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WHEN RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IS TAKEN AWAY

The Current State of Minorities in Pakistan

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Abstract

This research examines the state of religious freedom of minorities in Pakistan through a qualitative approach using a systematic review of empirical literature over the last fifteen years. Pakistan, as a country with a 96.4% Muslim population, has various religious minority groups, including Hindus (1.6%), Christians (1.4%), Ahmadiyya, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Parsi who face a hostile environment. Although the founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, promised religious freedom in his speech on 11 August 1947, the reality shows that religious minorities have experienced systematic discrimination since the adoption of the 1949 Objective Resolution. This research analyses the condition of minorities from the perspectives of the constitution, legal implementation, and social practices. The findings show that religious minorities in Pakistan face various forms of discrimination ranging from limited access to basic services, employment discrimination, religion-based violence, forced conversions, blasphemy accusations, to premeditated murder. Pakistan's constitution limits the political rights of minorities, with only Muslims able to become President and Prime Minister. Although the Pakistani government has signed various international human rights treaties and announced various minority protection policies, implementation on the ground is far from adequate. Blasphemy laws have become instruments of repression that threaten minorities with the death penalty. This research concludes that religious minorities in Pakistan suffer from multiple forms of discrimination and systematic oppression that not only violate human rights but also threaten social cohesion and Pakistan's image of pluralism in international eyes.

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Introduction

Pakistan is a country that has an interfaith population. In terms of population, the larger groups include Hindus, Ahmedis, and Christians, while smaller minority religious groups include Buddhists, Sikhs, and Parsi. These minority religious groups live in a hostile environment.¹ They are 'very small and powerless' and have experienced constant fear.²

The founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, in his famous speech on 11 August 1947, said: You are free, you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to mosques or any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may follow any religion or sect, or creed, which has nothing to do with the affairs of the State.³ His speeches and behaviour before and after the partition of the subcontinent are evidence of his secular leanings and intentions for the nascent state on the world atlas. He opposed the idea given by Amir Ali Khan, the treasurer of the Muslim League, that Pakistan would become a theocratic state. He stopped Khan from saying so on stage as it could imply that he too shared the view of Pakistan being a theocratic state.⁴

Unfortunately, his dream of making Pakistan a secular state did not materialise. Right after his death, Liaqat Ali Khan, the first prime minister of the newly established country, in his famous speech on 12 March 1949, said that the formation of the state was only half the work to be done. The other half would be done by making it a "laboratory" of Islam. The religious minorities in the country realised this fact when the 1949 Resolution was adopted. They realised that the energies of the state would be directed towards advancing and protecting the interests of Muslims who were in the majority.

As a result of the discrimination found in this constitution, non-Muslims began to lose hope for a future in the country, as the leadership of the fledgling state began to steer it towards becoming an Islamic state. For example, the country's first law minister, Jogendar Nath Mandal, told a reporter in 1950 that Hindus did not see a secure future in Pakistan. He told reporters: 'I have asked them to wait for a few more weeks and I am also ready to accompany them to India'. Similarly, members of religious minorities were scared when the Objective Resolution was passed on 12 March 1949.⁵ Based on these historical facts, it can be concluded that religious minorities have experienced marginalisation and consequent fear since the inception of the country.⁶

¹ M. M. Fuchs & S.W. Fuchs, "Religious Minorities in Pakistan: Identities, Citizenship and Social Belonging," *Journal of South Asian Studies* 43, no. 1 (2020): 52-67.

² A.K. Raina, "Minorities and Representation in a Plural Society: The case of the Christians of Pakistan," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 37, no. 4 (2014): 684-699.

³ Ali Raza Shah & Bela Nawaz, "Issues and State of Religious Minorities in Pakistan: A Systematic Literature Review," *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 5, no. 3 (2021): 70-88.

⁴ F. Ispahani, *Purifying The Land of The Pure: A History of Pakistan's Religious Minorities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁵ F. Ispahani, "Constitutional issues and the treatment of Pakistan's religious minorities," *Asian Affairs* 49, no. 2 (2018): 222-237.

⁶ M. Muzaffar et al., "The Politics of Religious Legislation: A Case Study of Pakistan 1979-2000," *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 1, no. 2 (2017): 276-90.

Academic studies on religious minorities in Pakistan are still very limited, with noticeable research gaps. The scholarly literature on minority communities such as Shi'a, Ahmadiyya, Hindu, and Sikh is far less than that on Christian communities, despite their demographically significant proportions.⁷ This knowledge vacuum is particularly pronounced in the study of the Hindu community, which has long historical roots in the region. One important contribution in filling this gap is Ali Usman Qasmi's 'Ahmadis and the Politics of Religious Exclusion in Pakistan',⁸ which provides an in-depth analysis of the social history and political dynamics of the Ahmadiyya community in relation to the Pakistani state. The work offers a comprehensive perspective on the experiences of minority groups in the context of national history and politics.

Qasmi analyses how political dynamics, the degradation of modernist interpretations of Islam by bourgeois Muslims, and the growing influence of religious scholars (ulama) have synergistically resulted in the rejection of Muslim identity recognition for the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan. Sadia Saeed, in her research, deepens this issue by showing that the absence of an official ideology that guarantees equal citizenship rights across religious groups has perpetuated the marginalisation of Ahmadiyya in the political sphere. Furthermore, Saeed notes the 'politicisation of religion' in the judiciary since the 1980s, which has effectively weakened the legal system's ability to protect the rights of Ahmadis as full and equal citizens.⁹

In the context of academic studies on the Shi'a community in Pakistan, two important works have made significant contributions. Andreas Rieck's *The Shias of Pakistan* is the first comprehensive study to explore the internal dynamics of the Shia community deeply. Using new sources, Rieck analyses the complexity of their struggle for communal rights and state protection.¹⁰ As a complement, Simon Wolfgang Fuchs in "In

⁷ Khan Muhammad Waliullah Khan, *Sikh Shrines in Pakistan* (New Delhi: Kalpaz, 2000); Ian Talbot, "Pakistan and Sikh Nationalism: State Policy and Private Perceptions," in *Sikh Formations* 6, no. 1 (2010): 63-76; Sadia Saeed, "Political Fields and Religious Movements: The Exclusion of the Ahmadiyya Community in Pakistan," *Political Power and Social Theory* 23 (2012): 189-223; Asif Arif, *L'Ahmadiyya: Un islam interdit: Histoire et persecutions d'une minorite au Pakistan* (Paris: Harmattan, 2014); Jurgen Schaflechner, "Forced Conversion and (Hindu) Women's Agency in Sindh," *South Asia Chronicle* 7 (2017): 275-317; Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan: A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); and Gurharpal Singh, "The Control of Sacred Spaces: Sikh Shrines in Pakistan from the Partition to the Kartarpur Corridor," *Sikh Formations* 15, no. 1 (2019): 1-18.

⁸ Ali Usman Qasmi, *The Ahmadis and the Politics of Religious Exclusion in Pakistan* (London: Anthem Press, 2014).

⁹ Sadia Saeed, *Politics of Desecularization: Law and the Minority Question in Pakistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹⁰ Some earlier works include Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "Sectarianism in Pakistan: The Radicalization of Shi'i and Sunni Identities," *Modern Asian Studies* 32, no. 3 (1998): 689-716; Syed Hussain Arif Naqvi, "The Controversy about the Shaykhiyya Tendency among Shia 'Ulama' in Pakistan," in Werner Ende and Rainer Brunner (eds), *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture and Political History* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); and Vernon J. Schubel, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam: Shi'i Devotional Rituals in South Asia*

a Pure Muslim Land: Shi'ism between Pakistan and the Middle East” broadens the perspective by examining the dialectics of Shi'a religious thought from local to transnational dimensions, and offers a new interpretation of sectarianism in Pakistan.¹¹ Nonetheless, academic literature on minorities in Pakistan still tends to focus on aspects of exclusion and discrimination, indicating the need for more comprehensive and diverse studies.

This research uses a systematic review of some of the previous empirical literature on the problems faced by religious minorities in Pakistan, a centre of religious diversity. Using various keywords in Google Scholar, JSTOR, Emerald Insight, and ProQuest. Their findings were analysed, and relevant themes for the purpose of this research were established, namely around religious freedom. This theme was identified through a comparison of the last fifteen years of literature addressing issues faced by religious minority groups. Newspaper reports, opinion pieces, articles, and other relevant writings were also considered.

This research uses a qualitative methodological approach to explore in depth the situation of religious minorities in Pakistan from the time of Partition to the contemporary period. The main objective is to understand and explain the constitutional rights of minority groups in a comprehensive context. To ensure the validity and depth of the research, the author collected data from a variety of diverse sources. Data collection methods included literature review, online resources, official documents, official statistics, previous studies, related reports, journal articles, and print media publications. Both primary and secondary data were utilised systematically according to the research needs. The final research process involved analytical collation of the data, which enabled the processing and interpretation of information to produce comprehensive and meaningful findings on the condition of religious minorities in Pakistan.

State of Religious Minorities in Pakistan

Although religious minority communities in Pakistan make up only about 4 per cent of the total population, they are often in the spotlight in news reports about the world's second-largest Muslim country.¹² Contrary to the peaceful images in music videos, the

(Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993). Compare also several articles by Mariam About Zahab, for example “The Sunni–Shia Conflict in Jhang (Pakistan),” in Imtiaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld (eds), *Lived Islam in South Asia: Adaptation, Accommodation and Conflict* (Delhi: Social Science, 2004); “‘Yeh Matam Kayse Ruk Jae? (How Can This Matam Ever Cease?)’: Muharram Processions in the Pakistani Punjab’, in Knut A. Jacobsen (ed.), *South Asian Religions on Display: Religious Processions in South Asia and in the Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2008); and “The SSP: Herald of Militant Sunni Islam in Pakistan,” in Laurent Gayer and Christophe Jaffrelot (eds), *Armed Militias of South Asia: Fundamentalists, Maoists and Separatists* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

¹¹ See Simon Wolfgang Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land: Shi'ism between Pakistan and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

¹² For census purposes, Hindus, Christians, Ahmadis and so-called ‘Scheduled Castes’ (in this order) are regarded as religious minorities by the Pakistani government. Smaller minorities are

reality of life for religious minorities in Pakistan is far from harmonious. Popular narratives emphasise their challenging daily experiences, including various forms of violence, discrimination, and marginalisation. The problems faced are complex, ranging from limited access to basic services such as education, sanitation, transport, and healthcare, to systemic discrimination in employment. Moreover, they also face more serious threats of violence, such as kidnappings, forced religious conversions, blasphemy accusations, targeted killings, and repeated attacks on their places of worship.¹³ The overall picture shows that religious minorities in Pakistan experience extremely difficult living conditions, with very limited opportunities and security, as if they have almost no room for a decent life in society.

The academic discourse on religious minorities in Pakistan parallels the popular narrative, which shows deep concern for their situation.¹⁴ Scholarly discussion on the topic began to develop around forty years ago, with one of the landmark studies being Streefland's ethnographic work titled "The Sweepers of Slaughterhouse: Conflict and Survival in a Karachi Neighbourhood".¹⁵ The study made a significant contribution to the academic debate by raising the concept of 'double discrimination' experienced by the Christian community. Streefland not only discusses religious-based discrimination but also exposes the complexities of discrimination based on caste structures. In addition, his research presents a comprehensive picture of Christian community life in one of Pakistan's fast-growing urban areas, including the dynamics of family relationships, employment structures, and economic exchange systems.

collectively labelled as 'other'. According to the 2017 Census, Muslims make up 96.2 percent of Pakistan's population, Hindus 1.6 percent, Christians 1.59 percent, Scheduled Castes 0.25 percent, Ahmadis 0.22 percent, and other minorities 0.07 percent. Most Christians live in the Punjab, while Hindus and Scheduled Castes are overwhelmingly located in Sindh. Ahmadis are evenly spread throughout the country, with some concentration in Islamabad. Pakistan's Shi'i community, which is not counted as a religious minority in the census, makes up around 20 percent of the total population, with estimates varying widely from 15 percent to 25 percent. See Andreas Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan: A Beleaguered and Assertive Minority* (London: Hurst, 2015).

¹³ Maria-Magdalena Fuchs & Simon Wolfgang Fuchs, "Religious Minorities in Pakistan: Identities, Citizenship and Social Belonging," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 43, no. 1 (2020): 52-67.

¹⁴ For the most recent examples, see Farahnaz Ispahani, *Purifying the Land of the Pure: A History of Pakistan's Religious Minorities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Tariq Rahman, "Pakistan's Policies and Practices towards the Religious Minorities," *South Asian History and Culture* 3, no. 2 (2012): 302-15.

¹⁵ Pieter H. Streefland, *The Sweepers of Slaughterhouse: Conflict and Survival in a Karachi Neighbourhood* (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1979). The academic literature on religious minorities in the colonial period for the region that comprises today's Pakistan is much richer. See, for example, Harding, Religious Transformation in South Asia; and Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

The period between 1980 and 1986, which coincided with the authoritarian rule of President Zia-ul-Haq and the introduction of the so-called ‘blasphemy laws’, became a turning point in academic discussions around religious minorities in Pakistan. Scholars generally focused on two main themes: in-depth analyses of the political implications of the laws and systematic examinations of the persecution experienced by the Christian community. These two themes are inseparable and closely intertwined in scholarly studies. Particularly in relation to Christian minorities, academic narratives consistently emphasise their position as a beleaguered, marginalised, and persecuted group within Pakistan’s social and political structures.¹⁶

Neglected Legal Basis

Pakistan is a predominantly Muslim country. Pakistan’s 2023 digital census results show a slight shift in religious demographic composition compared to 2017. The majority of the population is Muslim, accounting for 96.4% of the total population, down slightly from 96.5% six years earlier. The Christian community was recorded at 1.4% and Hindus at 1.6% in 2023, compared to 1.3% and 1.7% in 2017. However, Christian church leaders in Pakistan questioned the accuracy of the data, stating that the census significantly understated the actual numbers of their community and did not match their observations of population growth.¹⁷

The limited participation of minorities in social and state affairs is clearly reflected in this demographic composition. This is further emphasised by Pakistan’s constitution, which restricts their political rights. For example, Article 41 (2) expressly stipulates that only Muslim citizens are eligible to hold the office of president, with the additional prerequisites of being at least 45 years old and qualifying as a member of the National Assembly.¹⁸ Similarly, the Constitution of Pakistan in Article 91 (3) expressly stipulates the procedure for the election of the Prime Minister. The clause asserts that after the election of the Deputy Speaker and the Speaker, the National Assembly shall elect a Muslim member as Prime Minister. This process takes place with no room for debate and prioritises religious requirements over other considerations.

In the socio-political context of Pakistan, there are two distinct schools of thought: the traditional and moderate approaches. Moderates argue that the foundations of the

¹⁶ Amalendu Misra, “Life in Brackets: Minority Christians and Hegemonic Violence in Pakistan,” *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 22, no. 2 (2015): 157-81; Qaiser Julius, Ahmadi and Christian, *Socio-Political Responses to Pakistan’s Blasphemy Laws: A Comparison, Contrast and Critique with Special Reference to the Christian Church in Pakistan* (Carlisle: Langham, 2017).

¹⁷ “Pakistan’s 2023 census ‘grossly undercounts’ Christians, leading to fewer opportunities, say church leaders,” *Christian Daily Asia*, 31 July 2024. <https://www.christiandaily.com/news/pakistans-2023-census-grossly-undercounts-christians.html>

¹⁸ Anita Wilson, Samina Saeed & Aziz Ur Rahman, “Constitutional Rights of Religious Minorities in Pakistan,” *Global Political Review* V, no. 1 (2020): 316-325.

Pakistani state should be built on the principles of inclusive citizenship, emphasising open and egalitarian national values. In contrast, conservatives argue that Pakistan was established solely to protect and enforce Islamic practices. Although Pakistan has signed various international human rights treaties, such as the International Civil and Political Rights Covenant (ICCPR) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), in practice it has made significant reservations. As a result, the scope of these treaties has been severely limited, as the state has prioritised compliance with Islamic commandments over international commitments to the protection of human rights.

Article 18 of the UDHR guarantees the fundamental freedom of every individual in matters of belief, conscience and thought. Juridically, both customary law and international treaties have bound Pakistan to protect the rights of its citizens, especially minority groups. The basic principle emphasised is the need to treat minorities as equal citizens, with full guarantees of freedom of belief and religion. This includes granting equal rights in terms of religious protection and practice, without discrimination or different treatment based on faith background.

Having recognised the importance of basic rights for all citizens in the constitution, a more in-depth discussion of minority rights will be undertaken in a dedicated subsection. The main focus will be to explore freedom of religion and belief with reference to perspectives and standards developed by the United Nations (UN) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

The Constitution of Pakistan in Article 20 expressly protects religious rights and the establishment of religious institutions. The Lahore Resolution of 1940 proposed the concept of a new state for Muslims that upheld the protection of the rights of minority groups. The document emphasised fundamental principles such as religious freedom, tolerance, democratic equality, and social justice, which later became the philosophical foundation of Pakistan's constitution. Through this resolution, minority groups were guaranteed the freedom to practice their religion and express their culture without discrimination.

Muhammad Ali Jinnah's thinking during the period 1940-1947 laid the fundamental foundations for Pakistan's commitment to freedom of worship and the guarantee of citizen security. In his speeches, particularly on 11 August 1947 before the first constitutional assembly, Jinnah affirmed the principles of equality without discrimination. He explicitly stated that in Pakistan, religious identity should not be a determinant of citizenship status. Jinnah emphasised that every citizen has the right to embrace and practice his or her own beliefs without state interference, noting that religion is a private matter and should not affect one's political rights. This statement reflected an inclusive and tolerant vision of the newly formed nation, where diversity of beliefs was respected and guaranteed.¹⁹

¹⁹ I. Khalid & M. Anwar, "Minorities under Constitution (s) of Pakistan," *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* 55, no. 2 (2018): 51-62.

Discrimination of Concern

Narratives that focus only on the experiences of minority groups have limitations in describing the complexity of social problems. In reality, traumatic experiences are not limited to minority groups, but are shared by Pakistan's citizens at large. Many citizens face systemic challenges such as weak law enforcement, repressive state behaviour, and inconsistent rule of law in different regions.

In 2019, the human rights situation in Pakistan was of grave concern, which was confirmed by various independent monitoring agencies. Contrary to popular belief, the country not only harms minority groups but also threatens the majority of its own citizens. The collective experience of violence creates a systemic impact that harms the entire society. Religious minorities, however, face greater pressure due to their small numbers and structural vulnerability. They are often targets of faith-based discrimination, with limited access to remedial resources. Some legal provisions, particularly in Pakistan's Penal Code, directly discriminate against certain minority groups, such as the Ahmadiyya, resulting in exclusion and widespread human rights violations.²⁰

Some legal frameworks in the country, including certain parts of the constitution, tend to define citizenship exclusively in favour of Muslim groups. Consequently, citizens from religious minorities face uncertainty and vulnerability in their citizenship status. However, these issues should not be simplified as mere manifestations of the "intolerance" assumed to be inherent in Islam or the process of "Islamisation". Rather, the phenomenon must be understood in a more comprehensive context, namely the failure of the state system, the emergence of authoritarian tendencies, and the rise of complex nationalist and communist ideologies.

An overly narrow approach to the persecution and exclusion of minorities creates problems in understanding their experiences. Existing narratives tend to simplify and homogenise minority groups, as if they were nameless masses suffering identically, without regard to the particularities of each group - be it Shi'a, Ahmadiyya, Christian, Hindu or Sikh. The consequence of this view is the erasure of the individuality, personal history, and capacity for action of each minority member. Furthermore, it reduces their complex life experiences and religiosity to a mere story of exclusion and daily resistance against the bigotry of the majority, thus removing the uniqueness and depth of each group's experience.

The belief systems of minority groups are highly complex and diverse realities, encompassing thoughts, religious practices, concepts of piety, communal identities, which have profound variations by region, social class, and denomination. Our understanding of them is still very limited. Critical questions that have not been adequately addressed include: How have Ahmadiyya theological and legal conceptions evolved over the past decade? In what ways have Hindu and Sikh holiday themes and

²⁰ Osama Siddique and Zahra Hayat, "Unholy Speech and Holy Laws: Controversial Origins, Design Defects and Free Speech Implications," *Minnesota Journal of International Law* XXVII, no. 2 (2008): 303-385.

traditions been shaped by the Pakistani context? What processes take place in the translation and interpretation of non-Muslim religious scriptures into local languages, and how does the majority discourse influence their interpretations? This area of research is vast and requires in-depth exploration to understand the complexities of minority religious experiences.

The common discourse on “victimisation” often overlooks the complexity of minority group identities. They have a range of overlapping identities and concerns that connect them to the wider society, encompassing dimensions such as ethnicity, gender, language, culture, regional history, caste, social class, political affiliation, and employment status. As a concrete example, the majority of Christians in Pakistan are of Punjabi ethnic origin, which means that despite their religious differences, they share deep historical, ethnic, cultural and linguistic ties with other Punjabi groups. Recent research, such as Ammara Maqsood’s in Lahore, has even shown that the new middle class exhibits progressive thinking tendencies that transcend sectarian and religious boundaries, with equal emphasis on education and rational religious understanding.²¹

The dominant discourse on minority groups today tends to portray them as if they exist in a historical vacuum, detached from the evolving social, political, and historical dynamics. This approach makes it seem as if their condition is frozen, stagnant, and has no potential for change, while the society around them continues to evolve. This historically unfounded reading treats minority groups as isolated entities, which is a misleading artificial construct. As a result, despite the recognition of the challenges faced by minority groups in Pakistan, our understanding of their identity and complexity remains very limited.

The Current State of Religious Freedom in Pakistan

Islam affirms the fundamental principle of respect for human dignity and human rights regardless of differences in belief or religion. Islamic teachings unequivocally state that taking the life of a person without a legitimate reason is tantamount to killing the entire human race, which demonstrates the importance of respect for life. From an Islamic perspective, the basic rights of non-Muslims are recognised equally with those of Muslims. This principle clearly emphasises that no Muslim is allowed to do any harm, be it violence to life, taking of property, or destruction of places of worship of people of other religions.

The Constitution of Pakistan guarantees the principle of equality and legal protection for all citizens. In Article 25 (1), the document asserts that every citizen is equal before the law and is entitled to identical protection of the law. Furthermore, in its preamble, the constitution emphasises the importance of providing adequate guarantees

²¹ Ammara Maqsood, *The New Pakistani Middle Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

for minority groups to freely practice their religious beliefs and develop and preserve their cultural heritage.²²

The US State Department's annual report on the human rights situation in Pakistan for 2023 reveals a number of crucial issues. Representatives of ethnic minority groups asserted that constitutional provisions guaranteeing their rights were never fully implemented in practice. Independent observers also highlighted two major issues that are particularly damaging to religious minorities: the practice of forced conversions and the discriminatory implementation of blasphemy laws.²³

In the document, it is stated that while Pakistan's constitution explicitly recognises the right of every citizen to embrace, practice and propagate his or her religious beliefs, there are significant restrictions. Article 20 of the constitution underlines that the religious right is not an absolute right, but is bound and may be limited by prevailing considerations of law, social order, and morality.²⁴

In a report released in February 2023, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan expressed deep concern regarding the situation of religious freedom in the country throughout 2021 and 2022. Through the document, the commission highlighted a number of incidents that were deemed to contradict the government's official promise to protect the right to freedom of religion and belief of its citizens. According to the report, the official stance of the Pakistani government has been to create conditions that allow the practice of religion-based discrimination to continue without consequence, while at the same time, the space for religious freedom has been further narrowed.²⁵

In January 2023, a group of UN human rights experts serving on the Human Rights Council published a report that explored the issue of conversion and forced marriage that specifically affects women and girls from religious minority communities. In a press release, the experts expressed deep concern about the systematic practices to which girls are subjected. They recounted tragic cases where teenage girls were forced to separate from their families, relocated to distant places, forcibly married off to much older men, and forced to change their religion—a series of actions that clearly violate international human rights standards. Experts emphasised their concern that the practice of forced

²² National Assembly of Pakistan, The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan [as modified up to 28 February 2012] (PDF), accessed 26 November 2024. https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1333523681_951.pdf

²³ US Department of State, 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Pakistan, 22 April 2024. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/pakistan/>

²⁴ National Assembly of Pakistan, The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan [as modified upto 28 February 2012] (PDF), accessed 26 November 2024. https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1333523681_951.pdf

²⁵ Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, *A Breach of Faith: Freedom of religion or belief in 2021/22* (Lahore: Visionaries Division 90A Airlines Housing Society, 2023).

marriage and forced conversion is carried out using threats of violence directed at girls, women, or their family members.²⁶

In the press release, the experts revealed alarming findings that the practice of forced marriages and religious conversions apparently involves religious leaders, security forces, and the justice system. They also noted that victims who experience these incidents often do not receive serious treatment from the police. The police often refuse to record reports or even justify abductions under the pretext of 'love marriages'.

In April 2024, the Special Rapporteurs again voiced deep concern about the lack of protection for women and girls from minority groups in Pakistan. They asserted that young girls from Christian and Hindu communities remain highly exposed to the risk of various acts of violence, including forced religious conversion, abduction, child trafficking, underage and forced marriage, domestic servitude, and sexual violence.²⁷

The Pakistani government has maintained a blasphemy law that has been an instrument of repression against religious minorities. The law allows for arbitrary actions, from arrest to prosecution. The death penalty is a mandatory consequence for those accused of blasphemy, and as of the end of 2023, dozens of convicts were still awaiting execution. Historical records show that since 1990, at least 65 people have lost their lives due to blasphemy charges in Pakistan.²⁸

To mark Minority Rights Day on 11 August 2024, Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari announced a series of measures to empower minority groups in the country. Zardari said the government has set a 5% quota for minorities in government jobs and allocated special seats in parliament. The aim is to encourage the effective participation of minority groups in national development. In addition, the government plans to provide financial support, including marriage grants, educational scholarships, and funds for maintaining places of worship for minority communities. The president emphasised Pakistan's commitment to protecting the religious, social, political, and economic rights of minority groups.²⁹

The series of facts and reports that have been presented clearly reveals a dark portrait of the condition of minorities in Pakistan, where non-Muslim groups face deep and complex systematic discrimination. They are not only treated as second-class citizens, but

²⁶ UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, Press Release: Pakistan: UN experts urge action on coerced religious conversions, forced and child marriage, 16 January 2023. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/01/pakistan-un-experts-urge-action-coerced-religious-conversions-forced-and>

²⁷ UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, Pakistan: UN experts alarmed by lack of protection for minority girls from forced religious conversions and forced marriage, 11 April 2024. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/pakistan-un-experts-alarmed-lack-protection-minority-girls-forced-religious>

²⁸ Human Rights Watch, Pakistan: Events of 2023, 11 January 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/pakistan#79bf71>

²⁹ Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of Pakistan, President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan Message on the occasion of Minorities' Day on 11th August 2024, 10 August 2024. https://pid.gov.pk/site/press_detail/26093

are structurally faced with various mechanisms of oppression that are rooted in various social, legal, and political systems. The discrimination they experience is not just a matter of representation, but a real threat to their safety, dignity, and basic rights as human beings. From threats of violence, forced conversions, underage marriages, to arbitrary blasphemy accusations, minority groups seem to have no safe space to live and express their beliefs.

While the Pakistani government has formally committed to protecting the rights of minorities, the practice on the ground is far different. Announced policies often amount to mere political rhetoric, with no concrete implementation that can provide substantive protection for these vulnerable groups. This not only harms minority groups individually, but also jeopardises social cohesion and Pakistan's image of pluralism in international eyes. The systematic oppression experienced by non-Muslim groups is not only a violation of human rights but also a potential time bomb of social conflict that could undermine the country's social and democratic fabric.

Conclusion

The condition of religious minorities in Pakistan presents an alarming and complex picture. Although the founding vision of Muhammad Ali Jinnah promised Pakistan as a secular state that guarantees religious freedom for all citizens, the reality is that religious minorities face systematic discrimination and oppression rooted in various social, legal, and political systems.

The main findings of this study show that religious minorities in Pakistan, comprising Hindus, Christians, Ahmadiyya, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Parsi, experience various forms of discrimination and violence. They are not only treated as second-class citizens, but also face real threats to their safety, dignity, and basic human rights. The discrimination they experience includes limited access to basic services such as education and health, discrimination in employment, religion-based violence, forced conversions, forced marriages, abductions, arbitrary blasphemy charges, and premeditated killings and attacks on places of worship.

From a constitutional aspect, although the Constitution of Pakistan guarantees the principle of equality and legal protection for all citizens, in practice, there are significant restrictions on the political rights of minorities. Articles 41(2) and 91(3) of the Pakistani Constitution explicitly limit the offices of President and Prime Minister to Muslims, indicating structural discrimination in the political system. Blasphemy laws are the most dangerous instrument of repression for religious minorities. It allows for arbitrary measures ranging from arrest to prosecution under penalty of death. Data shows that since 1990, at least 65 people have lost their lives due to blasphemy charges in Pakistan.

Although the Pakistani government has formally committed to protecting the rights of minorities through the signing of various international human rights treaties and the promulgation of various protective policies, implementation on the ground is far from adequate. Announced policies are often just political rhetoric without concrete implementation that can provide substantive protection for these vulnerable groups. The

systematic oppression experienced by non-Muslim groups is not only a violation of human rights, but also has the potential to become a time bomb of social conflict that can undermine the social and democratic order of the country. This situation not only harms minority groups individually, but also jeopardises Pakistan's social cohesion and image of pluralism in international eyes.

Addressing these issues requires comprehensive reforms that include constitutional changes, fair law enforcement, and a more inclusive social paradigm shift. The government of Pakistan needs to demonstrate a serious commitment to protecting the rights of religious minorities, not only through formal policies but also through tangible implementation that minority communities can feel. Only with a holistic approach and long-term commitment can Pakistan realise its founding vision as a state that guarantees religious freedom and equality for all its citizens.

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