

PAKISTAN

The government of Pakistan tolerates and is responsible for systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. The religious freedom situation in Pakistan remained exceedingly poor during the past year. Sectarian and religiously-motivated violence is chronic, and the government has failed to protect members of the majority faith and religious minorities. For these reasons, USCIRF again recommends in 2012 that Pakistan be designated as a “country of particular concern”, or CPC, under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). USCIRF has recommended that Pakistan be named a CPC since 2002, but the State Department has not followed that recommendation.

Background

Discriminatory laws, including blasphemy laws and severe legal restrictions on Ahmadis, have fostered an atmosphere of violent extremism and vigilantism in Pakistan.

Blasphemy laws: Blasphemy laws, used predominantly in Punjab province but also nationwide, target members of religious minority communities and dissenting Muslims, frequently resulting in imprisonment on account of religion or belief. The blasphemy laws do not require proof of intent or evidence to be presented after allegations are made, and do not include penalties for false allegations. Further, the laws do not provide clear guidance on what constitutes a violation, empowering accusers to apply their personal interpretations of Islam. The most high-profile blasphemy case is that of Asia Bibi, a Christian farm worker and mother of five sentenced to death in November 2010, but she is not alone. In June 2011, Abdul Sattar was sentenced to death in Punjab province for allegedly texting blasphemous messages. To date, at least 14 individuals have death sentences pending or are in the process of appeal. Courts imposed lengthy prison sentences for blasphemy or other conduct deemed offensive to Islam. Two Muslims and a Christian were sentenced to life in prison for defiling the Qur’an over the past year, joining at least 16 other individuals who are serving life sentences. In addition, more than 40 individuals currently are in jail for violating the blasphemy law. A detailed list of these individuals is in the appendix to the 2012 Annual Report.

Legal Restrictions on Ahmadis: Ahmadis, who number between three and four million in the country, are subject to the most severe legal restrictions and officially-sanctioned discrimination. They are prevented by law from engaging in the full practice of their faith and may face criminal charges for a range of religious practices, including the use of religious terminology. In 1974, the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto amended the constitution to declare members of the Ahmadi religious community “non-Muslims,” despite their insistence to the contrary, and in 1984, during General Zia-ul-Haq’s dictatorship, the penal code was amended, making basic acts of Ahmadi worship and interaction criminal offenses.

Religious Freedom Conditions

Religiously-motivated and sectarian violence is chronic, threatening the freedoms of religion and expression, as well as other human rights, for everyone in Pakistan. Authorities have not consistently brought the perpetrators of such violence to justice, and extremism in religious and public schools has contributed to the erosion of the social and legal status of religious minorities.

Religiously-motivated violence: The following examples of sectarian or religiously-motivated violence, which occurred in the last year, are illustrative of the numerous attacks against innocent Pakistanis by religious extremists.

- **Shi’a:** Violent extremists repeatedly targeted Shi’a processions and mosques throughout the past year, particularly in the province of Balochistan. In one of the most heinous attacks, 26 Shi’a pilgrims were killed after being ordered to disembark from a bus. The same day a follow-up attack on relatives trying to collect the bodies claimed three lives.
- **Ahmadis:** In recent years, scores of Ahmadis have been murdered in attacks which appear to be religiously motivated, with several occurring during the past year.
- **Christians:** Mob attacks against Christians were reported throughout the past year. Punjab province is the locus for the majority of violence, as it is home to the largest Christian community. For instance, in April 2011, a mob ransacked several Christian houses and a school after allegations of blasphemy spread through the community in Punjab’s Gujranwala district.

- **Hindus and Sikhs:** Owing to their minority status, Hindus and Sikhs are more vulnerable to crime, including robbery and kidnapping for ransom. A Hindu attorney was kidnapped in December in Sindh province, as was a Sikh businessman. Hindus also have been targeted in the province of Balochistan, where they are the largest religious minority and where the security situation is problematic due to a long-running ethnic insurgency. In November 2011, three Hindu doctors were gunned down in Sindh province.

Extremism in Religious and Public Schools: In Pakistan, some religious schools, or *madrassas*, provide ideological training to those who take part in violence targeting religious minorities within Pakistan and abroad. In mid-2005, the government of Pakistan renewed its effort to require all *madrassas* to register with the government and ordered them to expel all foreign students. Reports indicate, however, that the registration process has had little effect on the content of the schools' curricula, and government controls are lacking as to the *madrassas'* sources of funding. Pakistani primary and secondary schools continue to use textbooks that foster prejudice and intolerance of religious minorities, especially Hindus and Christians. USCIRF released a report in November 2011, "Connecting the Dots: Education and Religious Discrimination in Pakistan," which assessed the impact of textbooks and teaching practices on student attitudes toward religious minorities. The report's findings suggest that linkages exist between deficits in religious freedom and societal forms of discrimination and violence.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

In addition to designating Pakistan a CPC, USCIRF recommends that the U.S.:

- Designate Pakistan as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act;
- Articulate clearly that upholding religious freedom and related human rights is an essential element of the U.S. policy toward Pakistan, and include discussions on religious freedom and religious tolerance in U.S.-Pakistan dialogues and summits; and
- Engage the Punjab province's political leadership about reducing the large number of blasphemy cases in that province and preventing violence against religious minorities; and
- Urge the Pakistani government to:
 - Investigate instances of violence and vigorously prosecute individuals allegedly involved, especially the case of Shahbaz Bhatti's murder, so as to make clear that such activity will not be tolerated;
 - Prioritize the prevention of religiously-motivated and sectarian violence as well as reinforce the rule of law;
 - Repeal blasphemy, anti-Ahmadi, and other laws targeting religious minorities;
 - Set national textbook and curricula standards that actively promote tolerance towards all religions and introduce into the curriculum for all students the "Ethics for Non-Muslims" course; and
 - Sign into law and implement the *madrassa* reform agreement made with the National Madrassa Oversight Board.

Please see USCIRF's 2012 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Pakistan.