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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Pakistan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion and requires all provisions of the law to be consistent with Islam. The constitution states, "Subject to law, public order, and morality, every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice, and propagate his religion." The penal code sets punishments for blasphemy that range from 10 years in prison to the death penalty, although the government has never executed anyone for blasphemy. It also states, "A person of the Qadiani group or the Lahori group (who call themselves Ahmadis) is a non-Muslim." The constitution and penal code prohibit Ahmadis from acting or representing themselves as Muslims. Speech or action intended to incite religious hatred is punishable by up to seven years in prison.

According to media reports, police at times killed or physically abused members of religious minorities or failed to protect individuals from violence linked to religion. Frequently, police accused of abuses were lightly sanctioned or not punished at all. In one case, police failed to protect a detainee facing blasphemy charges in Punjab's Nankana Sahib district; a mob stormed a police station and lynched him on February 11. Police suspended two senior officers for failing to prevent the lynching and ordered an investigation. The officers were reinstated after a departmental inquiry found them "not guilty of negligence, incompetence, and cowardice."

According to the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Center for Social Justice (CSJ), 329 persons were accused of blasphemy during the year, of whom 75 percent were Muslims, 20 percent Ahmadi Muslims, and 3.3 percent Christians. One Hindu was also accused; the faith of the others was unknown. At least 171 persons were accused of blasphemy in 2022, according to CSJ. NGOs agreed the actual number of blasphemy cases was likely higher, but uneven reporting and lack of media coverage in many areas made it difficult to be precise. At least eight persons who had been charged previously, Muslim and Christian, received death sentences for blasphemy during the year, but none of the sentences were carried out. The Federal Investigative Agency (FIA) Cyber Crime Wing arrested 140 individuals for alleged blasphemy on social media; 11 received death sentences, two of which were confirmed by higher courts. On February 1, the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA) degraded Wikipedia services for hosting “blasphemous content.” Social media platforms blocked more than 71,000 URLs containing “objectionable” content at the agency’s request. In August, the Senate passed legislation, approved earlier by the National Assembly, that would increase punishment for blasphemy in some cases. Civil society, legal activists, and the then Minister for Human Rights and Christian groups expressed concerns about the contents of the bill and how it had been approved. The President sent the bill back to parliament in August, but it could no longer be considered following dissolution of the National Assembly the same month.

According to NGOs and media reports, individuals convicted and sentenced to death in well publicized blasphemy cases remained in prison for long periods while awaiting action on their appeals. Civil society and legal sources said some judges were hesitant to decide blasphemy cases due to fear of violence from persons they considered Islamist extremists if they did not impose harsh sentences. During the year, courts overturned some blasphemy convictions upon appeal and acquitted or granted bail to some individuals in prison on blasphemy charges; bail was exceedingly rare in cases that carried the death penalty. In some cases, judges set bail far above the amount required by law. There were reports that courts failed to adhere to basic evidentiary standards in blasphemy cases.

There were reported cases of government intervention and action by courts, law enforcement, and local authorities in situations of attempted forced marriage and forced conversion, which often included kidnapping. Enforcement action against those responsible was rare, however, and religious minorities continued to protest what they stated was the government’s weak response. According to CSJ, there were 103 cases of forced marriage and the conversion of Christian, Hindu, and Sikh women and girls during the year. In January, a UN

panel of experts said it was “deeply troubled” by reports of the rise in abductions, forced marriages, and forced conversions of underage girls and women in the country.

The Ministry of Interior banned, monitored, or curtailed the activities of religiously oriented groups it judged to be extremist or terrorist. According to Ahmadiyya community leaders, authorities continued to target and harass Ahmadi Muslims for blasphemy, violations of “anti-Ahmadi laws,” and other crimes, and regularly denied construction permits for their places of worship. Religious minority community representatives stated the government was inconsistent in safeguarding their members against societal discrimination and neglect, and that official discrimination against Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Ahmadi Muslims persisted to varying degrees, with Ahmadis saying they experienced the worst treatment. Government officials and politicians attended and spoke at *Khatm-e-Nabuwat* (Finality of Prophethood) conferences that secular and Ahmadi critics argued were venues for hate speech against Ahmadi Muslims. Human rights advocates and Ahmadiyya Muslim community leaders reported police and local authorities rarely took action to prevent attacks on, or to punish assailants who vandalized or destroyed, Ahmadi mosques, minarets, and gravestones. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), in a February report, said the standardized national curriculum created an “exclusionary narrative that sidelines Pakistan’s religious minorities.” Civil society groups continued to report that some madrassahs around the country taught doctrine they considered to promote violent extremism and intolerance toward religious minorities.

There were reports that armed sectarian groups continued to perpetrate violence against religious gatherings and buildings. In January, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing at a mosque in a police compound in Peshawar that killed 100 and injured 169. On July 31, a suicide attack at a Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam – Fazal (JUI-F) political gathering in the Bajaur tribal district killed 54 persons and wounded at least 83; the Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K) claimed responsibility. A September 29 suicide bombing against a Sunni procession in Mastung, Balochistan, killed 57 and wounded 58 as Muslims celebrated the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday.

Throughout the year, individuals – often unidentified – assaulted and killed Hindus, Christians, Ahmadis, Sikhs, Sunnis, and Shia in attacks sources said were religiously motivated. Civil society organizations and media documented at least 16 persons killed for their faith during the year: seven Shia Muslims, four Sikhs, three Christians, one Hindu, and one Ahmadi Muslim. In February, police identified Inam-ul-Haque in the killing of Ahmadi doctor Rasheed Ahmad in Gotriala, Punjab. In May, unidentified gunmen shot and killed seven Shia teachers at

a school in the Kurram district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Province. In four incidents in Peshawar between March and June, unidentified men shot and killed three Sikh shopkeepers and a Christian sanitary worker. In attacks on August 16, a large mob that sources stated was incited by local Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) leaders destroyed churches, several homes of Christian families, and a cemetery in Faisalabad's Jaranwala subdistrict in response to a blasphemy allegation. Police arrested five Christians on blasphemy allegations and more than 350 protestors for the violence, including some TLP leaders. Attacks on Shia Hazaras in Balochistan resumed after a two-year lull, with three Hazara policemen killed in two incidents in Quetta. Activists and members of minority communities said the country's culture of impunity, along with state inaction, fueled hate crimes and blasphemy accusations.

Civil society activists and media continued to report incidents of young Christian and Hindu women being abducted and raped by Muslim men. Ahmadi continued to report widespread societal harassment and discrimination against community members, including physical attacks, destruction of homes and personal property, and threats intended to force them to abandon their jobs or towns. There were also reports of attacks on religious minorities' holy places, cemeteries, and religious symbols. As of November, for example, there were at least five separate attacks on Ahmadi worship places in Karachi.

Christian activists continued to report widespread discrimination against Christians in private employment other than menial labor. Ahmadiyya Muslim community representatives stated that the Urdu language press frequently printed hate speech, and inflammatory anti-Ahmadi rhetoric continued to exist on social media, at times spread by senior members of mainstream political parties. Community members stated clerics routinely delivered anti-Ahmadi sermons in mosques. Human rights and religious freedom activists and members of minority religious groups continued to report that they exercised caution when speaking in favor of religious tolerance because of a societal climate of intolerance and fear. Some activists reported receiving death threats because of their work.

The Ambassador, other U.S. embassy officers, and visiting senior U.S. officials including the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom engaged government officials to urge them to make progress on blasphemy laws and laws concerning Ahmadi Muslims, better protect members of religious minority communities, improve sectarian relations, and encourage interfaith respect. Embassy officers met with civil society leaders, experts, and journalists to collect information on religious freedom issues not covered in the media, stress the need to protect the rights of religious minorities, and offer support to victims of religion-based abuses. They also met with representatives of other embassies, leaders of religious

communities, NGOs, and legal experts working on religious freedom issues to discuss ways to increase respect among religious groups and enhance dialogue. The embassy and consulates general highlighted religious freedom and examples of interfaith dialogue in the United States on their social media platforms throughout the year. The embassy and consulates general sponsored outreach activities such as speakers and workshops to promote religious freedom and peacebuilding among religious and community leaders.

On December 29, the Secretary of State redesignated Pakistan as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompany designation in the national interest of the United States.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 247.7 million (midyear 2023). According to the results of the first digital national census conducted between March 1 and May 15, 96.3 percent of the population is Sunni or Shia Muslim. The census questionnaire did not differentiate between Sunni and Shia.

Sources vary on the precise breakdown of the Muslim population between Sunni and Shia Muslims. Sunnis are generally believed to be 80-85 percent of the Muslim population, while Shia Muslims, including ethnic Hazara, Ismaili, and Bohra (a branch of Ismaili), are generally believed to make up 15 to 20 percent.

Unofficial estimates vary widely regarding the size of minority religious groups. Religious community representatives estimate religious groups not identifying as Sunni, Shia, or Ahmadi Muslim constitute 3 to 5 percent of the population. According to the 2023 census results, other groups which together comprise less than 5 percent of the population include Hindus, Christians (including Roman Catholics, Anglicans and other Protestants), Ahmadi Muslims, Baha'is, Sikhs, and Parsis (Zoroastrians). Estimates of the Zikri Muslim community, located in Balochistan, range between 500,000 and 800,000 individuals. The Indigenous Kalash, who

practice a blend of animism and ancestor worship and are located in KP Province, are estimated to number under 4,000.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

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

According to the penal code, punishments for persons convicted of blasphemy include the death penalty for "defiling the Prophet Muhammad," life imprisonment for "defiling, damaging, or desecrating the Quran," and up to 10 years' imprisonment for "insulting another's religious feelings." The government has never executed anyone for blasphemy, however. Speech or action intended to incite religious hatred is punishable by up to seven years in prison. Under the law, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony is responsible for reviewing internet traffic and reporting blasphemous or offensive content to the PTA for possible removal or to the FIA for possible criminal prosecution.

The constitution defines "Muslim" as a person who "believes in the unity and oneness of Almighty Allah, in the absolute and unqualified finality of the Prophethood of 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 that "a person belonging to the Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, or Parsi community, a person of the Qadiani group or the Lahori group (who call themselves Ahmadis), or a Baha'i, and a person belonging to any of the scheduled castes" is a "non-Muslim."

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

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

The government may use the antiterrorism courts, established as a parallel legal structure under antiterrorism legislation, 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 that 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 that no person shall be compelled to pay any special tax for the propagation or maintenance of a religion other than the person's own. The government collects a mandatory, automatic 2.5 percent *zakat* (tax) from Sunni Muslims who hold savings accounts in banks. It distributes the funds through a government-run charity as stipends for poor families and students, payment for medical treatment, and support to Sunni mosques and madrassahs registered with the government. Sunni Muslims who want to distribute *zakat* themselves may request an exemption, and Shia Muslims are exempted by filling out a declaration of faith form. Shia and Ahmadi Muslim communities run their own charity programs.

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

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

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

The provincial and federal governments have legal responsibility for certain minority religious properties abandoned during the 1947 partition of British India. The federal government supervises and controls both religious and secular properties abandoned during partition via the Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB), which holds in trust some 200 Sikh gurdwaras and 150 Hindu temples across the country. The Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (PSGPC) is responsible for maintaining gurdwaras.

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

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

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

The constitution states, "All existing laws shall be brought into conformity with the injunctions of Islam as laid down in the Holy Quran and Sunnah [Islam's body of traditional social and legal custom and practice]." It further states that no law shall be enacted that is "repugnant" to Islam. The constitution states this requirement shall not affect the "personal laws of non-Muslim citizens" or their status as citizens.

The constitution establishes a Federal Shariat Court (FSC) composed of Muslim judges to examine and decide whether any law or provision is "repugnant to the injunctions of Islam." The constitution gives the FSC the power to examine a law of its own accord or at the request

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

The constitution establishes a Council of Islamic Ideology to make recommendations, at the request of 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.”

There is no specific language in the law authorizing civil or common law marriage; religious authorities sign marriage certificates, which are registered with the local marriage registrar. The provincial-level Sindh Hindu Marriage Act and the national-level Hindu Marriage Act (applying to federal territory and all other provinces) codify legal mechanisms to formally register and prove the legitimacy of Hindu marriages. In addition to addressing a legal gap by providing documentation needed for identity registration, divorce, and inheritance, the Hindu Marriage Acts allow marriages to be voided when consent “was obtained by force, coercion, or by fraud.” The acts allow for the termination of the marriage upon the conversion of one party to a religion other than Hinduism. The Sindh provincial government has legislation allowing couples to seek divorce and granting Hindu women the right to remarry six months after a divorce or a spouse’s death. The Sindh Hindu Marriage Act also applies to Sikh marriages. The Punjab Sikh Anand Karaj Marriage Act allows local government officials in that province to register marriages between a Sikh man and Sikh woman solemnized by a Sikh *Anand Karaj* (“Blissful Event,” or wedding ceremony) marriage registrar.

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

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

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

The constitution prohibits discriminatory admission based on religious affiliation to any public educational institution. According to regulations, the only factors affecting admission to public schools are students’ grades and home provinces, although students must declare their religious affiliation on application forms. This declaration is also required for private educational institutions, including universities. Students who identify themselves as Muslims must declare in writing they believe Muhammad is the final prophet, which is contrary to Ahmadi beliefs. Non-Muslim students are required to have the head of their local religious communities verify their religious affiliation. There is no provision in the law for atheist students. There is a 2 percent minimum admissions quota for religious minority students in public technical, professional, and higher education institutions in Punjab and KP Provinces.

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

The constitution requires the President and Prime Minister to be Muslim. All senior officials, including members of parliament, must swear an oath to protect the country’s Islamic identity.

The law requires elected Muslim officials to swear an oath affirming their belief that the Prophet Muhammad is the final prophet of Islam. This requirement prohibits Ahmadi Muslims from holding elected office, as they recognize a prophet subsequent to the Prophet Muhammad.

The constitution reserves seats for non-Muslim members in parliament and provincial assemblies. The 336-member National Assembly (the lower house of parliament) has 10 seats reserved for non-Muslims. The 96-member Senate has four seats reserved for non-Muslims, one from each province. In the provincial assemblies, there are three such reserved seats in KP; eight in Punjab; nine in Sindh; and three in Balochistan. Reserved seats are distributed proportionately to political parties based on the number of seats won in the general election. Party leaders choose the minority individuals who hold these seats; they are not elected directly by the minority constituencies they represent. There is no obligation to appoint members to the reserved seats in proportion to their community's share of the population.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

According to media reports, police at times killed or physically abused members of religious minorities during the year or failed to protect those facing threats from religious groups.

On February 11, a mob stormed a police station in Punjab's Nankana Sahib district, grabbed a detainee facing blasphemy charges, and lynched him, according to media reports. Police said the victim, Muhammad Waris, was taken into custody for allegedly desecrating the Quran; the reports stated that news of the crime outraged residents, and hundreds surrounded the police station. According to the reports, police arrested 60 suspects. Punjab Inspector General of Police Usman Anwar suspended two senior police officers for failing to prevent the lynching and ordered an investigation into their actions.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif also ordered an investigation and in public comments asked why the police did not stop the mob. "The rule of law should be ensured. No one should be allowed to influence the law," Sharif said. On social media after the incident, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister for Interfaith Harmony and Pakistan Ulema Council chairman Hafiz Tahir Mehmood Ashrafi said Waris' lynching was "a very cruel and criminal act." Ashrafi noted that "the Islamic Shariah and the law of Pakistan do not allow anyone to be a litigant by himself, a judge and an arbitrator by himself," adding that it was the "responsibility of the Punjab state government to take immediate action" against the perpetrators, "arrest them and try them in an antiterrorism court." Minister for Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety Shazia Marri said the incident was part of a "sad and dangerous trend that continues to haunt our society." As reported by international media, the HRCP stated it was "deeply shocked" by the lynching and that the attack on Waris was "yet another failure of the state to prevent mob 'justice.'" The HRCP also said "lip service and weak measures against law enforcers give the state the appearance of a helpless observer, not a protector of the citizens' lives and property."

The police officers suspended after the lynching incident, Feroze Bhatti and Nawaz Virk, were reinstated after a five-month departmental inquiry found them "not guilty of negligence, incompetence and cowardice." Warburton Police initially charged more than 800 individuals for the killing of Muhammad Waris and later arrested and prosecuted 180 of them. The trial remained underway in the district court at year's end.

On July 12, according to Eeshan Ravi, a Hindu sanitation worker in Karachi, police arrested and then tortured him in a police jail; Ravi told media that a police inspector and four other police officers hung him upside down and physically assaulted him. There were no reports that action was taken against the police officers, or that Ravi was mistreated solely because of his religion.

On September 22, according to media reports, Faisalabad police briefly detained and allegedly tortured two Christian human rights activists from Karachi, Pastor Ghazala Shafique and Luke Victor. The two activists were visiting Faisalabad to help Pastor Eleazar Sidhu, who was shot and wounded September 3. On September 5, Sidhu released a video in which he stated that he was attacked by two men on a motorcycle as he took a child to school. Police said that Sidhu confessed to faking the shooting to receive asylum abroad. Human rights activists said his confession was coerced. In a video statement released later in September, Sidhu said that police had detained him for 11 days, denied him food and water, and verbally abused him.

In older cases, on February 8, a local court in Tharparker, Sindh, acquitted police officer Mohammad Soomar in the 2022 killing of Bhagchand Meghwar, a Hindu, inside a police

station. Meghwar, who belonged to a scheduled caste community, was found dead in jail in March 2022 after he was arrested for theft.

Assistant police Sub-Inspector Ghulam Murtaza and Constable Azmat Ali remained jailed at year's end on trial for murder for beating to death Bashir Masih, a Christian bus driver accused of theft, in September 2022. Both officers were fired by the Punjab police following their 2022 arrest.

In June, members of the Hindu community in Rahim Yar Khan, Lahore said that conditions had improved "drastically" since the 2021 attack on the Siddhivinayak Hindu Temple, and there was peace between the local Hindu and Muslim communities, reinforced by a substantial deployment of police and paramilitary Punjab Rangers.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief or Expression

According to CSJ, there was an increase in the number of reported blasphemy cases during the year, with at least 329 persons accused of blasphemy, compared with at least 171 persons accused of blasphemy in 2022. Of those accused during the year, 75 percent were Sunni and Shia Muslims, 20 percent Ahmadi Muslims, and 3.3 percent Christians, according to CSJ. Most of those accused of blasphemy were awaiting formal charges. Civil society representatives reported authorities charged at least 87 individuals in during the year with blasphemy or related religion-based criminal charges, compared with the 52 reportedly charged in 2022. Exact figures were not available, but at least 72 Ahmadi Muslims, eight Christians, and an unknown number of Sunni and Shia Muslims were charged during the year. At least eight persons who had been charged previously, Muslim and Christian, received death sentences for blasphemy during the year, but none were carried out. NGOs agreed the actual number of blasphemy cases was likely higher, but uneven reporting and lack of media coverage in many areas made it difficult to give a precise figure. The HRCP, in a February report entitled *Breach of Faith: Freedom of Religion or Belief 2021-2022*, urged that authorities raise the legal threshold for evidence used to support blasphemy accusations. The report stated that "it must be ensured that the laws in question are not weaponized by people to settle personal vendettas, as is so often the case."

In September, the Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights noted with concern that blasphemy laws were used to settle personal scores and sought details from authorities on persons languishing in jail on blasphemy charges. In October, the NCHR shared some details with the committee, estimating the number of detentions for blasphemy through September

at 215. The NCHR stated that 198 of those were in jail pending or on trial for blasphemy charges; 78 persons in Sindh, 55 in KP, 37 in Punjab, 27 in Islamabad, and one in Balochistan. According to the NCHR, 17 others had been convicted, including 11 from Islamabad, four from Sindh, and two from Balochistan. The committee set up a national coordination committee in the Ministry of Human Rights that would draft standard operating procedures to address problems that “cause sufferings to minorities.” While the government has never carried out an execution for blasphemy, as the higher courts have generally overturned convictions on appeal or reduced the sentences of persons sentenced to death for blasphemy, persons convicted have often spent many years in detention awaiting execution before their death sentences were overturned.

Police often arrested those charged with blasphemy. Sources stated that in some cases, police protected individuals being threatened by mobs for blasphemy while in others, they failed to protect accused individuals, even those already in custody. On April 15, Faisalabad police prevented a woman accused of blasphemy from being attacked by a mob outside her residence when she said her sister was a “prophet who received holy revelations.” City police officer Syed Ali Nasir Rizvi calmed the protestors by assuring them the “cursed” woman would be brought to justice in accordance with the law.

On April 17, police rescued Tian (one name only), a Chinese supervisor at the Dasu Hydropower Project, from angry protesters who attempted to kill him for his alleged blasphemous remarks. Media reported that Tian was accused after he highlighted the slow pace of work during Ramadan. He was airlifted from Upper Kohistan to nearby Abbottabad district by an army helicopter. The police filed a formal blasphemy complaint against Tian but an Abbottabad court released him on bail April 28, a rarity in blasphemy cases. According to media reporting, Maulana Waliullah Tohidi, a local cleric, said the interpreter who accused Tian should be charged for incitement. The interpreter, however, left Upper Kohistan and the situation was defused, according to local journalists.

On April 19, police in Pakpattan, Punjab, arrested a Christian, Musarrat Bibi, and a Muslim, Muhammad Sarmad, on blasphemy charges for allegedly burning pages of the Quran while cleaning a school storeroom, according to media reports. Both were acquitted of blasphemy by a Pakpattan court December 8 on the grounds they were illiterate and could not have known the content of the papers they burned. Police arrested Kashif Nadeem, who filed the complaint against Bibi and Sarmad and assembled a mob outside the school to protest their alleged actions.

On April 27, Karachi police arrested Ali Ahmed Tariq, an Ahmadi Muslim lawyer, for blasphemy for adding the prefix “Syed” to his name in a court filing. The government said the use of “Syed” – denoting descent from the Prophet Muhammad – was limited to Muslims (and not Ahmadis). The Sindh High Court granted Tariq bail May 23, but he was soon rearrested based on a 1992 complaint filed in Shahadpur, Sindh, that said he used the common Islamic greeting “Assalam-o-Alaikum.” Tariq was granted bail in the second case on November 11. As of year’s end, both cases remained pending.

On May 6, a mob killed a Muslim cleric, Nigar Alam, in Sawal Dher near Mardan, KP, while he was in police custody. Police took him into custody at a rally organized by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party after participants attempted to attack him following remarks some considered blasphemous, as he equated the Prophet Muhammad to a local politician. Police took Alam to a stall at the rally venue to protect him but did not prevent the mob from killing him. The district police chief told the media that the crowd “was so agitated” that it was “extremely challenging for police to even recover the body.” Local politicians, including from PTI, did not publicly condemn the killing. According to media reports, 104 persons were charged with the killing, some of whom were detained while others were granted bail. A local *jirga* (a traditional council of leaders that makes decisions by consensus) later determined that the killing was unlawful and un-Islamic and ordered the accused to pay Alam’s family 4.5 million Pakistani rupees (\$16,300) in *diyat*, or blood money, in return for the family forgiving the accused. The family later gave one million rupees (\$3,622) to members of the jirga – an uncommon, but not unprecedented, means of compensating jirga members for their work, according to sources in the region.

In September, a court in Peshawar sentenced a man to life imprisonment after convicting him of desecrating the Quran approximately five years earlier. Additional district and sessions judge Mohammad Sher Ali Khan ruled that the prosecution had proved the charge of Quran burning against the accused “without any shadow of doubt.”

During the year, some individuals were charged with blasphemy for their activities on social media, often based on information obtained from the 15 cybercrime units throughout the country that included antiblasphemy cells. The FIA Cyber-Crime Wing apprehended 140 individuals on such charges during the year; 11 received death sentences from trial courts, and two had their death sentences confirmed by higher courts.

On March 24, in an earlier FIA case, an Antiterrorism Court (ATC) in Peshawar sentenced Muslim man Syed Muhammad Zeeshan to death for posting on WhatsApp material about the Prophet Muhammad and religious beliefs the ATC said were derogatory. In 2021, the FIA

arrested Zeeshan, a resident of Mardan in KP, based on a complaint by a resident of Talagang, Punjab. As of year's end, his case was on appeal before the Peshawar High Court.

On June 2, a court in Bahawalpur, Punjab, sentenced Noman Masih, a Christian, to death for allegedly sharing blasphemous content through WhatsApp. Masih's family and lawyer told the media that a fair investigation was not conducted in the case.

On July 8, police in Sargodha, Punjab, arrested Zaki Masih, a Christian, after a complaint by a local resident was filed with police accusing him of sharing blasphemous material on his Facebook account. Zaki's brother told media that the resident was using the charges as part of a longstanding land dispute with the family.

On July 25, police in Arifwala, Punjab, charged five persons with blasphemy for "deliberately and maliciously outraging religious feelings" in WhatsApp messages.

On August 21, police in Sahiwal, Punjab, arrested a Christian man, Ehsan Shah Masih, for blasphemy and terrorism after he shared a video of the August 16 mob attacks on churches and Christian homes in Jaranwala, Punjab. TLP party members protested and demanded police action against Masih. The police detained Masih's family for several days before releasing them.

On September 5, a court in Rawalpindi sentenced Faizan Razzaq, Amin Rais, Muhammad Rizwan, and Wazir Gul to death for blasphemy by sharing online content deemed to be insulting to the Prophet Muhammad and the Quran; another person in their case was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment. The FIA Cyber-Crimes Unit in Rawalpindi registered the case.

In a statement issued in July, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony said there was an urgent need for awareness among all sections of society, particularly religious scholars, professors, journalists, lawyers, and leaders, to help prevent the "misuse of social media platforms for spreading derogatory and inappropriate (religious) content." The ministry said there were "highly organized" campaigns on social media to spread blasphemous material. Citing a report by the FIA and the Legal Commission of the Rawalpindi Bench of the Lahore High Court, the ministry stated there were "more than 400,000" online accounts in the country disseminating "severe blasphemy."

Other blasphemy cases continued without resolution, including those of several individuals accused of spreading blasphemous content through social media under the Pakistan

Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (PECA). In the case of a group of Ahmadi Muslims charged under PECA in 2019 for sharing Ahmadi literature on social media, the Lahore High Court on September 26 summoned the caretaker Prime Minister and caretaker Chief Minister of Punjab to appear in person December 18 in response to their “non-serious” and “uncooperative” attitude in enforcing a verdict against the Ahmadis. Neither appeared in court, however. The criminal case against the accused Ahmadi Muslims remained in progress at year’s end; two of the Ahmadis remained in jail, while a third was released on bail, but was being sought for rearrest after failing to attend a trial date, which an Ahmadi leader said was for health reasons.

The trial of the killers of Tahir Naseem, a U.S. citizen killed in a courtroom in 2020 while on trial for blasphemy because he was perceived to be an Ahmadi Muslim, was underway before the Antiterrorism Court in Peshawar at year’s end.

Fansan Shahid, a Christian arrested in 2022 on blasphemy charges, remained in jail in Gujranwala, Punjab pending trial at year’s end.

According to NGOs and media reports, individuals convicted and sentenced to death in well publicized blasphemy cases dating as far back as 2014, including Notan Lal, Nadeem James, Taimoor Raza, and Junaid Hafeez, remained in prison awaiting action on their appeals. In all the cases, judges continued to delay hearings, adjourn hearings without hearing arguments, adjourn hearings before issuing rulings, or send appeals to other judicial benches. Civil society and legal sources said lower court judges, and high court judges based outside provincial capitals who had little or no security protection, were generally hesitant to decide blasphemy cases due to fear of violence from extremists if they did not impose harsh sentences. Legal observers said lower court judges who did rule on blasphemy cases continued to quickly convict and sentence the accused, often with the understanding that those convicted likely would be freed on appeal by higher court judges who had better security protection.

During the year, courts overturned some blasphemy convictions upon appeal and acquitted or granted bail to some individuals who had spent years in prison on blasphemy charges. According to legal experts, bail was exceedingly rare in blasphemy cases that carried the death penalty. In some cases, judges set bail far above the amount required by law.

For example, in January, a judge of the Lahore High Court set bail at 4 million rupees (\$14,500), eight times what some legal scholars said should be the maximum amount, for Catholic Sunny Waqas, who was arrested and charged in 2019 for carrying blasphemous sketches of the Prophet Muhammad to show others. Waqas’ attorney said the judge granted bail because the

trial against him did not conclude within the mandatory two-year period. The attorney said the judge seemed intent on making Waqas' release "impossible" because the bail was so high and Waqas came from a poor family. After his family raised the funds for bail, Waqas was released on February 3, according to media. The attorney said the high bail was only one of the "irregularities" in how Waqas' case was handled; judges "threatened" and Muslim lawyers "intimidated" Waqas and his attorney. She said one judge told her on the day of the bail hearing, "You know you can be burned alive for pursuing this case." The attorney said the case showed how courts "deliberately ignore constitutional and procedural law when dealing with blasphemy cases, especially against Christians."

On June 27, a local court in Sangla Hill, Faisalabad acquitted Ahmadi Muslim Ramzan Bibi on charges of blasphemy for donating money to a local Sunni mosque. On October 18, a court in Lahore granted postarrest bail to a Christian couple, Kiran Bibi and Shoukat Masih, arrested in September on charges of desecrating the Quran. On November 18, the Supreme Court granted bail to a person charged with committing blasphemy on account of his mental health. The court ruled that a suspect who was of unsound mind and incapable of making his defense should be released as long as there was a sufficient guarantee the accused would return to court and would not pose a danger to himself or others.

Media reported in February that Christian nurse Tabitha Gill, accused of blasphemy in 2021 for saying she would pray for someone at the hospital where she worked, went into hiding along with her family. Media reported in July that she and her family had "escaped to North America." The blasphemy case filed against her remained active.

On January 17, the National Assembly passed legislation that would increase punishment for some forms of blasphemy by raising the penalties from three years to no fewer than 10 years for insulting the companions, wives, and family members of the Prophet Muhammad. There would also be a fine of one million rupees (\$3,622) for such violations. The legislation, which would amend the relevant sections of the penal code, would also make this form of blasphemy an offense for which bail would not be permitted.

Civil society and legal activists questioned the procedural validity of the bill's passage, as both the National Assembly and the Senate approved the measure by voice vote without a quorum, and it was never submitted for review to the relevant committees. Some civil society groups publicly protested the bill's passage. Other observers noted that the initial bill should have lapsed in April after the Senate failed to take action as required within three months of its passage by the National Assembly. According to media, Minister for Human Rights Riaz Hussain Pirzada wrote President Arif Alvi to urge that the President "undo" the amendments

because they were passed to “please a specific group” (the Jamaat-e-Islami party, which proposed them) and approved without “fulfilling the norms of parliamentary proceedings.”

Azad Marshall, President of the Anglican Church of Pakistan, said the new law was “worrisome” to Christians. He told media that “the existing blasphemy laws have encouraged religious persecution for decades and this new legislation is bound to exacerbate the problems for our people.” Marshall stated that “the unanimous passage of this bill (in the lower house) shows that political parties are not inclined to protect citizens from false charges and are instead focused on appeasing their Islamist voters.” CSJ and the HRCP also said they were “deeply concerned” about the new bill, which they stated would “aggravate misuse of the law to settle personal vendettas” and was “likely to exacerbate the persecution of Pakistan’s beleaguered religious minorities and minority sects.” The Senate passed the bill August 7 and sent it to President Alvi for consideration. He did not sign it, but sent it back to parliament for reconsideration August 9, by which time the National Assembly was dissolved, effectively ending consideration of the bill, which never became law.

MP Maulana Abdul Akbar Chitrali of Jamaat-e-Islami, who introduced the bill, said although the number of persons who committed blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad was low, not penalizing those who insulted a companion of Muhammad or other “sacred personalities” only “promotes terrorism and disruption in the country.” If bail were permitted, it would result in a shorter period of time served, he said, and violators would be “encouraged to commit the same crime again.”

NGOs, legal observers, and religious minority representatives continued to raise concerns regarding the failure of lower courts to adhere to basic evidentiary standards in blasphemy cases. They also raised concerns about the slow pace of adjudicating these cases, including cyber cases, which led to some suspects remaining in detention for years as they waited for their initial trial or appeals. Some convicted persons spent years in prison before higher courts overturned their convictions and freed them for lack of evidence. According to legal advocacy groups, some lower courts continued to conduct proceedings with spectators from groups supportive of harsh punishment for blasphemy, such as members of the TLP, whose members often threatened the defendants’ attorneys, family members, and supporters. At other times, advocacy groups reported that for security reasons, blasphemy trials were held inside jails, resulting in a loss of transparency. Legal observers also reported judges and magistrates often delayed or continued trials indefinitely to avoid confrontation with, or threats or violence from, the groups provoking protests. In some cases, judges and court staff delayed trials in the hope of having the case transferred to another judge. Police, prosecutors,

and defense attorneys were similarly reluctant to appear in blasphemy cases, which further delayed investigations and trials, and denied defendants adequate legal representation in some cases, according to legal observers.

NGOs and legal observers continued to say that the law requiring a senior police official to investigate any blasphemy charge before a complaint could be filed contributed to objective investigations and the dismissal of many blasphemy cases. Some NGOs noted, however, that police did not uniformly follow this procedure. In some cases, the court remanded the accused to police custody for 14 days before he or she had been formally charged so that a senior officer might carry out an investigation. In other cases, lower-ranking police filed blasphemy charges without waiting for the required investigation by a senior police official. NGOs and legal observers stated police rarely filed charges against individuals who made false blasphemy accusations.

There were reported cases of government intervention and action by courts, law enforcement, and local authorities in situations of attempted kidnapping and forced conversion. Enforcement action against alleged perpetrators, however, was rare. According to CSJ, there were at least 136 cases of abduction and forced conversion of Hindu and Christian women and girls during the year, an increase from CSJ's count of 103 cases the previous year. Most victims were minors, and at least 18 percent were less than 14 years old. Other estimates of forced or coerced conversions varied widely – with Hindu and Christian activists stating that more than 500 girls were abducted and forcibly converted each year, while some clerics and government officials completely denied the practice's existence. Human rights activists stated that to avoid prosecution, abductors commonly coerced their victims into overstating their age and claiming that they converted to Islam and married willingly. In many cases, courts accepted this testimony and granted custody to the abductor. When courts determined girls to be below the age of marriage, they commonly sent them to shelters rather than back to their parents.

In January, a UN panel of experts said it was “deeply troubled” by reports of the rise in abductions, forced marriages, and forced conversions of underage girls and women in the country. The panel called for “immediate steps” by the government to “prevent and thoroughly investigate these acts objectively and in line with domestic legislation and international human rights commitments.” The panel further noted that “perpetrators must be held fully accountable.” The UN experts also said, “family members say that victims’ complaints are rarely taken seriously by police” who “refuse to register the reports or argue that no crime has been committed.”

In a February report, the HRCP called for legislation to criminalize forced conversion and asked the government to develop a national stated policy that “unambiguously eschews religious extremism and majoritarianism.” It also asked for an autonomous commission for religious minorities.

Media reported that on February 4, police opened a kidnapping case against Muslim Rana Tayyib for the abduction and forced conversion of a 15-year-old Christian girl in December 2022. When police raided the house, neither Tayyib nor the girl were present. Tayyib’s first wife produced an Islamic marriage certificate for the girl and Tayyib. Two members of Tayyib’s family were arrested but later released. The attorney for the girl’s family said, “If the police had acted when the crime was first reported, the child could have been recovered sooner, but the prolonged delay has given the accused ample time to change locations.” The attorney said that only young girls from minority groups were targeted for forcible marriage because their families were generally too poor to fight the marriages in court. There was no update available on this case as of the end of the year.

On April 19, Hindu Guddi Kolhi told police in Chelhar, Sindh, that she had been kidnapped by a Muslim man and forcibly converted to Islam. Kolhi told media she managed to escape from the man’s confinement after a year of forced marriage. The man denied the charges and said it was a freewill marriage. Police filed a case against the man that was still pending at year’s end.

A Hindu girl abducted in August 2022 at the age of 16 was turned back over to her abductor, Shaman Ali Magsi, early in the year after he produced a document claiming she was over 18. Her family said they intended to seek court action to be allowed to meet with her.

Religious minorities and several organizations continued to protest what they stated was the government’s weak response to alleged cases of forced marriage and forced conversion, noting such incidents continue to happen regularly in all provinces.

Some representatives of minority religious groups said Hindus in areas affected by 2022 floods converted to Islam or married Muslims to qualify for flood relief. In one case, on January 30, more than 100 individuals from the Hindu Bheel community converted to Islam at a ceremony organized by local politicians and the custodian of Amrot Sharif shrine in Sultankot, Shikarpur district, Sindh. Local residents said that influential local politicians and religious leaders offered Hindus food and financial incentives for converting, as most received no flood assistance from authorities and faced discrimination in relief and rehabilitation activities.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

The Ministry of Interior maintained multitier schedules of religiously oriented groups and individuals it judged to be extremist or terrorist. These schedules included groups that were banned or had their activities monitored and curtailed (Schedule 1), as well as individuals whose activities in public could also be curtailed, including during Shia religious commemorations such as Ashura (Schedule 4). Rawalpindi district authorities banned 36 Shia and Sunni scholars from the district during Muharram (July-August), stating the decision was meant to maintain peace and harmony during the commemorations and related processions during that period, which had been targets of violence by extremist groups. Likewise, on the recommendations of the district intelligence committee, the Hafizabad district administration banned 19 Shia and Sunni scholars with a record of delivering provocative speeches from Muharram processions. The district administration of Abbottabad in KP similarly banned 24 Shia clerics during Muharram.

According to media reports and law enforcement sources, in the weeks leading up to and during Muharram, authorities at the federal level restricted the movement and activities of certain clerics. Shia community representatives accused authorities of bias by restricting their religious ceremonies and arresting community members.

According to Ahmadiyya community leaders, authorities continued to target and harass Ahmadi Muslims for blasphemy, purported violations of “anti-Ahmadi laws,” and other crimes. Ahmadi leaders stated that 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 – such as for using the standard Islamic greeting or for naming their children Muhammad. Ahmadiyya community representatives continued to say that NADRA required Ahmadis to declare in an affidavit that they were non-Muslims to obtain a national identification card.

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

Community representatives reported Christians continued to face difficulties in registering marriages with Islamabad union councils because the councils said they had no authority to deal with unions recorded by Christian marriage registrars (usually church authorities).

Legislation designed to govern Christian marriages nationwide remained stalled for the fifth straight year. Members of parliament and officials of the Ministry of Human Rights and the Ministry of Law and Justice continued to consult with leaders from prominent Christian denominations and with NGO representatives, but the denominations, church leaders, and NGO representatives had not agreed on elements of the draft law pertaining to divorce and interfaith marriage by year's end.

Although the Sindh Hindu Marriage Act covered registration of Sikh marriages in that province, members of the Sikh community reportedly continued to seek a separate Sikh law so as not to be considered Hindus for the purposes of the law. Some Hindu activists reported implementation of the law remained uneven, with more consistent application in urban areas.

Multiple complaints were lodged with police to prevent the Ahmadiyya Muslim community from sacrificing animals on Eid-al-Adha (June 29). In a June 22 letter, the Lahore High Court Bar Association urged the Punjab Home Ministry to issue directives for police to restrain Ahmadis from gathering for Eid prayers and slaughtering animals during the holiday. On June 24, the Islamabad Bar Association called on authorities to prevent Ahmadiyya Muslim community members from performing ritual sacrifice on Eid-al-Adha. On July 3, Punjab police registered five First Investigation Reports (FIRs) in Lahore, Faisalabad, Nankana Sahib, and Gojra against Ahmadiyya Muslim community members for slaughtering or attempting to slaughter sacrificial animals on Eid-al-Adha. Police arrested two Ahmadis for ritual slaughter.

Some religious minority leaders continued to criticize the process by which political party leaders selected parliamentarians for reserved minority seats. According to these minority leaders, only "rich businessmen" were selected through the process, and many were not well regarded by the minority communities they were meant to represent. Others said parliamentarians occupying reserved seats had little influence in either their parties or the legislatures because they did not have a voting constituency. Women from religious minority communities criticized political parties for nominating only men to seats reserved for religious minorities in all legislative bodies. Women from these communities demanded amendments to the law to make mandatory the appointment of religious minority women to these seats. Several minority rights advocacy groups disputed the results of the 2023 census, saying the numbers underrepresented their true population and diminished their political influence because minority seat allocation in the national and provincial parliaments is based on census figures.

Some religious leaders and activists said minorities lacked the full franchise because they faced undue restrictions on obtaining the national identity documents needed to vote. They

said local NADRA officials raised additional barriers when minorities tried to obtain ID cards and were unwilling to visit minority-dominant areas when conducting ID registration drives. Other minority religious leaders said minorities lacked the franchise but said access to documentation was correlated with poverty and limited education rather than undue restrictions. They stated that rural minorities tended to be poor, uneducated, unaware of their political rights and less likely to pursue or acquire ID documents.

NGOs active on religious freedom issues reported harassment by police and intelligence services, including threats to shut them down if they continued their efforts.

In December, with national elections scheduled for early 2024, Human Rights Watch (HRW) said discriminatory provisions that remained in the country's electoral law effectively excluded members of the Ahmadiyya community because of their religious beliefs, as Ahmadis had to either renounce their faith or agree to be placed in a separate electoral list that categorizes them as "non-Muslim" in order to vote. Rather than deny their beliefs, most Ahmadis did not vote at all, according to their community representatives.

The government continued to permit limited, non-Muslim foreign missionary activity and to allow those missionaries to preach if they did not do so against Islam and acknowledged they were not Muslim. According to the government's immigration website, the Ministry of Interior processed visa applications for "Christian missionaries" invited by organizations registered in the country. The sponsoring organization had to certify that the applicant was a bona fide member of the organization and assume responsibility for the missionary's financial support. In their visa applications, missionaries had to commit to "respect and abide by the laws of Pakistan" and "refrain from indulging in internal politics." Missionary visas were valid for one year and permitted one reentry per year and a single one-year extension. According to missionary sources, only "replacement" visas for those taking the place of departing missionaries were available for long-term missionaries seeking to enter the country for the first time. According to the ministry website, "Entry visas are not granted to foreign missionaries desirous of opening new missions or strengthening existing ones engaged in proselytizing activities." Civil society sources continued to state that missionary activity was permitted by the government but was limited in practice by general societal intolerance of proselytizing to Muslims. Civil society contacts continued to report that visas for foreign missionaries were sometimes refused or delayed for so long that the mission had to be cancelled.

In a video released October 9, the PTA urged parents to monitor the online activity of their children to ensure they did not post potentially blasphemous content. The PTA stated the

video was only a public service announcement, and that it would leave action against violators to law enforcement.

On February 1, the PTA degraded all Wikipedia services in the country for 48 hours for hosting “blasphemous content,” directing the platform to block/remove the reported contents. On February 6, Prime Minister Sharif ordered that access to Wikipedia be restored with “immediate effect.” In September, the PTA said it received 350 complaints per day about “objectionable” content on social media. PTA sources said the agency received 92,534 requests to block online content from January 1 to December 31. Of those, it blocked 71,965 URLs and rejected 2,145 blocking requests. The remaining 18,424 requests were pending at year’s end. The URLs blocked included 10,243 for content “against the glory of Islam,” 38,681 for violating standards of decency and morality, and 3,181 for sectarian/hate speech content.

According to representatives of some minority religious groups, the government continued to allow most organized religious groups to establish places of worship and train members of the clergy. The government also continued a nationwide survey of former religious properties managed by the Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB) so that the relevant religious groups could reclaim and restore their old properties, most of which were former Hindu temples and Sikh gurdwaras abandoned during partition. Members of the Punjab Sikh community expressed concerns, however, that the ETPB continued to compromise the sanctity of Sikh sites by allowing commercial activities at those locations. The Sikhs said they wanted the PSGPC, and not the ETPB, to approve any reconstruction of Sikh sites.

The Walled City of Lahore Authority said it completed 75 percent of the preservation work on a temple and six churches in parts of Punjab and had reopened the 1,000-year-old Shivala Hindu Temple in Sialkot. In July, the Sindh government announced it would rebuild the Marie Mata Temple after individuals demolished the 150-year-old structure that month to redevelop the plot for commercial real estate purposes.

Although there continued to be no official restriction on the construction of Ahmadi places of worship, Ahmadiyya Muslim community leaders stated that local authorities regularly denied construction permits and forbade Ahmadis from calling their places of worship mosques. On September 13, the Lahore High Court ruled that provisions of the law criminalizing certain acts of the Ahmadiyya community did not mandate razing or altering their structures built before laws against Ahmadis were added to the penal code in 1984.

Authorities provided enhanced security for Shia Muslim, Christian, and Hindu places of worship at various times throughout the year, including around religious holidays or in

response to specific threats. Sindh police deployed police officers from the Special Protection Force for Minorities to protect churches, temples, and gurdwaras across the province in response to targeted threats against minority houses of worship; 400 officers were sent to Kashmore after a July 16 attack on a Hindu temple there. No additional incidents were reported in areas where members of the unit deployed. By the end of the year, the special protection unit had hired approximately 4,000 of its authorized strength of 5,000 officers. Sindh officials also installed approximately 2,000 CCTV cameras at minority houses of worship around the province to improve security monitoring and facilitate prosecution of individuals engaged in antiminority violence. Muhammad Shoaib Suddle, a senior public servant who leads a special Supreme Court commission on the protection of minority rights, said that Punjab and KP officials were working to establish similar units. Suddle said that Balochistan had not yet complied with the Supreme Court's earlier mandate to create such a unit.

Christian and Hindu representatives in Sindh and Balochistan stated the police generally provided adequate security for minority places of worship, especially during major holidays. Police also increased security for Christian and Shia Muslim places of worship in Punjab. In February, Multan police directed officers to provide security for churches during Lent. In July, Lahore police increased security for 227 Muharram processions with the installation of 24-hour camera surveillance, walk-through gates, and metal detectors. Lahore police enhanced security arrangements for churches in the city after the violent attacks in August against churches and Christian homes in Jaranwala. Christian activists reported that Punjab police increased security around churches during the Christmas season.

Ahmadiyya community representatives noted their religious sites and cemeteries continued to lack police protection nationwide.

The government continued to implement the National Curriculum of Pakistan (formerly the Single National Curriculum), which aimed to standardize primary school instruction across the country's three types of educational institutions – private, public, and religious. Religious minority groups criticized the curriculum's emphasis on an Islamic perspective in nonreligious subjects, including Urdu, English, and geography, and said the curriculum violated constitutional restrictions on "compulsory religious instruction" and the constitution's delegation of most authority for education to provincial governments. Members of religious minority groups reported little improvement in the material in the curriculum, but said some language they considered to be hate speech had been removed from textbooks. Critics of the curriculum also said the course in ethics offered as an alternative to Islamic studies suffered from a lack of instructional materials and qualified teachers.

The Supreme Court continued to review suggestions from Shoaib Suddle of the court's commission for the protection of religious minorities. Suddle objected to Islamic religious content in compulsory nonreligious courses because it forced religious minority students to receive Islamic instruction and included negative stereotypes of non-Muslims. In 2021, Suddle recommended removing Islamic content from those general courses and concentrating it solely in Islamic studies textbooks, because that subject was compulsory only for Muslim students.

The HRCP said in February that the standardized National Curriculum created an "exclusionary narrative that sidelines Pakistan's religious minorities."

While the law only requires schools to teach Islamic studies and the Quran to Muslim students, sources continued to report many non-Muslim students had to participate in these classes because their schools did not offer parallel courses in their own religious beliefs or ethics or there were no teachers available to teach such courses. The government did not permit Ahmadi Muslims to teach Islamic studies in public schools. As of the end of the year, Sindh's education department was editing textbooks for first through ninth grade for Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, and Parsis, which would allow minority students to take classes on their own religions even if no teacher from that religious group was available.

In March, the National Curriculum Council issued no-objection certificates for publishing religious books for students of seven minority groups, Hinduism, Sikhism, Christianity, Baha'i, Zoroastrianism, Kalash and Buddhism, enrolled in educational institutions supervised by the federal government.

Civil society groups continued to state that some madrassahs around the country, particularly those that were unregistered, taught doctrine they said promoted violent extremism and intolerance toward religious minorities. These groups also said the federal government sought to curb this practice through madrassah registration and curriculum reform. In January, according to media reports, Prime Minister Sharif told a delegation from five madrassah boards that the government would "extend every type of help" to madrassahs so they could teach from a more modern curriculum. He did not provide details.

In November, the KP provincial religious affairs department concluded a training project aimed at enhancing the knowledge and skills of teachers and students in religious seminaries. The initiative was designed to bridge the gap between traditional religious education and modern societal requirements, helping participants become productive and responsible citizens. Under this project, more than 1,000 students and teachers from madrassahs across

the province received training. The training sessions were conducted in multiple districts, including Peshawar, Mardan, Abbottabad, Bannu, and Nowshera. The program spanned five days and was made possible with technical support from the Muttahida Ulema Board.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

In a statement issued in response to the HRCP's February report on freedom of religion or belief in the country, HRW said, "Authorities need to take urgent measures to end the legal discrimination against religious minorities and to prevent religious persecution and marginalization of minorities." The HRW also stated that "authorities also need to hold perpetrators of violence and discrimination against religious minorities accountable."

At a press conference on April 6, representatives of independent Christian churches in Faisalabad said they were being harassed after the FIA began an investigation into their finances. According to Christian leaders, in March the FIA served notices to 300 persons, including pastors, Sunday school teachers, and officials of charities, saying they were suspected of money laundering and other financial crimes, and their bank accounts were frozen. Those served were ordered to present their complete financial records to the police, who specifically asked for details of tithes and offerings, according to one pastor. Some of the pastors involved said they would file a complaint in the Lahore High Court against the FIA investigations. At year's end, the pastors were trying to find an "amicable" resolution to the dispute, without resorting to the High Court. Many of the affected bank accounts remained frozen, however.

While the Ministry of Law and Justice was officially responsible for protecting the legal rights of all citizens, in practice the Ministry for Human Rights continued to assume primary responsibility for protecting the rights of religious minorities. The NCHR was also mandated to conduct investigations of allegations of human rights abuses, but legal sources said the commission had little power to enforce its recommendations and requests for information.

Members of religious minority communities continued to say that the Ministries of Law and Justice, Interior, and Human Rights inconsistently applied laws that safeguarded minority rights and enforced the protections of religious minorities. Religious minority community members also stated the government was inconsistent in safeguarding against societal discrimination and neglect, and that official discrimination against Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Ahmadi Muslims persisted to varying degrees, with Ahmadi Muslims saying they experienced the worst treatment.

Religious freedom activists and civil society groups continued to raise concerns regarding the limited powers of the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) and the decision to exclude Ahmadi Muslims from the commission when it was formed. Ahmadi Muslim leaders again said they would not join the body as long as it required them to identify as non-Muslims; they would be willing to participate as a Muslim minority or on the basis of equal citizenship. The commission continued to function without legislative authority and without power to resolve problems. The National Assembly passed legislation to modify the NCM in August, but religious freedom activists and civil society groups said it was flawed and did not address major issues, such as Ahmadi membership. The Senate dropped the bill from its agenda just before the National Assembly was dissolved that month.

Minority religious leaders continued to express their preference that the commission operate under the Ministry for Human Rights rather than the Ministry for Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony. Minority religious leaders continued to say the Ministry of Religious Affairs was dominated by clerics who had expressed biases against minorities in past public statements and actions, and that it was primarily concerned with regulating and facilitating the annual Hajj to Mecca. In contrast, they said the Ministry of Human Rights already oversaw and supported other national commissions with a similar role and mandate, including the NCHR, the National Commission on the Status of Women, and National Commission on the Rights of the Child.

Minority religious leaders said members of their communities continued to experience discrimination in admission to colleges and universities. Ahmadi representatives said the wording of the government-required declaration students had to sign as part of their admissions applications to universities continued to prevent Ahmadis from declaring themselves as Muslims. Students' refusal to sign the statement automatically disqualified them from fulfilling admissions requirements. The government said Ahmadis could qualify for admission if they did not state they were Muslims.

Members of religious minorities, particularly lower-caste Hindus and Christians, reported cases of forceful evictions from their homes and villages by government officials who assisted individuals desiring their land. Sindh-based religious leaders reported cases of real estate developers and "land mafias" encroaching on religious property, including commercial real estate owned by houses of worship surrounding churches, temples, and gurdwaras. They also accused what they said were powerful real estate networks of seizing minority-owned farmland and pushing rural minorities into debt bondage.

Most minority religious groups said they continued to face discrimination in government hiring. According to activists, provincial governments often failed to meet the 5 percent civil service hiring quota for religious minorities. According to CSJ, 30,866 positions reserved for minorities remained vacant during the year, including 3,943 in the federal government, 18,914 in Punjab, 3,165 in Sindh, 3,670 in KP, 827 in Balochistan, and 347 in the territory of Gilgit-Baltistan. The open positions were not filled even after the Supreme Court ruled on January 21 that the federal and provincial governments must uphold the job quota for minorities and avoid job advertisements that hurt the dignity and self-respect of minorities by implying that certain minority groups should apply for only low-level, menial jobs. The Supreme Court also rejected the Punjab Public Service Commission's request to fill open minority quota positions that had been vacant for a year with nonminority appointees. CSJ reported 80 percent of the non-Muslims appointed to government positions reserved for them were working in low-paid sanitation jobs. Minority rights activists said most government employment advertisements for sanitation workers continued to list being non-Muslim as a requirement; they criticized these advertisements as insulting.

Representatives of religious minorities continued to say a "glass ceiling" prevented their promotion to senior government positions, but one NGO stated that due to insufficient higher education opportunities (compared to the majority religious community), few religious minorities met the qualifications to apply for senior positions. While there were no official obstacles to the advancement of minority religious group members in the military, there were very few generals who were Christians. Ahmadi officers rarely rose above the rank of colonel and were not assigned to more senior positions.

Community leaders continued to state the government did not take adequate action to protect its poorest citizens, including religious minorities, such as Christian and Hindu Dalits, from bonded labor practices such as landowners forcing individuals to work, sometimes for multiple generations, to pay off alleged debts owed to the landowner. The leaders stated that Hindu Dalits remained vulnerable to human rights violations and pressure by perpetrators to withdraw police cases.

The Bonded Labor Liberation Front, an NGO, reported that nearly 6.7 million persons worked in debt bondage around the country during the year, 98 percent of them at brick kilns. The Walk Free Foundation, an international organization campaigning against slavery, reported that common practices in the brick kiln industry – such as giving meager "advances" to workers they had to work off, paying far below minimum wage, paying workers as a "team" rather than individually, and owners refusing payment entirely – resulted in what the

foundation said was de facto slavery. Most bonded laborers working in brick kilns were Christians or Hindu Dalits. According to the NGO Scheduled Caste Rights Commission in Sindh, 600,000 men, women, and children from Dalit communities were held in a debt bondage system in that province.

The government continued to prohibit citizens, regardless of religious affiliation, from traveling to Israel by marking Pakistani passports as “valid in all countries, except for Israel.” Representatives of the Baha’i community continued to say this policy particularly affected them because the Baha’i World Center – the community’s spiritual and administrative center – is in Haifa, Israel. Christian advocates also called on the government to allow Christians to travel to Israel.

Government officials and politicians continued to attend and speak at Khatm-e-Nabuwat conferences held in major cities and at religious sites around the country. The groups that organized the conferences stated they were defending the teaching that Muhammad was the final prophet. Both secular and Ahmadi critics said the conferences were venues for hate speech against Ahmadi Muslims.

At a conference on June 19 in Lahore, Maulana Muhammad Amjad Khan, a leader of the opposition Islamist JUI-F party, said some world powers had been pressuring the country to change Islamic provisions in the constitution and law (to accept Ahmadis) but he vowed his party would not allow a change in the Khatm-e-Nabuwat law. “We will chase Qadianis [Ahmadis] within and outside the parliament,” he said.

Addressing a Khatm-e-Nabuwat conference on September 6 in Lahore, JUI-F leader Maulana Fazl-ur-Rehman said the country had been singled out on the issue of finality of the prophet of Islam. He said no other Islamic country faced the same pressure, because the 240 million people of Pakistan were being asked to withdraw the constitutional amendment declaring Ahmadis non-Muslims since “a few people” were not willing to accept it.

Sirajul Haq, leader of the opposition Jamaat-i-Islami party, addressed several Khatm-e-Nabuwat conferences during the year and wrote an article titled “aqeeda khatm-e-nabuwat: eman ki shart” (belief in the finality of prophethood: a condition of faith) in the Urdu-language daily *Nawa-i-Waqt* on September 7, the anniversary of the constitutional amendment that declared Ahmadis non-Muslims. Haq wrote, “History is the evidence that whosoever during Islamic rule assailed Khatm-e-Nabuwat has been sent to hell.” He said the government had not punished Ahmadis’ religious activities but instead appointed members of the Ahmadi community to government positions, including as ministers and advisors, and warned that the

nation would not tolerate what he said was the government's leniency with regard to Ahmadis. Nawa-e-Waqt published six articles on its editorial page on September 7 that assailed Ahmadis for not believing in the finality of the Prophet Muhammad.

During the year, several political leaders used inflammatory religious language to attack their political rivals. In September the PML-N spokesperson referred to a lawyer reportedly hired to defend Imran Khan as having also represented "blasphemer" novelist Salman Rushdie. The PML-N official also accused lawyer Geoffrey Robertson of publishing blasphemous material about Jesus Christ, whom he referred to as Prophet Isa. On September 27, during a live television talk show, a PML-N senator called former Prime Minister Imran Khan an "agent of Jews" and a "sinner" leading to an on-air fistfight with PTI spokesperson Sher Afzal Marwat.

The Ministry for Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony invited Muslim cleric Mian Mithu to speak at a January 31 government-organized seminar on forced conversion, generating criticism from civil society groups. Mian Mithu had led efforts to convert minorities in Sindh, and at the seminar denied the existence of forced conversion.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned incidents of Quran desecration in Sweden and the Netherlands in January, saying, "such acts cannot be condoned under the guise of freedom of expression, opinion and protest." The ministry said it conveyed its concerns to both governments. In Lahore and Karachi, protestors chanted slogans condemning a Dutch politician involved in one of the incidents.

In July, Prime Minister Sharif called for nationwide anti-Sweden protests following a Quran-burning incident in Stockholm. Protest rallies took place in Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Peshawar, and elsewhere. Members of the Jamaat-e-Islami and TLP parties also organized their own anti-Sweden rallies.

Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

The Ahmadiyya community reported 44 incidents of damage to Ahmadi mosques and 109 incidents of Ahmadi gravestones and tombs being vandalized or destroyed during the year. Human rights advocates and Ahmadiyya Muslim community leaders reported police and local authorities rarely took action to prevent attacks on Ahmadi mosques or to punish assailants who vandalized or destroyed Ahmadi mosques, minarets, and gravestones. In several instances, they said police participated in or even led the attacks. Local authorities generally

prevented the repair or rebuilding of minarets, gravestones with Islamic verses, or other structures with identifiably Islamic features.

Ahmadi community members said an assistant commissioner, local police, and TLP activists desecrated 74 Ahmadi graves in the Daska area of Sialkot on September 25. The authorities reportedly cordoned off nearby streets and vandalized graves during the night, taking advantage of the darkness.

On April 17, a mob destroyed the minarets and dome of a 120-year-old Ahmadi mosque in the Ghughiat area of Sargodha district in the presence of police, according to media reports. On July 15, media reported that Jhelum district police demolished minarets of an Ahmadi mosque after local TLP leader Asim Ashfaq Rizvi warned the local District Police Office that if the administration did not demolish the minarets by the 10th of Muharram (July 29), TLP would demolish the mosque itself. On September 8, 15, and 20 unidentified persons reportedly demolished the arch of the Ahmadi mosque in Shahdara, a suburb of Lahore, while police provided protection to those committing the destruction. On September 24, according to Ahmadi community representatives, police demolished the minarets of two Ahmadi mosques in the Kirto and Nano Dogar areas of Sheikhpura district. Police demolished the minarets despite 50 local residents from different faiths and religious groups signing a petition certifying they had no objection to the Kirto mosque and urging that no action be taken against it.

Civil society organizations and media outlets said that armed sectarian groups connected to organizations banned by the government, including TTP and the anti-Shia group Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, continued to perpetrate violence and other abuses against religious minorities. Groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United States and other governments, such as ISIS, also committed violent acts. Among the targets of these attacks were Shia Muslims, particularly the predominantly Shia Hazara community, and government security personnel. Data on sectarian attacks varied because no standardized definition existed among reporting organizations of what constituted a sectarian attack. When reporting on attacks that had a suspected sectarian motive, journalists said they often refrained from reporting the victim's sectarian identity to avoid stoking tensions.

On January 30, TTP claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing during afternoon prayers at a mosque in a police compound in Peshawar. The initial death toll included 100 police personnel, while 169 sustained injuries. No group claimed responsibility, though Omar Mukarram Khorasani, a member of TTP's Central Shura, took credit for the bombing while disavowing involvement of TTP itself. He said the attacks were retaliation for the killing of his

brother Omar Khalid Khorasani – TTP’s deputy chief and orchestrator of a 2014 massacre in a Peshawar school – by the Pakistani Army in August 2022. No arrests were made in this case by year’s end.

On June 21, Maulana Noor Muhammad of JUI-F and his brother Zubair Khan were killed, and another person critically injured, when unidentified armed motorcyclists opened fire on a car in Inayat Kalay Bazaar, Bajaur tribal district, KP. The Bajaur Peace Action Committee, a local NGO, organized a rally on June 24 to protest the killings and demand the police take stronger action to maintain law and order. Rally participants said the killers fled the scene in broad daylight without being challenged by police. ISIS-K later took responsibility for the killings.

On July 31, a suicide attack at a JUI-F political gathering in the Bajaur tribal district resulted in the deaths of 54 people, including 23 minors. According to the Counter Terrorism Department, at least 83 persons were hurt in the attack. ISIS-K claimed responsibility.

Attacks on Shia Hazaras in Balochistan resumed during the year after a two-year lull. On August 1, armed men opened fire on security personnel escorting a polio vaccination team, killing two Hazara policemen in Quetta, Balochistan. Two days later, another Hazara policeman was assassinated in Quetta. According to Hazara community leaders and activists, Quetta’s Hazara community remained under considerable threat, and Hazaras were not able to freely travel even within Quetta due to threats from religious extremists.

Suicide bombers attacked two mosques in Balochistan and KP Provinces on September 29, killing 60 persons, including two children, and wounding 70 others as Muslims celebrated the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday. Media said one of those killed was a deputy superintendent of police who had attempted to stop one of the bombers. While no group claimed responsibility for the Hangu, KP attack, according to sources at the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, ISIS-K appeared to be responsible.

Naveed Ahmad, reportedly a follower of hardline Islamist clerics, who shot and wounded former Prime Minister Khan in November 2022, remained in custody at year’s end, charged with murder, attempted murder, and criminal mischief with a terrorism enhancement.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Throughout the year, individuals, often unidentified, assaulted and killed Hindus, Christians, Ahmadis, Sikhs, Sunnis, and Shia in attacks sources believed to be religiously motivated. The attackers' relationship to organized terrorist groups was often unknown. Civil society organizations and media documented at least 16 persons "killed for their faith" during the year: seven Shia Muslims, four Sikhs, three Christians, one Hindu, and one Ahmadi Muslim.

On January 11, in Renala village, Okara district, Punjab, three Muslims accused Allah Ditta, a Catholic, of stealing fruit from a Muslim-owned orchard, according to Christian media. When the accused confronted the accusers, they shot and killed him. The victim's son said the killers threatened to kill the rest of the family if they informed police; the family of one of the accused offered the family 500,000 rupees (\$1,800) as "blood money" to drop the charges. The victim's family filed an FIR against the three Muslims; police arrested one while two remained at large at year's end. Sources familiar with the case said the parties reached an out-of-court settlement.

In a similar incident, on February 6, Muslim landowner Rana Muhammad Waseem and five others beat to death Emmanuel Masih, a Christian farmworker, after accusing him of stealing oranges from Waseem's orchard in the Khanewal district of Punjab, according to Christian media. The victim worked for a neighboring Muslim family. Police arrested Waseem and two others for the killing. The victim's nephew said the Muslims who employed 35 Christian families on their area farms "know that we are helpless and that they can get away with anything, even murder." He said that "the fact that we are Christians makes us more vulnerable to injustice."

On February 19, Rasheed Ahmad, an Ahmadi doctor, was shot and killed in his clinic in Gotriala, Punjab. Police filed a report against two suspects, one of whom, Inam-ul-Haque, was later found dead of a gunshot wound at a nearby farm. Local sources told media they believed he killed himself after killing Ahmad. Ul-Haque's family said unknown individuals found ul-Haque and shot him.

Thousands of mourners on May 5 attended the funeral of seven Shia teachers who were shot and killed at a school in Kurram, a tribal district of KP Province, on May 4. The mourners rallied against the killings, which also drew nationwide condemnation. The teachers were attacked by unidentified assailants who stormed their school as they were supervising exams. The Deputy Commissioner of Kurram said the attack was likely in retaliation for a separate attack that killed a Sunni Muslim from the same school just hours earlier. Four individuals from a Sunni tribe in Kurram were implicated in the attack, and all four fled to Afghanistan, according to a

local law enforcement official. The same source said the sectarian violence was likely the latest flare-up of a Sunni-Shia inter-tribal land dispute.

Minority religious community members remained targets of attacks in the Peshawar area during the year. On March 31, unidentified men shot and killed Sikh shopkeeper Dayal Singh in Peshawar. On April 1, unknown men shot and killed a Christian sanitary worker, Kashif Masih, in Peshawar when he was on his way home. On June 23, unidentified motorcyclists shot and killed Sikh trader Manmohan Singh in Kakshal. On June 24, Sikh shopkeeper Tarlog Singh was shot and wounded by unidentified armed men in Daggari; he was treated for his leg wound in a local hospital and released. Also on June 24, Sikh shopkeeper Manmohan Singh was shot and killed in Peshawar by unknown armed assailants. According to media reports, police made arrests in each of those cases, but no details were available.

On August 5, unknown masked attackers killed Muslim Abdul Rauf Barkat, who taught English at a private language institute in Turbat, Balochistan, because of remarks he made during a lecture which some of his students said were blasphemous. Barkat explained his remarks to a group of clerics who visited him following the blasphemy allegations. The clerics instructed him to appear before a local jirga for judgment, but he was shot and killed en route to the jirga.

On August 16, a mob destroyed churches and homes of Christian families and vandalized a Christian cemetery in Faisalabad's Jaranwala subdistrict following allegations from some local citizens that two brothers, both Christians, defaced a copy of the Quran. The accusers said that some damaged pages of the Quran had been found near a house in Jaranwala, where the two lived. Local TLP leaders called on followers to come to the area and take action against the alleged desecrators. One international Christian NGO said that local mosques used their loudspeakers to issue a call for "revenge" against Christians. The contents of local homes, including that of the local assistant district commissioner, a Christian, were looted and burned in the streets during the 10 hour attack. NGOs and international media said 26 churches were destroyed and more than 200 Christian families fled the area because of the violence, but no one was reported killed. NGOs and media estimated the mob to be as large as 5,000 persons at the height of the violence.

Christian NGOs and international media said police stood by and watched the violence at first, but then intervened, firing into the air and wielding batons before dispersing the attackers with the help of Muslim clerics and elders. Authorities arrested 358 individuals, including the Christians accused of desecrating the Quran, brothers Rocky and Raja Masih, and some TLP leaders. Of those arrested, 75 were declared innocent and released and 283 were charged. Of

those charged, 223 were released on bail, 39 were refused bail and remained in jail pending trial at year's end, and there was no information available about the remaining 21 individuals. Punjab police chief Usman Anwar said to the media that "if police had started baton charging or attacking or tear gassing the mob, that would have resulted in multiple injuries or deaths," which would have "aggravated the situation" and then "spread around the country." Troops were called in later in the day to help restore peace, while police were dispatched to guard churches across the province. The NGO Center for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS) facilitated the brothers' surrender to authorities and said the two stated they were innocent.

In visits to Jaranwala after the violence, senior government officials offered help to the victims and said the government would act against the perpetrators. Caretaker Prime Minister Anwar-ul-Haq Kakar said he was "gutted" by images of the attack, adding that "stern action will be taken against those who violate law and target minorities." Kakar also said that "all law enforcement has been asked to apprehend culprits and bring them to justice." Media said the Prime Minister offered compensation checks of two million rupees (\$7,200) each to 100 families during his visit to the area on August 21. On August 19, Supreme Court Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa referred to articles 295 and 295-A of the penal code, by which anyone who "hurt the religious sentiments of anyone" was liable to be punished. On August 20, Ulema Council Chairman and Special Assistant to the Prime Minister for Religious Affairs Tahir Mahmood Ashrafi said the attacks were anti-Islamic. Ashrafi said, "the attackers have shamed us for which I apologize to the Christians of all over the world including (in) Pakistan." He announced the formation of a 20-member committee with Christian leaders to review the incident and to supervise the restoration of damaged houses, buildings, and churches of local Christians. Also on August 20, a delegation from the Pakistan People's Party visited and expressed sympathy with the Christian community. Media reported that during their weekly sermons on August 18, imams and clerics across the country said the Jaranwala attacks were "shocking," those who carried out the violence were "enemies of Islam and Pakistan," and the violence "harmed the image of Islam and Muslims around the world."

There were instances of conflicts between Sunni and Shia Muslims in KP Province. During the summer, violence flared between Sunni and Shia tribal militants in Kurram district, sparked by what sources stated was a land dispute. The army and Frontier Corps deployed troops to restore order. A local jirga negotiated a one-year ceasefire after seven individuals died and 34 were injured. In late October in the same district, violence erupted after a video appeared on social media showing a local Shia man allegedly insulting a wife of the Prophet Muhammad.

Media and local officials reported between 40-70 deaths and 40-200 injuries before a jirga of tribal elders and community leaders negotiated a ceasefire on October 31.

Four Muslim men arrested for killing Hindu businessman Satan Lal in January 2022 in Ghotki District, Sindh, were released from custody during the year, drawing criticism from a local Hindu leader. No further information was available about the case or their release.

Activists and members of minority communities said the country's culture of impunity, along with state inaction, was fueling hate crimes and blasphemy accusations. According to an Al Jazeera count, since 1990 at least 80 persons were killed extrajudicially in connection with blasphemy allegations.

Civil society activists and media continued to report incidents of young Christian and Hindu women being abducted and raped by Muslim men. Victims said their attackers singled them out as vulnerable due to their religious minority identity. According to CLAAS and the Pakistan Center for Law and Justice, there were also reports of religious minority women being physically attacked by men.

In February, according to Christian media, Muslim Kamran Allah Bux threw acid on the face of Sunita Masih, a Christian, in the Masoom Shad area of Karachi because she refused to enter into a relationship with him and convert to Islam. Police located Bux and took him into custody. At year's end, the case was pending in a Karachi district level court and the victim, by choice, remained mostly confined to her home because of her injuries, according to a local human rights activist familiar with the case. Media reported that in his statement to police, Bux said he had fallen in love with Masih and attacked her with acid after she rejected his proposal. Mary James Gill, director of the Center for Law and Justice, said "minority (Christian and Hindu) girls face harassment and intimidation from Muslim men every day, but their pleas for help go unheeded."

On May 17, a Hindu woman and her six children who went missing on May 7 in Karachi were reported converted to Islam on the same day they were reported missing by their husband and father. A "certificate of conversion" was issued by Jamia Binoria Aalamia, an Islamic seminary in Karachi.

On June 6, four men reportedly kidnapped, raped, and killed a 40-year-old Christian widow, Shazia Imran, in Lahore. The victim's family said the accused ringleader of the incident, Mani Gujjar, attempted to force Shazia to convert to Islam and marry him but she refused. Police arrested Gujjar.

On July 22, media outlets reported that three daughters of a Hindu businessman, Leela Ram, were abducted and then converted to Islam by their abductors in Ghotki, Sindh.

According to media sources, in August, Muslim Muhammad Amir abducted, forcefully converted, and married a Christian minor girl, in Jaranwala, Faisalabad. The victim's father, Aftab Joseph, said that the Muslim family also filed a false abduction case against him and his family when they began their efforts to locate and recover their daughter. Joseph said that he, along with his six family members, were on prearrest bail (a practice by which pretrial arrest and detention may be preempted by paying bail before the arrest is made).

Criminal gangs in northern Sindh kidnapped approximately 30 Hindus and several Muslims for ransom during the spring and summer of 2023, according to the HRCP. Sources from religious groups said Hindus were kidnapped at higher rates because they were excluded from local patronage and protection networks run by police and powerful landlords. In July, the HRCP said it was "alarmed" by reports of "deteriorating law and order in the districts of Kashmore and Ghotki in Sindh, where members of the Hindu community, including women and children, have allegedly been held hostage by organized criminal gangs." Hindu leaders said that police were sometimes complicit in these kidnapping efforts and/or were pressured by landowners who influenced the government to look the other way. The leaders said police sometimes even received a portion of ransom payments. After significant media attention and large-scale protests by Hindus across Sindh, mediators negotiated the release of all kidnapped Hindus by October, although several more Hindus were kidnapped in November.

Members of religious minority communities continued to report cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment, and illegal confinement due to their faith. Ahmadi Muslims continued to report widespread societal harassment and discrimination against community members, including physical attacks, destruction of homes and personal property, and threats intended to force Ahmadis to abandon their jobs or towns.

In its *World Watch List* report covering events during the year, the international Christian NGO Open Doors stated that "the devastating attack in Jaranwala in August 2023 is a sobering reminder of the hostile environment Pakistan's Christians live in." The NGO also stated, "The number of Christian girls and women abducted, abused, and forcefully converted to Islam is growing – some are even killed. All Christians face institutionalized discrimination, given only jobs that are deemed degrading. Although historical churches are relatively free to worship, they are heavily monitored and have been targeted for bomb attacks."

In addition to the August violence in Jaranwala, there were other reports of attacks on religious minorities' holy places, cemeteries, and religious symbols. For example, in three instances in Punjab, unidentified men reportedly vandalized Ahmadi community graves in the Chak-89 area of Faisalabad district in January, the minarets of an Ahmadi mosque in the Chak 168 Murad area of Bahawalnagar district in August, and two graves of the Ahmadi community in Kasur district in October. In September, mosques in the Shahdara Town area of Lahore broadcast calls for Muslims to demolish an Ahmadi place of worship because it looked like a traditional mosque. At the request of local Muslim clerics, police then stood guard as the building was demolished.

In Kashmore, Sindh, a group attacked a Hindu temple overnight on July 15-16 using what police said were rocket launchers, which failed to function. The attackers then used guns to shoot at the temple and adjoining homes belonging the Hindus, according to media. The building was empty at the time, and no one was reported injured. Police said they were searching for the suspects, estimated to include eight or nine individuals. The HRCP called for Sindh police to investigate the attack without delay and said it had received "disturbing reports" that gangs threatened to attack Hindu places of worship, using "high-grade weapons."

Also overnight on July 15-16, a crew of unknown individuals used heavy equipment to raze the 150-year-old Mari Mata Hindu temple in the Soldier Bazaar area of Karachi. Local residents said they saw a police vehicle in the area, which they believed was there to "give cover" to the demolition crew, according to media reports.

There were at least five attacks on Ahmadi places of worship in Karachi during the year. On September 21, media reported that 20-25 persons stormed an Ahmadi mosque in Karachi's Martin Road area and destroyed windows, glass doors, furniture, and other valuables; they fled before the police arrived. Police told media they were trying to identify the attackers, but community activists stated that police had failed to take any action following an attack on the same mosque on January 18.

Christian religious freedom activists continued to report widespread discrimination against Christians in private employment. They said Christians continued to have difficulty finding jobs other than those involving menial labor, with some advertisements for menial jobs specifying they were open only to Christian applicants.

In June, a man with the social media name Desi Traveller posted a video on social media about Rabwah, the location of the Ahmadi spiritual headquarters, and narrated how Ahmadi men and women could easily be recognized because men wore a tilted cap and women wore half

veils. In the video, the man used derogatory captions including false road signs mentioning *Jannah* (paradise) and *Dozekh* (hell) to attract more viewership. On social media, numerous individuals commented on the video, mostly cursing Ahmadis and endorsing the finality of the Prophet Muhammad.

In its report released in February, the HRCP expressed “considerable alarm” over the state of religious freedom in the country and said incidents of religious minorities, especially Ahmadis and Christians, facing persecution had not improved during the period from July 2021 to June 2022. The HRCP report focused on forced conversions, the desecration of places of worship belonging to minorities, and what it said was the marginalization of the [Ahmadi community](#) .

Throughout the year, Islamic organizations with various political affiliations held conferences and rallies to support the doctrine of Khatm-e-Nabuwat. English and local-language media often covered the events that featured anti-Ahmadi rhetoric that Ahmadiyya community representatives said could incite violence against Ahmadis. Khatm-e-Nabuwat conferences were held throughout the year but most of them were organized in September and October to mark anniversary of the declaration of Ahmadis as non-Muslims.

Islamic clerics in Chenab Nagar (Rabwah), Punjab – the home of the Ahmadi community’s headquarters in Pakistan –convened two conferences in that city in September to invite all non-Muslims, including Ahmadis, to “join Islam” and not follow Ahmadi teaching, and to ask the government to crack down on the “illegal activities” of Ahmadis. In a September 18 conference in Karachi, prominent Islamic scholar Mufti Muneebur Rehman said September 7 was an important day in the history of Pakistan as Ahmadis were declared non-Muslims on that day, meaning that the finality of the prophethood would be protected “at any cost.”

The Khatm-e-Nabuwat conference in Mamukanjan, Punjab, on November 14 declared anyone, including Ahmadis, to be nonbelievers if they did not have faith in the finality of the prophethood of Muhammad.

Observers reported that English-language media continued to cover issues facing religious minorities in a more objective manner, but vernacular print and broadcast media outlets continued to publish and broadcast anti-Ahmadi rhetoric. Ahmadiyya Muslim community representatives stated that the Urdu-language press frequently printed hate speech in news stories and editorials, some of which could be considered as inciting anti-Ahmadi violence. Inflammatory anti-Ahmadi rhetoric continued to exist on social media and was at times

spread by senior members of mainstream political parties. Community members stated clerics routinely delivered anti-Ahmadi sermons in mosques.

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

In early October, clerics from Charbagh tehsil (subdistrict), Swat district, KP Province, prohibited women from playing cricket in the local stadium, stating that the athletics were “immodest” and violated the community’s Islamic faith. Local elders and clerics from local mosques issued the ban the morning of a scheduled match between girls’ teams to prevent them from playing.

According to an article published November 1 in the *Express Tribune*, clerics from the Lakki Marwat district of KP Province enforced a ban on all music at weddings. The clerics said music at weddings and “associated behavior” were contrary to Islamic norms. The clerics warned they would refuse to officiate at marriage ceremonies of the couples involved and would not offer funeral prayers for family members of the violators.

In November, a group of clerics in the Kohistan district of KP Province threatened female employees of NGOs with forced marriages or expulsion from the area if they were found working in public. The clerics said, “If a female worker of an NGO is found roaming on the streets without a male relative, such as her brother or father, and if she is single, we will ask any local to marry her. But if a female NGO worker is married then she will be expelled from the area.” Local civil society organizations reported that the district administration of Kohistan later organized a session with the clerics to address their threats. There were no other reports of similar threats or incidents in the area during the year.

According to an August 22 opinion piece by the UK-based Institute of Development Studies, in some parts of Pakistan, groups of Hindu, Christian, and Muslim women worked together to defuse sectarian strife by forming “peace committees” that used diplomacy and persuasion to intervene when tensions rose in their communities.

In Peshawar, protests against Israel outside of American-owned fast-food franchises in October and November often included antisemitic rhetoric, according to sources present at the events. At a November 4 JUI-F rally organized outside a Peshawar McDonald’s, sources reported protest leaders calling for Muslims to “play their role cutting off the economic supply

line of the Jews.” According to these sources, it was very common during the months following the October 7 Hamas attacks against Israel for JUI-F and JI leaders at rallies to emphasize Israel’s religious identification, referring to religious texts and citing passages from the Quran portraying Jews and Christians as perpetual adversaries of Islam.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador, Consuls General, other embassy officers, and visiting senior U.S. officials, including the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and the Counselor of the Department of State, engaged government officials on religious freedom issues during the year. The government officials included the Prime Minister, senior advisors to the Prime Minister and officials from the Ministry of Law and Justice, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Education, and senior members of the Senate and National Assembly, as well as provincial ministers in Punjab and Sindh. Embassy and visiting U.S. officials urged the government to make progress on revising blasphemy laws and laws concerning Ahmadi Muslims, better protect members of religious minority communities, improve sectarian relations, and encourage interfaith respect.

In response to a question about the violence in Jaranwala, Faisalabad on August 16, the Deputy Spokesman for the Department of State said the United States was “deeply concerned that churches and homes were targeted in response to reported Quran desecration in Pakistan.” The statement added that “violence or the threat of violence is never an acceptable form of expression, and we urge Pakistani authorities to conduct a full investigation into these allegations and call for calm for all of those involved.”

Embassy officers met with civil society leaders, experts, and journalists to collect information on religious freedom issues not covered in the media, stress the need to protect the rights of religious minorities, and offer support to victims of religion-based abuses. They also met with representatives of other embassies, leaders of religious communities, NGOs, and legal experts working on religious freedom issues to discuss ways to increase respect among religious groups and enhance dialogue.

In June, the Consul General in Lahore met with the Hindu community in Rahim Yar Khan to discuss the continuing effects of the 2021 attack on the Siddhivinayak Hindu Temple, religious discrimination, and relations with the majority-Muslim community in the area.

The embassy and consulates general continued to highlight the principles of religious freedom and examples of interfaith dialogue in the United States on their social media platforms. The embassy and consulates general posted items covering various U.S. officials' visits to religious sites during the year and commemorating Interfaith Harmony month in April, National Minorities Day in August, as well as diverse religious holidays, including Eid al-Fitr, Diwali, Holi, and Christmas, that generated thousands of positive responses.

The embassy and consulates general sponsored outreach activities such as speakers and workshops to promote peacebuilding among religious and community leaders. The embassy and consulates general in Lahore, Karachi, and Peshawar held several events to promote religious freedom. The consulate general in Karachi hosted a series of iftars during Ramadan, during which officers spoke on the importance of reinforcing respect, cooperation, and acceptance of diversity among all interfaith communities to nurture flourishing societies.

Another embassy-supported program assessed the justice system's effectiveness in responding to the legal needs and protecting the legal rights of minority communities. The program also provided minority religious communities legal assistance and support.

On December 29, 2023, the Secretary of State redesignated Pakistan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom and issued a waiver of the sanctions that accompany the designation in the national interest of the United States. Pakistan was first designated a CPC in 2018.

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