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UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

ISSUE UPDATE: ASSESSING BLASPHEMY IN PAKISTAN

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To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

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Assessing Blasphemy and Related Laws on Religious Freedom in Pakistan

Introduction

In August 2023, a mob of hundreds of individuals attacked the Christian community of Jaranwala, Pakistan, damaging dozens of churches and homes following accusations of blasphemy. The attacks erupted after two Christians were accused of desecrating the Qur'an, a criminal offense under Pakistan's blasphemy law. The violence caused hundreds to flee their homes and resulted in the [arrest](#) of over 100 people. The attacks in Jaranwala represent the most severe attack against Pakistani Christians in recent years and coincides with the Pakistani government's efforts to strengthen the country's existing blasphemy legislation.

In Pakistan, blasphemy accusations, whether true or false, often lead to lengthy prison sentences on death row and solitary confinement, foment violence towards religious minorities, and in some cases, the killing of the accused. Many instances illustrate the use of blasphemy allegations to settle personal vendettas, leading to acts of violence before charges can be drafted or presented to a court. In many cases, there is no punishment for those who offer false accusations or perpetrate vigilante violence. According to advocacy groups, more than 2,100 people have been [accused](#) of blasphemy in Pakistan since 1987, with 40 currently on [death row](#) and at least 89 [killed](#) by mobs for blasphemy accusations. Rather than taking steps to mitigate the violence, however, the Pakistani government has recently undertaken efforts to strengthen the country's existing blasphemy legislation.

This report describes the increasing use of Pakistan's blasphemy law in 2023 to target individuals based on their religion or belief, including its disproportionate use against the country's religious minority populations. It highlights select examples of recent blasphemy cases, including against Pakistan's Ahmadiyya Muslim community, and provides an overview of Pakistani officials' efforts to strengthen and justify the legislation both domestically and on the international stage.

Pakistan's Blasphemy Law

Overview

Pakistan inherited its blasphemy law from British colonial rulers, who criminalized the use of derogatory remarks against religious groups or religious feeling. This law was adopted into Pakistan's [Penal Code](#) in 1947 and later strengthened under the

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rule of General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq in the 1980s to punish anyone who insults Islam, with harsh penalties that can include a death sentence or imprisonment for life. Individuals can be charged with blasphemy for using derogatory remarks against Muslim holy personages (Section 295-A), defiling or desecrating the Qur'an (Section 295-B), or insulting the Prophet Muhammad (Section 295-C).

Under the current legislation, as well as the [Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act](#), Pakistanis, including children, the mentally ill, and the elderly, have been charged with blasphemy. Alleged blasphemous actions include sending or proliferating text messages deemed insulting to the Prophet Muhammad, as well as sharing, liking, or writing posts on social media considered insulting to Islam. Individuals are often accused of damaging or harming the Qur'an or other Islamic texts.

Pakistan has also censored organizations for material deemed hurtful to religious sentiment in the country. Notably, in February, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) imposed a [nationwide](#) block of Wikipedia, claiming the platform had refused to remove "blasphemous content." Under the current law, the Ministry of Religious Affairs is responsible for reviewing internet traffic and reporting blasphemous content to the PTA. While the ban on Wikipedia was removed three days later, it highlights the Pakistani government's scope in applying blasphemy legislation.

Those accused of blasphemy often face mob violence, imprisonment, or the death sentence. While the government has not yet executed anyone for blasphemy,

nonstate actors have killed alleged blasphemers. Those accused often languish in jail with limited opportunities for bail. Several of Pakistan's religious political parties champion the country's blasphemy law as a way to garner additional votes. In contrast, former government officials who were vocal supporters of reforming the blasphemy law have been killed. Former Prime Minister Imran Khan, while [criticized](#) for his support and defense of the blasphemy law, was also accused of blasphemy by political opponents.

Pending Amendment to the Blasphemy Law

In January 2023, Pakistan's National Assembly, the lower house of Parliament, unanimously [passed](#) an amendment to the country's blasphemy law. Introduced by a member of the religious political party, Jamaat-e-Islami, the private member's bill expands punishable offenses and offers harsher punishments for blasphemy. The [amendment](#) seeks to expand and strengthen punishments for condescending remarks against "holy persons," including the Prophet Muhammad's family, wives, and companions, and the four caliphs. It seeks to increase the possible range of punishment to a minimum sentence of three years and a fine, up to life imprisonment, while simultaneously making the offense non-bailable. In August, the Senate passed the bill. While the President must sign the law for it to go into effect, human rights groups continue to [express](#) concern about the impact of the legislation on religious minorities. A federal minister has [urged](#) Pakistan's caretaker government to undo the recent amendment, but the issue has yet to be taken up.

Increase in Blasphemy Cases

Notable Cases and Mob-Related Violence

As noted in USCIRF's 2023 [Blasphemy Legislation Factsheet](#), Pakistan is one of the strictest and most frequent enforcers of blasphemy laws. USCIRF maintains the [Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#), which identifies select victims targeted based on their religion. As of December 2023, the database includes the cases of 56 individuals in Pakistani custody, 48 of whom are detained under blasphemy charges. Often, however, the blasphemy law is used in Pakistan to settle individual feuds or for political purposes. As a result, false accusations are not uncommon. In April, for example, a Christian woman, Musarrat Bibi, was falsely [accused](#) of burning pages of the Qur'an at a school where she was employed. Bibi was arrested, despite being illiterate and unable to identify Qur'anic verses. In a rare decision, the case was ultimately dismissed after authorities learned accusations were made by rivals of Bibi who held grudges against her for holding a management position within the school canteen. Those responsible for putting forth the accusations, however, were not punished.

In such rare cases where accused have been acquitted, they continue to face significant challenges, including social stigmatization and threats. One of the most well-known cases is that of Asia Bibi, who was imprisoned for eight years on death row and was acquitted of blasphemy charges in 2018. Riots and violence followed her release, with public calls for her execution. In 2023, Bibi reportedly [continues](#) to face a lack of support while in exile, despite the global attention brought to her case. This type of persecution and violence is ongoing in Pakistan. In November, for example, a Christian couple was granted [bail](#) after being charged with blasphemy for posting Bible verses on social media. Once released on bail, however, the couple turned to hiding and must relocate frequently to avoid mob violence.

In many instances, vigilante groups and perpetrators of targeted violence against those accused of blasphemy operate with impunity, even in the presence of police forces. In February, at least 50 men [stormed](#) a police station in Punjab to kidnap a Muslim man, Muhammad Waris, who had been accused of desecrating the Qur'an. Initially, after he was accused of blasphemy, locals reportedly [planned](#) to hang Waris, but authorities transported him to the police station in Nanaka Sahib. Once he was taken into custody, however, the mob stormed the police station, removed Waris from his jail cell, beat him, and lynched him.

Groups, such as the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), argue that the threshold for evidence in blasphemy cases should be raised to mitigate their

weaponization. In 2023, Pakistan's Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights [noted](#) that 215 individuals have been arrested under blasphemy charges, with the largest number of arrests during the year occurring in Sindh and Punjab provinces. According to the Committee, 179 individuals are currently on trial throughout Pakistan. In Punjab alone, however, Prison Department data [indicates](#) that 551 individuals were imprisoned for blasphemy, including 506 adults under trial and 45 convicted, as of November 2023. Of those imprisoned, an [estimated](#) 40 individuals are on death row. This includes [Junaid Hafeez](#), a Fulbright scholar and lecturer at Bahauddin Zakariya University who was arrested in 2013 after his students accused him of insulting the Prophet Muhammad on social media. Hafeez has been held in solitary confinement since 2014, when his first lawyer was murdered. In 2019, he was sentenced to death and continues to languish in prison.

Jaranwala Attacks

The August attack on Christian communities in Jaranwala is a notable example of how blasphemy accusations can foment widespread violence towards religious minorities. Christians make up less than 2 percent of Pakistan's population, but Jaranwala, located in Faisalabad District in Punjab, is [home](#) to over 5,000 Christians. On August 16, a mob burned at least 24 churches, and raided and damaged several smaller chapels and homes. A Christian graveyard was also desecrated, with community leaders noting that violence lasted for 10 hours without police intervention.

The attack in Jaranwala occurred after two Christians were accused of committing blasphemy by desecrating a Qur'an. Following the accusations, members of the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) began making public announcements from mosques for individuals to gather in Jaranwala. Reports indicate the mob was composed of Muslims from outside Jaranwala. As violence escalated local Muslims [offered shelter](#) and warning to their Christian neighbors, painting Qur'anic verses on the doors of Christian homes in an attempt to spare them. Prior to the mob attack, Muslims and Christians had lived together peacefully in the area.

Demonstrations condemning the violence and Pakistan's blasphemy law took place in Karachi and Lahore. Both the caretaker prime minister and chief minister visited Jaranwala following the attacks, promising compensation for damages and repairs to all the churches. As of November 2023, however, not all damaged churches had been repaired.

Despite authorities arresting close to 200 people involved in the attack, reporting indicates that fear among the Christian community persists. Smaller churches are unable to afford sufficient protection, and in some instances, services are conducted outside of damaged churches. Additionally, many Christian children in the community have not returned to school out of fear of recurring violence.

In the aftermath of the attacks, assailants have continued to accuse religious leaders in the region of blasphemy and to violently target them, as highlighted by a recent assassination attempt against a local pastor. Pastor “Vicky” filed a police report claiming that unknown men had written Islamic slogans on his church. He was then *approached* by two men who threatened to kill him, accusing him of insulting the Prophet Muhammad. Three days later, the men intercepted the pastor as he was returning from a worship service and shot him. As he was recovering, authorities falsely *accused* Pastor Vicky of staging the shooting, forced him to record a video confessing, and then placed him in police custody. He had to pay the police bail money to be released. The assailants who attempted to assassinate him are still at large.

Anti-Ahmadiyya Law

Discrimination in Law and Practice

In addition to blasphemy, Pakistan’s penal code includes strict punishments against the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, which comprises nearly 4 million people in Pakistan. In 1984, President Zia ul-Huq introduced Sections 298-A and 298-B, which make it a criminal offense for Ahmadis to call themselves Muslims, use Muslim practices in worship, or share their faith. Ahmadis are therefore prohibited from publicly declaring their faith, obtaining material related to their faith, citing the Qur’an, building mosques, referring to their places of worship as mosques, or making the public call for prayer (the *adhaan*).

Since Pakistani citizens are required to *declare* their religious affiliation to obtain official documents, such as passports, birth certificates, and national identification cards, Ahmadis must sign a statement declaring that they are not Muslim. Additionally, to register to vote, Ahmadis must either renounce their faith or be placed on a separate *electoral list*.

Targeted violence and discrimination against the Ahmadiyya community has intensified throughout 2023. In March, the District Bar Council of Gujranwala in Punjab Province issued a *notice* stating that all lawyers who seek admission to the bar council must provide an affidavit condemning Mirza Ghulam Ahd Qadiani, the founder of the Ahmadiyya faith, and declare

Ahmadis as non-Muslim. Ahmadi lawyers already face discrimination, physical assault, and detainment, as demonstrated by the recent case of *Syed Ali Ahmad Tariq*. Tariq was accused of violating Section 298-B of Pakistan’s Penal Code for signing a court document using the religious prefix “Syed.”

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

Places of Worship

In September 2023, the Lahore High Court *ruled* that Ahmadiyya mosques built before 1984 cannot be destroyed or altered. Despite this decision, several structures have been vandalized and threatened. In some instances, police have been complicit by failing to stop perpetrators from vandalizing minarets. This includes an April *attack* against the Ahmadiyya mosque in Ghooghia, Punjab. The mosque, which is over a century old, had several minarets demolished by vigilantes in the presence of police. Similarly, in May, a mob of 150 people vandalized an Ahmadiyya mosque in Halqa Rehman, *destroying* four minarets. In July, anti-Ahmadiyya activists publicly called for the destruction of minarets at Ahmadiyya mosques in Jhelum, coinciding with the 10th day of Muharram. Political parties, such as the TLP, continue to use hateful and inflammatory rhetoric against the Ahmadiyya community and to call for the vandalism of Ahmadiyya mosques.

United Nations Resolution

In addition to domestic efforts to strengthen blasphemy legislation, in July, Pakistan presented a draft *resolution* to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in response to a Qur’an *burning* by far-right political activists in Sweden. Following the Qur’an burning in Sweden, *thousands* of Pakistani Muslims protested in Lahore and Karachi to condemn the act. The UN draft put forth by Pakistan condemned “recurring acts of public burning of the Holy Qur’an in some European and other countries.” The resolution further called on countries to take steps to “prevent and prosecute acts and advocacy of religious hatred that constitute incitement



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to discrimination, hostility or violence,” which Pakistan and other Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) countries believe includes burning the Qur’an. The resolution [passed](#) with 28 votes in favor, 12 against, and 7 abstentions.

The desecration of any holy book or object for expressive purposes is deeply offensive and should be condemned, but it should not be criminally punished. Both freedom of expression and religious freedom protect expression that some find offensive. Under international human rights law, speech can be criminalized only if it amounts to incitement to imminent violence—meaning it directly urges listeners to act violently and they are likely to do so imminently. Speech that offends other peoples’ religious beliefs or feelings should be countered through condemnation, education, and dialogue, under the consensus approach of UN Human Rights Council [Resolution 16/18](#) that has been followed on these issues since 2011.

Conclusion

Blasphemy legislation remains a key challenge to the protection of religious freedom in Pakistan. In its [2023 Annual Report](#), USCIRF outlined a number of steps the U.S. government should take to address religious freedom issues in Pakistan, including entering into a binding agreement under Section 405(c) of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), with the Pakistani government. This agreement would be designed to encourage concrete steps to address religious freedom in Pakistan, including repeal of blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws. In the absence of repeal, the U.S. government should encourage the Pakistani government to enact reforms to ensure higher thresholds of evidence and proper investigation of blasphemy cases, in addition to making blasphemy a bailable offense. It also should ensure that false accusations and perjury are investigated and punished under Pakistan’s Penal Code. In a November [press release](#), USCIRF further called on Pakistani authorities to ensure that the Lahore High Court Ruling on Ahmadiyya mosques is observed and that all citizens have equal access to vote regardless of their religious identity.

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