

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions across Pakistan continued to trend negatively. The systematic enforcement of blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws, and authorities' failure to address forced conversions of religious minorities—including Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs—to Islam, severely restricted freedom of religion or belief.

While there were high-profile acquittals, the blasphemy law remained in effect. USCIRF is aware of nearly 80 individuals who remained imprisoned for blasphemy, with at least half facing a life sentence or death. After spending five years in solitary confinement for allegedly posting blasphemous content online, Junaid Hafeez [was given](#) the death sentence in December 2019. Many ongoing trials related to blasphemy experienced lengthy delays as cases were moved between judges. Moreover, these laws create a culture of impunity for violent attacks following accusations. In March 2019, a student [murdered](#) Professor Khalid Hameed over perceived "anti-Islamic" remarks. [Protestors](#) in Sindh attacked and burned Hindu shops and houses of worship following two incidents: in the first, a cleric accused a Hindu veterinarian of wrapping medicine with paper printed with Qur'anic verses; in the second, a student [leveled](#) blasphemy charges against a Hindu principal. A mob also [attacked](#) a Christian community in Punjab after a mosque claimed over its

loudspeaker that the community had insulted Islam. In another incident, nearly 200 Christian families in Karachi [were forced](#) to flee their homes due to mob attacks after false blasphemy accusations against four Christian women.

Ahmadi Muslims, with their faith essentially criminalized, continued to face severe persecution from authorities as well as societal harassment due to their beliefs, with both the authorities and mobs targeting their houses of worship. In October, for example, police partially [demolished](#) a 70-year-old Ahmadiyya mosque in Punjab. In Hindu, Christian, and Sikh communities, young women, often underage, continued to be kidnapped for forced conversion to Islam. Several independent institutions [estimated](#) that 1,000 women are forcibly converted to Islam each year; many are kidnapped, forcibly married, and subjected to rape. Local police, particularly in Punjab and Sindh, are often accused of complicity in these cases by failing to investigate them properly. If such cases are investigated or adjudicated, the women are reportedly questioned in front of the men they were forced to marry, creating pressure to deny coercion. In October 2019, the Sindh Government [rejected](#) a bill seeking to criminalize forced conversion. Religious minorities also faced broader social discrimination, with reports of economic boycotts.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Pakistan as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation;
- Enter into a binding agreement, under Section 405(c) of IRFA, with the Pakistani government to encourage substantial steps to address religious freedom violations with benchmarks, including but not limited to:
  - Release blasphemy prisoners and other individuals imprisoned for their religion or beliefs;
  - Repeal blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws; until repeal is accomplished, enact reforms to make blasphemy a bailable offense, require evidence by accusers, ensure proper investigation by senior police officials, allow authorities to dismiss unfounded accusations, and enforce existing Penal Code articles criminalizing perjury and false accusations;
  - Address extremist rhetoric often preceding attacks on minorities, while protecting freedom of expression, and remove from education curricula any content discriminatory to religious minorities;
  - Create the National Commission for Minorities' Rights as mandated by the Supreme Court's 2014 decision; and
- Remove requirements for self-identification of religion on identity documents;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Pakistani government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
- Assign a portion of existing U.S. Department of State programs to help increase security for at-risk religious communities and houses of worship.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Policy Update:** [Pakistan's Blasphemy Law](#)
- **Hearing:** [Protecting Houses of Worship and Holy Sites](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Welcomes Release of Religious Prisoner of Conscience Abdul Shakoor](#)

## Background

Pakistan's population is 96.28 percent Muslim (85–90 percent Sunni, 10–15 percent Shi'a, and 0.22 percent Ahmadi), with smaller populations of Hindus (1.60 percent); Christians (1.59 percent); and Sikhs, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians/Parsis (<1 percent). Pakistan was established as an Islamic Republic in 1956 with special status for Islam (for example, only Muslims can serve as president and prime minister). In October 2019, Pakistan's National Assembly blocked a bill allowing non-Muslims to hold these positions. Pakistan's constitution nominally protects religious freedom by prohibiting faith-based discrimination and guaranteeing the right to religious practices and access religious education. The constitution also reserves for religious minorities 10 seats in the National Assembly, four seats in the Senate, and 23 seats in four provincial assemblies. However, the constitution's second amendment, added in 1974, declares Ahmadis non-Muslims.

## Blasphemy Law

Sections 295 and 298 of Pakistan's [Penal Code](#) criminalize acts and speech insulting a religion or belief or defiling the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad, a place of worship, or religious symbols. These vague provisions are frequently abused to target religious minorities through false accusations, with cases often violating legal procedures. Accusers are typically not required to present evidence, and judges are often under extreme pressure from religious groups to convict. The law sets severe punishments, including the death penalty. To date, Pakistan has not executed anyone for blasphemy. While Muslims represent the greatest number of individuals charged or sentenced, religious minorities face a disproportionately higher rate of allegations and arrests. Frequently, blasphemy charges occur in an atmosphere of societal harassment or mob violence. Many accused individuals never reach the courtroom; vigilante violence has killed 62 people since 1990, with few prosecutions. Even lawyers defending those charged with blasphemy, presiding judges, and individuals speaking against the law are targeted, as with the 2011 [murder](#) of Punjabi Governor Salman Taseer.

## Anti-Ahmadiyya Laws

Ahmadi Muslims face severe restrictions. Besides the constitution's second amendment, articles 298(b) and 298(c) of the Penal Code prohibit Ahmadis from self-identifying as Muslims, propagating or disseminating materials about their faith, or calling their houses of worship mosques. Ahmadis have been imprisoned simply for sharing Ahmadiyya literature. They are prohibited from voting as Muslims and were previously denied registration under joint electoral lists, relegating them to separate electoral lists with less political power. In 2018, the Islamabad High Court [ruled](#) that individuals must disclose their faith to receive identity documents, with civil society arguing this was meant to target Ahmadis.

## Violence by Extremist Groups

While terrorism decreased in recent years, Pakistan remains a base for extremist groups, such as the Pakistani Taliban and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. These groups often target Shi'a and Sufi Muslims in addition to non-Muslims. In May 2019, a Sufi shrine in Lahore was [bombed](#),

killing 10 people and wounding 20. The previous month, a [bombing](#) claimed by the Pakistani Taliban and the Islamic State targeted a Hazara Shi'a neighborhood in Quetta, killing 24. [Provincial](#) and [local](#) authorities increased security for Shi'a during Muharram. In July, as part of a crackdown on extremism after the Financial Action Task Force placed Pakistan on its "grey" list, authorities [arrested](#) Hafiz Saeed for supporting Lashkar-e-Taiba. In February 2020, an anti-terrorism court convicted him of terrorist financing.

## Positive Developments

There were positive developments in 2019, such as the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor with India, [allowing](#) Sikh pilgrims to visit the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Pakistan's Punjab Province; Prime Minister Imran Khan [laying](#) the foundation stone of Pakistan's first Sikh university; and the [reopening](#) and renovation of a Hindu temple in Sialkot. In January 2019, the Supreme Court upheld Asia Bibi's acquittal from blasphemy charges, and she departed for Canada later in the year. [Abdul Shakoore](#), an Ahmadi who was part of USCIRF's [Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project](#), was released from prison in March after being sentenced to eight years in 2015 on terrorism charges for sharing Ahmadiyya literature. In September, the Supreme Court acquitted [Wajih-ul Hassan](#), who spent 18 years imprisoned with a death sentence under false blasphemy charges. The government has taken steps to address [educational material](#) with discriminatory content against religious minorities, including [announcing](#) in April that it would bring 30,000 madrassas under government control to combat religious extremism, despite earlier provincial governments' [failures](#) to register madrassas comprehensively under the 2015 National Action Plan. In 2019, the government also announced it would implement a common national curriculum beginning in 2021.

## Key U.S. Policy

During 2019, Pakistan continued to be a key partner for U.S. security interests, particularly with the Afghanistan peace process. After President Donald J. Trump suspended military assistance to Pakistan in 2018 due to its unwillingness to confront certain terrorist groups, in particular the Haqqani network, this bilateral relationship saw improvement in 2019, especially with Prime Minister Khan making his [first visit](#) to the United States in July and the U.S. government seeking Pakistani support for talks with the Taliban. Despite this progress, U.S. officials continued to raise concerns about religious freedom violations. In February, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom [Samuel D. Brownback](#) visited Islamabad to meet with Pakistani officials to push for positive change on religious freedom. A number of senior U.S. officials also highlighted Pakistan's religious freedom violations during the second [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#) and President Trump [met](#) with [Abdul Shakoore](#) in the White House. then Acting Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Alice G. Wells further [elaborated](#) on these issues during an October hearing before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and Nonproliferation. On December 18, the State Department [redesignated](#) Pakistan as a CPC under IRFA, but again issued a waiver on any related sanctions "as required in the 'important national interest of the United States.'"