

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Pakistan continued to worsen. The government systematically enforced blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws and failed to protect religious minorities from abuses by nonstate actors. There was a sharp rise in targeted killings, blasphemy cases, forced conversions, and hate speech targeting religious minorities including Ahmadis, Shi'a Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs.

Pakistan's treatment of religious minorities is best assessed through the prism of its treatment of the Ahmadiyya community, who continued to face severe official and societal persecution for their beliefs and self-identification as Muslims. The year saw a surge in [targeted killings](#) of Ahmadis. Between July and November, five Ahmadis were murdered, including 57-year-old Tahir Naseem, an American citizen [accused](#) of blasphemy who was [shot](#) in a [courtroom](#) in July.

In May, the government formed the National Minorities Commission (NMC) required by a 2014 Supreme Court decision, however Ahmadis were excluded. During debates surrounding their possible inclusion, Noor-ul-Haq Qadri, Pakistan's Minister for Religious and Inter-faith Harmony Affairs, publicly [stated](#), "Whoever shows sympathy or compassion towards [Ahmadis] is neither loyal to Islam nor the state of Pakistan." The government did not address statements made by Qadri or other officials who incited hatred and intolerance towards Ahmadis and other religious minorities.

Pakistan's religiously discriminatory legislation, such as the [blasphemy](#) and anti-Ahmadiyya laws, used in combination with new media rules, contributed to egregious human rights abuses and fostered an overall atmosphere of intolerance for religious minorities

that often leads to violence and discrimination. In August alone, over 40 blasphemy First Incident Reports (FIRs) were registered, mostly [targeting](#) the Shi'a minority during the month of Muharram.

Other religious communities were also targeted with blasphemy charges. In 2020, there reportedly were 30 Christians, including seven on death row, [jailed in Pakistan](#) on charges of blasphemy. They include Asif Pervaiz, a 37-year-old Christian garment factory worker whom a Lahore court [sentenced to death](#) in September.

The issue of [abduction](#), [forced conversion](#) to Islam, rape, and forced marriage [remained](#) an imminent threat for religious minority women and [children](#), particularly from the Hindu and Christian faiths. During 2020, USCIRF documented incidents of forced marriages, more than half involving minors. The government did little to ensure minor girls' safety and return to their families. Authorities often do not take any action, and in abduction cases that are brought to the courts, officials have claimed that victims [willingly converted](#) to Islam. The head of the Parliamentary Committee on Forced Religious Conversions, Senator Anwarul Haq Kakar, claimed that most cases of forced conversion "have some degree of willingness on the part of the girl." Pakistani courts systematically failed to protect and provide justice to victims, who are often [forced to testify](#) that they [converted voluntarily](#) to protect themselves and their families from further harm. In April, Myra Shahbaz, a 14-year-old Christian schoolgirl, was abducted at gunpoint. Despite Myra telling police she was drugged, raped, and forced to sign papers her abductor later used to allege that she was 19 and had voluntarily married and converted, the court ordered that she be returned to her abductor.

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;
 - 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;
 - Reform public educational textbooks, curriculum, and teacher training materials to ensure content is inclusive of and not discriminatory toward religious minorities; and
 - Remove requirements for self-identification of religion on identity documents;
 - 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:
- Advocate for the release of religious prisoners of conscience in Pakistan, including [Junaid Hafeez](#), [Ramzan Bibi](#), [Shafqat Emmanuel](#), and [Shagufta Kausar](#).

Background

Pakistan's [population](#) is 96.28 percent Muslim (85–90 percent Sunni, 10–15 percent Shi'a, and 0.22 percent Ahmadi), with smaller populations of Hindus (1.6 percent); Christians (1.59 percent); and Sikhs, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians (<1 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 also reserves for religious minorities 10 seats in the National Assembly, four seats in the Senate, and 23 seats in four provincial assemblies. However, 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 Ahmadis, Shi'a Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, and others who do not adhere to the majority Sunni interpretation of Islam. The law sets severe punishments, including the death penalty. Although some individuals have received death sentences, Pakistan has not executed anyone for blasphemy. A recent USCIRF [report](#) found that implementation of these blasphemy laws made Pakistan the world's worst offender of blasphemy-related prosecutions and societal violence between 2014 and 2018.

In 2020, some individuals charged with blasphemy were acquitted: Sawin Masih, a Christian, was sentenced to death in 2014 and [acquitted](#) by the Lahore High Court in October 2020. Ramesh Kumar Malhi, a Hindu veterinary surgeon accused in May 2019 of delivering medicine for animals wrapped in paper with Qur'anic text, was [acquitted](#) by a trial court in March 2020. Malhi's practice was burned down after blasphemy allegations emerged; he remains in hiding due to continued death threats.

The Punjab Assembly passed the Protection of Foundation of Islam Bill in July, giving the Inter-Services Public Relations, the media and public relations wing of the Pakistan Armed Forces, powers to censor and monitor any literature considered anti-Islamic.

Growing Intolerance and Hate Speech

Influential Sunni Islamist extremists and groups actively promoted hate speech and incitement to violence against religious minorities via digital platforms and public sermons. Such extremist groups [blamed Shi'a Muslims](#) for bringing coronavirus to Pakistan, calling it the "[Shi'a virus](#)," egged on by government and media claims that the virus came from pilgrims returning from Iran. The government's failure to address hate speech and promote religious harmony contributed to mob violence. In September, after Sunni extremists [led anti-Shi'a protests](#) in

Karachi, a [mob attempted to lynch](#) a Shi'a student at Kohat Technical University while another [targeted an elderly man](#) in Charsadda.

Attacks on Houses of Worship

Pakistan's [Hindu](#) and Sikh communities also faced [discrimination](#) and desecration of their religious sites. In 2020, five Hindu and Sikh temples were vandalized by extremist mobs. In July, the government also [halted](#) construction of Islamabad's Hindu temple due to pressure from hardline Islamic clerics and politicians who argued that allocation of state money defied the country's Islamic identity. The government did not openly push back on radical Islamist narratives that leave little or no room for religious tolerance and freedom of belief.

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. It is a crime punishable by fine, imprisonment, or death for Ahmadis to profess their faith. They are prohibited from citing the Qur'an or Hadith; displaying Qur'anic text; sharing their faith; printing or obtaining material related to their faith; or calling their places of worship "mosques."

Key U.S. Policy

Pakistan played a key role in the [U.S. Taliban Peace Agreement](#) that took place in Doha, Qatar, in February 2020. Then President Donald J. Trump continued to [emphasize](#) Pakistan's importance in the region for U.S. security interests, particularly with the Afghan peace process and the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. Then Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Alice Wells [visited](#) Islamabad in January to discuss the growing bilateral relationship in light of Pakistan's cooperation in promoting peace in Afghanistan and regional stability. In 2020, Pakistan was estimated to receive a total of \$299 million in aid from the United States, significantly lower than the \$766 million in 2019.

In April, then Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Samuel D. Brownback [called](#) for the release of religious prisoners of conscience in Pakistan amid the coronavirus pandemic. In June, he [raised](#) concern regarding anti-Shi'a sentiments. Following the murder of Tahir Naseem in July, the U.S. Department of State [called on Pakistan](#) to reform its blasphemy law and court system. In August, then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo issued a [statement](#) for Pakistan Independence Day, noting that the United States was looking forward to working with Pakistan to expand fundamental freedoms. On December 2, 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

- **Policy Update:** [Pursuing an IRFA Binding Agreement](#)
- **Hearing:** [Blasphemy Laws and the Violation of International Religious Freedom](#)