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2017 REPORT ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM - PAKISTAN

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion and requires all provisions of the law to be consistent with Islam. The constitution also states, “subject to law, public order, and morality, every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice, and propagate his religion.” The courts continued to enforce blasphemy laws, whose punishment ranges from life in prison to the death sentence for a range of charges, including “defiling the Prophet Muhammad.” According to civil society reports, there were at least 50 individuals imprisoned on blasphemy charges, at least 17 of whom had received death sentences. According to data provided by civil society organizations (CSOs), police registered at least 10 new blasphemy cases against 17 individuals. CSOs reported lower courts often failed to adhere to basic evidentiary standards in blasphemy cases. In April a mob shot and beat to death Mashal Khan, a student at Abdul Wali Khan University in Mardan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), following an accusation of blasphemy later deemed by investigators to be false, which prompted widespread condemnation in the country. Ahmadiyya Muslim Community leaders and human rights organizations continued to express concerns about the government’s targeting of Ahmadis for blasphemy, and Ahmadis continued to be affected by discriminatory and ambiguous legislation that denied them basic rights. On October 2, the president signed into law a bill that changed the electoral oath affirming belief that the Prophet Muhammed is the final prophet of Islam to a “declaration” and abolished separate voter lists for Ahmadis, sparking weeks of protest. In response, the government attributed the change in the oath to “clerical error,” and parliament reversed the provisions. Throughout the year, government officials engaged in anti-Ahmadi rhetoric and attended events that Ahmadi Muslims said incited violence against members of their community. Members of religious minority communities continued to raise concerns regarding the government’s inconsistency in safeguarding minority rights, and official discrimination against religious minorities persisted. CSOs expressed concern that authorities often failed to intervene in instances of societal violence against religious minorities, and police often failed to arrest perpetrators of such abuses.

Armed sectarian groups connected to organizations banned by the government as extremist, as well as groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United States and other governments, staged attacks targeting Christians, Ahmadi Muslims, Sufi Muslims, and Shia Muslims, including the predominantly Shia Hazara community. On February 16, a suicide bomber at the Lal Shahbaz Qalander Sufi shrine in Sehwan, Sindh, killed at least 88 persons and injured more than 200 who were gathered for a ritual. The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) later claimed responsibility. In January, March, and June, terrorist groups targeted markets in the Shia majority city of Parachinar, Kurram Agency, Federally Administered Tribal Area, killing at least 115 persons and injuring nearly 400. On December 17, suicide bombers killed nine and injured nearly 60 worshippers at a church in Quetta, Balochistan; ISIS-K claimed responsibility for the attack. The government continued to implement the National Action Plan (NAP) against terrorism, including countering sectarian hate speech and extremism as well as military and law enforcement operations against terrorist groups. Civil society groups, however, expressed ongoing concerns about the safety of religious minorities.

Throughout the year, unidentified attackers targeted and killed Shia, Hazaras, and Ahmadis in attacks believed to be religiously motivated; the attackers’ relationship to organized terrorist groups was often unclear. Attacks against Shia members of the minority Hazara ethnic group increased during the year. In five separate incidents, unidentified assailants shot and killed 15 members of the Hazara Shia community. Assailants killed at least seven members of the Ahmadi community in multiple incidents that appeared to be targeted attacks. There were

numerous reports of societal violence related to allegations of blasphemy; of efforts by individuals to coerce religious minorities to convert to Islam, including forced conversions of young girls; and of societal harassment, discrimination, and threats of violence directed at members of religious minority communities. There also continued to be reports of attacks on the holy places, cemeteries, and religious symbols of religious minorities.

Senior officials from the U.S. Department of State, including the Ambassador, the Special Advisor on Religious Minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia, and embassy officers met with senior advisors to the prime minister, the minister for human rights, and officials from the Ministry of Law and Justice, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony to discuss the need to combat sectarian violence, to ensure the protection of religious minorities, and to limit the misuse of provisions of blasphemy law. Embassy officers met with civil society leaders, local religious leaders, religious minority representatives, and legal experts to discuss ways to combat intolerance and promote dialogue on interfaith cooperation to increase religious freedom. Visiting U.S. government officials met with madrassah board leaders and members of the National Counterterrorism Authority to discuss plans for curriculum reform in the public and madrassah education systems. They also met with minority community representatives, parliamentarians, human rights activists, and members of the Office of the Prime Minister to highlight concerns regarding the treatment of the Shia, Ahmadiyya, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, and other minority communities, the application of blasphemy laws, and other forms of discrimination on the basis of religion. The Department of State publicly condemned terrorist attacks throughout the year, including the February attack on the Lal Shahbaz Qalandar shrine; attacks in the Shia majority city of Parachinar; the October attack on the Jhal Magsi shrine in Balochistan; and the December bombing of the Bethel Memorial Methodist Church in Quetta. On December 22, 2017, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed Pakistan on a Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 204.9 million (July 2017 estimate). According to a national census conducted in 1998, 95 percent of the population is Muslim (75 percent of the Muslim population is listed officially as Sunni and 25 percent as Shia). Per government figures, the remaining 5 percent includes Ahmadiyya Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Parsis/Zoroastrians, Bahais, Sikhs, Buddhists, Kalasha, Kihals, and Jains.

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

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

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion but states “subject to law, public order, and morality, every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice, and propagate his religion.” A 1984 amendment to the penal code restricted the rights of members of the Ahmadiyya community to propagate their faith.

According to the constitution, every citizen also shall have the right to freedom of speech, subject to “reasonable restrictions in the interest of the glory of Islam,” as stipulated in the penal code. According to the penal code, the

punishments for persons convicted of blasphemy include the death sentence for “defiling Prophet Muhammad,” life imprisonment for “defiling, damaging, or desecrating the Quran,” and 10 years’ imprisonment for “insulting another’s religious feelings.” Speech or action intended to incite religious hatred is punishable by up to seven years’ imprisonment.

The constitution defines “Muslim” as a person who “believes in the unity and oneness of Almighty Allah, in the absolute and unqualified finality of the Prophethood of Muhammad ... the last of the prophets, and does not believe in, or recognize as a prophet or religious reformer, any person who claimed or claims to be a prophet after Muhammad ... ” It also states “a person belonging to the Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, or Parsi community, a person of the Qadiani group or the Lahori group (who call themselves Ahmadis), or a Bahai, and a person belonging to any of the scheduled castes” is a “non-Muslim.”

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

The penal code criminalizes “deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs” and provides for a sentence of up to 10 years in prison.

A 2015 constitutional amendment allows military courts to try civilians for terrorism, sectarian violence, and other charges; this authority was renewed in January for an additional two years. The government may also use special civilian terrorism courts to try cases involving violent crimes, terrorist activities, and acts or speech deemed by the government to foment religious hatred, including blasphemy.

The constitution states no person shall be required to take part in any religious ceremony or attend religious worship relating to a religion other than the person’s own.

The constitution provides for “freedom to manage religious institutions.” It states every religious denomination shall have the right to establish and maintain its own institutions. The constitution states no person shall be compelled to pay any special tax on the propagation or maintenance of a religion other than the person’s own. The government collects a 2.5 percent *zakat* (tax) from Sunni Muslims and distributes the funds to Sunni mosques, madrassahs, and charities.

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

The provincial and federal governments have legal responsibility for certain minority religious properties abandoned during the 1947 partition of British India.

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

The constitution states the government shall make Islamic studies compulsory for all Muslim students in state-run schools. Although students of other religious groups are not legally required to study Islam, schools do not always offer parallel studies in their own religious beliefs, and the students may have no other option. In some schools,

however, non-Muslim students may study ethics. Parents may send children to private schools, including religious schools, at the family's expense. Private schools are free to teach or not teach religious studies.

By law, madrassahs are prohibited from teaching or encouraging sectarian or religious hatred or violence. The law requires all madrassahs to register with one of five *wafaqs* (independent boards) or directly with the government, to account for their sources of financing, and to accept foreign students only with valid student visas, a background check, and the consent of their governments.

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." It further states no law shall be enacted which is "repugnant" to Islam. The constitution states this requirement shall not affect the "personal laws of non-Muslim citizens" or their status as citizens. Personal laws regulating marriage, divorce, and inheritance for minority communities date from pre-partition British legislation.

The constitution establishes a Federal Shariat Court (FSC) composed of Muslim judges to examine and decide whether any law or provision is "repugnant to the injunctions of Islam." The constitution gives the court the power to examine a law of its own accord or at the request of the government or a private citizen. The constitution requires the government to amend the law as directed by the court. The constitution empowers the court to review criminal cases relating to certain crimes, including rape and those linked to Islamic morality, such as extramarital sex, alcohol use, and gambling. The court may suspend or increase the sentence given by a criminal court in these cases. The court exercises "revisional jurisdiction" (the power to review of its own accord) in such cases in lower courts, a power which applies whether the cases involve Muslims or non-Muslims. Non-Muslims may consult the FSC in other matters which affect them or violate their rights if they so choose. Decisions of the court may be appealed to the Supreme Court.

The constitution establishes a Council of Islamic Ideology to make recommendations, at the request of the parliament and provincial assemblies, as to "the ways and means of enabling and encouraging Muslims to order their lives in accordance with the principles of Islam." The constitution further empowers the council to advise the legislative and executive branches when they choose to refer a question to the council, as to whether a proposed law is or is not "repugnant to the injunctions of Islam."

In the absence of specific language in the law authorizing civil or common law marriage, marriage certificates are signed by religious authorities and registered with the local marriage registrar. In March the government enacted legislation codifying the legal mechanisms to register Hindu marriages and to prove the legitimacy of Hindu marriages under the law, a move which proponents state could help reduce the frequency of forced marriages and conversions of Hindus. The law allows for the termination of the marriage upon the conversion of one party to a religion other than Hinduism.

The government considers the marriage of a non-Muslim woman dissolved by the government if she converts to Islam, although a non-Muslim man may convert and his marriage remains recognized. Children born to a non-Muslim couple are considered illegitimate and ineligible for inheritance if their mother converts to Islam. The only way to legitimize the marriage and the children is for the husband also to convert to Islam. The children of a Muslim man and a Muslim woman who both convert to another religious group are considered illegitimate, and by law the government may take custody of the children.

The constitution directs the state to "safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of minorities," to secure the well-being of the people irrespective of creed, and to discourage sectarian prejudices. It forbids discrimination against any religious community in the taxation of religious institutions. The National Commission on Human Rights, an independent government-funded agency, is required to receive petitions, conduct investigations, and request remediation on human rights violations; it has quasi-judicial powers and can refer cases for prosecution but does not have arrest authority.

According to the constitution, there shall be no discrimination on the basis of religion in appointing individuals to government service, provided they are otherwise qualified.

The constitution prohibits discriminatory admission based on religious affiliation to any governmental educational institution. According to regulations, the only factors affecting admission to government schools are students' grades and home provinces; however, students must declare their religious affiliation on application forms. This declaration is also required for private educational institutions, including universities. Students who identify

themselves as Muslims must declare in writing they believe the Prophet Muhammad is the final prophet. Non-Muslims are required to have the head of their local religious communities verify their religious affiliation.

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

The constitution requires the president and prime minister to be Muslims. All senior officials, including members of parliament, must swear an oath to protect the country's Islamic identity. The law requires that elected officials swear an oath affirming their belief that the Prophet Muhammad is the final prophet of Islam.

There are reserved seats for religious minority members in both the national and provincial assemblies. The 342-seat National Assembly has 10 seats for religious minorities. The 104-seat Senate has four reserved seats for religious minorities, one from each province. In the provincial assemblies, there are three such reserved seats in KP; eight in Punjab; nine in Sindh; and three in Balochistan. Political parties elected by the general electorate choose the minority individuals who hold these seats; they are not elected by the minority constituencies they represent.

The country is party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and maintains two reservations: 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 (Law of Evidence)," under which the in-court testimony of men is given greater weight than that of women; 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

Summary paragraph: Civil society organizations continued to voice concern about the application of the country's blasphemy laws. According to civil society reports, there were at least 50 individuals imprisoned on blasphemy charges, at least 17 of whom had received death sentences. According to data provided by CSOs, police registered at least 10 new blasphemy cases against 17 individuals. There were at least two minors imprisoned for blasphemy in Punjab Province. Civil society groups said the blasphemy laws disproportionately impacted members of religious minority communities. The Supreme Court acquitted two persons charged with blasphemy during the year; a third case was closed due to the death of the accused while awaiting trial, while other blasphemy cases continued without resolution. A high-profile government campaign against blasphemy on social media resulted in several indictments and legislation codifying the criminalization of online blasphemy. A Supreme Court hearing for the appeal of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman sentenced to death for blasphemy in 2010, remained on indefinite hold since October 2016. Several sources reported the continued practice of initiating blasphemy complaints against neighbors, peers, or business associates to intimidate them or to settle personal grievances, and said there were instances in which government entities such as the police and courts were complicit in this practice. Legal observers said authorities took steps to protect some individuals from unfounded accusations of blasphemy, although lower courts continued to fail to adhere to basic evidentiary standards in blasphemy cases. Despite an August directive from the Islamabad High Court, the parliament took no action to amend the penal code to make the penalties for false accusations of blasphemy commensurate with those for committing blasphemy. According to Ahmadiyya community leaders, the targeting and harassment of Ahmadi Muslims for blasphemy and other purported violations of law persisted. In October the president signed into law a bill that changed the electoral oath affirming belief that the Prophet Muhammad is the final prophet of Islam to a "declaration" and abolished separate voter lists for Ahmadis, sparking an uproar and weeks of protests by supporters of cleric Khadim Hussain Rizvi and his Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan political party, which said the change in the electoral oath was tantamount to blasphemy. In October and November, parliament passed legislation reversing both changes. Some government officials engaged in anti-Ahmadi rhetoric and attended events that Ahmadi Muslims said incited violence against members of their community. The government continued to prosecute counterterrorism actions under the NAP, which included an explicit goal of countering sectarian hate speech and extremism. Civil society groups expressed concern that authorities often failed to intervene in instances of societal violence against

religious minorities, and police failed to arrest perpetrators of such abuses. NGOs and media outlets, however, reported police intervention helped to prevent religiously based violence on some occasions. Members of religious minority communities stated the government was inconsistent in safeguarding minority rights, and official discrimination against Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Ahmadiyya Muslims persisted. A bill passed by the Sindh Assembly in November 2016 criminalizing forced conversions stalled when the governor declined to ratify it, disappointing religious minority activists.

In April a mob attacked, shot, and beat university student Mashal Khan to death on the campus of Abdul Wali Khan University in Mardan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, following an accusation of blasphemy. According to university administrator statements, police who reported to the scene were unable to control the mob because there were so many students involved. A subsequent police investigation found that a group at the university had manufactured the blasphemy allegation against Khan due to his activism on campus. Members of the public and government officials, including the prime minister, condemned the killing. On September 19, an Anti-Terrorism Court (ATC) indicted 57 individuals, including university employees, for their roles in the killing. The trial was ongoing at year's end.

In January according to media reports, five secular social media activists who had criticized the government disappeared from cities around the country, triggering a public outcry against the government, which was widely believed to be responsible for the abductions. While the activists were missing, a number of Muslim clerics launched a social media campaign labeling the bloggers as blasphemers deserving of death. Four of the five activists reappeared several weeks later. In October one of the bloggers publicly stated he had been tortured by a state intelligence agency during his disappearance. As of year's end, the whereabouts and fate of the fifth blogger, Samar Abbas, remained unknown. On December 22, the Federal Investigation Agency told the Islamabad High Court that it had found no evidence the bloggers had committed blasphemy.

According to press reports, in October Majlis Wahdat-ul-Muslimeen, a Shia political organization, launched a protest campaign in Karachi to highlight the issue of Shia activists who had been unlawfully detained or "disappeared" by authorities in recent years. Shia representatives had previously reported the government targeted Shia activists under the pretense of law enforcement actions. The Sindh chief minister denied the allegations.

According to CSOs, Indrias Masih, a Christian accused along with 41 others of lynching two Muslim men, died of gastrointestinal tuberculosis in August in Kot Lakhpat Jail in Lahore. Some organizations said prison authorities neglected Masih's health due to his status as a minority member. An ATC indicted Masih and the other 41 on charges of murder and terrorism in September 2016. The lynching allegedly occurred after terrorists bombed two Christian churches in March 2015. The trial was ongoing at year's end.

According to data provided by CSOs, police registered new cases against at least 17 individuals under blasphemy laws during the year, compared with 18 new cases in 2016. There were continued reports of individuals initiating blasphemy complaints against neighbors, peers, or business associates to settle personal disputes or to intimidate vulnerable persons. While the law requires a senior police official to investigate any blasphemy charge before a complaint can be filed, human rights activists said police did not uniformly follow this procedure. According to religious organizations and human rights groups, religious minorities continued to be disproportionately accused of blasphemy relative to their small percentage of the population. CSOs also stated police continued not to file charges against many individuals who made false blasphemy accusations, and if charges were filed, courts most often acquitted those accused.

On June 11, an ATC in Bahawalpur, Punjab, sentenced Taimoor Raza, a Shia Muslim, to death after he was convicted of posting blasphemous material on social media. The verdict represented the first time courts had convicted an individual for blasphemy stemming from a social media posting. The appeals process was ongoing at year's end.

On September 14, a court in Gujrat, Punjab, sentenced Nadeem James, a Christian man, to death after he was convicted of sending blasphemous content via WhatsApp. James appealed the verdict to the Lahore High Court, and the case was pending at year's end.

On October 12, a court in Sheikhpura, Punjab, sentenced three Ahmadis to death for blasphemy based on an incident that occurred in 2014. According to representatives of the Ahmadiyya community, the acts of blasphemy

allegedly committed by the three involved their removal of posters that advocated the murder of Ahmadis with impunity due to their alleged apostasy.

In May a court in Rawalpindi sentenced Zafar Bhatti, a Christian, to life in prison for allegedly sending blasphemous text messages in 2012. Bhatti's lawyer said he planned to appeal the case to the Lahore High Court.

In January an ATC in Lahore acquitted 115 individuals charged with burning more than 125 Christian homes in Joseph Colony in 2013, following a blasphemy allegation against a member of the Christian community. According to press reports, the courts cited a lack of evidence in the acquittal. At year's end, no one had been convicted for the incident. The Christian whose alleged blasphemy sparked the attack remained on death row following his 2014 conviction.

In May media reported police in Hub, Balochistan, arrested Prakash Kumar, a Hindu, for sharing allegedly blasphemous material on social media. Police refused to hand Kumar over to a mob that subsequently gathered outside the station. In the violence that followed, a minor was killed and three police officers were injured. Kumar's case was ongoing at year's end.

The Supreme Court's indefinite postponement of hearings regarding the case of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman sentenced to death for blasphemy in 2010, continued. Authorities arrested Bibi in June 2009 after a group of Muslim women with whom she was arguing accused her of blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad. The Supreme Court indefinitely postponed Bibi's October 2016 appeal hearing when a member of the three-judge bench assigned to the appeal unexpectedly recused himself. Prior to the judge's recusal, clerics affiliated with some religious organizations threatened death to anyone involved in Bibi's release. There was no subsequent hearing during the year.

In separate incidents in July and August, authorities in Punjab arrested two Christian teenagers for alleged blasphemy; the families of both boys said the accusations stemmed from interpersonal disputes. Another Christian teenager in Punjab, Nabeel (Masih) Amanat, remained in custody on blasphemy charges at year's end; he faced up to 10 years' imprisonment if convicted. Kasur District police arrested Amanat in September 2016 for sharing an allegedly blasphemous picture of the Kaaba in Mecca on Facebook.

On May 31, a court in Punjab sentenced two Ahmadis to three years' imprisonment for publishing an Ahmaddiya publication banned by the province in 2014. Ahmadi representatives said a court order had allowed them to keep publishing, but the Punjab Counter-Terrorism Division raided the publication's offices in December 2016, arresting four individuals. Ahmadi representatives stated those arrested were tortured while in police custody. An appeal against the judgment was pending with the Lahore High Court at year's end.

In March authorities in Lahore charged two Ahmadis with blasphemy for preaching their faith. A court rejected their request for bail, and at year's end they remained in prison awaiting trial.

Courts overturned some blasphemy convictions upon appeal, after the accused had spent years in prison. On February 27, the Supreme Court overturned a Balochistan High Court verdict of life imprisonment due to lack of evidence and exonerated Khuda Bakhsh, a man accused of burning a Quran in Naseerabad, Balochistan, in 2012. Bakhsh had been imprisoned for five years prior to the Supreme Court ruling. On June 7, the Supreme Court acquitted another individual convicted of burning a Quran based on lack of evidence. The Supreme Court verdict noted several inconsistencies and deficiencies in the original conviction, which stemmed from a 2006 allegation. On December 29, the Supreme Court, citing procedural irregularities related to evidence, overturned the life sentence of Mohammad Mansha for blasphemy after he had served nine years in prison. Mansha was arrested in 2008 after the imam of a mosque in Bahawalnagar, Punjab, told authorities Mansha had desecrated a copy of the Quran.

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

Authorities charged 77 Ahmadis in 10 separate religion-related cases during the year, according to Ahmadiyya Muslim community leaders. As of the end of the year, nine Ahmadis remained in prison on religion-related charges, including 80-year-old Abdul Shakoor, who was arrested by the Punjab Counter-Terrorism Division in December 2015 for selling Ahmadiyya religious books. In 2016 an ATC sentenced Shakoor to five years'

imprisonment for propagating the Ahmadiyya Muslim faith, and to an additional three years under the Anti-Terrorism Act for stirring up “religious hatred” and “sectarianism,” with sentences to run concurrently. In August a court overturned the blasphemy conviction of Ahmadi Qamar Ahmad Tahir after he had spent 21 months in prison. The authorities arrested Tahir in November 2015 for allegedly ordering the burning of a Quran at the factory where he worked as a security guard. A mob subsequently burned down the factory, an Ahmadiyya mosque, and several homes belonging to Ahmadis.

In the spring the government launched a high-profile crackdown on blasphemy on social media. In a March court order stemming from the blasphemy case against the five bloggers abducted in January, Islamabad High Court Justice Shaukat Aziz Siddiqui directed the government to block websites containing blasphemous material. In his order, Siddiqui called blasphemers “the biggest terrorists” and warned that if the government did not take action against them, “the patience of the followers of Holy Prophet (Peace be Upon Him) may run out of control.” The following week, then-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif called blasphemy an “unpardonable sin” and ordered authorities to apprehend and prosecute those who posted blasphemous material online. In April then-Minister of Interior Chaudhry Nisar said authorities had blocked 152 Facebook pages and put eight suspects on the country’s exit-control list. On May 10, millions of individuals received text messages from the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) warning them that uploading or sharing blasphemous content on social media was a punishable offense under the law. Human rights activists decried the public awareness campaign, arguing that it would encourage more mob attacks on alleged blasphemers. In September, at the behest of the Federal Investigation Agency, an ATC reportedly indicted four individuals for posting blasphemous content online. In October the PTA reported to parliament it had “taken action” against 188 websites and blocked 3,025 websites for containing blasphemous material. In November the media reported the PTA had created an interagency committee tasked with monitoring and blocking blasphemous content online. Human rights activists expressed concern the government would use this initiative as a pretext to suppress views on the internet that differed from those of the government, including on religious issues.

In May the newspaper *DAWN* said that 41 of the 64 groups banned by the National Counter-Terrorism Authority for involvement in terrorism were openly using Facebook to recruit and train followers, including sectarian groups responsible for attacks on members of religious minority communities.

According to civil society and media reports, there were cases in which government mediation prevented intercommunal mob violence. In September mediation by CSOs and government officials, including a federal minister, diffused tensions over an interfaith marriage in Qaidabad, Punjab. Police also intervened on several occasions to interdict mob violence directed at individuals accused of blasphemy.

A trial in a military court continued against two men accused of murder in the June 2016 killing of Amjad Sabri, a singer of Sufi devotional music. In addition to Sabri’s killing, Mohammad Ishaq and Mohammad Asim were charged with nine other counts of terrorism.

A bill passed by the Sindh Assembly in November 2016 criminalizing forced conversions remained pending at year’s end. The bill mandates a 21-day waiting period and a minimum age of 18 for any person wishing to convert, and it establishes a minimum sentence of five years for those convicted of forcing others to convert. On January 7, after some Muslim scholars and religious parties objected to some of the bill’s clauses, Sindh’s governor declined to ratify the bill and returned it to the Sindh Assembly for review. Religious minority activists expressed disappointment the bill had stalled and said they believed it would help protect underage girls belonging to religious minorities, who were particularly vulnerable to forced conversions through abductions, rape, and forced marriages.

In the weeks leading up to and during the Islamic month of Muharram, religiously significant for Shia Muslims, authorities at the federal and provincial levels restricted the movement and activities of an unknown number of clerics. According to civil society and media reports, the government targeted individuals known for exacerbating sectarian tensions. Some CSOs characterized the restrictions on clerics prior to the Ashura holiday as too broad. Provincial governments deployed hundreds of thousands of police and other security personnel to protect Shia religious ceremonies across the country during the commemoration of Ashura, which observers noted was more peaceful than in previous years.

In June, in the wake of three terrorist attacks targeting markets in the Shia majority city of Parachinar, Kurram Agency, Federally Administered Tribal Area, residents protested against the government’s failure to protect them

from sectarian violence. Frontier Constabulary officers fired on the protesters, killing four persons. Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa subsequently met with members of the Shia community in Parachinar, called for an inquiry into the shooting, and announced security improvements.

According to Ahmadiyya Muslim Community leaders, authorities continued to target and harass Ahmadi Muslims for blasphemy, violations of “anti-Ahmadi laws,” and other crimes. Ahmadiyya leaders stated the ambiguous wording of the legal provision forbidding Ahmadis from directly or indirectly identifying themselves as Muslims enabled officials to bring charges against members of the community for using the standard Islamic greeting or for naming their children Muhammad. Representatives also stated provincial authorities prevented Ahmadis from purchasing land near the community’s headquarters in Rabwah.

According to reports, the Senate Human Rights Committee continued to debate possible procedural reforms to discourage misuse of the country’s blasphemy laws, a legislative process begun in December 2016. In August the Islamabad High Court directed parliament to amend the penal code to make the penalties for false accusations of blasphemy commensurate with those for committing blasphemy. Parliament had not acted on the court’s direction as of year’s end.

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

The government failed to restrict advertisements or speeches inciting anti-Ahmadi violence in television and print media, despite a promise to do so in the 2014 NAP. Some government officials made anti-Ahmadi statements and attended events that vilified the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. In January the annual Khatm-e-Nabuwat conference was held in Lahore under the leadership of, among others, Punjab Minister of Specialized Healthcare and Medical Education Khawaja Salman Rafique and Punjab Minister of Primary and Secondary Health Khawaja Imran Nazir. Speakers called on the government to “stop the support of the Qadianis [a pejorative term for Ahmadi Muslims].” Then Federal Minister of Finance Ishaq Dar also addressed the conference and promised there would be no changes to the blasphemy laws. In February at a conference of political parties organized under the auspices of the International Majlis Tahaffuz Khatm-e-Nabuwat, an organization which aims to safeguard the “finality of prophethood,” several political leaders made anti-Ahmadiyya statements, including Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam President Maulana Fazl-ur-Rehman and Raja Zafar ul Haq, the chairman of the governing Pakistani Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N) party. In a meeting with Muslim clerics in October, Punjab Law Minister Rana Sanaullah said Ahmadis were more dangerous to Islam than any other “non-Muslim” minority.

The requirement that Muslim elected officials swear an oath affirming their belief that the Prophet Muhammed is the final prophet of Islam continued to discourage Ahmadi Muslims from seeking public office. In order to seek office, Ahmadis would be forced to do so as non-Muslims, despite self-identifying as Muslim. On October 2, the president signed into law a bill that changed the electoral oath to a “declaration” and abolished separate voter lists for Ahmadis. The change sparked a nationwide uproar, including a roughly three week sit-in by the Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP) political party, which is also known as Tehreek-e-Labaik Ya Rasool Allah and whose platform centers on enforcement of the blasphemy laws. The protesters said the change in the electoral oath was tantamount to blasphemy. Speaker of the National Assembly Ayaz Sadiq issued a statement attributing the change to a “clerical error,” and former Prime Minister Sharif set up a committee within the ruling PML-N to determine the individuals responsible for the change. On October 16, parliament reversed the changes to the oath, reverting back to the original wording. As demanded by the protesters, Law and Justice Minister Zahid Hamid resigned. The government also agreed to other demands, including to release the protesters who had been arrested and to make a report on its investigation into the alteration of the electoral oath; in exchange, Khadim Hussain Rizvi, head of the TLP, agreed not to issue a fatwah against Hamid. Some observers stated the government’s concessions to the TLP’s demands represented a surrender to extremism, and representatives of the Ahmadiyya Muslim

Community expressed concern that the actions signaled an escalation in state-sanctioned persecution of their community.

On October 10, in a speech in the National Assembly, Member of the National Assembly Safdar Awan, son-in-law of former Prime Minister Sharif, called for Ahmadis to be banned from service in the military or civil service and for institutions named for Ahmadis to be renamed. The speech was carried live on government-run Pakistan Television. The military subsequently issued a statement affirming its commitment to nonsectarianism.

On November 29, the Karachi City Council unanimously passed a resolution condemning the attempt to change the electoral oath and calling for punishment of the party responsible. Jamaat-i-Islami city council member Junaid Makati, who proposed the resolution, said the attempt to change the oath was a conspiracy between the PML-N government and “Jewish elites.”

On November 24, the Punjab Assembly passed a resolution demanding the government make the “finality of prophethood” a mandatory part of the school curriculum. Following the federal government’s November 25 agreement with the TLP, several hundred protesters affiliated with the TLP continued to stage a sit-in outside the Punjab Assembly to protest remarks by Punjab Law Minister Sanaullah which they said were tolerant of Ahmadis. The TLP ended its protest on December 2 after reaching an agreement with the Punjab government. While the terms of agreement were not made public, the TLP claimed the Punjab government made numerous concessions. The Punjab provincial government, however, did not confirm these claims, and observers stated there was no evidence any concessions were being implemented.

On November 30, in response to the protests, the Supreme Court issued an order that stated “there is no place in the public discourse to propagate the commission of an offense or to incite people to resort to violence. Broadcasts cannot encourage violence, extremism, militancy, or hatred.”

In December the Islamabad High Court temporarily banned television anchor Aamir Liaquat Hussain from appearing in the media for inciting hatred and violence. The court’s ruling came in response to a petition that accused Hussain of promoting religious intolerance by issuing Islamic fatwas on the air that led to incidents of sectarian violence.

The government continued efforts to enforce its previous bans on the activities of, and membership in, some religiously oriented groups it judged to be extremist or terrorist. The Ministry of Interior maintained a multitier schedule of groups that were either banned or had their activities monitored and curtailed. The schedule included individuals whose activities in the public sphere could also be curtailed.

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

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

According to civil society activists and monitoring organizations, some public school textbooks continued to include derogatory statements about minority religious groups, including Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and Christians. Civil society leaders said the teaching of religious intolerance remained widespread, and although multiple groups had presented recommendations for the removal of discriminatory content, the federal government had not taken the initiative to support the recommended changes. Monitoring groups said textbooks used in all four provinces for grades one to 10 continued to contain religiously intolerant and biased material against Hindus, Christians, and other religious minorities. These groups reported there were initiatives by some provincial authorities to remove discriminatory material and promote tolerance through the textbooks, such as the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board’s effort to incorporate short stories promoting peace and harmony into Urdu textbooks, which started in 2016 and ran until March when the initiatives ended. Books published after March did not explicitly include materials derived from the effort but did include some passages added as part of the initiatives. Punjab authorities also added a separate chapter on religious minority groups to some textbooks. While private schools remained free to choose whether or not to offer religious instruction, they were reportedly

under government pressure to teach Islamic studies. The government did not permit Ahmadis to teach Islamic studies in public schools.

There were continued reports that some madrassahs taught violent extremist doctrine. Increasing government supervision of madrassahs remained a component of the NAP, and there was evidence of continued government efforts to increase regulation of the sector. According to press reports, provincial authorities continued campaigns to geotag madrassahs. Press reports also indicated provincial authorities continued efforts to close madrassahs with connections to terrorism. The authorities prosecuted cases involving sectarian hate speech and restricted the movement and public sermons of some clerics accused of spreading sectarian hatred. Security analysts and madrassah reform proponents observed many madrassahs failed to register with one of five waqafs (religious endowments) or with the government, to provide to the government documentation of their sources of funding, or to accept foreign students only with valid student visas, a background check, and the consent of their governments, as required by law.

Members of religious minority communities said there continued to be inconsistent application of laws safeguarding minority rights and enforcement of protections of religious minorities at both the federal and provincial levels by the federal Ministry of Law and Justice, as well as by the federal Ministry of Human Rights and its provincial counterparts. Religious minorities said they remained concerned that government action to address coerced conversions of religious minorities to Islam was inadequate.

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

Some human rights groups criticized the government's commitment to the Ministry of Human Rights 2016 Action Plan for Human Rights, particularly its provisions related to religious minorities. The plan included nine provisions for the protection of the rights of minorities, among them enforcement of laws criminalizing incitement to religious hatred and protection for places of worship for minority religious groups.

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

In January the Sindh governor returned a law passed in November 2016 establishing a Minorities Commission for the province to the Provincial Assembly for further review. The law states the 11-member commission will examine government policy and laws and make recommendations to better protect the rights of minorities in Sindh. The commission would also have the inquiry powers of a civil court, including the ability to summon witnesses and receive evidence on affidavits. The draft law remained pending at year's end.

Religious minority community leaders continued to state that the government failed to take adequate action to protect minorities from bonded labor in the brick-making and agricultural sectors, an illegal practice in which victims were disproportionately Christians and Hindus. Such families, particularly on agricultural lands in Sindh Province, often lived without basic facilities and were prevented from leaving without the permission of farm landlords. In September the Punjab Provincial Assembly passed legislation which further amended a 2016 law prohibiting the use of child labor in the brick industry. Under the amended law, the penalty for employing children was increased from up to six months' imprisonment and a criminal fine to up to five years' imprisonment and a maximum fine of 500,000 rupees (\$4,500).

Historically, Hindu and Sikh leaders had noted the legal uncertainty surrounding the process of registering marriages for their communities created difficulties for Hindu and Sikh women in obtaining inheritances, accessing health services, voting, obtaining a passport, and buying or selling property. The enactment of the Hindu Marriage Act in March addressed many of these problems, but media reported some Hindu community leaders expressed concern that a provision of the national bill permitting annulment of Hindu marriages could be used to legitimize forced conversions of Hindu women. Members of the Sikh community continued to report difficulties related to the registration of marriages for their community. Some local administrative bodies continued to deny Christian and Ahmadi marriage registrations; advocates called for a new law governing Christian marriages, as the existing regulation dated to 1872. On June 19, the Lahore High Court restored a

section of a law on Christian divorce that General Zia ul Haq's government had suspended in 1981, allowing the country's Christian community an avenue to legally divorce for reasons other than adultery.

Legal experts and NGO representatives continued to state that the full legal framework for minority rights remained unclear. While the Ministry of Law and Justice was officially responsible for ensuring the legal rights of all citizens, in practice the Ministry for Human Rights assumed primary responsibility for the protection of the rights of religious minorities. In addition, the country's 18th amendment to the constitution devolved certain authorities and responsibilities for the protection of human rights and rights of religious minorities to provincial governments.

Minority religious leaders stated members of their communities continued to experience discrimination in admission to colleges and universities. Ahmadi representatives said the wording of the declaration students needed to sign on their applications for admission to university continued to prevent Ahmadis from declaring themselves as Muslims. Their refusal to sign the statement meant they were automatically disqualified from fulfilling the admissions requirements. The government maintained Ahmadis could qualify for admission as long as they did not claim to be Muslims. Ahmadiyya community leaders reported multiple Ahmadi students had been expelled from public universities after not disclosing their religious affiliation at initial admission.

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

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

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

Ahmadiyya leaders continued to report the government hindered Ahmadis from obtaining legal documents and pressured community members to deny their beliefs by requiring individuals wishing to be listed as Muslim on identity cards and passports to swear the Prophet Muhammad was the final prophet of Islam and the Ahmadiyya movement's founder was a false prophet. Ahmadiyya community representatives reported the word "Ahmadi" was written on their passports if they identified themselves as such. Ahmadiyya leaders continued to report the government effectively disenfranchised their community by requiring voters to swear an oath affirming the "finality of prophethood" in order to register as Muslims. Since voters who registered as Ahmadis were kept on a separate voter list, they said they were more exposed to threats and physical intimidation, and many Ahmadis did not try to participate in the political process. On December 16, media reported police in Sialkot, Punjab, had arrested six Ahmadis for listing themselves as Muslims on their identity cards and for registering to vote as Muslims during a local 2015 election.

Religious minority leaders continued to state the system of selecting minority parliamentarians through the internal deliberations of mainstream parties resulted in the appointment of party stalwarts or those who could afford to "buy the seats" rather than legislators who genuinely represented minority communities. They also stated the system effectively precluded the election of minority women, who were rarely in a position of sufficient influence with the major political parties to contend for a seat.

According to Ahmadiyya community members, authorities continued to seal or demolish Ahmadi mosques, barred construction of new mosques, and took no action to prevent attacks on mosques or punish assailants who demolished, damaged, forcibly occupied, or set Ahmadi mosques on fire. In May the Lahore High Court granted bail to 37 individuals accused of participating in a December 2016 attack on an Ahmadiyya mosque in Chakwal. During the incident, one of the attackers was killed, and one of the Ahmadiyya worshippers died of a heart attack. At year's end, 60 of the 67 attackers had been granted bail, one Ahmadi remained imprisoned on murder charges, and the mosque remained sealed. Following an attack on an Ahmadiyya procession in central Punjab in late 2016,

Ahmadiyya leaders reported the community undertook no processions in 2017, on the grounds the government's policies created conditions where Ahmadis could not safely hold processions or publicly congregate.

The government continued to deny citizens, regardless of religious affiliation, the right to travel to Israel. Representatives of the Bahai community said this policy particularly affected them because of the location of the Bahai World Center – the spiritual and administrative center of the community – in Israel.

On December 25, Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa attended a Christmas celebration at a church in Rawalpindi and expressed appreciation for the role Christians played in the country's public institutions and armed forces.

During an April gathering to celebrate the Hindu observance of Holi, then-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif condemned the practice of forced conversions and affirmed the constitution guaranteed equal rights for members of all religious communities.

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

ABUSES BY FOREIGN FORCES AND NONSTATE ACTORS

There continued to be violence and abuses committed by armed sectarian groups connected to organizations banned by the government, including Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (previously referred to as Sipah-e-Sahaba), as well as abuses by individuals and groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United States and other governments, such as ISIL-K. Data on sectarian attacks varied, as there was no standardized definition of what constituted a sectarian attack. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, 231 persons were killed and 691 injured in 16 incidents of sectarian violence during the year. Civil society groups expressed ongoing concerns about the safety of religious minorities and urged the government to fully implement its National Action Plan to combat terrorism, as well as the Supreme Court's June 2014 order regarding protection for members of religious minority groups.

On February 16, ISIS-K claimed responsibility for a suicide attack on the Sufi shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan, Sindh, which killed at least 88 people and injured more than 200 during a religious activity. In November the media reported the authorities had arrested a suspect in connection with the attack.

Sectarian violent extremist groups continued to target Shia houses of worship, religious gatherings, religious leaders, and other individuals in attacks resulting in at least 112 persons killed during the year. Some organizations recorded upwards of 220 Shia killed in at least 18 sectarian incidents during the year.

Terrorist groups targeted markets three times in the Shia majority city of Parachinar, Kurram Agency, Federally Administered Tribal Agency. On January 21, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami and the TTP claimed responsibility for a bomb attack that killed 25 persons and injured 87. On March 31, a suicide attack for which Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), a Sunni splinter faction of the TTP, claimed responsibility killed 25 persons and injured more than 100. On June 24, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi claimed responsibility for bomb blasts that killed 67 persons and injured more than 200.

On November 29, gunmen killed two worshippers as they exited a Shia mosque in Islamabad. Lashkar-i-Jhangvi al-Alami claimed responsibility for the attack.

In another attack, claimed by ISIS-K on October 6, a suicide bomber blew himself up at the shrine of Pir Rakhya Shah, which attracts both Sunni and Shia followers, in Jhal Magsi, Balochistan, killing 21 persons and injuring 24.

On December 17, suicide bombers killed nine and injured nearly 60 members of the Christian community in a terrorist attack on the Bethel Memorial Methodist Church in Quetta, Balochistan. One of the attackers blew himself up outside the church's main hall, where hundreds of worshippers had gathered for Sunday service, and police officers providing security for the church shot and killed another attacker. This was the first attack on a church in the country claimed by ISIS-K.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Throughout the year, unidentified attackers targeted and killed Shia, Hazaras, and Ahmadis in attacks believed to be religiously motivated. The attackers' relationship to organized terrorist groups was often unclear.

On February 26, unidentified assailants killed three members of the Shia community in Paroa, KP. Attacks against Shia members of the minority Hazara ethnic group increased over the past year. In at least five separate incidents, unidentified assailants targeted and killed at least 13 members of the Hazara community.

There were multiple instances of what appeared to be targeted killings of Ahmadiyya community members by unknown individuals. On March 30, gunmen killed an Ahmadi man riding on a motorbike in Nankana Sahib, Punjab; the man's son was injured in the attack. On April 7, unidentified gunmen on a motorbike killed an Ahmadi man walking to a mosque in Lahore. On April 18, unidentified assailants robbed and killed a female Ahmadi professor from Punjab University in Lahore. On May 3, gunmen killed an Ahmadi man while he was returning home.

On October 9, gunmen killed an Ahmadi husband, wife, and their two-year-old son in their home. Police investigated the incident as a so-called honor killing allegedly carried out by the wife's brother and his accomplices, who were angry she had married an Ahmadi man against her family's wishes.

There were media reports of numerous incidents of societal violence related to allegations of blasphemy. In April three sisters killed a Shia man near Sialkot, Punjab, whom they had accused of committing blasphemy 13 years earlier. The victim had fled the country due to the blasphemy allegations, which his family said were due to his Shia faith, but had recently returned. Also in April in Chitral, Punjab, a mob severely beat a man inside a mosque whom they said had made blasphemous remarks. The mosque's imam, fearing for the man's life, handed him over to the police, who filed blasphemy charges against him. In August two assailants in Tando Adam, Sindh, killed an intellectually disabled man who had been acquitted on blasphemy charges due to his condition; authorities arrested and investigated the perpetrators who confessed to killing him because he had committed blasphemy. Also in August near Wazirabad, Punjab, a mob gathered outside a police station after authorities arrested an 18-year-old Christian for allegedly burning pages of the Quran outside a shrine. Police moved the teenager to another police station and charged him with blasphemy.

In August a Muslim student in Burewala beat to death 17-year-old Sheron Masih, who was the only Christian in his grade level; Masih had complained of bullying. Police reportedly filed charges against several of the students.

Throughout the year, Islamic organizations with varying degrees of political affiliation held rallies and other events to support the doctrine of the finality of the Prophet Muhammad. The events, which were often covered by English and vernacular media, featured anti-Ahmadiyya rhetoric, including the incitement of violence against Ahmadis. Ahmadis continued to report widespread societal harassment and discrimination against members of their community, especially after the TLP protests in October and November.

The 2016 execution of Mumtaz Qadri, who was convicted of killing then-governor of Punjab Province Salman Taseer in 2011 after Taseer publicly criticized the country's blasphemy laws, continued to elicit protests from some religious groups. In its 2015 verdict confirming Qadri's death sentence, the Supreme Court stated criticism of the blasphemy laws was not blasphemy itself and vigilante violence was unacceptable. On January 4, police arrested 160 persons at a rally in Lahore celebrating Qadri's assassination of Taseer. In March thousands of persons gathered at Qadri's grave, which his family had turned into a shrine, to observe his death anniversary. Throughout the year, supporters visited the shrine to pay tribute to Qadri.

Reports continued of attempts to coerce religious minorities to convert to Islam. Rights activists reported victims of forced marriage and conversion were pressured and threatened into saying publicly they had entered into the marriage of their own free will. Christian and Hindu organizations stated that girls from their communities were particularly vulnerable to forced conversions. In April according to Christian activist organizations, a 14-year-old Christian girl was abducted by a police officer, held for four months in Hafizabad, Punjab, and forcibly converted to Islam. With the assistance of civil society organizations, the family won back custody of her. A criminal case against the girl's abductor was pending at year's end.

According to press reports, on June 6, four armed men kidnapped at gunpoint a Hindu teenager in Mirpukhas, Sindh. On June 8, the girl's parents led a protest demanding her return and alleging the kidnappers were receiving protection from politically-connected individuals in the locality. At year's end, the case was ongoing, and civil society organizations believed the girl remained in the custody of her kidnappers.

Christian activists continued to report widespread discrimination against Christians in private employment. They said Christians had difficulty finding jobs other than those involving menial labor; some advertisements for menial jobs even specified they were open only to Christian applicants.

Observers reported that some coverage in the English-language media of issues facing religious minorities had improved, but that journalists continued to face threats for covering these issues. In June Rana Tanweer, a journalist who covered minority rights issues for the newspaper *Express Tribune*, survived an assassination attempt when an assailant tried to run him over with a car; Tanweer escaped with a broken leg. A month earlier, according to Amnesty International and other human rights organizations, Tanweer's landlord received a call from someone who pressured him to evict Tanweer for his alleged "anti-Islam" stance. Several days later, someone spray-painted a message on Tanweer's home that read, "Qadiani supporter Rana Tanweer is an unbeliever who deserved to be killed."

Observers reported that Urdu-language media continued to show bias in reporting on minority religious groups, including multiple instances in which media used inflammatory language or made inappropriate references to minorities. Throughout the year commentators on private television channels and editorials in the vernacular press stated Ahmadis were "deserving of death" and labelled the community "enemies of Pakistan" and "blasphemers." For example, on October 3, Orya Maqbool Jaan said on his program on the private Neo TV channel that Ahmadis could be beheaded with impunity.

Human rights and religious freedom activists and members of minority religious groups reported they continued to be hesitant to speak in favor of religious tolerance because of the societal climate of intolerance and fear. Some activists reported receiving death threats because of their work.

There continued to be reports of attacks on religious minorities' holy places, cemeteries, and religious symbols, which police failed to prevent. According to media reports, an unidentified assailant threw a hand grenade in a church in Quetta, Balochistan, on October 7. No congregants were injured in the attack; there were no arrests for the incident by year's end.

In September the Pakistan Ulema Council, dominated by clerics from the Deobandi movement within Sunni Islam, issued a code of conduct for Muharram. The code of conduct specifically condemned sectarianism and urged the Sunni community to respect Shia processions around the Ashura holiday.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

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

In August the Secretary of State raised concerns about the country's enforcement of the blasphemy laws and the rights of members of the Ahmadiyya community in public remarks during the release of the 2016 International Religious Freedom Report.

Following the February attacks on the Lal Shahbaz Qalander shrine, the Department of State condemned the attacks during a press briefing and extended condolences to the victims and their families. In June the White House and the Department of State both condemned terrorist attacks in Quetta and the Shia majority city of Parachinar. In October the Department of State condemned the attack on the Jhal Magsi shrine in Balochistan. In December the Department of State condemned the attack on Bethel Memorial Methodist Church in Quetta.

In March the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia visited Islamabad and Karachi and met with religious minority community representatives, parliamentarians, members of the Office of the Prime Minister and the federal cabinet, and human rights attorneys. The Special Advisor highlighted concerns over attacks by violent extremists against members of religious minorities, the enforcement of blasphemy laws, and discrimination against Ahmadi Muslims.

In April the Consul General in Karachi, Sindh – the country’s most religiously diverse province – toured Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and Sikh places of worship to promote interfaith engagement. Following the tour, the Consul General held a roundtable discussion for local religious leaders to discuss interfaith dialogue and the rights of religious minorities.

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

On December 22, 2017, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed Pakistan on a Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.

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