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## “A Conspiracy to Grab the Land”

Exploiting Pakistan’s Blasphemy Laws for  
Blackmail and Profit



## **“A Conspiracy to Grab the Land”**

**Exploiting Pakistan’s Blasphemy Laws for Blackmail and Profit**

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# “A Conspiracy to Grab the Land”

## Exploiting Pakistan’s Blasphemy Laws for Blackmail and Profit

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## Summary

Pakistan's blasphemy laws are inherently discriminatory, denying equality before the law to non-Muslims and facilitating violence against anyone accused of the crime. Blasphemy is an offense officially punishable by death in Pakistan, and while no one has been executed for blasphemy, the laws have long been used to carry out personal vendettas and prosecute members of minority religious communities with grave consequences. A mere accusation of blasphemy can be a death sentence: in the past decade, vigilantes have killed dozens of people in mob violence following blasphemy accusations.

This report focuses on an additional widespread abuse: people making blasphemy accusations often do so for economic motivations, including forced evictions to acquire land that belongs to another. While the targets of blasphemy accusations and the violence fostered by the law belong to all socio-economic and religious groups in Pakistan, most of the victims have been from marginalized groups.

Blasphemy accusations against Christians and Ahmadis in particular have often forced entire communities to flee their homes and neighborhoods. Because many minority communities in Pakistan live in informal, low-income settlements without titles to the land, their forced exodus leaves their property up for easy seizure. Those alleging blasphemy have also benefitted financially by targeting business rivals and businesses owned and run by religious minorities. This exploitation of the blasphemy law, in particular the ease with which anyone can make an accusation as part of a personal dispute or for economic gain, has instilled fear among those at risk.

An entrenched bias in the criminal justice system results in miscarriages of justice against people accused of blasphemy. The authorities almost never hold those who commit violence in the name of blasphemy to account, while those accused under discriminatory and vague laws—generally without evidence—suffer long pretrial detention, lack of due process, and unfair trials that may result in years of imprisonment. In cases of vigilante attacks, police seldom take action to protect those targeted, and those who do may themselves face threats of violence. As a result, perpetrators of mob violence who enjoy the patronage and protection of politicians or religious leaders avoid arrest or are acquitted.

Human Rights Watch calls on the government of Pakistan to repeal the blasphemy law and safely release all those held or imprisoned on blasphemy charges. The authorities should investigate all attacks and threats based on blasphemy accusations, with particular concern for those targeting religious minorities and other marginalized groups and those that result in forced evictions and large-scale forced displacement. The authorities should also institute safeguards to prevent the coerced transfer and sale of properties of those accused following such incidents.

## **Methodology**

This report is based on Human Rights Watch’s research in the Lahore, Gujranwala, Kasur, Sheikhpura, and Islamabad districts of Pakistan between May 2024 and January 2025. Human Rights Watch interviewed 14 people who had faced blasphemy accusations, as well as two dozen lawyers, prosecutors, judges, police officials, human rights activists, journalists, and others who described the devastating consequences of these accusations for entire communities and the lack of government action to prevent this abuse or provide justice.

We also reviewed court decisions and reports by governmental bodies and nongovernmental organizations. While this report is not an exhaustive study of the problem, these reports, as well as those published in the media and by civil society organizations, corroborate claims of widespread human rights violations linked to the misuse of the blasphemy law.

All interviews were conducted in Urdu. Eight interviews were conducted by phone.

On May 1, 2025, we wrote to the government of Pakistan to seek their response to our findings. No response was received.



## A History of Discrimination and Persecution

While Pakistan's blasphemy laws have been an instrument of persecution for decades, there has been a significant rise in the number of blasphemy cases since 2022. In 2020, individuals brought 11 cases of alleged blasphemy in Pakistan, and 9 in 2021. In 2024, at least 475 blasphemy cases were registered.<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, those alleging blasphemy have based their accusations on comments made on social media.

Pakistan's blasphemy laws have their origin in British colonial laws designed to curb incitements to religious violence at a time when rival political groups frequently manipulated outbreaks of violence over sectarian issues for political purposes. Since independence in 1947, Pakistan has enacted other laws restricting freedom of religion and also amended the existing laws to provide for harsher punishments.<sup>2</sup> Section 295-C of Pakistan's penal code makes the death penalty mandatory for blasphemy.<sup>3</sup> While no one has been executed in Pakistan for the offense of blasphemy, a mere blasphemy accusation often effectively becomes a death sentence: mob violence and targeted killings have left dozens of people accused of blasphemy dead.<sup>4</sup>

Since President Zia-ul Haq's rule in the 1980s, few political leaders have called for reform of the laws. On January 4, 2011, Salmaan Taseer, the governor of Punjab province who had sought to repeal the blasphemy law, was killed by his own security guard. Since then, few public officials have dared speak out against the law.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> National Commission on Human Rights, "Blasphemy Report," October 2024, <https://nchr.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Blasphemy-Report-Oct-2024.pdf>, (accessed January 2, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> In absolute numbers, most victims of blasphemy violence and persecution are Muslims. However, given that more than 98 percent of Pakistan's population is Muslim, non-Muslim victims of blasphemy are significantly overrepresented in proportional terms. In September 1974, Pakistan's parliament introduced a constitutional amendment that defined the term Muslim and listed groups deemed to be "non-Muslim." The amendment also declared Ahmadis to be non-Muslims.

<sup>3</sup> Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973. In 1984, Pakistan amended its penal code, enacting five ordinances that explicitly targeted religious minorities, including a law against blasphemy; a law punishing defiling the Quran; a prohibition against insulting the wives, family, or companions of the Prophet of Islam; and two laws specifically restricting the activities of Ahmadis. On April 26, 1984, then military ruler Gen. Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq issued these last two laws as part of Martial Law Ordinance XX, which amended Pakistan's penal code, sections 298-B and 298-C.

<sup>4</sup> The violence and criminal prosecutions flowing from Pakistan's blasphemy laws have been extensively documented, including by Human Rights Watch. For example, "Pakistan: Mob Attacks Christian Settlement," Human Rights Watch news release, August 22, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/22/pakistan-mob-attacks-christian-settlement>.

<sup>5</sup> Sherbano Taseer, "My Father Died for Pakistan," *New York Times*, January 9, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/09/opinion/ogtaseer.html>, (accessed January 1, 2025).



In many cases, Pakistani authorities have not only failed to condemn violence in the name of blasphemy but have even provided justification for it. In a seminal case in 1993, the Supreme Court in *Zaheeruddin v. The State* not only upheld the validity of various anti-Ahmadi laws and other discriminatory legislation, but went on to say:

It is the cardinal faith of every Muslim to believe in every Prophet and praise him. Therefore, if anything is said against the Prophet, it will injure the feelings of a Muslim and may even incite him to the breach of peace, depending on the intensity of the attack.<sup>6</sup>

The police generally fail to investigate and gather evidence in vigilante attacks, whether from fear or prejudice. Wary of retaliation, they are particularly reluctant to investigate cases in which religious clerics or violent Islamist groups have taken part. The government seldom brings charges against those responsible for violence and discrimination. Human Rights Watch's research indicates that almost no one apprehended in connection with such attacks has been convicted in the last several years.

## Unequal Citizenship

Discrimination under the law against religious minorities and the failure of Pakistan's federal and provincial governments to address religious persecution by violent Islamist groups has put vulnerable communities at grave risk.<sup>7</sup>

Unequal citizenship is set out under the Constitution of Pakistan. Article 260(c)(b) defines Muslims and non-Muslims and stipulates that a non-Muslim cannot become the president or the prime minister of the country.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Zaheeruddin v. the State*, 1993 SCMR 1718, para. 83. The judgment while referring to some Ahmadi teachings further said, "Can then anyone blame a Muslim if he loses control of himself on hearing, reading or seeing such blasphemous material as has been produced by Mirza Sahib?"

<sup>7</sup> Mohammed Hanif, "Pakistan, Land of the Intolerant," *New York Times*, October 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/19/opinion/pakistan-muslims-ahmadis.html>, (accessed November 24, 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Constitution of Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973.

Approximately 4 percent of Pakistan's population are non-Muslim, with Hindus and Christians being the largest non-Muslim groups.<sup>9</sup> Religious minorities have faced socio-economic exclusion for generations, living in irregular settlements and working in the lowest-paying occupations and those considered the least desirable.<sup>10</sup> Religious and sectarian violence facilitated by the blasphemy laws has disproportionately harmed non-Muslim minorities.<sup>11</sup> In 2023, following an accusation of blasphemy, a mob attacked a Christian community, destroying several churches and setting fire to dozens of houses.<sup>12</sup>

## Reform Attempts

The Pakistan government has occasionally tried to introduce safeguards against abuse of the blasphemy law. A 2005 criminal law amendment required a high-ranking officer to investigate allegations under section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code. However, this procedural requirement is routinely disregarded. In June 2014, the Supreme Court created a federal task force to promote religious tolerance; new educational curricula to encourage religious harmony and social tolerance; the curbing of hate speech on social media; the establishment of a national council for minorities' rights; police reform; employment opportunities; and prompt action whenever the constitutional rights of religious minorities were violated or places of worship desecrated.<sup>13</sup> However, the Supreme Court decision remains largely unenforced, despite demands from religious minorities and civil society groups for implementation.<sup>14</sup> The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 2017 enhanced the

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<sup>9</sup> The Hindu population primarily resides in Sindh province, and Christians in Punjab province. Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, <http://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files//tables/POPULATION%20BY%20RELIGION.pdf>, (accessed November 2, 2024).

<sup>10</sup> These workers, in most instances, live in segregated neighborhoods that lack basic amenities. Ayra Indrias Patras, "Examining Pakistan's Relationship with Religious Minorities: A Case Study of the Christian Community," *NUST Journal of International Peace and Stability*, January 2024, <https://njips.nust.edu.pk/index.php/njips/article/view/163>, (accessed November 24, 2024). For example, about 5 percent of Lahore's population is Christian, while almost 100 percent of solid waste management workers are Christian. Aqeel, Asif, "Christians were required only as sweepers," *Friday Times*, October 23, 2015, <https://thefridaytimes.com/23-Oct-2015/christians-required-only-as-sweepers>, (accessed November 24, 2024).

<sup>11</sup> In absolute numbers, most victims of blasphemy violence and persecution are Muslims. However, given that more than 98 percent of Pakistan's population is Muslim, non-Muslim victims of blasphemy are significantly overrepresented in proportional terms.

<sup>12</sup> "Pakistan: Mob Attacks Christian Settlement," Human Rights Watch news release, August 22, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/22/pakistan-mob-attacks-christian-settlement>.

<sup>13</sup> S.M.C. No. 1 of 2014, Supreme Court, accessed at: [http://www.supremecourt.gov.pk/web/user\\_files/File/smc\\_1\\_2014.pdf](http://www.supremecourt.gov.pk/web/user_files/File/smc_1_2014.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> "Implementation of SC judgment sought for minority rights," *The News*, June 19, 2022, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/967375-implementation-of-sc-judgment-sought-for-minorities-rights>, (accessed February 19, 2025).

punishment for false accusations.<sup>15</sup> However, it too failed to curb the persecution, violence, and intimidation that the blasphemy law facilitated.

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<sup>15</sup> The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2017, [http://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1487652645\\_471.pdf](http://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1487652645_471.pdf).

## Use of Blasphemy Accusations for Economic Gain

The explosive nature of blasphemy accusations and the speed with which they spread on social media makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the accused to defend themselves or escape violent repercussions. With social media, the scale and reach of blasphemy accusations have evolved into a lucrative “business” of extortion, blackmail, and land grabs, particularly targeting religious minorities and other economically marginalized communities.

Blasphemy accusations against Christians and Ahmadis have long incited mob violence and forced entire communities to flee their homes.<sup>16</sup> Often that forced flight leaves their property up to be seized. As many in these communities lack title of ownership to the land, evicting them or forcing them to flee makes it easy to occupy or take their land.<sup>17</sup> Accusers, who often have ties to political groups—routinely weaponize blasphemy accusations for personal and economic motives against business rivals and trades owned and run by religious minorities.

In addition to the draconian blasphemy laws, the absence of a proper land record system, weak judicial process, and lack of rule of law make religious minorities vulnerable to coordinated intimidation campaigns, forced evictions and displacements, and land grabs. Many cases involve powerful political or religious groups. Tajammal Gondal, a lawyer, working on forced evictions in Punjab province said:

The outdated land record system, colonial land eviction laws, and corruption make everyone who is poor in Pakistan vulnerable to land grabs. However, for religious minorities, the risk is significantly amplified because of discrimination. Also, religious minorities often live in ghettoized

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<sup>16</sup> For example, in March 2013, more than 100 families fled after a mob attack in Lahore. Even before the advent of social media, print and broadcast media coverage of such incidents left those accused at risk of vigilante violence. In 2006, the Peshawar High Court said, “whenever a person is charged for such an offence [blasphemy], the print media give extensive coverage to such incident and the accused person is cursed and abused by the society/people-at-large. So much so that even his life becomes at risk at the hands of certain segments of the society.” *Hazrat Ali Shah vs The State* (PLD 2014 Peshawar 122).

<sup>17</sup> Muhammad Younas, “Pakistan: Forced evictions and socio-economic costs for vulnerable communities,” April 2013, Urban Resource Center, <https://urckarachi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Pakistan-Eviction-paper-URC-Karachi-1.pdf>, (accessed February 19, 2025).

neighborhoods, and it creates an incentive to level a blasphemy accusation against just one person and the entire community will feel unsafe.<sup>18</sup>

There is a long history of using blasphemy accusations for blackmail and economic gain. On January 4, 2024, Lahore’s Special Branch, an intelligence division of the police, delivered a report, “The Blasphemy Business,” to the chief minister, chief secretary, inspector general of police, and the director of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), the agency responsible for investigating alleged acts of blasphemy that occur in the digital space.<sup>19</sup> The report found that an organized group was working in collusion with FIA officers to entrap individuals through social media and messaging apps in blasphemy cases and subsequently blackmail and extort them.<sup>20</sup> The group, reportedly responsible for 90 percent of the blasphemy cases registered by the FIA since 2021, included members of religious organizations such as Tehreek Labbaik (TLP) and an organization called the Legal Commission on Blasphemy Pakistan, which has called for harsher enforcement of the blasphemy law.<sup>21</sup>

Following the release of the report, the statutory National Commission on Human Rights (NCHR) conducted an extensive investigation and found a sharp increase in the registration of blasphemy cases initiated by the FIA’s cybercrime unit, often in collaboration with the lawyers’ organization.<sup>22</sup> The Punjab Police’s Special Branch explained the nature and operations of this group, which operates as a business, hunting “blasphemers” and then extorting them:

They have created various WhatsApp and Facebook groups on social media to lure in and trap youth. Once involved, these individuals are falsely implicated in blasphemy cases in collaboration with certain elements within the FIA, with the intent of extorting them. The number of people

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<sup>18</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Tajammal Gondal, Lahore, October 20, 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Human Rights Watch has reviewed the report. See also Ahmad Noorani, “Pakistan Prosecutes Over 400 Bright Youth on Blasphemy Charges,” Fact Focus, September 25, 2024, <https://factfocus.com/humanrights/3784/>, (accessed November 27, 2024).

<sup>21</sup> Imaan Mazari, “The Untold Plight of Over 700 Jailed Pakistanis Trapped in Blasphemy Cases,” *Dissent Today*, December 21, 2024, <https://dissenttoday.net/featured/pakistan-blasphemy-business-group-extremism/>, (accessed January 4, 2025).

<sup>22</sup> National Commission on Human Rights, “Blasphemy Report,” October 2024, <https://nchr.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Blasphemy-Report-Oct-2024.pdf>, (accessed January 2, 2025).

entrapped by this group is astounding, and the question is, what possible motive over 700 unconnected youth from different parts of the country could have to commit blasphemy using electronic devices?<sup>23</sup>

The nongovernmental Human Rights Commission of Pakistan alleged that the groups “calculated use of the blasphemy laws for profit,” saying that they had:

ensnared over 450 people through fabricated accusations of blasphemy across the country, reportedly with the complicity of some law enforcement personnel.... Organized groups—some with strong ties to far-right sections of the legal fraternity—share blasphemous content online with unsuspecting people and then file false cases to blackmail the families of the accused. Neither the government nor the judiciary can afford to ignore such systematic entrapment on this scale.<sup>24</sup>

Blasphemy accusations have proved a lucrative tool for economic exploitation and land grabs in large part because Pakistani law enables and encourages the intimidation and persecution of religious minorities. Successive governments in Pakistan have not only repeatedly failed to reform or repeal the blasphemy law, but also to hold accountable the perpetrators of violence and those who run organized campaigns using the blasphemy law for economic gain.

On rare occasions, the courts have recognized that those accusing others of blasphemy have done so out of malicious intent. In 2014, the Supreme Court said that, “[t]he majority of blasphemy cases are based on false accusations stemming from property issues or other personal or family vendettas rather than genuine instances of blasphemy and they inevitably lead to mob violence against the entire community.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Imaan Mazari, “The Untold Plight of Over 700 Jailed Pakistanis Trapped in Blasphemy Cases,” *Dissent Today*, December 21, 2024, <https://dissenttoday.net/featured/pakistan-blasphemy-business-group-extremism/>, (accessed January 4, 2025)

<sup>24</sup> Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (@HRCP87) statement on X, <https://x.com/HRCP87/status/1880218412162359338>, January 17, 2025, (accessed January 18, 2025).

<sup>25</sup> Supreme Court of Pakistan, *Malik Muhammad Mumtaz Qadri v the State*, October 7, 2015.

In 2013, a trial court in Lahore acquitted four Ahmadi individuals accused of disseminating “objectionable material,” finding that:

The prosecution case registered against the accused person is result of malice, ill-will, malafide and prejudice of the complainant and witnesses against the accused persons on the basis of their sect/faith. It is proved before this court that the complainant is habitual of getting cases registered against “Ahmadis” to satisfy his ego.<sup>26</sup>

The case of Farhan, a young man who is blind and has been charged with creating and disseminating blasphemous content, is a stark example of persecution and extortion. The group demanded a payment of PKR 1,400,000 (US\$5,000) from Farhan’s family in exchange for the FIA declaring him innocent. His family did not have the money to pay the blackmailers, and as of March 2025, his case remained pending in court.<sup>27</sup>

According to the NCHR, lawyers who represent blasphemy defendants are “ostracized by the legal community solely for accepting such cases.”<sup>28</sup>

## Notable Recent Examples

There have been several high-profile examples of the use of blasphemy accusations for land grab and motivations.

### *Rimsha Masih*

In August 2012, a local cleric near Islamabad accused Rimsha Masih, a 14-year-old Christian girl with Down syndrome, of burning pages of the Quran.<sup>29</sup> The cleric’s accusation led to a mob attack on the Christian community, forcing 300 Christian families to flee their homes. Later, it was found that the cleric had planted the pages of Quran himself and one of the cleric’s associates said that he told them, “It was the only way to expel the

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<sup>26</sup> *The State v Khalid Ashfaq* (FIR 510/13), (2013) pp. 8, 10.

<sup>27</sup> National Commission on Human Rights, “Blasphemy Report,” October 2024, <https://nchr.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Blasphemy-Report-Oct-2024.pdf>, (accessed January 2, 2025).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> “Rimsha Masih, Pakistani girl accused of blasphemy, finds refuge in Canada,” *Guardian*, July 1, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/01/pakistan-girl-accused-blasphemy-canada>, (accessed December 11, 2025)



Christians from the area.”<sup>30</sup> Despite that the accusations were proven false, Rimsha and her family felt compelled to leave the country.<sup>31</sup>

### *Joseph Colony*

In March 2013, a mob of 3,000 people attacked Joseph Colony, a Christian housing community in Badami Bagh, following an allegation of blasphemy against Sawan Masih, a resident. More than 100 houses were ransacked, burned, and looted. The entire community fled.<sup>32</sup> The local government said that the police had “avoided” confronting the “religiously charged mob” because if any officers were killed, “the issue might have blown out of proportion and spread all across the country.”<sup>33</sup> Instead of protecting the residents of Joseph Colony, the police arrested Sawan Masih. In 2014, a trial court sentenced him to death; he was finally acquitted in 2020 when his conviction was overturned. Local residents and rights activists maintained that the objective of the attack was to capture land in Joseph Colony.<sup>34</sup> At the trial, Sawan Masih said that for years, businessmen linked to the local steel industry had pressured the Christian community to sell their property and leave because they wanted the land:

They contrived a case under the blasphemy law.... They put up banners against me alleging blasphemy against the Prophet.... They played with the religious sentiments of the people.... They involved the local police to create fear and alarm among Christian residents who were threatened and told to leave the colony to save their lives.... This was a conspiracy to grab the colony.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Tahir Gora, “Welcome to Canada, Ramisha Masih,” *Huffington Post*, June 27, 2013, [https://www.huffpost.com/archive/ca/entry/welcome-to-canada-rimsha-masih\\_b\\_3503287](https://www.huffpost.com/archive/ca/entry/welcome-to-canada-rimsha-masih_b_3503287), (accessed December 12, 2025).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Rana Yasif, “Mob Violence: 106 acquitted in Joseph Colony case,” *Express Tribune*, January 29, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1310101/mob-violence-106-acquitted-joseph-colony-case/>, (accessed July 2, 2019).

<sup>33</sup> Muddasir Raja, “Joseph Colony case: Lahore police admits it purposefully avoided clash with mob,” *Express Tribune*, April 3, 2013, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/530622/joseph-colony-case-proceedings-to-move-to-trial-courts>, (accessed December 13, 2024).

<sup>34</sup> *Const. P. No. 10 of 2013 Against the violence in Christian Colony in Badami Bagh area over alleged blasphemy*, CMA No.1549/13, (2013), Supreme Court of Pakistan, [www.supremecourt.gov.pk/web/user\\_files/File/Const.P.No.10%20of2013-Dt-25-3-2013.pdf](http://www.supremecourt.gov.pk/web/user_files/File/Const.P.No.10%20of2013-Dt-25-3-2013.pdf) (accessed November 15, 2024). In its judgment in April 2014, the Supreme Court also held: “In a situation like this where the police officers themselves had taken shelter in a godown [warehouse], no one else could protect the life and property of the inhabitants of the Joseph Colony and their failure to do so is sufficient to prima facie hold that the Fundamental Rights of the citizens of Joseph Colony were not protected as enshrined under Articles 9 and 14 of the Constitution.”

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

The Christian community was able to return to their vandalized and robbed houses, but they lived in fear. A few families that had the financial resources moved out of the neighborhood since they realized that living in a Christian majority neighborhood meant that they would remain vulnerable to such attacks in the future.<sup>36</sup>

### *Additional Cases*

In August 2009, following accusations that members of the Christian community in Gojra, Punjab, had desecrated the Quran, a mob of hundreds attacked Christian homes, setting them on fire, while Christian residents tried to flee. Nine people were killed while the local police refused to intervene.<sup>37</sup> In the aftermath of the violence, the situation in the city remained tense, with schools closed and paramilitary forces deployed. The government ordered an inquiry into the incident; however, the recommendations of the inquiry report remained unenforced.<sup>38</sup>

In another case, Parvez Masih, the headmaster of a Christian high school in Sialkot, was arrested in 2001 for alleged blasphemy under article 295(C). According to Freedom House, Mohammed Ibrahim, the owner of another school in the area, fabricated the accusation because he resented the competition created by Masih's school.<sup>39</sup>

Ayub Masih, a 26-year-old Christian man living in Sahiwal district, Punjab, was jailed for six years after being arrested in October 1996 when one of his neighbors claimed to have heard Masih praise a "blasphemous" author. In April 1998, Masih was sentenced to death for insulting the Prophet Muhammad. In 2001, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention issued an opinion on Masih's case, finding a violation of his right not to be arbitrarily detained and his right to a fair trial.<sup>40</sup> He was finally acquitted and released in

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<sup>36</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Peter Jacob, Lahore, February 20, 2024.

<sup>37</sup> "Pakistan: Who's Attacking the Christians?" *Time Magazine*, August 5, 2009, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1914750,00.html>, (accessed December 3, 2024).

<sup>38</sup> Rana Tanveer, "Gojra riots inquiry: Tribunal recommends revisiting blasphemy laws," *Express Tribune*, August 10, 2016, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1159320/gojra-riots-inquiry-tribunal-recommends-revisiting-blasphemy-law>, (accessed February 20, 2025).

<sup>39</sup> "The Impact of Blasphemy Laws on Human Rights," Freedom House, October 21, 2010, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/PolicingBelief\\_Pakistan.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/PolicingBelief_Pakistan.pdf), (accessed December 18, 2025)

<sup>40</sup> UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, "Opinion No. 25/2001 (Pakistan)," in Opinions Adopted by the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (E/CN.4/2003/8/Add.1), 22, [http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage\\_e.aspx?m=117](http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?m=117).

2002, after his lawyer was able to show that the sole complainant in the case, Masih's neighbor, had forced Masih's family out of their house and taken the property as his own.<sup>41</sup>

The Ahmadiyya community in particular is frequently targeted, with groups often associated with local religious and political figures destroying, sealing, or forcibly occupying Ahmadiyya places of worship. On December 5, 2016, representatives of the local Ahmadiyya community in Chakwal district, Punjab, wrote to the district administration seeking protection, stating that the life and property of Ahmadis were at risk and that local clerics might "try to forcibly occupy Ahmadis' worship place." Authorities failed to act.<sup>42</sup> On December 12, 2016, a mob of about 1,000 people, many wielding batons, stones, and firearms, attacked the site. The spokesperson of the Ahmadiyya community said the mob wanted to "seize Ahmadi property." Clerics leading the mob claimed that the Ahmadiyya place of worship was a mosque and belonged to Muslims. The Ahmadis were forced to vacate, prompting one mob leader to claim the campaign had "succeeded as Ahmadis have been driven out of the mosque."<sup>43</sup>

Rashid, a retired civil servant, described his experience while working in a district in Punjab in which he had to adjudicate a dispute regarding a religious cleric's encroachment on government land. Rashid belongs to an Ahmadi family but personally identifies as a Sunni Muslim. According to Rashid:

In 2018, a piece of land that was owned by the district government was encroached on by a local cleric. There was ample evidence to prove that the government owned the land and I intended to pass an order asking the cleric to return possession to the government. The cleric along with five or six associates came to my office and told me, "Be very careful in deciding this issue. We have researched your history and know you are an Ahmadi. All I need to do is to do a Friday sermon where I reveal your identity to the people, and you will be burned alive in your office."

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<sup>41</sup> "SC acquits blasphemy accused," *Dawn*, August 16, 2002, <https://www.dawn.com/news/52786/sc-acquits-blasphemy-accused>, (accessed December 17, 2024)

<sup>42</sup> Imran Gabol, "Mob 'besieging' Ahmadi place of worship in Chakwal dispersed by police," *Dawn*, December 12, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1302057>, (accessed November 24, 2025).

<sup>43</sup> Rana Tanveer, "Army, police disperse mob besieging Ahmadi place of worship in Chakwal," *Express Tribune*, December 12, 2016, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1261227/protesters-wrest-control-ahmadi-worship-place-chakwal>, (accessed November 24, 2025).

Rashid felt he had no choice: “Even the all-powerful government machinery is powerless before a threat like this. I requested my boss to transfer me to another district. To my knowledge, the land remains in the possession of the cleric.”<sup>44</sup>

## Forced Eviction and Displacement

The weaponization of the blasphemy law and the violence incited by mere accusations have been used to drive entire communities from their homes. Blasphemy accusations on individual members of communities, often religious minority communities, have resulted in mob attacks, the vandalization and looting of homes, and the destruction of places of worship, in addition to injuries and deaths. Many of those who flee to safety never return to their homes.

### *Maryam*

Maryam, 47, is a Christian woman who lived in the Lahore district. A home-based worker who stitched clothes for clients, she lives with her two teenage daughters and her husband who has been ill with a kidney ailment and unemployed for years. Her neighborhood has both Muslim and Christian residents. In February 2023, her neighbor, Nasir (pseudonym), from the adjacent house asked her to sell her house to him as he needed more space for his son’s family. Maryam was unwilling to sell despite repeated demands. In April 2023, Maryam woke up to banging on her door. Outside a mob of nearly two dozen people had gathered accusing her of committing blasphemy by burning the page of the Quran. Maryam locked her door from inside and called the police and some friends. In about 15 minutes, one of her husband’s friends who was a Muslim arrived at their house and managed to calm the mob down and disperse them. Nasir had filed a complaint for registration of a blasphemy case against her. Maryam told Human Rights Watch:

The whole thing was outrageous. We can’t ever think of disrespecting any holy book. Religion was never even a topic of discussion in our lives until Nasir wanted our house. It was blatantly an attempt to grab our house. The only evidence he presented was a couple of pieces of paper that were

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<sup>44</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Rashid K. (pseudonym) via telephone, November 2024.

completely burned so there was no way to tell from where the pages came.<sup>45</sup>

Nasir told Human Rights Watch that he saw smoke coming from pieces of paper being burned outside Maryam's house and saw that these pages were from the Quran. However, before he could put the fire out, the pages had been reduced to ashes.<sup>46</sup>

Maryam alleged that the local police told her that they could not help or protect her in the long run and that the most that they could do was to delay the registration of a criminal case for a few days. Maryam said:

I had lived in that neighborhood for 25 years but just one false accusation changed everything in one minute. Our sense of safety, security and community was demolished. For the next few days, we hardly slept at night, knowing that a mob could attack and kill us at any point. To continue to live there was simply not an option anymore. In the days following the attack, we received calls from several real estate agents who wanted to know if we were going to sell the house. We sold the house much below the market price. The house was our only asset. We bought a smaller house in an all-Christian neighborhood and moved. Even now, many months later we live in fear. Once an accusation of blasphemy is made, anyone can decide to kill you at any time.<sup>47</sup>

### *Rizwan*

Rizwan, 65, a farmer with agricultural land outside Lahore, is a Christian whose family is one of the very few Christian families in the area. In 2019, Bashir, a local landowner with political connections, claimed that part of Faisal's land was his and demanded that Rizwan vacate the land. Rizwan said that he refused and resisted pressure from the local police and revenue authorities. In 2021, according to Rizwan, he was forcibly dispossessed when Bashir showed up with armed men who removed Rizwan's workers, tractor and other

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<sup>45</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Maryam (pseudonym), Lahore, October 28, 2024.

<sup>46</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Nasir (pseudonym), Lahore, October 29, 2024.

<sup>47</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Maryam (pseudonym), Lahore, October 28, 2024.

agricultural implements from the land.<sup>48</sup> Rizwan went to the local police and administration who kept delaying taking any action. A week later, Rizwan went to the land and found that a board had been put up on the front part of his plot saying that the area was earmarked for a mosque. “I felt my blood going cold and the hair on the back of my neck standing when I saw the board,” he said. “I was trembling with fear when I came home. I knew what it meant. If I were to object to the construction of a mosque, I would be lynched in a heartbeat.”<sup>49</sup> Rizwan had no choice but to give up the land and negotiate whatever amount Bashir was willing to pay him. He characterized the transfer as a distress sale.

### *Ashiq*

Ashiq, 38, had an automobile sales business in Lahore. He is a Christian who married a Muslim woman, Maha, against both of the families’ wishes in 2021. The couple faced death threats from Maha’s family who claimed that Ashiq had persuaded Maha to convert to Christianity (which she denies), that Maha had committed apostasy, and that Ashiq had committed blasphemy. Ashiq told Human Rights Watch:

For weeks we lived in constant fear. We told no one about where we were living yet we would check the locks of the door’s multiple times during the night. We wouldn’t leave the house for days. We changed our mobile phone numbers and severed all contact with everyone. Yet, her family found us after two months in hiding. Her brother gave me the choice of either giving my automobile shop to him or they would tell everyone about our marriage and the “apostasy” — that was certain death for both of us. I transferred the shop to his name. Ever since then we have lived in poverty, and I have had part-time jobs, but we are alive. We want to save enough money to move out of Pakistan since this threat will never go away as long as we are here, we can be blackmailed and extorted for all that we have at any point.<sup>50</sup>

Human Rights Watch documented cases in which threats and harassment from local residents forced Ahmadis to close their businesses and relocate to Rabwah, an almost

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<sup>48</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Rizwan, Sheikhpura, November 3, 2024.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ashiq and Maha (pseudonym) via telephone, November 7, 2024.

entirely Ahmadi town. The response from police and government officials, as detailed below, ranged from indifference to active complicity.

A serving senior superintendent of police claimed that it was often difficult to protect Ahmadis because of entrenched bias and because it was not a priority for an understaffed police force:

In an ideal world, we would have the capacity to protect everyone. However, the police are already understaffed, and we cannot provide protection to everyone accused of blasphemy. Sometimes the best course of action for everyone involved is for the person to relocate.<sup>51</sup>

Another senior police officer spoke about how potent and dangerous the blasphemy law is as a weapon:

In honesty, Pakistan is a police state in many aspects, the writ of the state is not allowed to be challenged—except when it comes to blasphemy. We are under tremendous pressure to register even blatantly false blasphemy cases and also to make arrests. The police, the prosecutors, the judges—everyone is hostage, no one wants to be the person to point out that a blasphemy case is false since then the "blasphemy industry's" wrath will be directed towards that person. I know that this may come across as cowardly, but this is the sad truth.<sup>52</sup>

The Pakistani government has a duty to ensure that people targeted for abuse have protection and avenues for redress. The failure of the police and other authorities to ensure the rights of the Ahmadis to life and security, freedom of religion, and their economic, social and cultural rights, violates Pakistan's obligations under international human rights law.

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<sup>51</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Raza (pseudonym), Lahore, April 19, 2019.

<sup>52</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Riaz (pseudonym), Lahore, December 11, 2024.



### *Masroor*

Masroor, 55, is an Ahmadi man who had lived in a middle-income neighborhood in Lahore. His family had lived in the same house for 20 years. In mid-2021, he received a call from someone who claimed to be from the police who told him that a complaint had been made against him.<sup>53</sup> The accusation was that he had put up a sign with the *kalima*—the Islamic declaration of faith—outside his gate; in Pakistan it is a criminal offense for an Ahmadi to use Islamic symbols or “pretend” to be a Muslim. Masroor denied putting any religious inscription outside his gate. He told Human Rights Watch:

A few days after the call from the [person claiming to be] police, I received a random visit from a real estate agent inquiring if I wanted to sell my house. I told him that I had no such intention. The next day, a local level political party member called me and said that people in the neighborhood were very concerned about my faith and there were risks to my life and the lives of my family members. We never had any problems with any neighbors and while we never advertised our faith, there were a few people who did know about our being Ahmadis. The next few days were spent in crippling fear and then one morning we found a handwritten note saying that “Ahmadis are *Wajib-ul-Qatl*” [liable to be killed] and we should leave. The same day, the real estate agent again “coincidentally” reached out. It was clear to me that we had to move. We made a distress sale significantly under the market price and moved. We now make sure that no one in our new neighborhood knows about our faith.<sup>54</sup>

## Extortion and Business Rivalries

### *Abbas*

Abbas, 36, is a Shia Muslim with a successful trading business who lives in Gujranwala district in Punjab province. In January 2022, he had a business dispute with Rafique (pseudonym), one of the suppliers from whom he imported goods. Community elders tried to mediate between the two but were unsuccessful. Abbas claimed that Rafique had sold

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<sup>53</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Masroor Ahmad (pseudonym), Lahore, October 10, 2024.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

him defective machinery and defrauded him out of PKR 2 million (\$7,000).<sup>55</sup> In February 2022, as Abbas contemplated taking Rafique to court, he received a call from the local police that a blasphemy complaint has been filed against him. Abbas told Human Rights Watch:

When I went down to the police station, I was told that Rafique had filed a blasphemy complaint against me based on video clips that I had shared on WhatsApp nearly six months earlier. The clips had nothing objectionable or blasphemous in them and had a religious cleric giving a sermon. He claimed that the clip blasphemed against a holy personality of Islam (the Prophet's wife), while the clip never mentioned her name. The police knew that the case was completely false however they intimidated me and asked me to pay PKR 50,000 (\$180) or else they would register a formal FIR [First Information Report] against me. A couple of days later, Rafique called me and said he would withdraw his complaint if I agreed to stop demanding my money from him and through a written agreement settle the accounts with him. I had no choice but to settle. Even though I knew that accusation was completely flimsy and could never be proved, if the allegation became public, it would be a sword hanging over my head for the rest of my life.<sup>56</sup>

### *Nadia*

Nadia, 52, is a beautician and make-up artist working in Lahore. She is a Christian woman who is a single mother of a teenage son. In July 2019, she decided to quit her employment at a local salon and set up her own business. She pooled her life savings and obtained loans from people she knew to start her own salon.<sup>57</sup> Her previous employer tried to dissuade her from starting her business and tried to convince her to stay by offering a raise. When Nadia refused, the previous employer threatened her, saying that “the consequences of this will not be good for you.”

In November 2019, a mob led by a local cleric barged into her salon, beat her and her staff, and ransacked and vandalized the premises. They claimed that she had desecrated the

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<sup>55</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Abbas (pseudonym), Gujranwala, October 20, 2025.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Nadia (pseudonym), Lahore, November 12, 2025.

Quran and that a boy in the neighborhood had found pages of the Quran in the trash. Naida denies this. She said, “I respect all religions and didn’t even have a copy of the Bible at the salon. Why would I have a copy of the Quran? I would have to be completely mad and suicidal to even think about disrespecting it.”<sup>58</sup>

Naida suspected that her previous employer had put the local cleric up to it. She said:

Another salon in the neighborhood would have eaten into her business. The fact that I was a single woman and a Christian meant that she realized where I was the most vulnerable. Once an allegation had been made, it was impossible for me to continue the salon or even to continue living in the neighborhood. I moved to my sister's house in Faisalabad district and ever since then I have been struggling. I have no steady source of income, no real work. My son had to change schools. I lost all my clients and all my friends. This is the power of this one allegation in Pakistan. It completely turns your life upside down.<sup>59</sup>

Mian Yasir is a lawyer who has represented several blasphemy defendants over the past decade. He told Human Rights Watch:

In my experience, almost all blasphemy accusations in Pakistan are driven by personal motives and mostly by economic reasons. The accusation is a weapon to settle all kinds of scores. Religious minorities are additionally vulnerable, but everyone is vulnerable, even Muslim religious clerics are not immune. Anyone can weaponize this against anyone at any time in Pakistan. This is the sad reality.<sup>60</sup>

Jessica, 27, works in a private company. She belongs to a Christian family though she considers herself completely secular. She said:

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

<sup>60</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Mian Yasir, Lahore, November 24, 2025.

Everything is a little bit harder. Ever since we were children, we were told by our parents to not touch or even be near something which has Arabic or a religious inscription on it, to never talk about religion and to avoid all confrontations in professional and personal lives. Who knows when someone would decide to make an accusation that would end our lives?<sup>61</sup>

### *Firoz*

Firoz, 43, is a Christian who runs a private school in a low-income neighborhood in Lahore. The school has both Muslim and Christian students. In February 2021, Firoz received a call from an angry parent regarding "blasphemous" comments by a teacher in a grade 5 class.<sup>62</sup> Firoz offered to meet the parent and also asked the teacher for an explanation. The teacher denied making any blasphemous comments. A few days later, a group of people affiliated with a local religious and sectarian organization visited the school and threatened to "burn down the school" if an apology was not made.<sup>63</sup> Firoz said that while he did not fire the teacher, she was terrified by the entire controversy and resigned. However, her leaving the school was not enough to appease the religious group. Firoz said:

It soon became clear to me that it wasn't about any remark or "blasphemy." They asked me to donate PKR 200,000 (\$800) to their religious charity to "atone" for my sin. Of course, they realized that since I was a Christian, just a murmur of blasphemy would mean that my school and possibly I too would be set on fire by a mob. No one would ask any questions. My religion made me additionally vulnerable. However, a blasphemy accusation could also result in burning down of a school run by a Muslim. The truth of the allegation doesn't matter. Now, I have started a cycle of blackmail, and they can extort me whenever.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Jessica Bhatti, Lahore, December 7, 2024.

<sup>62</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Firoz (pseudonym), Lahore, January 5, 2025.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

## International Legal Standards

Pakistan is a party to core international human rights treaties that place binding legal obligations on the federal and provincial governments. Pakistan ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 2010,<sup>65</sup> and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 2008.<sup>66</sup>

The ICCPR and ICESCR obligate the Pakistan government to guarantee the right to equality before the law and to protect all persons against discrimination based on religion, ethnicity, social origin, or other status.<sup>67</sup> Blasphemy laws in Pakistan violate articles 18 and 19 of the ICCPR, which prohibits restrictions on the rights to freedom of religion in private and public, and to freedom of expression and opinion. The blasphemy laws are discriminatory on their face, and facilitate advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence.<sup>68</sup>

International human rights law upholds every human being's "inherent right to life" and limits the death penalty to "the most serious crimes."<sup>69</sup> Imposing the death penalty for blasphemy violates this right. The UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions has clarified that the death penalty "may be imposed only for those crimes that involve intentional killing."<sup>70</sup> Human Rights Watch opposes the death penalty in all circumstances because of its inherent cruelty and irreversibility.

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<sup>65</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) G.A. res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 52, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force March 23, 1976.

<sup>66</sup> International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) G.A. res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 49, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 993 U.N.T.S. 3, entered into force January 3, 1976.

<sup>67</sup> ICCPR, article 2; ICESCR, article 2.

<sup>68</sup> ICCPR, article 20. See generally UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 22: Article 18 (Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion), July 30, 1993, CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/453883fb22.html> (accessed July 19, 2020); UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 34, Article 19, Freedoms of opinion and expression, September 12, 2011, CCPR/C/GC/34, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4ed34b562.html> (accessed July 19, 2020).

<sup>69</sup> ICCPR, article 6.

<sup>70</sup> CCPR/C/LBN/CO/3, para. 22; CCPR/C/48/D/470/1991; and A/67/275, para. 66.

Blasphemy laws also violate Pakistan's obligations under international law to uphold the right to a fair trial and protect against arbitrary detention. Article 9 of the ICCPR provides that everyone has the right to liberty and security of person and that no one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention.<sup>71</sup> The UN Human Rights Committee, the independent expert body that monitors compliance with the ICCPR, stated in its General Comment No. 35 that arrest or detention as punishment for the legitimate exercise of the rights guaranteed by the ICCPR, including freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief; arrest or detention on discriminatory grounds; or imprisonment after a manifestly unfair trial violate the prohibition on arbitrary arrest or detention.<sup>72</sup>

The failure of Pakistani authorities to prevent private actions against individuals deprives those targeted of their rights under the ICESCR to an adequate standard of living, including the right to adequate housing, the highest attainable standard of health, education, and cultural life, among other rights.<sup>73</sup> The right to housing also includes protection against forced eviction, defined as “the permanent or temporary removal against their will” of people from homes, business premises, or land “without the provision of, and access to, appropriate forms of legal or other protection.”<sup>74</sup> Violations of these rights can occur through the failure of the state to respect, protect, or fulfill these rights.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child prohibits discrimination based on a child's religion, or the religion of their parents,<sup>75</sup> and states that governments shall respect children's right to freedom of religion.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, child belonging to religious minorities shall not be denied the right, along with other members of their group, to practice their own religion.<sup>77</sup> Countries that are parties to the ICCPR and the ICESCR also undertake to respect the liberty of parents to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> ICCPR, article 9.

<sup>72</sup> UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 35, Article 9 (Liberty and Security of Person), para. 18

<sup>73</sup> ICESCR, articles 7, 11, 12, 14 and 15.

<sup>74</sup> Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment 7, Forced evictions, and the right to adequate housing (Sixteenth session, 1997), U.N. Doc. E/1998/22, annex IV at 113 (1997), para. 4.

<sup>75</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, G.A. Res. 44/25, annex, 44 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 49), p. 167, U.N. Doc. A/44/49 (1989), art. 2.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 14(1).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 30.

<sup>78</sup> ICCPR, art. 18(4); ICESCR, art. 13(3).

Under the ICCPR, Pakistan is obligated to uphold the right to an effective remedy for victims of human rights violations.<sup>79</sup> Victims have the right to have their claims determined by competent judicial, administrative, or legislative authorities or any other competent authority, which should enforce such remedies.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> ICCPR, art. 2.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., art. 2(3).



## **Recommendations**

### **To the Government of Pakistan**

- Repeal laws that discriminate against religious and other minorities, including section 295(C) of the penal code (the Blasphemy Law) and section 298.
- Ensure non-discrimination based on religious affiliation in access to education, health, and other essential services.
- Investigate thoroughly and impartially attacks using blasphemy accusations as a pretext and appropriately prosecute those who carry out, aid, and sponsor such attacks.
- Investigate fully the role of religious parties and organizations in blasphemy accusation attacks and prosecute as appropriate group leaders and members responsible for planning, inciting, participating in, or aiding such attacks.
- Promptly respond to and investigate all threats against religious minorities.
- Ensure that minorities are not denied the right to enjoy their own culture and to profess and practice their own religion.
- Take prompt and appropriate administrative or legal action against any government officials who endorse, encourage, or enable violence and discrimination based on the blasphemy law and blasphemy accusations.
- Allow unfettered access to the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion to visit Pakistan on terms consistent with the mandate of the office with specific reference to the abuses of the blasphemy law.
- Combat religious discrimination and intolerance in public schools and madrassas by removing hate material against religious minorities from school curriculum and textbooks.

### **To the Provincial Governments of Pakistan**

- Safely release all those detained or imprisoned for blasphemy and drop the charges against them. Ensure prompt and impartial investigation and appropriate prosecution of perpetrators and instigators of violence in the name of blasphemy. Investigate alleged police inaction in response to the violence.

- Clearly and unequivocally signal, through public statements and measures by senior state and high-ranking police officials, that those responsible for mob violence against religious and other minorities should be appropriately prosecuted, regardless of position or standing.
- Consider adopting a compensation, relief, and rehabilitation scheme for victims of mob violence and their families in line with their injuries, therapeutic needs, legal needs, and loss of employment.
- Promptly undertake long-proposed police reforms to ensure police act in accordance with human rights standards and without political interference. These should include trainings on community relations, acting without bias, and de-escalation of violence techniques.
- Promote the police strengthening ties with affected communities and victim support groups.
- Establish working groups of community leaders and national and local law enforcement officials to coordinate efforts to address faith-based violence.
- Improve outreach to affected communities on the outcome of investigations and prosecutions.
- Ensure that police officers, regardless of rank, implicated in criminal offenses are disciplined or prosecuted as appropriate.
- Ensure victims of abuses or their families have access to adequate and competent legal aid.
- Provide adequate health care, including psycho-social assistance, for victims of abuses and their families.
- Collect systematic data on crimes against religious and other minorities in line with international standards, including on victims, perpetrators, types of crime, and prosecution rates.

## **To Foreign Governments**

- Urge the Pakistani government to protect religious and other minorities and ensure prompt investigation and fair prosecutions in all cases of communal violence.
- Urge the Pakistani government to make strong public statements denouncing all violence directed against religious and other minorities and send a clear message to extremist religious and other groups that they will be held accountable for any crimes.

- Support government and civil society initiatives to collect systematic data on crimes directed against religious and other minorities in line with international human rights standards.
- Provide increased support for Pakistani nongovernmental organizations engaged in effective human rights monitoring and delivery of direct assistance to victims of violence targeting religious and other minorities.

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# “A Conspiracy to Grab the Land”

## Exploiting Pakistan’s Blasphemy Laws for Blackmail and Profit

Pakistan’s blasphemy laws are discriminatory, denying equal citizenship to non-Muslims and enabling and inciting violence against whomever is targeted. A blasphemy accusation can effectively be a death sentence since while no one has been executed for the offense of blasphemy, in recent years dozens of people accused of blasphemy have been killed by mob violence or targeted attacks.

“*A Conspiracy to Grab the Land*” describes the use of blasphemy accusations for economic gain and land grabs. Blasphemy accusations against Christians and Ahmadis have long incited mob violence and forced entire communities to flee their homes, their exodus leaving property up for land grabs. Blasphemy accusations are also weaponized for personal and economic motives by those who wield them against rivals and businesses run by religious minorities. The failure of the Pakistani authorities to hold the perpetrators of this violence accountable has emboldened them and made religious minorities even more vulnerable.

Human Rights Watch calls on the Pakistani government to urgently reform the blasphemy law. The government should also prosecute those who use the blasphemy law to engage in acts of violence or for economic gain.



*Police and residents stand amid debris outside the torched St. John Church on the outskirts of Faisalabad, Pakistan, on August 17, 2023, a day after Muslim men were incited to commit anti-Christian violence.*  
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