

KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, Pakistan’s religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate. Religious minorities were subject to frequent attacks and threats, including accusations of blasphemy, targeted killings, lynchings, mob violence, forced conversions, sexual violence against women and girls, and desecration of houses of worship and cemeteries. Members of the Shi’a Muslim, Ahmadiyya Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and Sikh communities faced the continued threat of persecution via harsh and discriminatory legislation, such as anti-Ahmadiyya and blasphemy laws, as well as increasingly aggressive societal discrimination amid a rise in radical Islamist influence. These laws have enabled and encouraged radical Islamists to operate with impunity, openly targeting religious minorities or those with differing beliefs, including nonbelievers.

The new government under Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif, which took office in April, [weaponized](#) the country’s blasphemy laws against former Prime Minister Imran Khan and his cabinet members. Religious minorities, however, were especially vulnerable to prosecution or violence based on blasphemy allegations in a society that has grown increasingly intolerant of religious diversity. Blasphemy cases remained a substantial threat to religious freedom, as did the sort of mob violence that has long accompanied such accusations. In February, a court [sentenced](#) Notan Lal—the owner and principal of a private school in Ghotki, Sindh—to life in prison under Article 295(c) of the Pakistani Penal Code (PPC) after a student accused him of insulting the Prophet three years prior. His appeal remains pending despite pleas of

innocence. That same month, an angry mob in Punjab Province [stoned](#) to death Muhammad Mushtaq, a mentally ill man accused of burning the Qur’an; a mob of some 300 people then hanged his body from a tree.

Societal violence and targeted killings also continued to plague the country’s religious minorities. In January, unknown gunmen [killed](#) a Christian priest and wounded another as they drove home from Sunday Mass in Peshawar. In May, unidentified assailants gunned down two Sikh businessmen in Peshawar, and a seminary student [stabbed](#) to death an Ahmadiyya man in Okara District, Punjab Province. The victim’s family members [accused](#) the chief cleric of the seminary of provoking the student to commit murder by delivering sermons calling for violence against the Ahmadiyya community. From January to July alone, that community reported the desecration of over 170 graves and at least two houses of worship, often with the assistance of authorities. In July in Punjab Province, 53 Ahmadiyya graves were [desecrated](#) in Gujranwala District under the supervision of the police, while security forces [arrested](#) several Ahmadis for conducting Islamic ritual slaughter in celebration of the Eid al-Adha holiday and thereby “posing as Muslims.” In June, a group of armed men [desecrated](#) a Hindu temple in Karachi after two spokespersons for India’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) reportedly made insulting statements about the Prophet Muhammad; Pakistan’s government vowed to hold the perpetrators accountable, although it had made no arrests by the end of 2022.

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 such repeal, 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 radical Islamist rhetoric, which often precedes attacks on minorities, while protecting freedom of expression;
 - Hold accountable individuals who incite or participate in vigilante violence, targeted killings, forced conversions, and other religiously based 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](#), [Notan Lal](#), [Zafar Bhatti](#), and [Aneeqa Ateeq](#).

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom in Pakistan in 2022](#)
- **Podcast:** [Deteriorating Religious Freedom Conditions in South Asia](#)

Background

Pakistan's [population](#) is an estimated 96.5 percent Muslim (85–90 percent Sunni, 10–15 percent Shi'a, and 0.2 percent Ahmadi) with smaller populations of Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians comprising the remaining 3.5 percent. Pakistan was established as an Islamic Republic in 1956, granting special status to Islam; the constitution [establishes](#) Islam as the state religion, defines the country's purpose "wherein the Muslims shall be enabled to order their lives . . . in accordance with the teachings and requirements of Islam," and allows only Muslims to serve as president and prime minister. Pakistan's constitution nominally protects religious freedom by prohibiting faith-based discrimination and guaranteeing the right to religious practices and education while [reserving](#) 10 seats for religious minorities in the National Assembly, four in the Senate, and 23 in four provincial assemblies. However, a 1974 constitutional amendment declares Ahmadis non-Muslims, excluding them from representation. In addition, Pakistan maintains several laws, including criminal blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws, that further restrict the freedom of religion or belief.

Blasphemy and Anti-Ahmadiyya Laws

Sections 295 and 298 of the PPC 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. Those accused of blasphemy face violence, imprisonment with limited opportunity for bail, and even the death sentence, although no blasphemy convict has been executed by the state in Pakistan. In January 2023—after the reporting period—the National Assembly [passed](#) a draft law that would increase the penalties for certain blasphemy cases to life imprisonment while [eliminating](#) their eligibility for bail.

Articles 298(b) and 298(c) of the PPC prohibit Ahmadis from self-identifying as Muslim, forcing them 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. Ahmadiyya Muslims are prohibited from citing the Qur'an or Hadith; displaying Qur'anic text on gravestones, houses of worship, or elsewhere; sharing their faith; or calling their places of worship "mosques."

Sexual Violence and Forced Conversion of Women and Girls

Abductions, [forced conversion](#) to Islam, rape, and forced marriage—frequently allowed with impunity—remain imminent threats for religious minority women and children, particularly Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs. In January, neighbors [abducted](#), forcibly converted to Islam, and married Mahnoor Ashraf, a 14-year-old Christian girl in Lahore, to a 45-year-old Muslim man. In March, in Sindh Province, a man attempting to abduct and forcibly marry 18-year-old Hindu Pooja

Kumari [shot and killed](#) her when she resisted. In April, 12-year-old Christian Zarvia Pervaiz was [abducted](#), forced to convert to Islam, and married to a 40-year-old man; a Lahore judge [dismissed](#) her parents' case in August, claiming that she had converted and married "of her own free will" despite her status as a minor.

In October, concerns over such abuses prompted several United Nations special rapporteurs, including those on freedom of religion or belief and on violence against women and girls, to [express](#) their concern to the government of Pakistan. That [communication](#) provided a series of individual examples, which it referred to as "indicative of a wider phenomenon throughout the country," and it warned of the reported "inaction and complicity of security forces and the judiciary in the face of these abuses."

Radical Islamism: Armed Groups and Political Influence

Radical Islamist influence continued to worsen in 2022, including through armed groups, political factions, and individuals, many of whom used rhetoric, disinformation, or direct violence targeting religious minorities. Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) gained popularity, using [blasphemy](#) laws as rallying points. In March, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) killed over 60 in a [deadly attack](#) on a Shi'a mosque, marking yet another instance of [extremist violence](#) against religious minorities.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States has long considered Pakistan's stability and security a foreign policy priority, making it one of the largest recipients of U.S. foreign aid—[more than \\$32 billion](#) over the last two decades. It increased that level of aid in 2022, largely due to the [devastating floods](#) that covered vast swaths of Pakistani territory from June to August, killing over 1,700 and destroying around 2.3 million homes. By the start of 2023, the U.S. government had provided over \$98 million in humanitarian assistance in response to that crisis, largely through the U.S. Agency for International Development. This assistance came in addition to U.S. support in 2022 for Pakistani efforts to combat the COVID-19 epidemic, including [pledging](#) and partially implementing the donation of an additional 77 million vaccine doses. In October, the United States [hosted](#) a visit from Pakistan's outgoing Chief of Army Staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, just weeks after [announcing](#) plans to move forward with a \$450 million deal to support the Pakistani Air Force's F-16 program. Reports [suggest](#) that these dynamics may point to improvement in bilateral relations, long complicated by the two countries' starkly differing agendas and interests vis-à-vis Pakistan's neighbors in Afghanistan, India, and China.

On November 30, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Pakistan as a CPC under IRFA. However, as in prior years, the State Department issued a national interest waiver that absolved Pakistan of liability to sanctions or other significant penalties that would otherwise accompany that designation.