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Religious Freedom in Pakistan in 2022

By Niala Mohammad, Senior Policy Analyst

In 2022, Pakistan's religious freedom conditions remain on a negative trajectory with religious minorities subject to frequent attacks and threats including accusations of blasphemy, targeted killings, lynchings, mob violence, forced conversions, and desecration of houses of worship and cemeteries.

Members of the Shi'a Muslim, Ahmadiyya Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and Sikh communities face increasingly aggressive societal discrimination due to a rise in Sunni Islamist extremism and the continued threat of persecution via discriminatory legislation such as the blasphemy laws and anti-Ahmadiyya laws. These laws have enabled and encouraged Islamist extremists to operate with impunity, easily targeting religious minorities or those with differing beliefs, including non-believers.

In 2022, the new government under Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif also weaponized the discriminatory blasphemy laws, traditionally used to persecute religious minorities, against former [*Prime Minister Imran Khan*](#) and his cabinet members. Religious minorities, however, remain particularly vulnerable to aggression and accusations under these laws as they continue to face threats of violence in a society that has grown increasingly intolerant of religious diversity.

This country update examines the growing intolerance for religious diversity fueled by extremism and existing problematic Pakistani legislation, citing recent occurrences of attacks targeting religious minorities in Pakistan.

Background

Pakistan's [*population*](#) is 96.3 percent [*Muslim*](#) (85–90 percent Sunni, 10–15 percent Shi'a, and 0.2 percent Ahmadi) with smaller populations of Hindus (1.6 percent); Christians (1.6 percent); and Sikhs, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians (<1.0 percent). Pakistan was established as an Islamic Republic in 1956, granting special status for Islam—for example, only [*Muslims*](#) can serve as president and prime minister. Article 2 of the Pakistani [*constitution*](#) establishes Islam as the state religion. Article 20 nominally protects religious freedom by prohibiting faith-based discrimination and guaranteeing the right to religious practices and religious education. The constitution reserves [*10 seats*](#) for religious minorities in the National Assembly, 4 seats in the Senate, and 23 seats in four provincial assemblies. However, a constitutional amendment added in 1974 declares Ahmadis non-Muslims, excluding them from representation.



In addition to these provisions, Pakistan maintains several laws, including criminal blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws, that further restrict the freedom of religion or belief and are often used to target religious minorities.

State Enforcement of Blasphemy Laws

Pakistan inherited its blasphemy laws from its British colonial rulers, who justified them to ease [communal tensions](#). The laws made it a [criminal offense](#) to

insult with deliberate and malicious intent the religious sentiments of any religious group. These colonial laws were adopted in 1947 as the [Pakistan Penal Code](#) (PPC) and eventually modified in the 1980s under military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq to protect Islam under Section 295 while undermining the rights of religious minorities, particularly the Ahmadiyya community under [Chapter XV](#) ‘Of Offences Related To Religion’ under Sections 298-B and 298-C.

Article 295 of PPC - Offences Relating to Religion:

295. Injuring or defiling a place of worship, with intent to insult the religion of any class: Whoever destroys, damages, or defiles any place of worship, or any object held sacred by any class of persons with the intention of thereby insulting the religion of any class of persons or with the knowledge that any class of persons is likely to consider such destruction, damage, or defilement as an insult to their religion, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to two years, or with fine, or with both.

A. Deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs: Whoever, with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings of any class of the citizens of Pakistan, by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representations insults the religion or the religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, or with fine, or with both.

B. Defiling, etc., of Holy Qur'an: Whoever willfully defiles, damages, or desecrates a copy of the Holy Qur'an or of an extract therefrom or uses it in any derogatory manner or for any unlawful purpose shall be punishable with imprisonment for life.

C. Use of derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of the Holy Prophet: Whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation or by any imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to fine.

Those accused of blasphemy face violence, imprisonment with limited opportunity for bail, and even the death sentence, although no blasphemy convict has been executed by the state in Pakistan. Even if acquitted by a court of law, the accused and their family are often ostracized or expelled from the community and face continued aggression. Mere allegations of blasphemy are enough to cause riots and the killing of the accused by armed assailants or vigilante groups.

Blasphemy laws are also used to fulfill personal vendettas and disputes, and they often target religious minority communities and those with differing beliefs. In December 2020, USCIRF published a [report](#) entitled *Violating Rights: Enforcing the World's Blasphemy Laws*, which examined the enforcement of blasphemy laws worldwide over a five-year period. This report found that the country with the most cases of state enforcement of blasphemy laws was Pakistan. According to [reports](#), 84 individuals were charged with blasphemy in 2021.

Among the prisoners accused of blasphemy in Pakistan who are highlighted on USCIRF's Freedom of Religion and Belief Victims List are [Junaid Hafeez](#), [Asif Pervaiz](#), [Stephen Masih](#), [Notan Lal](#), and [Aneeqa Ateeq](#). However, many others charged with blasphemy remain imprisoned or on death row.

Mob Violence Incited by Blasphemy Allegations

Many of those who are charged or merely accused of blasphemy are killed by vigilante mobs or in targeted killings. In December 2021, workers at a factory in Sialkot lynched factory manager Piryantha Kumara, a [Sri Lankan](#) national. The attackers accused Kumara of blasphemy for tearing down a poster with Islamic holy verses. The lynching went viral on social media as hundreds of onlookers recorded the incident, many of whom [chanted slogans](#) used by supporters of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP)—an Islamist extremist political party—as the perpetrators set Kumara's body ablaze. In [April 2022](#), an anti-terrorism court in Pakistan sentenced six men to death and nine others to life in prison, and 72 additional suspects to “rigorous” jail terms of two years each, for lynching Kumara after [Sri Lankan officials](#) demanded justice from Pakistani authorities.

Just months later, in February 2022, an angry mob stoned to death Muhammad Mushtaq, a [mentally ill](#) man accused of burning the Qur'an, in Khanewal District, Punjab Province. Officers at the scene were also injured

while trying to take the accused into custody. The mob of some 300 people then hung his body from a tree. Videos shared on social media showed a large crowd gathered at the site.

Blasphemy accusations also provoke violence targeting religious minorities and their property. For example, in 2019, [Notan Lal](#), the owner and principal of a private school in Ghotki, Sindh, was accused by a student of insulting the Prophet Muhammad during an Urdu lesson. The 2019 accusation prompted mob violence and the vandalization of Hindu minority properties, including the school where the incident reportedly took place and a nearby Hindu temple. In February 2022, Lal was sentenced to life in prison and fined on charges of blasphemy under Article 295(c) of the PPC for “derogatory remarks in respect of the Holy Prophet.” His appeal remains pending despite pleas of innocence.

Targeted Killings

During the first six months of 2022, targeted killings were mostly directed at males in leadership positions from religious minority communities. In January 2022 an unknown gunman killed a [Christian priest](#) and wounded another as they drove home from Sunday mass in Peshawar. In May 2022, two Sikh businessmen were gunned down by unidentified assailants in Peshawar. Also in May 2022, an [Ahmadi man](#) was stabbed to death by a seminary student in Okara District, Punjab Province. According to the First Incident Report (FIR), the victim's family members [accused](#) the chief cleric of the seminary of provoking the student to commit murder by delivering religious speeches inciting violence against the Ahmadiyya community.

Anti-Ahmadiyya Laws

In 1974, the Pakistani government, under then Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, constitutionally redefined the status of the Ahmadiyya, formerly recognized by the government as a Muslim sect. Under the military dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistan adopted Ordinance XX of 1984, a legal ordinance amending the PPC making it a criminal offense for members of the Ahmadiyya community to refer to themselves as Muslims, contrary to their beliefs. Sections 298-B of the [PPC](#) further make it a criminal offense for Ahmadis to use language and names associated with the Prophet, use Muslim practices in worship, or propagate their faith.

Article 298 of PPC – Misuse of epithets, descriptions and titles, etc., reserved for certain holy personages or places:

B. (1) Any person of the Qadiani group or the Lahori group (who call themselves “Ahmadis” or by any other name who by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation—

(a) refers to, or addresses, any person, other than a Caliph or companion of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), as “Ameer-ul-Mumineen”, “Khalifatul- Mumineen”, “Khalifa-tul-Muslimeen”, “Sahaabi” or “Razi Allah Anho”;

(b) refers to, or addresses, any person, other than a wife of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), as “Ummul-Mumineen”.

(c) refers to, or addresses, any person, other than a member of the family “Ahle-bait” of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), as “Ahle-bait”; or

(d) refers to, or names, or calls, his place of worship a “Masjid”;

shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years and shall also be liable to fine.

B. (2) Any person of the Qadiani group or Lahori group (who call themselves “Ahmadis” or by any other name) who by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation refers to the mode or form of call to prayers followed by his faith as “Azan”, or recites Azan as used by the Muslims, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years, and shall also be liable to fine.

298 - C. Person of Qadiani group, etc., calling himself a Muslim or preaching or propagating his faith: Any person of the Qadiani group or the Lahori group (who call themselves ‘Ahmadis’ or by any other name), who directly or indirectly, poses himself as a Muslim, or calls, or refers to, his faith as Islam, or preaches or propagates his faith, or invites others to accept his faith, by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representations, or in any manner whatsoever outrages the religious feelings of Muslims shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years and shall also be liable to fine.

Under these laws, the reference to the Ahmadiyya leader as the Caliph or the Messiah of Islam is considered blasphemy. Ahmadiyya Muslims are prohibited from printing, obtaining, or distributing material related to their faith, making citations from the Qur’an or *hadiths*, using the *kalmah* or Muslim creed (in personal inscriptions including invitations, gravestones, signs, jewelry, etc.), building mosques or calling their places of worship mosques, and making the call for Muslim prayers (the *adhan*). Virtually any public act of worship, devotion, or propagation by an Ahmadi can be treated as blasphemy, a criminal offense punishable by fine, imprisonment, or death.

These repressive laws and policies largely contribute to the systemic and societal discrimination against *Ahmadiyya Muslims* in Pakistan—discrimination that government officials often publicly support and enflame. Hardline clerics, religious groups, politicians, and political parties often use the country’s anti-Ahmadiyya laws and blasphemy laws as a rallying point. Officials’ use of fiery language incites violence and harassment of Ahmadis, including targeted killings, desecration of graves, demolition of Ahmadiyya mosques, unofficial boycotts of businesses, hate speech including from government officials, and online harassment.

For example, in May 2022, the *spokesperson for the Ahmadiyya* community in Pakistan reported that the body of an Ahmadi man was exhumed from his grave. There was one targeted killing of an Ahmadi man in *May* this year and four other attempted faith-based killings, according to reports from the Ahmadiyya community. In *March*, a Sunni Muslim man was killed by unidentified assailants working at the clinic of an Ahmadi Muslim doctor in Peshawar. From January 2022 to July 2022, the Ahmadiyya community reported that over 170 graves and at least two houses of worship were desecrated, often with the assistance of authorities. In *July 2022*, 53 Ahmadi graves were desecrated in Gujranwala District, Punjab Province under the supervision of the police. This year during *Eid ul Adha*, the Muslim holiday that marks the sacrifice of Prophet Abraham, several members of the Ahmadiyya community in Punjab Province were arrested for hurting Muslim sentiments by allegedly conducting Islamic ritual slaughter inside their homes in celebration of the holiday. Ahmadiyya community members say aggression towards them is influenced by the far-right Islamist groups such as the TLP.

Growing Extremism

Islamist extremist political groups and individuals use rhetoric and spread disinformation targeting religious minorities for personal and political gain. These groups are emboldened by Pakistan's laws and often use blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws as rallying points for their campaign slogans. In [June 2022](#), TLP and Ahl-i-Sunnat Wal Jamaat, a political and a religious group, respectively, chanted slogans demanding the expulsion of an Indian High Commissioner and the boycott of Indian products after India's Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) spokesperson Nupur Sharma made controversial statements about the Prophet Muhammad. The uproar led to the desecration of a [Hindu temple](#) in Karachi.

Further fueling this [extremism](#), Pakistani textbooks often portray religious minorities as second-class citizens. Activists and educators have criticized the revised Single National Curriculum (SNC) of Pakistan for its lack of religious inclusion. In [March 2022](#), however, Pakistan's Federal Ministry of Education said that Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, the Baha'i faith, Christianity, Hinduism, Kalash, and Sikhism will be added to the nation's religious studies curriculum in the SNC.

Abduction, Marriage, and Forced Conversion to Islam

Cases of abduction, forced conversion to Islam, rape, and forced marriage remained imminent threats for religious minority women and children, particularly from the Christian, Hindu, and Sikh faiths. In [January 2022](#), Mahnoor Ashraf, a 14-year-old Christian girl in Lahore was abducted, forcefully converted to Islam, and married to a 45-year-old Muslim neighbor, Muhammad Ali Khan Ghauri. Ashraf's family filed charges against Ghauri for forcibly converting a minor. However, the Islamic marriage certificate used to document the marriage states that she was 19, even though her birth certificate proved otherwise. In [March 2022](#), Pooja Kumari, an 18-year-old Hindu girl was shot dead in Sindh Province when she resisted an abduction for forced marriage attempt.

Currently, there is no existing law that specifically criminalizes forced conversions or protects minority faith women in Pakistan. In [October 2021](#), a parliamentary committee rejected a bill proposed to protect minorities against forced conversion that was also opposed by Pakistan's Ministry of Religious Affairs. Parliamentarians argued that setting an age limit for conversions by non-Muslims "goes against Islam and the Constitution of Pakistan."

While women from minority faiths often endure forced conversion through marriage, some men from minority faiths are coerced to convert through socio-economic means. In Pakistan, religious minorities particularly from the Hindu and Christian communities are overwhelmingly in a lower socio-economic position making them particularly vulnerable. Individuals and organizations in affluent positions use economic [incentives](#) like financial support and debt forgiveness to persuade religious minority families to convert to Islam. In some instances, [conversion](#) to Islam is seen as a way to avoid religious discrimination and violence.

Conclusion

As outlined in this factsheet, international religious freedom conditions in Pakistan remain dire. The existence and enforcement of blasphemy laws and anti-Ahmadiyya laws facilitate Islamist extremist elements and support their narrative that leaves little space for religious inclusion. Pakistan's laws further fail to protect religious minorities at increasing risk of abduction, forced marriage, and forced conversion to Islam. As the U.S. government continues to engage with Pakistan, it should continue to raise religious freedom concerns and ensure protection of religious communities targeted by Pakistan's problematic laws and extremist groups, including by implementing the recommendations contained in USCIRF's [2022 Annual Report](#).



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