq Hussein Jilani's June 2014 Supreme Court ruling on the protection of religious minorities, in particular through the creation of a rapid response police task force to protect vulnerable communities and places of worship.

On January 13, the Secretary of State convened the ministerial-level Strategic Dialogue in Islamabad. As part of the Strategic Dialogue, its relevant working groups, and other bilateral engagements that continue, senior U.S. Administration officials stressed the importance of addressing sectarian violence, countering violent extremism, and fostering an environment conducive to the free exercise of religious belief.

The Ambassador, consuls general, and embassy officers, as well as other visiting Department of State officials, met with government officials to discuss reform of the blasphemy law, curriculum reform in the public and madrassah education systems, the treatment of the Ahmadi Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, and other minority communities, interfaith dialogue, and religious tolerance.

Visiting senior Department of State officials and embassy officers also met with civil society leaders, academic experts, and journalists to stress the need to end sectarian violence and the misuse of blasphemy laws. They met with leaders of religious communities and NGOs working on religious freedom issues to discuss ways to

increase religious tolerance and dialogue. Embassy officers explored with these groups the development of outreach programs and projects to promote religious tolerance. Visiting officials and embassy officers also discussed with third country diplomatic representatives potential collaboration to promote religious freedom.

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