

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING
NAVIGATING CHALLENGES AND
OPPORTUNITIES FOR RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM IN PAKISTAN

Thursday, August 29, 2024

10:30 a.m. ET

Virtual Hearing

P A R T I C I P A N T S

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Stephen Schneck, Chair
Eric Ueland, Vice Chair
Vicky Hartzler
Asif Mahmood
Meir Soloveichik

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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR SCHNECK: Good morning, everyone. It's my honor to welcome you to today's hearing on religious freedom in Pakistan.

Thank you to our distinguished witnesses for taking the time to join us today.

My name is Stephen Schneck, and I am the chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body, created by the 1998 Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA.

The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government.

Today USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this important hearing.

Religious freedom in Pakistan remains concerning. Religious minorities continue to be subjected to discriminatory laws, arbitrary

arrests, and mob violence.

Of these, Pakistan's blasphemy law remains one of the most pervasive challenges to religious freedom and is frequently used to detain individuals of various faiths.

Blasphemy accusations require little to no evidence and often result in lengthy prison sentences or solitary confinement for those accused of blasphemy.

As demonstrated over the last year, in particular, blasphemy accusations can also foment violence towards religious minorities by vigilante groups and are even made spuriously to settle disputes or to target those minorities.

This month marks the one-year anniversary of the Jaranwala attacks, one of the largest attacks against Pakistan's Christian community in recent years.

These attacks left dozens of churches damaged and destroyed by mob violence in response to blasphemy accusations against two Christians.

While hundreds were initially arrested for

participating in the violence, most have now been released.

Unfortunately, such patterns of violence have continued in 2024, as in June, we saw in Sargodha, when a 70-year-old Christian man was killed by a violent mob, again, after being accused of blasphemy.

We will hear even more from our witnesses about the systematic challenges with Pakistan's blasphemy law, and potential policy options to address this problematic and dangerous law.

With that, I'll now turn the floor over to Vice Chair Eric Ueland to discuss some of the additional concerns that USCIRF is tracking with respect to Pakistan.

Commissioner Ueland.

VICE CHAIR UELAND: Thank you very much, Chair Schneck and welcome to everybody today to our hearing on religious freedom matters in Pakistan. Thanks, as well, to our witnesses for joining us today.

I'd like to briefly highlight some of the

other key challenges to religious freedom occurring in Pakistan today.

In addition to its harsh blasphemy law, Pakistan's penal code includes strict punishments against the country's Ahmadidyya Muslim community, which prohibits them from identifying as Muslim.

Ahmadis are additionally prohibited from citing their holy book, referring to their places of worship as mosques, or making the public call to prayer.

In order to register to vote, Ahmadis must either renounce their faith or be placed on a separate electoral list.

Over the last year, violence and intolerance towards this community has intensified, as shown by increasing numbers of attacks and arrests, which including in June Pakistani authorities arresting dozens of Ahmadis to prevent them from fully practicing their faith.

In addition, Christian and Hindu women and girls continue to be vulnerable to kidnappings and forced marriage and conversion. In these cases,

victims are often taken from their provinces and then forcibly married and forced to convert to Islam.

Perpetrators often evade justice, and in rare instances that such cases are prosecuted, the court system often reinforces the practice and justifies keeping victims with their abductors.

These are just some of the religious freedom issues that USCIRF continues to closely track and that our witnesses will discuss in more detail today.

With that, I'll now turn the floor over to my colleague, Commissioner Asif Mahmood, to discuss some of USCIRF's policy recommendations related to Pakistan.

Commissioner.

COMMISSIONER MAHMOOD: Thank you, Vice Chair Ueland.

In USCIRF's 2024 Annual Report, we recommended that the U.S. Department of State redesignate Pakistan as a country of particular concern, or CPC, under IRFA.

In December 2023, we were pleased that the State Department accepted our recommendations to redesignate Pakistan as a CPC. However, it did not take our recommendation to lift the national security waiver so that commensurate sanctions would be imposed.

USCIRF has also recommended that the U.S. government work to enter a binding agreement with the Pakistani government to encourage concrete steps to address religious freedom violations, including releasing prisoners held under the problematic blasphemy law and others imprisoned for their religion or belief.

USCIRF has especially called for the repeal of blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws, and until such repeal, we call for making blasphemy aailable offense and ensure proper investigations and punishments for false accusations.

We further urge that individuals be held responsible for inciting or participating in vigilante violence, targeted killings, forced conversions, and other religiously-based crimes.

This includes imposing targeted sanctions on Pakistani government officials and entities responsible for severe religious freedom violations.

I just want to add one sentence that religious bigotry does not only target minorities in Pakistan. In recent history, we saw the former popular prime minister and his wife, Bushra Bibi and Imran Khan, were also targets of religious bigotry.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses, and with that will turn the floor back over to Chair Schneck.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Commissioner Mahmood.

I would now like to take a moment to introduce our witnesses. We have two panels today. In our first panel, we will hear from Anjali Kaur. Ms. Kaur is the Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Bureau of Asia at the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Then, for our second panel, we will hear

from three witnesses. The first of these is Peter Jacob. Mr. Jacob is the Director of the Centre for Social Justice.

The second witness will be Asif Aqeel. Mr. Aqeel is the Founding Director of the Center for Law & Justice.

And our final witness will be Amjad Mahmood Khan. Mr. Khan is an Adjunct Professor at UCLA School of Law and the National Secretary for Public Affairs for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community USA.

I thank all of the witnesses for being here today and for their important testimony.

Ms. Kaur, please begin with your testimony.

MS. KAUR: Chair Schneck, Vice Chair Ueland, and distinguished Commission members, thank you for inviting me to testify on USAID's work in Pakistan and our support for religious freedom.

At USAID, we believe that freedom of religion, belief and conscience is a universal human right that undergirds the origin and

existence of democracy around the world.

Where religious freedom is protected other freedoms flourish. Religious freedom is deeply interlinked with the freedom of expression, association, movement and assembly.

Where religious freedom protections are absent, we find conflict, instability, and terrorism.

USAID's work in Pakistan supports a more resilient, gender equitable, inclusive, and prosperous nation.

Our assistance advances a broad-based, climate resilient economic growth, inclusive democratic governance and accountability, and recovery from the 2022 floods, all in line with U.S. and Pakistani priorities.

We also partner with Pakistan and strengthen the country's education system to address critical challenges in literacy and attendance rates by improving access to quality services with an emphasis on girls and underprivileged communities.

On December 29, 2023, the Secretary of State redesignated Pakistan as a country of particular concern under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.

Throughout 2023, the Ambassador, other U.S. Embassy and USAID officials, and visiting senior U.S. officials, including the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, engaged Pakistani government officials to urge them to make progress on blasphemy laws and laws concerning Ahmadi Muslims, better protect members of religious minority communities, improve sectarian relations, and encourage inter-faith respect.

All U.S. officials in Pakistan regularly raise these concerns and continue to urge Pakistani authorities to uphold the freedom of religion, or belief, for all.

We have urged Pakistan to conduct full and transparent investigations into violent incidences against members of religious minority groups, to hold those responsible fully accountable.

In Pakistan, USAID assistance uses a community-based approach to build resilience and stability, expand

the writ of civilian government, help reduce grievances, and mitigate conflict, and address the specific drivers of radicalization, by undermining the legitimacy and attraction of violent extremist organizations in conflict-affected areas.

For example, the Building Peace in Pakistan Project, implemented by the United States Institute of Peace, strengthens digital use platforms and amplifies the voices of marginalized populations.

It has worked in over 600 schools, universities and madrassas to promote peace, social cohesion, and tolerance for diversity through social action projects, policy seminars, awareness sessions, community dialogues, and meetings.

Recently, the Project developed a documentary film called Water Scars about the effects of the 2022 floods in Badin and the environmental and social economic challenges that changes that women and girls have faced.

USAID will continue to work to help Pakistan create mechanisms for political representation in constructive dialogue between the civilian government and citizens, activities that build relationships and trust

across sectarian, tribal, and religious lines, as well as advance inclusive and participatory governments.

They are all necessary to generate confidence and coexistence and a shared vision for Pakistan's future.

At USAID, we know that attacks on religious freedom undermine development across all sectors of society, but when religious freedom is protected and promoted, development improves for all people.

Currently, the USAID Asia Bureau's Asia Religious and Ethnic Freedom activity supports efforts to expand the freedom of religion and conscience in Asia. It works to improve local community partners', including religious and ethnic minority community partners', capacities to advance freedom of religion and develop and access resources.

Right now this program is currently supporting 12 activities in ten countries in Asia, with more on the horizon.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today, and I look forward to your counsel and to your questions.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Ms. Kaur.

I wonder if I could begin with I think a pretty

straightforward question.

In your mind, what are the most effective programs of USAID in Pakistan that seek to protect religious freedom or promote religious freedom within the country?

MS. KAUR: Thank you for that question.

There was a few that I spoke about during my testimony. As we don't work directly on religious freedom, what we do is work directly on all of the supporting programs that affect religious freedom.

So I'd like to talk about Building Peace in Pakistan, which enhances social inclusion by promoting a diversity of religious, ethnic, social and political perspectives in South Punjab, Northern Sindh, and the Merged Districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

This program also promotes policymaking to prevent, mitigate and resolve violent conflict and tackle extremism through nonviolent means.

So USAID through its implementing partner, U.S. Institute for Peace, under our program has implemented 52 projects through its implementing partners and conducted over 900 projects, activities in 28 cities across the

country.

And we've worked in over 600 institutions, which include schools, universities and madrassas, and we've been able to promote peace and tolerance, engaged over 80,000 people physically, 70,000 people through traditional media, and over 20 million people through digital media platforms.

We've really been able to provide training to 1,616 males and about 60 percent of the population, which was 39 percent females, 60 percent transgender, and non-binary, about one percent, and individuals that we were able to work with and provide with necessary knowledge and tools to prevent social division, and bolster cohesion within their communities, which is necessary for a peaceful society.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you.

Vice Chair Ueland.

VICE CHAIR UELAND: Thank you very much and thank you for your testimony this morning, Ms. Kaur.

Two questions. First, in terms of this outreach and work that you're doing through the implementing partner, could you give us some specific examples of the sorts of material or information that you are sharing that

is an effort to try to enhance some of the goals that you outlined earlier with an eye towards religious freedom and religious tolerance?

And, then, secondly, would you walk through the USAID perspective and any work it's done in Pakistan with Pakistani officials regarding the repatriation of Afghan refugees?

MS. KAUR: Let me first talk about the trainings that we've been able to do. We've provided a number of diverse peace-building training, subjects that range from providing skills and knowledge to student leaders and universities, training magazine editors to counter hate speech.

We've been really looking at being able to do various project activities across the country and really being able to think about how do we provide necessary knowledge and tools that really truly prevent the social division and bolster the cohesion that we feel like is necessary within the communities, necessary for a peaceful society.

We've also been looking at a total of 605 individuals that we've worked with that we have seen have

reported a change in knowledge and awareness and had this belief that advancing social cohesion is important for peaceful communities.

So we've been looking at the level of impact that we've been creating as well.

We've also done networks to be able to create or strengthen social cohesion by ranging from strengthening student societies in 15 universities across the country, creating a child assembly, and creating STEM clubs in schools and madrassas, developing a youth network of over 200 partner organizations, and setting up literary and art forums in universities as well. This is just to name a few.

And another project that we've conducted has been orientation workshops in Islamabad on preventing violent extremism through education and being able to look at education for faculty members from universities and colleges of South Punjab as well.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you.

Commissioner Mahmood.

COMMISSIONER MAHMOOD: Yes. Thank you, Ms. Kaur. Thank you. It was a wonderful presentation.

As everybody knows, that I was born and raised in Pakistan, and I'm very well aware of the local and real issues. And in my opinion, the vast majority of Pakistanis are tolerant and a loving people, but even if there are ten percent of people, the number comes into tens of millions who are causing problems.

My question is two-way for you. Especially your work in Northern Sindh and South Punjab, actually both areas of the hub of the whole religious bigotry, and actually every human rights violation there, how much follow-up you do, especially in schools, regular schools and in madrassas, and in local communities, with actually religious violence is incited because if you go to mainstream society, people are very accepting and people are, some are educated about these things, but those are the places where girls are abducted and put into conversion and forced marriages.

Those are places where people are declared either Jew agent or Hindu agent or [?] are whatever the thing is that they're murdered, and how much progress, whatever we're doing, our resources are great work, we get education, get people to seminars, but are we making any

progress ten years to now, five years from now, and now, that what we see in the past maybe we are more aware of things on social media?

But still I think that religious tolerance is going down, religious violations are going up, murders, kidnappings, harassment, imprisonment, and all these things which I'm mentioning is not only people, it is the whole society, and actually, most important, is government.

And we can only hold government officials responsible because we don't really have much control on people. And are there any concrete steps you're asking, okay, this is what we want you to do, or something happens, what actions are taken? Do you have any power or any leverage on that?

Thank you for my longer question.

MS. KAUR: Thank you for your question.

I want to refer to an activity that we're doing that encompasses the broader population that you're speaking to.

We have this activity called, program called Hum Ahang. And this is a citizen engagement activity, which really is meant to empower Pakistani citizens through

increased understanding of citizens' rights, religious freedoms, development of skills, to advocate for those rights, as peace builders, and this is religious peace as well.

And so it's really meant to strengthen citizen participation in governance processes, to advance peace and social cohesion.

So Hum Ahang also strengthens the capacity of provincial secretariats, local governments that you're speaking of, government stakeholders, to respond to emerging citizen needs, such as religious freedom.

And program initiatives engage youth and women for civic education and facilitates citizens' access to information.

So just in the last quarter, this program conducted several key activities in coordination with relevant partners and stakeholders with a strong focus on capacity building, awareness raising, and advocacy, both in the thematic areas of prevention of violent extremism and disaster mitigation.

And so I just want to highlight a few of the activities we've performed, which I think is helpful and

really truly helps us track the kind of impact that we're having.

So we were able to conduct training workshops in Sukkur and Mardan in peace building, disaster focused reporting and gender sensitive reporting, attracting media professionals from diverse backgrounds and fostering a commitment to apply new skills in their professional work.

We also organized dialogues in peace building and climate change with students of Shah Abdul Latif University, in Bahauddin Zakariya University. We developed a draft MOU for engagement with the management of six universities to formalize collaboration engagement with youth in program activities and establish youth assemblies.

A lot of this is what you're speaking to in terms of really harnessing the power of the education system, the school system.

And we also initiated discussions with the Sindh, the Provincial Disaster Management Authority, alongside with USAID and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, on climate change adaptation programming in Sindh and aligned ongoing interventions with existing program activity.

So we continue to do these dialogues, and what I'm trying to get across is that we do them on a number of forums and sectors because we recognize that in order to be able to have a peaceful cohesive environment that protects religious freedoms, we need to be able to understand and protect the community as a whole from the key grievances and the key issues that is keeping social cohesion from coming together.

And so that's what we hope to do, and that's where we're seeing some success and impact in through our programming.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Ms. Kaur.

Commissioner Hartzler.

COMMISSIONER HARTZLER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for being here today.

I was wondering if you could please share the total amount of U.S. dollars that is spent for USAID to Pakistan? How much money are we investing in total through USAID? And how many personnel do we have in Pakistan working on all these initiatives?

And, then, secondly, have we ever had discussions with the government about withholding any of these funds

until they make substantial progress in stopping the blasphemy law situation or the forced conversion?

So how much money, personnel, and how have we engaged with the government regarding the resources we are providing to the country?

MS. KAUR: Thank you for your question.

Let me first start by telling you a little bit about our work in Pakistan in terms of the money and the programming.

So our focus in Pakistan is really supporting a more resilient, gender equitable, inclusive and prosperous Pakistan. Our FY 2025 request, our requested resources were 80.8 million in ESF and GHP for USAID, advancing our priorities and economic growth, inclusive democratic governance, accountability, health, education, recovery from the '22 floods, and building capacity of government authorities and communities at risk to manage climate impacts.

Now, as we look to some of your other programs, we have approximately 150 total staff. That includes both of our U.S. direct hires as well as our local staff, and approximately we have roughly 20 Americans, and there are

approximately 120 Pakistanis that are there.

COMMISSIONER HARTZLER: Yes. So thank you.

So have you had discussions with the government about withholding some of this? This is an option through the International Religious Freedom Act that our government could do in our foreign policy is to withhold programming.

And so this is a lot of money coming in, and tell us more about your work with the government trying to leverage these funds to impact their change in their behaviors.

MS. KAUR: Thank you for that.

You know, we do continue to have conversations with the government. USAID, along with the State Department, continue to push for change. We continue to highlight, you know, any real grievances that are coming up, the blasphemy laws.

We have been advocating for that, but we specifically, you know, we work to be able to promote tolerance with the situation here, but we do not withhold programs, as we really see our work benefiting a broader population and not just directly the government.

And so in the way that we operate, it is really

to work with the government to make them understand how religious tolerance is the way forward and how it affects their society and their country as a whole.

COMMISSIONER HARTZLER: Thank you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Ms. Kaur.

Commissioner Soloveichik.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you very much.

Could you briefly share just a little bit more about the criteria by which you decide that a certain program actually lives up to the goal of tolerance promotion, not only in the immediate moment but with the potential for long-term change?

Is there a specific way by which you evaluate what is a good use of the funds in this context?

MS. KAUR: Yeah. Thank you for that.

So, essentially, you know, we talk about really hearing from numerous people, always engaging with communities. We really look at, we've got a very strong monitoring and evaluation program across USAID.

And in that program, we assess the impact of our trainings. We try to follow across our program cycles, normally about five years, of the impact the training it's

had, how it's been able to change mind sets.

A couple of the examples I've shared is that a number of these behavior change models, we do come back and when we speak with people, we realize, and they tell us about their mindset shifts or how they've perceived situations within their community that we realize are, you know, drastic changes from where we started but also leading towards a path and a trajectory of where we're headed.

Now monitoring evaluation is clearly based on what the program goals are, and what we hope is that by being able to tackle this issue, especially social cohesion and being able to address the division, we're able to attack it from a number of different levels and sectors, and that's truly our goal.

And so being able to see the impact and the progress in those other sectors also gives us a sense of creating a more equitable society, which overall allows us to be able to create greater, not just equity and equality, but greater tolerance as a whole.

So, you know, we do our own evaluations, and we also use secondary sources for this. We look at being able

to conduct assessments with our partner organizations as well.

So we have a very robust way of being able to understand how much impact we're having, and then we pivot and we adapt so that if something is not working, we look at the impact of the local community and then start pivoting and recognizing what we need to change together with our partners on the ground to address that situation and make it more effective.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Ms. Kaur. Thank you very much for this testimony.

Commissioner Ueland.

VICE CHAIR UELAND: Thank you very much, Chair Schneck.

And Ms. Kaur, just one additional question. I just want to ask again how, if at all, USAID has engaged with Pakistani officials about repatriation of Afghan refugees?

MS. KAUR: Sorry. Thank you for your question.

So we have been engaging, and I would say that this is very much in the space of the United States State Department. We would be happy to provide numbers in terms

of what that looks like in private to protect the security of those families.

The Pakistani authorities have largely respected the status of Afghans within the U.S. resettlement pathways and not sought to deport them to Afghanistan, and following the visit of the UNHCR Grandi to Pakistan this month, Pakistan has extended the stay of 1.45 million Afghan refugees who legally reside in the country, and until June 30, 2025.

We continue to raise these concerns consistently with Pakistan and continue Pakistan authorities to uphold the freedom of religion and belief for all, and we continue to hope that we have urged for full and transparent investigations into any violent incidences and really look to have this pathway continue forward.

VICE CHAIR UELAND: Thank you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Ms. Kaur, and we very much appreciate the good work of USAID around the world, and we very much appreciate your testimony today.

With that said, it's now time to introduce our second panel. At the second panel, we will hear from three witnesses, as I indicated, and the first of those witnesses

is Mr. Peter Jacob. Mr. Jacob, as I indicated, is the Director of the Centre for Social Justice.

I'm sorry. You're muted, sir.

MR. JACOB: Thank you so much.

Thank you so much, Chair Schneck and Vice Chair Ueland, and all respected members of the Commission, for hosting this hearing, which I think will entail some greater understanding between the Commission and some of the actors in Pakistan, and all that goodwill that is created will pave a way for some constructive reforms in Pakistan.

While listening to some of the efforts that USAID was involved, it is really commendable. It's a huge task that lies before us.

The challenges that we speak of today are monumental and therefore we need massive response, but it ought to be more meaningful as well. So in my written statement that I have submitted, in the interest of time, I have, I have explained the scale of abuse of blasphemy laws, for instance.

I as a researcher have been collecting this data over 32 years, and I have to admit that the actual scale is

much higher, perhaps three or four times higher, than what we have been able to gather as data.

In a recent report, the government of Pakistan has acknowledged before the U.N. Human Rights Committee that from 2018 to 2023, there have been in all 398 false allegations. I mean this scale in given five years is staggering.

Our question is, as a way forward, our question is whether the government is prepared now to actually compensate, pay reparation costs to the people who were wrongly accused, and they also faced sufferings all these years, incarcerated for a number of years, prolonged trials, displacements.

And the scale, as I said, runs into eight to 9,000 families. It is usually the families, but also the communities will suffer those losses.

Properties worth billions, public and private, have been burned, have been destroyed, and this includes places of worship, as Chair Schneck has mentioned aptly.

So this has, blasphemy has not only become a question of impunity for those groups who are styling their politics of hatred on these lines. It has become a

contentious issue in the courtrooms where the cases are pleaded, and it has become a very contentious issue in normal behavior of the society. So it has become, you know, very intolerant.

The second issue of forced conversions also has seen an upsurge in the previous last three to five years, and therefore in that way the situation is only worsening.

Therefore, my submission would be that Pakistan concedes to the recommendations made by Human Rights Committee, U.N. Human Rights Committee, in 2023, and [?] 34 that all countries should repeal their blasphemy laws. I think this is a time to consider this recommendation seriously.

Moreover, we also demand that government of Pakistan should form a commission of inquiry to actually try to decipher the suffering that we have gone through.

The blasphemy law has transformed this society into a place which is known for, you know, violent incidents and reoccurring violence against religious minorities especially.

I would like to finally say that although we acknowledge that the majority population has been also, and

recently they have been also, the Muslim faith identity, they have become victim of this blasphemy law and abuse.

The religious minorities have suffered disproportionately, and therefore it is more, more, I would say, a more repressive law and policies which are supported by what I call an infrastructure of hatred that exists in the society, in the schools, and it has the support of certain policies and the political parties.

One party has been mentioned, but all parties I think, including religious parties, they have suffered because of false allegations, but they are exercising that [?] politics, which is killing the very spirit of Pakistan.

It is something that we need to do in the interest of Pakistan to revive the actual and real spirit of Pakistan.

Thank you so much. Thank you, sir.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Mr. Jacob.

Our next witness will be Asif Aqeel of the Center for Law & Justice. Mr. Aqeel.

MR. AQEEL: Mr. Chair and other members of USCIRF, thank you for this opportunity to discuss and share our experiences in Pakistan.

For the record, different communities have faced violence, forced conversion, and migration driven by religious intolerance.

For this reason, the non-Muslim population has dwindled from around 40 percent before partition until 1947 to only four percent today.

Article 260 of Pakistan's constitution identifies seven non-Muslim minority communities. This identification becomes significant in statecraft laws, policies and privileges for Muslims.

However, in our everyday interaction, religion becomes essentially important on two occasions: when Muslims of one sect interact with the Muslims of the other sect, and then religion becomes essentially important when Muslims of any sect interact with non-Muslims of any religious minority.

Evidence from our organization Center for Law & Justice reveals that such interactions often lead to pressure and demeaning attitude towards non-Muslims who are then vulnerable to accusations under blasphemy laws, as Mr. Peter Jacob has just discussed.

Christians are told that the Bible is shamed or

Hindus are ridiculed that they worship idols. However, no non-Muslim community member can dare to refute or get into a religious argument because of stringent blasphemy laws.

There have been cases, like those of a Christian girl, Asma, in Sialkot in 2018, and of a Hindu girl, Pooja Oadh, from Sukkur, [?] Sindh, in 2022, who refused to convert and marry their predators and got killed. One was burned; the other one was shot dead.

However, there is some more susceptible and discrete which needs to be brought to light. Our research implying an intersectional framework has identified that young Hindu and Christian girls are most susceptible to religiously motivated sexual grooming, a term coined by Professor Mariz of Sussex University, Sussex University, to identify this unique phenomenon.

We have found that there is a clear predatory patterns. Girls from these communities between the ages of 12 to 16 are particularly vulnerable to this type of grooming because of illiteracy, poverty, and low socio-economic status.

These girls are first lured to marriage, then they are, when they have eloped with the person, they are

in love, then they are asked that marriage can only take place once they nominally convert to Islam, but afterwards, we have found sufficient evidence that they are forced to strictly practice religion.

And in most cases, we have also gathered data on this, that in most cases that initial promises quickly fade, leaving the girl isolated, and this conversion actually helps to isolate that girl from her family and her community.

We can recall that in February last year, six U.N. special rapporteurs and members of the Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls sent a joint letter of Pakistan, urging it to end forced conversions and child marriages.

However, Pakistan's federal Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony rejected such marriages as love marriages. Therefore, as our study has found, that Pakistan needs to revisit expand on such predatory patterns and provide protection to these minor girls because of their more vulnerability.

And we also believe that that the term "forced conversion" because the cases are filed as abduction, and

when these cases are presented in the court, police presents data of their telephonic talks or their meetings, which is why such cases often do not stand in the court, which is why we think on both sides, on the state side and on the organizations which are providing legal assistance, this phenomenon further needs to be investigated and understood so that we can protect thousands of girls, who are each year being targeted. Their lives are ruined, and they are never brought, there, no good amount of data is collected from this perspective.

Thank you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Mr. Aqeel.

Our final witness this morning will be Amjad Mahmood Khan. Mr. Khan, as indicated, is a professor at the UCLA School of Law and the National Secretary for Public Affairs for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in the United States.

Mr. Khan.

MR. KHAN: Well, thank you, Chair Schneck, and to Vice Chair Ueland, Commissioner Mahmood, to Commissioner Hartzler, to Commissioner Soloveichik, and to all of the terrific staff of USCIRF for convening this incredibly

important hearing.

I want to start perhaps a little bit unconventionally by saying "Assalamu alaikum." I do that, which is the traditional Islamic greeting, I do that deliberately in this hearing, particularly, as a member of the Ahmadiyya-Muslim community as a showing of solidarity to my fellow Ahmadi-Muslim brothers and sisters in Pakistan, who face arrest for saying the same greeting. And I think it's kind of a microcosm of some of the items that I'll be talking about in my testimony.

The work that USCIRF does I want to say at the outset is life changing. As a lawyer and litigator who has represented hundreds of prisoners of conscience in a pro bono basis from all religious communities, we routinely use USCIRF's reports in court proceedings to highlight the work that, to shine a spotlight on the persecution, and this is incredibly weighty evidence.

So I just wanted to thank everyone for convening this because it really saves lives. I've seen it in over 20 years of working in this space.

We have heard some really terrible stories just now with my two worthy colleagues talking about the

persecution that a number of religious communities face in Pakistan—the Christian community, the Hindu community, and many others—and I know personally having represented them as well, I stand in solidarity with them.

I want to talk about—I'll divide my testimony in three parts. I'll talk about some of the legal structures of discrimination, what I refer to as certain legal markers that institutionalize persecution in Pakistan, which are very important. Not just blasphemy laws, but other aspects as well.

I also then want to provide some important data that's recent and cumulative that's very important for the Commission to recognize in terms of the trending lines.

And then I'll end with some recommendations and some observations. So before proceeding to talk about these legal structures of discrimination, I think it's important for us to ask a few fundamental questions collectively, and these are in some ways rhetorical questions.

What does it mean to have the promise of religious freedom in Pakistan in its constitution? What does that really mean for Pakistan? What does it mean to

be an equal citizen in Pakistan?

These are, I think, fundamental questions that undergird everything we're talking about this morning. As far as the community, the Ahmadi Muslim community, is concerned, fundamentally, most essentially, Ahmadis are Muslim.

And that self-profession puts the persecution of the Ahmadi community in a very different context than perhaps other communities because we are a community that professes to be Muslim, but the constitution says we are not Muslim.

So imagine the second amendment to Pakistan's constitution for 50 years now, in fact, September 7th will be the 50th anniversary of this amendment, declares all Ahmadis to be non-Muslim so we are denied the right to profess our faith.

This puts us in a very precarious situation. We cannot use Islamic epithets, we cannot call our mosques "mosques." We can't act and exist as Muslims because we can be punished through criminal ordinances, and Ahmadis for their part are a very peaceful community.

The motto of the community is "love for all,

hatred for none." It's a very organized community with a central leader residing in the United Kingdom, his Holiness Mirza Masroor Ahmad. Millions of Ahmadis are united under his leadership, and they believe in all of the fundamentals of Islam, including the principal creed of Islam, which is the Kalima.

But that belief is irrelevant, irrelevant, under the law, for an Ahmadi, and that's because of this constitutional amendment.

But it's deeper than that. That's just the first structure of legal discrimination.

The second structure of legal discrimination for Ahmadis in Pakistan, and other groups, as well, of course, is what we've been talking about, which is the criminal code.

So there are five anti-blasphemy provisions in Pakistan, and the most notorious is a 50-word penal code provision, 295-C, which punishes any insults that are perceived insults to the honor of the Prophet of Islam, peace be upon him, with potential death, imprisonment and fines.

Now this is an incredibly, probably the most

remarkably broad law in the world, and I've studied the constitutions of Muslim countries, particularly, but all over the world, and Pakistan is the only constitution that defines who is or is not a Muslim for purposes of the law, but this 50-word code statute has been weaponized to suffocate the rights of many communities.

For Ahmadis, in particular, we're talking about over 4,000, 4,000 such cases have been registered under these provisions. There are two blasphemy laws that are specific.

They are called Ordinance XX, 298-B and C, and they actually criminalize Ahmadis for posing as a Muslim. That's the exact words, "posing as a Muslim."

So the sum effect of this is to create a really kind of Kafkaesque situation where Ahmadis cannot even call themselves Muslims and exist as Muslims, but the law will criminalize their very existence.

This is the state of affairs with that structure of discrimination, but it's beyond that as well. The constitution, the criminal code, the passport applications. Imagine every single citizen of Pakistan to renew their passport has to sign under penalty of perjury a declaration

that declares Ahmadis to be imposter Muslims, just to get a passport renewed.

And most egregiously for the community, Ahmadis have been excluded from the full and free voting rights in Pakistan, and this is a really critical point that I wish to raise that since 1985 Ahmadi Muslims cannot by operation of law vote in national and provincial elections because of this act.

It was originally in 2002, and now it's an extant provision of one of my recommendations later. Section 48A of the Elections Act of 2017—Ahmadis can only vote if they declare themselves to be non-Muslim, declare the founder of their community to be an imposter, and add their names to a supplemental list.

Of course, which Ahmadi, who would actually, in order to vote, say I'm not a Muslim? Imagine if every Catholic or Mormon in America had to say they're not Christian in order to vote in America. Just imagine that.

That's exactly the state of affairs for every Ahmadi so, of course, Ahmadis then can't vote in the elections. But they have a 99 percent literacy rate, and they have served with distinction in Pakistan.

You know, the first Nobel Laureate before Malala was an Ahmadi, Professor Abdus Salam, who won the Nobel Prize in Physics. The first Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Sir Zafrulla Khan, who later became the president of the U.N. General Assembly, the president of the International Court of Justice, was a member of the Ahmadi community, and he served in the armed forces in Pakistan.

They've built hospitals. My own aunt set up the first IVF clinic in all of Pakistan, and she worked on very complicated uterine cancer cases in rural Pakistan, for the people of Pakistan.

And she would tell me, just incidentally, that she would have armed guards with her to go to the hospital, and that some people would come in the dead of night because she was the only physician who can do the operation, but because she's an Ahmadi, she would have to do the operations at three a.m. because they did not want to be seen with an Ahmadi doctor.

So this is the kind, this is emblematic of the kind of pain that Ahmadis face.

Now, in the interest of time, I'll just focus on a few recent statistics which are very important. Over 400

Ahmadi Muslims have been murdered in Pakistan since its founding.

The past ten years have been especially brutal with targeted killings of multiple family members at a time. Ahmadi Muslim doctors, lawyers, religious leaders.

In 2010, 99 Ahmadi Muslims were murdered in Pakistan, including one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in all of Pakistan's history in Lahore. 86 Ahmadis were killed. On average, seven Ahmadi Muslims are killed every year.

We talked about the blasphemy prosecutions, which, of course, is an incredibly staggering situation. It's remarkable to see that these cases—let me just give you the latest data, which is in 2023 and 2024. 133 Ahmadi Muslims were booked by the police. 27 of them arrested. Six Ahmadi current prisoners of conscience. Five Ahmadi Muslims have been denied bail and remain in various states in that process.

There were incredible, a staggering number of arrests during the Eid celebration recently. Several Ahmadis were killed this year. This one case I wish to highlight, which is someone I know, and as a lawyer and as

a litigator someone I deeply admire, Ali Ahmed Tariq, a 77-year-old lawyer, who was representing an Ahmadi in blasphemy cases, and he himself was brutally attacked in court.

And the lawyers are not safe in Pakistan as well, and it's incredible because he was charged for blasphemy because his name had the word "Syed," which is a designation that, an Arabic designation name, and that offended someone, and because of that, he was charged for blasphemy.

And then I think that there is just, you know, with these 4,500 cases of Ahmadis, 40 percent of all arrests under blasphemy provisions, there is also vigilante violence.

227 mosques have been forcibly occupied, put on fire, sealed or prevented to be constructed. These are Ahmadi houses of worship, and that's a staggering number.

83 Ahmadi Muslims have been denied cemetery burial, and the bodies of 40 Ahmadis have been exhumed from cemeteries because they're the wrong kind of Muslims.

I mean if you go to the cemetery of Professor Salam, he's buried in Pakistan, one of Pakistan's greatest

heroes, the word "Muslim" is removed from his epitaph because that would be an arrestable offense, and so you just imagine the level of hate and discrimination that exists in that scenario.

So just a few recommendations to close here.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Really quickly if you don't mind, Mr. Khan.

MR. KHAN: Absolutely.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you.

MR. KHAN: Yes. There will just be a few. And I would lead by saying to repeal Section 48A of the Elections Act of 2017 so Ahmadis can vote alongside every other person in Pakistan.

That's an incredibly important point because Ahmadis are loving and serving Pakistan. They should be allowed to vote.

Stop the extraterritorial prosecution of foreign citizens. Ahmadis abroad have also been targeted by the Pakistan Telecom Authority.

Repeal regulations that prohibit the possession of literature for Ahmadis. Obviously, Ahmadis need protection from their sacred houses of worship, their

mosques, their gravesites, and remove these passport restrictions, restore religious freedom for Ahmadis.

And not to be target of hate by political parties in Pakistan. This unfortunately is all political parties. They tend to use the hatred of Ahmadis to foment violence against other communities.

So these are some humble recommendations. I look forward to your questions. Thank you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Mr. Khan.

I would remind all of the witnesses that we'd be glad to receive additional information in written testimony subsequently.

At this time, I'm going to defer from asking my questions. Perhaps I'll hold them to the end given the situation of time, and I'll ask Vice Chair Eric Ueland to begin.

VICE CHAIR UELAND: I really appreciate that.

Quickly, Mr. Aqeel, knowing the Punjab provincial government has recently passed a law, the Christian Marriage Act, which raises the minimum age for marriage, do you think the passage of this legislation will help curb forced marriage and conversion, and if so, why? If not,

why not?

MR. AQEEL: Sir, this law is passed by the [?] government, and it is limited only to the [?]. Those who worked on it, they should have got, they should have got one resolution under Article 144 of the constitution.

If two, any such law, if two resolutions are brought in the National Assembly, then that becomes a national law. So, currently, my understanding is that it is not, this law is not applicable to the entire country.

Secondly, changing this age, we had been working for a long time. This depends that if courts, the first thing is if they consider conversion as a starting point.

But if a child has converted to Islam, then how they can apply a Christian marriage law on them? So that will remain a challenge for the courts. I think we haven't heard so far this law invoked.

And we don't think, because in each case, whenever somebody converts, they say every other law is not applicable because now she is under Sharia. And this is also rarely available because in most of the cases when the child marriage takes place between a Muslim boy and a Muslim girl, they immediately [?] the courts, most of the

time.

But when the girl is non-Muslim, and she becomes Muslim, then this prevails to all human rights frameworks.

So I think this will work, this is what we expect will remain in the future. Thank you.

VICE CHAIR UELAND: Thank you for the answer and thank everybody, witnesses, for your testimony today.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Commissioner Mahmood.

COMMISSIONER MAHMOOD: Thank you, all the witnesses. It is indeed mindboggling.

I have a couple of three questions. I'm going to pose it right away for the sake of time. Number one thing which I want to highlight, and I have been actually getting messages, especially for Mr. Jacob and Asif Aqeel, also for Amjad Khan.

Two communities we have not been able to highlight here, and I want to make sure those communities are recognized and their grievances and their hardships are also in our heart and mind. One is Hazara community, mostly Shia community, and apparently they have lost more lives than any other community in Pakistan.

And they have been really en masse murder cases,

and we, I'm sorry we didn't touch this. We didn't get any representative from them because they don't have much international reach out. So I do not want to leave any community out of this thing who has been really, really in the extreme hardships, and we just don't talk about that.

So at some point, we should definitely address that.

The second community, which I'm very close worldwide, is the Sikh community, and I'm getting messages from them. I think they were going to join, but Karachi has terrible weather, and there's a lot of outages and they could not join, but Sikhs are going through a particular concern in Pakistan, actually all over the world.

Forced conversion we have talked about, but transnational terrorism, which I would not blame government of Pakistan or Pakistan, but Pakistan should raise more voice on that because probably from somewhere in the neighborhood, more Sikhs have been murdered in Pakistan than collectively all over the world in transnational terrorism, and that should be addressed too, and if Jacob or Aqeel or Amjad had any information on that.

The third thing is under the [?], and I'm also

concerned about this voting right. Obviously a lot of people will say the voting right is a different concern, but I think a lot of places democracy and voting rights [?] and religious freedom in Pakistan, not only Ahmadiyyas but other people are also targeted on that.

How can we basically work on, and what are the immediate measures can be taken so that every citizen of Pakistan has a say regardless of their faith or religion or belief because we believe democratic system is the key to every human right?

And religious freedom also plays a significant role under democratic system. So these are the three basic questions I have.

Thank you. Thank you, chair.

MR. AQEEL: If you like, I can respond, and then Mr. Jacob, who is here, he can further help us.

There's one particular problem to me when we talk about religious minorities. That's why the reason is I refer to the constitution of Pakistan. So whichever the minorities fall into that purview, I have covered them in my own research.

The challenges that there is genocide exists

against Shiites. But then Shiites are not a minority, which is why I didn't touch that.

Secondly, about the Sikhs, in my discussion, I didn't touch it, one. They are actually, they are a minority who are more privileged in many ways. One is that they have state sponsorship, which is why there are only ten, close to 10,000 in Pakistan. But they are present in the Punjab.

Similarly, they are present in the National Assembly, and whenever there is an issue of their girl being abducted or forced or love marriage or whatever, one thing is that they are not children, which is what we have gathered through our research.

Secondly, the state actually becomes very active and we can present cases of that. So but in the case of Hindus and Christian girls, this is entirely different.

Third thing is we did not mention Baha'is and Ahmadis, and Zoroastrians or Farsis because when we were conducting research, they told us that this is not their problem that their girls are being lured or they are forced into such marriages. To this date, we don't have any such response from them.

If it comes, I'll definitely take them into consideration. So that is the reason we are not touching that, and definitely there is genocide of them. There is no question about it.

But then that is not within the purview of my research on religious minorities. Thank you.

MR. KHAN: I might add there just briefly, Commissioner Mahmood, and to the commissioners.

So first off, I think it's incredibly important to understand the complexity and nuance and diversity within Islam, right? So when we talk about the Hazara community, it is a Shia community, which is, though large in number in Pakistan, obviously maintains a minority, theological minority status within the larger Sunni umbrella, and that creates a number of issues.

I've actually represented Hazaras, and I know them very well, particularly the situation in Afghanistan, and their community, of course, has testified in Congress a few times as well, and so I do think, I really respect that point.

I think it's important to make sure that we talk about all communities that even if they maintain any

semblance of some privilege or some rights in one area, they are suffering in other areas.

The Sikh community is another example of that, of course, and many other minorities as well. So I really appreciate that comment from Commissioner Mahmood. It's very important that all beleaguered communities stand in solidarity with each other so that the Pakistan government realizes that we're stronger when all communities are strong.

And then on the voting rights issue, I will say that that is a seminal issue. I 100 percent agree that if you think about it from the macro perspective, it's very difficult.

I mean I've been working in this space, like I said, for over two decades. Repealing blasphemy laws is almost an insurmountable task in Pakistan. Perhaps some marginal reforms. Those are met with criticism, but everyone can have the full and free right to vote in Pakistan.

As citizens of Pakistan, they pay taxes. They engage as citizenry. Why can't they have the restoration of the right to vote? Why do you have this Section 48

Election Act of 2017 that puts people on other rolls, that puts conditions on voting.

This should be eliminated, and this is good for Pakistan. This is good for the future of Pakistan. So I really appreciate that equal citizenship point, Commissioner Mahmood.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Mr. Jacob, did you want to respond as well?

MR. JACOB: Yes. I'd just like to thank Commissioner Mahmood for, you know, pointing out that all communities are not talked about. This is perhaps because of lack of information and paucity of time.

Otherwise, of course, what we complain about is the exclusion of the citizenry on the basis of religion, which has entailed to something even graver is the minoritization of the entire nation.

So somehow when you're excluded people on the basis of religion, it became a contentious matter, and now even some of the sects that formed the mainstream of Islam are, they stand excluded. Moderate voices and those, you know, voices of sanity, they are also excluded.

So it has created an environment which is unsafe

for everybody, and for that, I would like thank Commissioner Mahmood. Thank you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Mr. Jacob.

Commissioner Hartzler.

COMMISSIONER HARTZLER: Yes. I have a question for Mr. Aqeel, as well as another question for Mr. Jacob.

And I found your testimony really interesting, Mr. Aqeel, as it relates to conversions of the girls and the difficulty in prosecuting them. And I hadn't thought about the issue of religiously motivated sexual grooming as being a part of it.

And I wondered if you had considered producing some sort of a video or documentary or through social media or somehow getting out this information to these girls and their families to create more awareness of this.

Is that something that is being pursued? And also, you know, you said that the Center for Law & Justice is proposing a new approach, and so I would like to hear more about that.

And so, and then Mr. Jacob, your question for you is that your research indicates that police and other authorities have characterized the attacks in Jaranwala and

Sargodha as the outcome of foreign conspiracies.

So what tools, if any, could be used to address this kind of rhetoric and have any actions been taken by Pakistani officials to challenge this kind of rhetoric?

So appreciate you both answering this question.
So Mr. Aqeel.

MR. AQEEL: Thank you very much.

It's been, Center for Law & Justice has been providing legal assistance for the last, since 2011. And we realized that each time that we're going to the court, we were losing those cases.

And we also found that the relations most of the time existed, but then we were saying that there is some probably economic side we need to look at.

Later on, when Minority Rights Group International they got, reached us, and at that time, Sussex University's Professor Mariz was working on it, on this issue, because she's a Coptic Christian, and she had brought this understanding about the sexually motivated, religiously motivated sexual grooming.

And when we looked at it from that perspective, we found that there are not just few cases, there are

hundred, not even hundred, even thousand in Islam, but one prosecutor told us that it, from Sindh, almost every week, one or two or three such cases. People, they bring girls. They marry them, and after four or five, six days, they just divorce them.

This is more prostitution type of forcing. This is something different which we haven't yet worked on. We have done research on it. We haven't yet published it.

Secondly, Professor Mariz Institute of Development Studies, it is going to publish their research probably by the end of this year, which is why we are also holding back.

But our, another research, which is on intersectionality among women, minority women, that actually looks to some extent to this side.

So I can share with you that, and then if you have more question. About the approach, we are thinking that these cases should more be approached from the Pakistani penal court side which deals with allurements of a minor girl, and that might help.

But we are still looking into it from this perspective because so far the existing way of looking at

it in the NGOs and organizations is mainly about forced conversion.

And the lives ruined of thousands of girls, which never come out of because of that shame. Because to them, it is their choice. We are not reaching to them. So that's the reason I'm suggesting that we look at more from that legal, as well as sociological aspect, so that we can provide some, asking the government to look from this side, because they are saying that these are just love marriages because there is sufficient that type of legal evidence is available.

So I think we need to look at it more from sociological aspect. That can be more help.

COMMISSIONER HARTZLER: Well, as we just heard testimony on Panel I, from USAID, infusing millions of our dollars in education system to help educate girls, and I think this might be a real opportunity to help include in that curriculum, as a former teacher, to include in some of that curriculum some awareness of this whole topic.

So that would be a good use of our tax dollars, but, so let's keep working on that, but thank you for that.

Mr. Jacob, do you have any comments about how we

can change the mischaracterizations of these awful brutal attacks as foreign conspiracies?

MR. JACOB: Thank you so much, Commissioner Hartzler.

Before going on to this particular question, I would just like to mention two terms that I use to explain the kind of abuse that Asif Aqeel was mentioning.

So there is a kind of say a tradition of child sexual abuse as well as sexual slavery in some of the parts of the country that sexual slavery. So someone married but not married, it is a kind of slavery in the form of marriage.

However, to your question, commissioner, I would like to say that, yes, in fact, the administration when they fail to deliver on their responsibilities, and they are somehow helpless. They arrange such stories are, it has been characteristic, as you say, after the incidents, that they will blame someone inside out.

But then the question comes, how do you prosecute people under the same charges, and you don't find those conspiracies and expose them if that had happened?

So we are challenging this narrative, this false

narrative, I must say, inside Pakistan also, and we are, we are challenging always on the basis of married, and also because I will refer to here a report, a fact-finding report by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, which aptly explained the fear of minorities.

For instance, in Sargodha, as social ostracization. So I, because I wrote an article on the plight of Sargodha and the situation, how it's changed over the decades because I was exposed to that place personally. I lived there.

So that kind of impunity, when it is allowed to certain extremist group, even those groups which were banned in the past but allowed to operate and they even participate in the politics and they [?].

The administration has no other way to explain, you know, recurring, recurrence of those children, other than, you know, telling some kind of lies, or tricks, lying on them.

So therefore I mean this is, this is almost obvious. This narrative has failed to convince any serious section of press or public opinion locally or internationally.

COMMISSIONER HARTZLER: Thank you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Mr. Jacob.

Commissioner Soloveichik.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you.

Mr. Khan, how would you compare the state and status of Ahmadiyya Muslims in Pakistan with that of the Ahmadiyya population in other Muslim-majority countries, such as Indonesia, Saudi Arabia?

MR. KHAN: Yeah. It's a very important question. I know the focus here is on Pakistan, but because owing to the different beliefs that Ahmadis have or are perceived to have as being outside of the mainstream Islam, Ahmadis are persecuted in a number of Muslim-majority countries.

But there are some meaningful differences. In Indonesia, there was a time where 29 provinces had banned all Ahmadi activities, and there had been a huge crackdown, including a blasphemy law of 1965, that would punish and prosecute Ahmadis in Indonesia.

But there had been serious reform and change. There are about three or 400,000 Ahmadis in Indonesia, and now the government is taking steps to try to not have those acts, mob violence, happen with impunity. And so there has

been marked change actually in Indonesia so that there is some optimism there.

Bangladesh also had that type of optimism, but, of course, with the recent changes there in leadership, there is a lot of concerns for the Ahmadi community, and, of course, in Algeria, there have been thousands of Ahmadis who have been prosecuted and remain a serious a concern actually.

And also in Egypt and other parts, and Syria, as well. So there's been a lot of suffocation of rights in other Muslim-majority countries, but in Pakistan, it's the institutionalization, the weaponization of law, the mob violence, the acts with impunity, the police watching hundreds of mosques being torn down in front of the Ahmadi community.

These are the kinds of things that are so jarring, so stark, that make the persecution there so endemic.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you.

I wonder if I could at this time, since there seems to be enough time, pose a question that I have to the

panel, particularly to the attorneys on the panel.

One of my specific concerns, obviously I'm very concerned about the larger system of the blasphemy laws, but one of my specific concerns is, are the false accusations of blasphemy that are not addressed by the legal system, and I'm curious—I posted it to the attorneys especially—what sort of legal reforms in Pakistan might be able to address the problem of these false accusations?

MR. KHAN: If you want to take a shot first, and then I can comment? Go ahead, Peter.

MR. JACOB: Okay. Yes. So the first thing that need to perhaps reexplain is that abuse occurs because of the lacunae existing in the content of the law itself. So whereas there is no definition of religious insult, there is no, there are no important exemptions taken into account.

The element of intent is not taken into account in the text of the law. These abuses are [?] natural. They are likely to happen. This has been a conclusion that so many researchers have made, and I would like to reiterate it until and unless those lacunae are addressed.

I mean we primarily ask for repeal because that

has been a global voice, and from all sorts of blasphemy laws. But there can be substantive changes, like Mr. Schneck has. There can be substantive changes for the time being at least parallel to this legislation, which would neutralize.

For instance, adding the element of intent and definition of religious insult. These are two basic things. But you have to have exemptions like, exceptions like, you know, insanity, age, knowing not the consequences of one's action. These are important exceptions that need to be incorporated.

Thank you so much.

MR. KHAN: I think Peter is absolutely right. You begin with the remarkably broad vagueness of these statutes and codes, and then finding ways to, you know, change the language of the very codes themselves. Very difficult task because any marginal word changes are met with mob violence.

I mean it's remarkable. It's amazing in Pakistan how the mobs watch the law. They know the law. They know the codes. They know the language, and they wait and see if there are going to be changes in the language.

So that makes it exceedingly difficult to achieve what Peter rightly is saying are changes in the actual statutory language, but there's also the question of evidentiary burden, which, you know, I think as a trial lawyer, that's incredibly important to me.

The first information report is the seminal document. That's the criminal prosecution document. That first information report is based on a very thin read of evidentiary burden.

So you can really just say I don't like, I didn't like his name. His name is insulting to me. He has a Muslim-sounding name. You know, I didn't like the way he recited the Quran. I didn't like the way he looked at me.

I mean these are real cases, by the way, actual cases that have gone to trial. So that can't be the case. There has to be a higher evidentiary burden in the front end of the prosecution documents, and there could be some marginal reforms to punish those who bring frivolous complaints, and if that gets strengthened, then you reduce the pipeline of those frivolous cases.

And there shouldn't be any cases—we all know that—on the basis of these vague statutes. But at least

you'll reduce the number and keep in mind, the majority of case, I mean many Muslims, Sunni Muslims, are also victims of these very laws.

So it's an equal opportunity offensive statute; right? Of course, we are talking about the communities here, but it's not helping Pakistan in any way to settle disputes, personal disputes, through the weaponization of law.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Mr. Aqeel, any comments?

MR. AQEEL: I think Pakistan when we talk about law, one thing is essentially important. For general population, this is Western law, and to them, for example, when they run the red light, they think that this is not Islamic law.

So that distinction, how Pakistan, meaning people generally, apart from the elite who is studying in the English medium. Because I teach, [?] in law school, so I try to look from that perspective more. So we need to see how constitution is being rejected from the students, from class one, and until they graduate.

Most of them, they don't know what is in the law. They don't know what other fundamental laws. The reference

is always about fundamental laws about what Islam has sanctioned for Muslim and non-Muslims.

So with that type of discussion, which is why they are not interested in rest of the constitution and laws, and laws are not practiced the way it is in the developed countries.

They don't care about laws. These are the only religious laws that they are worried about in the constitution. For example, recently the Supreme Court judge in Article 20, and others can better explain, he just explained that that fundamental law touches upon propagation, giving liberty to every citizen that they can propagate their religion.

This liberty is also given to Christians, but the public sphere is only reserved for a Muslim who take control of this place. Everywhere you can see verses of words written about, which are Islamic words, but cannot [?] place something out in the, in a bazaar or on the road, not possible.

For Hindu, even impossible. They have even asked to remove such signs on the graveyards of Hindus and of Christians which they think is bothering them. And we have

been in Jaranwala, what was very evident, what they wanted to see, we wanted to break the cross. They wanted to drag it on the roads. They wanted to drag the cross in sewage open channels, just to disrespect it.

So with this type of mindset, changing the law first, changing the blasphemy laws is almost naturally impossible, and even something is changed, that wouldn't have much effect.

Thank you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you.

We have only a couple minutes left so very short period of time, but I want to offer the other commissioners a chance to ask any additional question that they may have.

Commissioner Mahmood. Commissioner Mahmood, your sound.

COMMISSIONER MAHMOOD: Sorry Thank you.

I just wanted to touch one more thing to get to real quick idea whether this is just a certain group, this is gone in the society. Normally, we see, and I just briefly mentioned in my opening statement, not only that minority communities are being targeted on religious bigotry or targeting.

Even mainstream communities are really targeted in Pakistan now, and we see many examples. I only give one example because that person is popular, not to be political, but the case that became very popular in Pakistan, when he was, I think, sentenced to several years, and there are so many other cases people are accused; they're targeted.

So I want to just get a sense whether this is getting into the mainstream population or culture of Pakistan to use religion whenever, wherever they can? Whether it's actual religion or [?] or culture, or social?

So is it a really problem now, just religious bigotry or social justice?

How can we work on to address that so that country doesn't go any worse than where it is? I really want cooperation, do everything possible for people in Pakistan to progress in a positive and right way. But these things are kind of concerning.

So I think Asif Aqeel might be the best person to answer this.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Yes. Mr. Aqeel, we have about, about one minute.

MR. AQEEL: I'll speak actually less than that. I think for Pakistan, there is not, no mainstream, and when you were saying that mainstream. Mainstream are the Sunnis, not just Sunnis, they are[?], but [?] have been more suffered brutal terrorism.

So I think as long as religionization of the state and as long as political weaponization of religion will remain, their struggle will remain between, among the Muslim factions, which one can control the state.

So I think that one. Others can help.

MR. KHAN: I'll just briefly, ten second, note of optimism. Remember Pakistan's founding was built on inclusivity and religious freedom. There were people in minority communities who were members of the cabinet.

So the promise of Pakistan is still there. The ability to ensure religious freedom is still there. There needs to be a preoccupation with focusing on restoring those visions and ideals and to answer Commissioner Mahmood's, just on a note of optimism.

CHAIR SCHNECK: With that note of optimism, this hopeful vision of Pakistan, I have to say that's all the time that we have today.

I want to thank all of our witnesses for their testimony, really their very, very important testimony. Pakistan remains a top priority for USCIRF. Please visit our website for more on our reporting on Pakistan and the other countries that we regularly monitor.

Now this hearing is officially adjourned. Thank you all.

[Whereupon, at 12:00 noon ET, the hearing was adjourned.]