

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Pakistan continued their negative trajectory. The year was filled with reports of targeted killings, lynching, mob violence, forced conversions, and desecration of houses of worship and cemeteries. These violations targeted religious minorities, including the Ahmadiyya Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, and Shi’a Muslim communities. The government continued systematically enforcing blasphemy, anti-Ahmadiyya, and cybercrime laws while failing to protect religious minorities from nonstate actors such as [Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan](#) (TLP), a far-right Sunni Islamist organization with growing influence in Pakistan.

Those accused of blasphemy faced violence, imprisonment with limited opportunity for bail, and even death. [USCIRF’s Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#) highlights 55 individuals detained or imprisoned on blasphemy charges in Pakistan. Mere accusations of blasphemy have incited [mobs to violence](#) against members of minority communities and those with differing beliefs. In January 2021, Tabitha Gill, a [Christian nurse](#) accused of blasphemy by her colleagues, was beaten and tortured by hospital staff in Karachi. In December, a violent mob in Sialkot killed and burned the body of a [Sri Lankan national](#), Priyantha Kumara, over blasphemy [allegations](#). In August, an [angry mob](#) attacked a [Hindu temple](#) in Punjab Province after courts granted bail to an eight-year-old Hindu boy who was accused of blasphemy for allegedly desecrating a local religious school. In July, a man acquitted of blasphemy charges was [hacked to death](#) by a police constable in Punjab. Though the government has publicly condemned mob violence, it has done little to protect religious minorities or provide justice.

Targeted killings remained a threat to members of religious minorities. In September, a Sikh medical practitioner and [community leader](#) was [gunned down](#) at his clinic in Peshawar. In March, a Hindu journalist was [shot dead](#) in Sukkar for his reporting. There were also two [reported](#) targeted [killings](#) of Ahmadiyya Muslims, including a homeopathic doctor who was shot and killed in Peshawar in February.

Ahmadiyya Muslims continued to face severe official and societal persecution for their beliefs and self-identification as Muslims. In 2021, the [Ahmadiyya community](#) reported 49 police cases for reasons of faith as well as the desecration of 121 Ahmadiyya graves and 15 places of worship by mobs often assisted by authorities. In December, [70-year-old](#) Asghar Ali Kalaar, who was accused of blasphemy, died in detention awaiting a bail hearing.

Abduction, [forced conversion](#) to Islam, rape, and forced marriage remained imminent threats for religious minority women and children, particularly from the Christian, Hindu, and Sikh faiths. In [October 2021](#), a parliamentary committee rejected a bill proposed to protect minorities against forced conversion that was also opposed by Pakistan’s Ministry of Religious Affairs. Parliamentarians argued that setting an age limit for conversions by non-Muslims “goes against Islam and the Constitution of Pakistan.” In December, the Sindh High Court [handed custody](#) of [Arzoo Raja](#), a 14-year-old Christian girl who was abducted, forcefully married, and converted to Islam, back to her parents with the condition that she remain Muslim. Raja’s 44-year-old abductor and the [cleric](#) who conducted the marriage and conversion certification maintain their innocence, stating that Raja had reached puberty or the age of consent according to [Shari’a law](#).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Pakistan as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation;
- Enter into a binding agreement, under Section 405(c) of IRFA, with the Pakistani government to encourage substantial steps to address religious freedom violations with benchmarks, including but not limited to:
 - Release blasphemy prisoners and other individuals imprisoned for their religion or beliefs;
 - Repeal blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws; until repeal is accomplished, enact reforms to make blasphemy a bailable offense, require evidence by accusers, ensure proper investigation by senior police officials, allow authorities to dismiss unfounded accusations, and enforce existing Penal Code articles criminalizing perjury and false accusations;
 - Remove requirements for self-identification of religion on identity documents;
 - Address extremist rhetoric often preceding attacks on minorities while protecting freedom of expression;
 - Hold accountable individuals who incite or participate in vigilante violence, targeted killings, forced conversions, and other hate crimes; and
 - Reform educational textbooks, curricula, and teacher training materials to ensure content is inclusive of and not discriminatory toward religious minorities.
- Impose targeted sanctions on Pakistani government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Incorporate religious freedom concerns into its larger oversight of the U.S.-Pakistan bilateral relationship through hearings, letters, and congressional delegations, and advocate for the release of religious prisoners of conscience in Pakistan, including [Junaid Hafeez](#), [Asif Pervaiz](#), [Stephen Masih](#), [Notan Lal](#), and [Aneeqa Ateeq](#).

Background

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

Blasphemy Law

Sections 295 and 298 of Pakistan's [Penal Code](#) criminalize acts and speech insulting religion or defiling the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad, places of worship, or religious symbols. These vague provisions are frequently abused to levy false accusations against Shi'a Muslims, Ahmadiyya Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and others who do not adhere to the majority Sunni interpretation of Islam. Cases often violate legal procedures, and judges come under extreme pressure from religious groups to convict. The law sets severe punishments, including the death penalty. Although some individuals have received death sentences and others have died in detention while awaiting trial, Pakistan has not executed anyone for blasphemy. Even lawyers defending those charged with blasphemy, presiding judges, and individuals speaking against the law are targeted. [Pakistani lawyer](#) Saif ul Malook—who has successfully overturned several convictions for blasphemy cases, including those of Asia Bibi and of Shagufta Kausar and her husband Shafqat Emanuel—said he and others like him face grave danger from extremists.

In 2021, some individuals charged with blasphemy were acquitted while some others were released on [bail](#). [Shagufta Kausar](#) and [Shafqat Emanuel](#), a Christian couple sentenced to death in 2014, were [acquitted](#) by the Lahore High Court in June. Their [acquittal](#) came after the [European Parliament](#) adopted a [resolution](#) demanding that Pakistan allow greater freedom of religion or belief and asked the European Union (EU) to reconsider Pakistan's preferential trade status. In October, [Sajjad Masih Gill](#) was acquitted by the Lahore High Court after being sentenced to life in prison for allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad in 2011.

Growing Intolerance and Extremism

Extremist and intolerant rhetoric put forth on [digital platforms](#) or in public spaces by organizations or individuals—including government officials, politicians, and religious clerics—often precede attacks

on religious minorities. The spread of extremist Islamist ideology in Pakistan has created an environment of increasing intolerance, exacerbating existing prejudices and inducing fear among religious minorities. The effects can be seen at both the micro and macro levels. For example, in [December 2021](#), staff at a bakery in Karachi refused to write “Merry Christmas” on cakes for Christian customers. Although the bakery relented after a public outcry on social media, instances like these are indicative of the intolerant climate fostered in Pakistan.

At the macro level, extremist organizations such as the TLP, which espouses intolerance toward religious minorities, often act with impunity. In [April 2021](#), the TLP demanded that the Pakistani government expel the French ambassador over the republication of cartoons in France depicting the Prophet Muhammad. Authorities responded by arresting TLP leader Saad Hussein Rizvi for inciting violence and banning the organization, prompting supporters to hold [violent protests](#) across Pakistan that resulted in several killed and hundreds wounded. However, in [November 2021](#), the government came to an [agreement](#) with TLP leaders and released Rizvi, removed his name from the state's terrorism watchlist, and lifted the [ban](#) on the TLP, allowing it to contest in elections and participate in political activities.

Anti-Ahmadiyya Laws

In addition to the constitution's second amendment declaring Ahmadis non-Muslim, Articles 298(b) and 298(c) of the Pakistan Penal Code prohibit Ahmadis, who consider themselves Muslim, from self-identifying as such. They are forced to sign a declaration swearing they are non-Muslim to obtain basic civil rights, such as the right to vote or receive national identification cards. It is a crime punishable by fine, imprisonment, or death for Ahmadis to profess their faith verbally or in writing. They are prohibited from citing the Qur'an or Hadith; displaying Qur'anic text on gravestones, houses of worship, wedding invitations, home decor, or jewelry; sharing their faith; printing or obtaining material related to their faith; or calling their places of worship “mosques.”

Key U.S. Policy

Pakistan continues to be one of the largest [recipients](#) of foreign aid from the United States since the onset of the war on terror, but the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 raised [tensions](#) in the bilateral relationship. In September, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken warned the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee that some of Pakistan's interests in the region [conflicted](#) with those of the United States. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley told the Senate Armed Services Committee the [United States](#) needed to examine [Pakistan's](#) sanctuary for the Taliban.

On November 15, the State Department [redesignated](#) Pakistan as a CPC under IRFA but again issued a waiver on any related sanctions “as required in the ‘important national interest of the United States.’”

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [Ahmadiyya Muslims](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Shari'a and LGBTI Persons](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Destruction of Cemeteries](#)
- **Podcast:** [Pakistan's Laws Enable Islamist Extremism](#)