

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, religious minorities in Pakistan, including Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Ahmadis, and Shi'a Muslims, continued to face attacks and discrimination from extremist groups and society at large. The government of Pakistan failed to protect these groups adequately, and it perpetrated systematic, ongoing, egregious religious freedom violations. Various media outlets promoted intolerance against religious minorities. Abusive enforcement of the country's strict blasphemy laws resulted in the suppression of rights for non-Muslims, Shi'a Muslims, and Ahmadis. Forced conversions of non-Muslims continued despite the passage of the Hindu Marriage Act, which grants greater rights in family law for Hindu citizens. The entry of fundamentalist, and often extremist, religious parties into the political arena in advance of July

2018 national elections further threatens religious minorities' already precarious status in the country. In May 2017, a USCIRF delegation visited Islamabad and met with Pakistani government officials, U.S. Embassy officials, representatives of civil society, and religious minority community leaders. Based on these violations, in 2018 USCIRF again finds that Pakistan should be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has found since 2002. Despite USCIRF's longstanding recommendation, the State Department has never so designated Pakistan. In December 2017, the State Department named Pakistan as the first, and only, country on its "Special Watch List," a new category created by December 2016 amendments to IRFA.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Pakistan as a CPC under IRFA;
- Negotiate a binding agreement with the government of Pakistan, under section 405(c) of IRFA, to achieve specific and meaningful reforms, with benchmarks including major legal reforms and releasing blasphemy prisoners, and accompany such an agreement with U.S.-provided resources for related capacity building through the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID);
- Ensure a portion of existing State Department Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor programs are geared to helping the government implement plans to ensure the physical security of religious minority communities, and to countering the extremist rhetoric that underlies their discriminatory treatment;
- Enhance support from the State Department and other relevant federal or federally funded organizations for non governmental groups engaging in conflict resolution and peace training for religious leaders and administrators of madrasa administration boards;
- Encourage the government of Pakistan to launch a public information campaign about the historic role of religious minorities in the country, their contributions to society, and their equal rights and protections, and use the tools of U.S. public diplomacy, such as educational and cultural exchanges and U.S.-funded media, to highlight similar themes;
- Use targeted tools against specific officials identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act; and
- Prioritize religious freedom issues in the U.S.-Pakistan bilateral relationship, and work with international organizations and representatives like the European Union (EU) Special Envoy for freedom of religion or belief outside the EU to jointly raise religious freedom concerns with Pakistani officials in Islamabad and in multilateral settings, including by:
 - Emphasizing to Pakistan's prime minister and military leadership the link between religious freedom and overall security in the country;
- Pressing the government of Pakistan to implement the two dozen religious freedom recommendations it accepted from its 2017 Universal Periodic Review by the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council, of which Pakistan is a member;
- Urging the government of Pakistan to repeal its blasphemy and anti-Ahmadi laws, until repeal can be accomplished, enact reforms to make blasphemy a bailable offense, require evidence by accusers, and allow investigatory authorities to dismiss unfounded accusations, and also urging the enforcement of existing penal code articles that criminalize perjury and false accusations; and
- Encouraging the government of Pakistan to enhance the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Inter-faith Harmony's role in fostering interfaith dialogue and empowering religious minority groups and to provide security and facilitate meetings between leaders and scholars from various religions and from the various Islamic sects.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Islamic Republic of Pakistan

GOVERNMENT

Federal Parliamentary Republic

POPULATION

207,774,520

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Islam

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

96.28% Muslim

85–90% Sunni

10–15% Shi'a

0.22% Ahmadi

1.59% Christian

1.60% Hindu

*Estimates compiled from the CIA World Factbook and Pakistan Bureau of Statistics

BACKGROUND

Pakistan is an ethnically diverse country with a population of 207 million people, according to the government's 2017 census. While the constitution establishes Islam as the state religion, articles 20 through 22 protect the rights of freedom of religion and religious education and articles 26 and 27 prohibit discrimination based on religion in relation to access to public places and provision of public services. There are 10 seats reserved for members of religious minority communities in the parliament. Yet, despite these provisions, the second amendment to the constitution prohibits Ahmadis from calling themselves Muslims or referring to their places of worship as mosques.

The continued operation of terrorist groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), and Tehrik-e-Taliban (Pakistani Taliban) challenges the overall security of the country. These groups threaten not only members of religious minority communities but also anyone who attempts to advocate on their behalf. This has resulted in politicians and judges avoiding the public promotion of rights for religious minorities, which

has fostered the spread of an increasingly divisive and anti-minority narrative among the public.

The government of Pakistan has not addressed the spread of sectarian or religiously motivated intolerant speech and has not prosecuted perpetrators of violent crimes against religious minorities. Despite the existence of specialized antiterrorism courts to deal

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with extremist suspects, a vast number of extremists have either been released from custody or avoided arrest and prosecution all together. Often, acquittals of terrorist suspects can be attributed to flawed police investi-

gation procedures, which continue to persist across Pakistan's police forces. Rather than addressing these institutional shortcomings, the civilian government gave control over terrorist prosecutions to military tribunals, which have had a higher rate of successful prosecutions but have also been accused of major violations of due process rights and for using torture against suspects.

The government of Pakistan has taken other steps to curb the capability of terrorist groups to target the public at large and religious minorities specifically. The

Zarb-e-Azb Operation launched by the military in 2014 in the western border region targeted sectarian terrorist groups like the Pakistani Taliban and LeJ, who have taken responsibility for several attacks against Christians, Shi'a Muslims, and Ahmadis. The impact of this operation continues to be felt today by terrorist groups who have a diminished capability to carry out attacks on vulnerable groups. The government has also provided additional security to religious minority groups, especially during religious festivals. Further, the National Action Plan of 2014 (NAP) set forth several strategies to deal with terrorism and address the spread of sectarianism and extremist ideology. Unfortunately, despite the elapse of three years, many of NAP's recommendations have not been implemented. Accordingly, religious minorities continue to deal with terrorist attacks, incitements to violence against them, and sociopolitical disenfranchisement.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2017

Conditions for Shi'a Muslims

During the past year, the Shi'a Muslim population continued to face security threats from extremist groups and increased social discrimination from the public. Nevertheless, there have been some positive developments in recent years, especially the decrease in targeted killings of Shi'a Muslims in Karachi in the aftermath of the law and order operation launched by the Army Rangers and city police in 2011. Further, the government has encouraged and facilitated intra-religious conferences that seek to bridge the growing sectarian divide in the country.

Despite government efforts, Shi'a Muslims continued to be targeted in parts of the country, especially in the restive border region. The LeJ and the Pakistani Taliban, who openly admit to the sectarian motives behind their missions, launched several attacks during the year. For example, in the aftermath of a January 2017 twin terrorist attack at a busy market in Parachinar and Quetta that left more than 80 people dead, the Pakistani Taliban claimed credit for the attack and explained it was meant to "teach a lesson to Shi'as."

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While other ethnic groups in Pakistan are also Shi'a Muslims, the Hazaras have a distinct appearance and have established their own neighborhoods and enclaves around the country. These two factors make Hazaras prime targets for sectarian extremist groups targeting Shi'a Muslims. Violent sectarian groups have perpetrated massive attacks on Hazara neighborhoods in places like Quetta despite the additional security provided by the government for those neighborhoods since 2013. In 2017, there were several kidnappings and murders of Hazaras, such as the attack on a coal miners' bus that left two Hazaras dead, and the January 2017 shooting that left five Hazaras dead and many others injured.

Conditions for Other Religious Minorities

Pakistan is home to many Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist, Parsi/Zoroastrian, and Christian citizens who face continued threats to their security and are subject to various forms of harassment and social exclusion. In December 2017, suicide bombers affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) attacked a church in Quetta, resulting in nine deaths. However, in a positive development, Ehsanullah Ehsan—the spokesman for Jamaat-Ul-Ahrar, the group that claimed responsibility for an attack in a public park against Christians on Easter in 2016—turned himself in to authorities and is in custody.

Social issues also continued to negatively impact non-Muslims. Forced conversion of women to Islam from various religious backgrounds continued in 2017. However, in February 2017 the Senate passed the Hindu Marriage Act to protect the rights of Hindus who wish to apply the family law prescribed by their religion. The act formally recognizes Hindu marriages and family law for the first time in the country's history. There was no substantive progress on the Christian Marriage and Divorce Bill of 2017, due to inaction by the government and disagreement among leaders in the Christian community. While the Christian Marriage and Divorce Bill was originally proposed in 2012, it stalled for several years before being sent to the Ministry of Human Rights for review before the National Assembly votes on the bill.

Non-Muslims remain on the periphery of the political sphere, with only 10 representatives granted to such minorities in parliament. After the 2017 census was released, non-Muslim leaders have complained that increases in their communities' population were not fully disclosed or reflected. Some activists have implied that the non-Muslim census figures have remained confidential because the non-Muslim population is likely entitled to more reserved seats in parliament based on its growth.

Blasphemy

By applying sections 295 and 298 of the penal code, Pakistani courts have continued to punish citizens for blasphemy. Since 2011, about 100 blasphemy cases have been registered, with nearly as many people currently serving prison sentences for blasphemy charges, approximately 40 of whom are awaiting the death penalty or are serving life sentences. This includes Asia Bibi, a Christian mother and field laborer who was sentenced to death by hanging based on allegations of blasphemy in 2010 and who has been in jail since awaiting appeal.

Others have been killed by mobs provoked by accusations of blasphemy, regardless of the accusation's veracity. In some cases, false allegations of blasphemy are made against religious minorities who are involved in a personal or legal conflict with a neighbor, colleague, or coworker. However, in a positive development, in January 2018, just after the end of the reporting period, the Pakistani Supreme Court ordered the release of an individual accused of blasphemy due to lack of credible evidence.

Pakistan's Telecommunication Authority has sent text messages to millions of citizens and released advertisements in local and national newspapers to emphasize that the nation's blasphemy laws apply to digital material. In 2017, authorities charged at least one individual for an allegedly blasphemous Facebook post. There is potential for digital blasphemy cases to explode in number, given the 35 million internet users in the country and nearly one million new users coming online each month.

Beyond their use online and against non-Muslims, blasphemy laws also have been used to delegitimize activists who challenge either religious orthodoxy or the role of the army in Pakistan. In 2017, after several progressive bloggers were disappeared by authorities due to their criticism of the army, blasphemy charges against the bloggers were made public. Despite being found innocent of blasphemy by the Islamabad High Court, several of these individuals were forced to flee Pakistan for their own safety.

Blasphemy charges also have been used to stifle discussion and dissent on Pakistan's college campuses. Merely discussing progressive ideas could lead to allegations of blasphemy. Junaid Hafeez was formerly employed by the Bahauddin Zakariya University in Multan and has been in jail since 2013 when he was accused of blasphemy based on a guest lecture he organized on women's rights. His case is further complicated by the fact that his original attorney, Rashid Rehman, was murdered by a religious extremist due to his defense of Hafeez.

In April 2017, college student and social activist Mashal Khan was murdered in broad daylight by a mob of students and administrators at Abdul Wali Khan University after he was accused of blasphemy. In

this case, the Supreme Court quickly ordered an investigation team to present findings on Khan's murder. The investigation team found that the blasphemy accusations against the victim were fabricated

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and recommended that the government adopt institutional reforms in order to avoid future incidents of mob violence based on false blasphemy allegations. While opposition political parties in parliament raised the issue of amending the blasphemy laws to criminalize false accusations in the aftermath of this incident, the government took no subsequent action.

The government has long failed to adopt measures that would repeal the blasphemy laws, despite their continued misuse against religious minorities and progressive Muslims. Furthermore, in late 2017 the government accepted the demands of Islamist protesters to hasten and ease the process of charging an individual

for blasphemy, although some of the specifics of these changes remain unclear.

Conditions for Ahmadis

In October of 2017, a parliamentary committee passed the Election Reform Act of 2017, which amended the Candidate's Nomination Form for Muslim candidates to change the wording of the oath affirming their belief in the finality of the prophethood of Muhammad from "I solemnly swear" to "I declare." Many religious groups and extremist groups sharply criticized the change, which they saw as intended to empower the Ahmadi community and facilitate their voting in the upcoming July 2018 national elections. In response, the government initially stated that the alteration was due to a clerical error, and then overturned its decision by returning the oath to its original state. Nevertheless, various Islamist groups launched a protest movement in the nation's capital, shutting down Islamabad and leading to a police operation that resulted in many serious injuries.

The Islamist protesters relented after the government, with the explicit agreement of the army, agreed to several demands, including the immediate firing of the nation's Law Minister. Near the end of the protests, a senior member of the military was seen in a video distributing money to protesters, telling them that the army was on the side of those defending the finality of the prophethood of Muhammad. Other demands by the protesters included easing the ability to bring individual blasphemy charges, as mentioned previously, as well as the creation of a registry for all Ahmadis working in the government. Both of these demands, if implemented by the government, could lead to increased targeting of the already vulnerable Ahmadi population in the country.

Ahmadis also face social, political, and economic discrimination and public allegations of blasphemy. USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project includes the case of Abdul Shakoor, an 80-year-old Ahmadi bookseller imprisoned since 2015 on blasphemy charges. Further, in 2014 police arrested four Ahmadi

men based on allegations that they were removing posters in their neighborhood that featured anti-Ahmadi slogans; three were sentenced to death for blasphemy in October 2017, while the fourth man reportedly died in police custody.

Elections

The increasing involvement of religious extremists in the political sphere in 2017, in advance of the July 2018 national elections, stirred sectarian and interreligious tensions in Pakistan and exacerbated the discrimination and violence felt by religious minorities. For example, Hafiz Saeed, leader of the terrorist group LeT (also known as Jamat-ud-Dawa) and the alleged planner of the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, was released from "preventative detention," to which he has been periodically subject over the past decade. Despite his recognition as an international terrorist by the UN Security Council and his continued public advocacy of violence against religious minorities, Saeed has announced he will be competing in national elections as a representative for the Mili-Muslim-League (MML), which also includes other associates of banned

terrorist organizations. Though the Ministry of Interior has attempted to reject MML's petitions to register its political party, and the Securities and Exchange Commission has banned Jamat-ud-Dawa from collecting charity, Saeed and the MML have demonstrated

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no evidence of ending their campaign.

Another new entrant to the political sphere is the leader of the protest movement that shut down Islamabad in December, Khadim Hussain Rizvi. Rizvi's public career took off in 2011 when he supported the murder of a provincial governor, Salman Taseer, for advocating in favor of changing the country's blasphemy laws. Rizvi has made public speeches calling for the elimination of rights for Ahmadi citizens. By 2017, Rizvi commanded a large following and was seeking to form a new political party, the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLR). While religious

leaders like Rizvi had associated themselves with established political parties in the past, by the end of 2017 they were attempting to run independently for elections to promote incitement to violence and anti-minority narratives.

Regardless of their success in the 2018 elections, the formal entry into the political system of such extremist Islamist figures threatens to have a deep impact. It is likely that other political parties that have otherwise maintained a secular or pro-minority agenda will begin to adopt extremist views in order to compete with these new parties. Further, these parties have demonstrated their influence with the general populace through the 2017 oath protests led by Rizvi, which culminated in the protest group dictating policies for the government to implement without holding any seats in parliament.

Intolerant Speech and Media

Despite having several laws meant to prohibit intolerant speech, the media has facilitated the spread of discriminatory language used to disparage minorities throughout the country. A prime example is the case of Amir Liaqat, a Muslim televangelist who has hosted many popular television shows in Pakistan. Liaqat has endangered the lives of progressive activists by accusing them of blasphemy, and has declared Ahmadis “enemies of Pakistan and Islam.” Pakistan’s Electronic Media Regulation Authority (PEMRA) has on several occasions banned Liaqat from appearing on television due to his intolerant speech and called for him to make public statements apologizing for spreading enmity between religions and Muslim minorities. Most recently, in December 2017 he was banned from appearing on any television network. While the recent ban demonstrates an attempt by PEMRA to punish and prevent intolerant speech or incitement to violence against religious minorities, Liaqat’s ability to find employment with various television networks, despite his history of bans, is evidence of the significant role media networks play in the spread of intolerance.

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Education

Education in Pakistan impacts religious freedom and the public narrative on religious minorities through the intolerant curriculum taught at public schools and the growth of extremist-influenced madrassas (religious schools). Pakistan’s public education curriculum has been criticized for intolerant and bigoted messages that portray non-Muslims as unpatriotic and teach students to distrust them. USCIRF’s 2016 study, *Teaching Intolerance in Pakistan: Religious Bias in Public Textbooks*, found nearly 70 intolerant or biased passages in the textbooks used across the nation’s four provinces.

As education continues to shift to the private sector, with private schools and madrassas ballooning in number, attention needs to extend beyond public school textbooks. There are 20,000 officially registered madrassas in Pakistan, but several thousand more operate without government registration. Despite an attempt in 2014 to regulate madrassas and their curriculum under the National Internal Security Policy, the government exercises little control over these schools and some are

administered by ideologically extreme mosques with ties to terrorist organizations. In 2017, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, the Commander of the Army Staff, stated that the government must take steps to regulate and modernize

the *madrassa* system, and recognized the link between the growth of unregulated *madrassas*, the influence of religious extremism in society, and the recruitment by terrorist outfits of new, young recruits.

Women and Religious Freedom

The role of women in Pakistan’s society remains a contentious issue, often due to conflicts over religious mandates relating to women. In many instances, women lack access to equal employment, education, and movement. Despite the passage of the Women’s Protection Act in 2006, women continue to be victims of rape, honor killings, and acid attacks without being able to bring their perpetrators to justice.

Often, the mistreatment of women is linked to religious issues, including—and especially—honor killings.

Some progress has been made regarding honor killings, as a few provincial assemblies have passed legislation to punish these crimes harshly.

It remains to be seen how effectively police and prosecutors will implement these laws. One city launched a Violence Against Women Center in March 2017, which received 1,300 complaints in nine months and provided assistance to victims and investigative authorities. The outcomes of the complaints received, however, is unknown.

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U.S. POLICY

Pakistan remains an important component of the U.S. strategy relating to international security; however, just after the reporting period, President Donald Trump pushed for a harder-line approach to the U.S. relationship with Pakistan. Over the past decade, the country has received nearly \$30 billion from the United States in military and civilian aid. For Fiscal Year 2018, President Trump announced that up to \$3 billion in aid will be suspended, based on the continued unwillingness of the Pakistani government to confront certain terrorist groups—like the Haqqani Network—that impact security in Afghanistan. During his visit to Afghanistan in December, Vice President Mike Pence stated that the government of Pakistan had been put “on notice” about granting safe havens to certain extremist groups. The significance of Pakistan in President Trump’s South Asia policy has been highlighted by the fact that then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense James Mattis visited Pakistan in 2017, with both emphasizing the need for Pakistan to work cooperatively and effectively against terrorist groups operating within its borders.

The U.S. government continued to raise religious freedom concerns in its engagement with Pakistan. In

2017, the U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan and embassy officers met with government officials, including those

representing the prime minister’s office, to discuss religious freedom issues like blasphemy laws, school curriculum, and the provision of security to religious minorities. Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South/Central Asia at the U.S.

Department of State visited Pakistan in March 2017, meeting with religious minority leaders, human rights lawyers, civil society activists, and government officials to discuss the state of religious freedom in Pakistan. On December 22, 2017, the State Department selected Pakistan as the only country on its “Special Watch List,” a new category created by the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016 for countries that engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.

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