

PAKISTAN 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion, and it requires that laws be consistent with Islam. The constitution states, “subject to law, public order, and morality, every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice, and propagate his religion.” The government’s general failure to investigate, arrest, or prosecute those responsible for religious freedom abuses promoted an environment of impunity that fostered intolerance and acts of violence, according to domestic and international human rights organizations. Government policies did not afford equal protection to members of minority religious groups, and due to discriminatory legislation such as blasphemy laws and laws designed to marginalize the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, minorities often were afraid to profess freely their religious beliefs. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), police registered 12 new cases under blasphemy laws during the year and the courts sentenced three individuals to death, six individuals to life imprisonment, and three individuals to two-years of imprisonment for blasphemy. The government did not carry out any executions for blasphemy during the year. The government announced it would create a national council for minorities with Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh representatives.

Attacks against ethnic Hazara Shia in Balochistan occurred throughout the year. There were targeted killings of Shia Muslims and those accused of committing blasphemy. Societal intolerance persisted, including mob attacks, blasphemy accusations, and violent extremist activities. Violent extremists in some parts of the country threatened citizens who did not follow their authoritarian interpretation of Islam.

The U.S. embassy and consulates general maintained a regular dialogue with the government, including ministers, other high-ranking officials, members of parliament, and civil society, including leaders of all religious groups and minority community representatives, to encourage religious freedom, tolerance, and harmony and to discuss specific issues of concern. These issues included: blasphemy laws; curriculum reform in the public and madrassah education systems; treatment of the Ahmadiyya, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, and other minority communities; sectarian violence; and ways to improve the protection of and outreach to minority religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

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The U.S. government estimates the total population at 196.2 million (July 2014 estimate). According to the most recent census conducted in 1998, 95 percent of the population is Muslim (75 percent of the Muslim population is listed officially as Sunni and 25 percent as Shia). There are also an estimated two to four million Ahmadi and 500,000 to 800,000 Zikri Muslims. Groups officially constituting the remaining 5 percent of the population include Hindus, Christians, Parsis/Zoroastrians, Bahais, Sikhs, Buddhists, and others. Other religious groups include Kalasha, Kihals, and Jains. There is one known Jew. Less than 0.5 percent of the population is silent on religious affiliation or claims not to adhere to a particular religious group.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares that adequate provisions shall be made for all citizens to profess and practice their religious beliefs freely. It states “Every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice and propagate his religion.” Other constitutional provisions and laws, however, impose limits on this right, which is “subject to law, public order and morality.”

According to the constitution and penal code, Ahmadis are not Muslims and are prohibited from calling themselves Muslims or their belief Islam, as well as from preaching or propagating their religious beliefs, proselytizing, or insulting the religious feelings of Muslims. The punishment for violation of these provisions is imprisonment for up to three years and a fine.

The government bans the activities of, and membership in, several religiously oriented groups it judges to be “extremist” or “terrorist.” Many banned groups remain active, and some avoid the law by changing their names once banned.

The law allows the government to use special streamlined courts to try cases involving violent crimes, terrorist activities, and acts or speech deemed to foment religious hatred, including blasphemy cases.

The government does not recognize either civil or common law marriage. Marriages generally are performed and registered according to one’s religious group. There is no legal mechanism for the government to register the marriages

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of Hindus and Sikhs, causing women of those religious groups' difficulties in inheritance, accessing health services, voting, obtaining a passport, and buying or selling property. The marriages of non-Muslim men remain legal upon conversion to Islam. If a non-Muslim woman converts to Islam and her marriage was performed according to her previous religious beliefs, the government considers the marriage dissolved. Children born to non-Muslim women who convert to Islam after marriage to a non-Muslim man are considered illegitimate, and therefore ineligible for inheritance. The only way to legitimize the marriage, and render the children legitimate, is for the husband also to convert to Islam. The children of a Muslim man and a Muslim woman who both convert to another religious group are considered illegitimate, and the government may take custody of the children.

Freedom of speech is subject to "reasonable restrictions in the interest of the glory of Islam," as stipulated in the penal code. Under the blasphemy laws, persons are subject to death for "defiling Prophet Muhammad," to life imprisonment for "defiling, damaging, or desecrating the Quran," and to 10 years' imprisonment for "insulting another's religious feelings." Speech or action intended to incite religious hatred is punishable by up to seven years' imprisonment.

Non-Muslim missionary activity is permitted and missionaries can proselytize as long as there is no preaching against Islam and the missionaries acknowledge they are not Muslim (thereby excluding Ahmadis). Foreign missionaries are required to have visas valid from two to five years and are allowed one entry into the country per year. Only "replacement" visas for those taking the place of departing missionaries are available.

The government does not restrict religious publishing in general; however, the sale of Ahmadiyya religious literature is banned. The law prohibits publishing any criticism of Islam or its prophets and insults to others' religious beliefs.

The government designates religious affiliation on passports and requests religious information in national identity card applications. Those wishing to be listed as Muslims must swear they believe the Prophet Muhammad is the final prophet, and must denounce the Ahmadiyya movement's founder as a false prophet and his followers as non-Muslim. This provision inhibits Ahmadis from obtaining legal documents and pressures community members to deny their beliefs in order to enjoy citizenship rights, including voting, which requires an identity card.

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The constitution provides for “freedom to manage religious institutions.” In principle, the government does not restrict organized religious groups from establishing places of worship and training members of the clergy. There is no official restriction on the construction of Ahmadiyya places of worship; however, Ahmadis are forbidden to call them mosques.

The provincial and federal governments have legal responsibility for certain minority religious properties that were abandoned during the 1947 partition of British India. The government collects a 2.5 percent *zakat* (tax) from Sunni Muslims and distributes the funds to Sunni mosques, madrassahs, and charities.

There is no legal requirement for individuals to practice or affiliate nominally with a religious group. The constitution requires the president and prime minister to be Muslims. All senior officials, including members of parliament, must swear an oath to protect the country’s Islamic identity.

The judicial system encompasses several different court systems with overlapping and sometimes competing jurisdictions reflecting differences in civil, criminal, and Islamic jurisprudence. The Federal Shariat Court (FSC) and the sharia bench of the Supreme Court serve as appellate courts for certain convictions in criminal courts, including those for rape, extramarital sex, alcohol use, and gambling. The FSC exercises “revisional jurisdiction” (the power to review, of its own accord, cases in lower courts) in those cases, a power which applies to such cases whether they involve Muslims or non-Muslims. Non-Muslims are allowed to consult the FSC in other matters that affect them or violate their rights if they so choose.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony is responsible for organizing participation in the Hajj and other Islamic religious pilgrimages. Authorities also consult the ministry on matters such as blasphemy and Islamic education. The ministry’s budget covers assistance to indigent minorities, repair of minority places of worship, establishment of minority-run small development projects, celebration of minority religious festivals, and provision of scholarships for religious minority students.

The Ministry of Law, Justice, and Human Rights is responsible for protecting individuals against religiously-based discrimination, although federal authorities largely defer such responsibility to provincial governments per the constitution.

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Islamic studies are compulsory for all Muslim students in state-run schools. Although students of other religious groups are not legally required to study Islam, they generally are not offered parallel studies in their own religious beliefs and by default are required to take Islamic studies. In some schools, non-Muslim students may study ethics. Parents may send children to private schools, including religious schools, at the family's expense. Private schools are free to teach or not to teach religious studies as they choose; however, they are reportedly often under government pressure to teach Islamic studies. The constitution specifically prohibits discriminatory admission to any governmental educational institution based on religious affiliation. Officials state the only factors affecting admission to government schools are students' grades and home provinces; however, students must declare their religious affiliation on application forms. This declaration is also required for private educational institutions, including universities. Students who identify themselves as Muslims must declare in writing they believe the Prophet Muhammad is the final prophet, thereby excluding Ahmadis. Non-Muslims are required to have the head of their local religious communities verify their religious affiliation.

Madrassahs, private schools run by Muslim clerics, vary greatly in their curriculum and character. In some rural communities, government schools may be difficult to reach or in poor condition, making madrassahs the only viable form of education available to impoverished students. By law madrassahs are prohibited from teaching or encouraging sectarian or religious hatred or violence. In recent years, in violation of the law, a small number of madrassahs have taught violent extremist doctrine in support of terrorism. The law requires all madrassahs to register with one of five *waqafs* (independent boards) or directly with the government, to cease accepting foreign financing, and to accept foreign students only with the consent of their governments. The government officially categorizes most madrassahs as "non-extremist institutions."

There are reserved seats for religious minority members in both the national and provincial assemblies. The 342-seat National Assembly has 10 seats for religious minorities. The 104-seat Senate has four reserved seats for religious minorities, one from each province. In the provincial assemblies, there are three such reserved seats in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP); eight in Punjab; nine in Sindh; and three in Balochistan.

Government Practices

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Government policies did not afford equal protection to members of majority and minority religious groups, and due to discriminatory legislation, minorities often were afraid to profess freely their religious beliefs. Media and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported killings of religious minorities by police. Minorities also stated the judiciary was biased against religious minorities, especially in cases involving blasphemy.

The government's general failure to investigate, arrest, or prosecute those responsible for societal abuses promoted an environment of impunity that fostered intolerance and acts of violence, according to domestic and international human rights organizations. In numerous cases during the year, authorities failed to protect victims of religiously motivated mob violence.

According to the press and human rights NGOs, on September 25, a police officer in Rawalpindi's Adiala prison shot and injured a mentally ill British citizen, Mohammad Asghar, who was sentenced to death under Pakistan's blasphemy laws. Prison authorities arrested the constable and four other prison officials suspected of negligence. The initial investigation revealed that accomplices allowed the officer to carry a weapon inside the prison, identify Asghar, and then shoot him.

On November 6, in Lahore, a police officer used an axe to kill Tufail Haider, a member of the Shia community who was jailed for allegedly committing blasphemy.

During the year, individuals continued to accuse government officials and media figures of blasphemy, and authorities opened and pursued criminal cases based on these accusations. On October 28, Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) politicians filed a blasphemy petition against the opposition Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) leader Syed Khursheed. Khursheed was accused of making blasphemous statements during a visit to a mausoleum. A blasphemy case against Sherry Rehman, the country's former information minister and former ambassador to the United States, continued. Rehman was accused of making blasphemous statements during a television interview in 2010. In November a Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) court sentenced actress Veena Malik and her husband, Asad Bashir Khan, to 26 years in prison for committing blasphemy on air. The court gave the same sentence to Mir Shakil-ur-Rahman, the owner of the Jang-Geo network, which aired the show. On December 10, the Supreme Court issued an interim order suspending the implementation of the GB court's judgment.

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Ahmadiyya community leaders expressed continued concern over authorities' targeting and harassment of Ahmadis for blasphemy, violations of "anti-Ahmadi laws," or other crimes. The vague wording of the legal provision forbidding Ahmadis from directly or indirectly identifying themselves as Muslims enabled officials to bring charges against members of the community for using the standard Muslim greeting or for naming their children Muhammad. According to Ahmadiyya leaders, authorities charged 24 Ahmadis in eight separate cases, largely in connection with "anti-Ahmadi laws." Police charged 13 Ahmadis for allegedly defiling the Quran in separate instances.

As blasphemy cases moved through the justice system, lower courts often failed to adhere to basic evidentiary standards, which led to some convicted persons spending years in jail before higher courts overturned their convictions and ordered them freed for lack of evidence. Lower courts conducted proceedings in an atmosphere of intimidation by violent extremists and generally refused to free defendants on bail or acquit them for fear of reprisal and vigilantism. In an effort to avoid confrontation with, or violence from, extremists, judges and magistrates often delayed and continued trials indefinitely. Religious organizations and human rights NGOs expressed concern over the failure to punish persons who made false blasphemy allegations. Religious minorities were disproportionately accused of blasphemy relative to their small population in Pakistan. Furthermore, police often did not charge, or courts acquitted, those persons who made false blasphemy accusations.

According to data provided by the HRCP, during the year, police registered 12 new cases under blasphemy laws during the year and the courts sentenced three individuals to death, six individuals to life imprisonment, and three individuals to two-years of imprisonment for blasphemy. HRCP notes that the courts acquitted one individual accused of blasphemy and granted bail to another individual who served five years in prison for blasphemy.

Observers noted individuals frequently initiated blasphemy complaints against neighbors, peers, or business associates to settle personal grievances or to intimidate vulnerable people. While the law required a senior police official to investigate any blasphemy charge before a complaint was filed, police did not uniformly conduct this procedure.

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According to news reports, on February 20, a judge dismissed the fourth bail petition of Liaquat Ali, who was accused of blasphemy in 2013. Ali and Ali's religious instructor were accused of blasphemy for allegedly incorrectly reciting the Islamic testimony of faith. Ali said the accusation was a personal grudge related to a property dispute.

On March 28, a court sentenced Sawan Masih to death for blasphemy in an incident that had triggered a riot in Lahore. The court convicted Masih, a Christian, of committing blasphemy in a conversation with a Muslim friend in 2013. A mob of more than 3,000 persons burned some 100 Christian homes in Lahore's Joseph Colony after the allegations against Masih emerged. Masih filed an appeal in the Lahore High Court, stating the charges were false and aimed at evicting Christians from the area.

On April 3, a trial court in Toba Tek Singh, Punjab, handed a death sentence to Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar, a Christian couple accused of texting blasphemous messages to local Muslims in Gojra, Punjab. Police first registered the case in June 2013.

On July 11, Islamabad's Anti-terrorism Court ordered the continued detention of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants Hammad Adil and Muhammad Tanveer. The men allegedly confessed, after their arrests in August 2013, to the 2011 assassination of Shahbaz Bhatti, the former federal minister of minority affairs and an outspoken critic of the blasphemy laws. Adil and Tanveer were the main suspects accused in the murder. Their trial was ongoing at year's end.

On October 16, the Lahore High Court upheld the death sentence of Aasia Bibi, a Christian woman on death row since 2010, when a district court found her guilty of making derogatory remarks about Prophet Mohammed during an argument. On November 24, her lawyers submitted an appeal to the Supreme Court.

According to Ahmadiyya community members, between 1984 (when the "anti-Ahmadi laws" were promulgated) and 2014, authorities sealed 33 Ahmadiyya mosques and barred construction of 52 mosques, while assailants demolished or damaged 31 Ahmadiyya mosques, set 14 mosques on fire, and forcibly occupied 19 mosques.

Members of religious minority communities said the federal Ministry of Law, Justice, and Human Rights, and its provincial counterparts, had failed to safeguard

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minority rights. Observers noted the inconsistent application of laws and enforcement of protections of religious minorities at both the federal and provincial levels remained serious problems.

On June 19, the Supreme Court ordered the government to compensate fully the families of the victims of the September 2013 bombing of Peshawar's All Saints Church that killed at least 83 and injured more than 146. The court noted that the government had delayed financial compensation to the families. The church reported families had yet to receive full compensation by the end of the year.

Discrimination against Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Ahmadis in admission to higher education institutions persisted. Minority leaders reported their communities faced restrictions in securing admissions into colleges and universities. Sikh leaders said that in some instances, Sikh students were required to obtain a certificate of permission from the Evacuee Trust Property Board, which they said was a lengthy process that discouraged Sikhs from pursuing higher education.

Most religious minority groups complained of discrimination in government hiring. While there was a 5 percent quota for hiring religious minorities at the federal and provincial levels, employers did not consistently enforce this requirement.

Promotions for all minority groups appeared limited within the civil service. Many minorities contended a "glass ceiling" prevented their promotion to senior positions. Although there were no official obstacles to advancement of minority religious group members in the military service, in practice non-Muslims rarely rose above the rank of colonel and were often not assigned to politically sensitive positions.

According to reports from the Jinnah Institute and other organizations, public school curricula included derogatory statements in textbooks about minority religious groups, particularly Ahmadis, Hindus, Jews, and Christians and the teaching of religious intolerance was widespread. According to a 2013 report by the human rights NGO National Commission for Justice and Peace, hate material in school curricula was the main reason for discrimination towards minority groups. Examining textbooks for the 2012-13 academic years in Punjab and Sindh for grades 1 to 10, the report found the curricula included discriminatory and inflammatory material against Hindus, Christians, and other religious minorities.

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All *waqafs* continued to mandate the elimination of teachings promoting religious or sectarian intolerance and of terrorist or extremist recruitment at madrassahs. Inspectors from the education boards mandated affiliated madrassahs with full-time students to supplement religious studies with secular subjects.

Generally, sacred books for religious minorities, except Ahmadis, were imported freely.

The government funded and facilitated Hajj travel for Muslims, but had no similar program for pilgrimages by religious minorities. Due to the passport requirements to list religious affiliation and denounce the Ahmadiyya prophet, Ahmadis were unable to participate in the Hajj.

The government does not recognize Israel, and citizens, regardless of religious affiliation, were not officially permitted to travel to Israel. This especially affected Bahais, since the Bahai World Center – the spiritual and administrative center of the community – is located in Israel.

The Supreme Court announced a detailed judgment regarding minorities' rights on June 20, following its February 23 action on the case of Hindus in Tando Adam, Sindh, who were allegedly denied access to a temple. The court directed the federal government to establish a task force to ensure the safety and protection of minorities in the country, develop a strategy for promoting religious tolerance, and evaluate school curricula to promote a culture of religious and social tolerance. The court also directed the federal government to take steps to discourage hate speech in social media and bring accused violators to justice under the law. The order also called on the government to create a national council for minorities' rights. On July 14, the government announced it would create a National Commission for Minorities with Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh representatives. According to news outlets, the government followed through, and commission members held their first meeting November 13.

Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

There were several incidents involving the abuse of religious groups by individuals or organizations designated as terrorist organizations by the U.S. government, and by armed sectarian extremist groups with strong links to such organizations, including Lashkar i Jhangvi, TTP, and Sipah-e-Sahaba.

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There were continued attacks against prominent Shia. A public database of attacks on Shia in Sindh reported 139 people killed and 49 injured in 141 separate attacks during the year.

Sectarian violence between violent Sunni and Shia militants continued, and several religious minority individuals and communities across the country were the targets of religiously motivated violence. Attacks on the Shia minority continued, particularly in Dera Ismail Khan, Quetta, Hangu, Kohat, Tank, Dera Ghazi Khan, Gilgit, and in Kurram and Orakzai Agencies. Attacks on houses of worship, religious gatherings, and religious leaders perpetrated by sectarian, violent extremist, and terrorist groups resulted in hundreds of deaths during the year.

The ethnic Hazara, who are predominantly Shia, faced particularly violent attacks. Human Rights Watch reported that more than 500 Hazaras have been killed in attacks since 2008. HRCP reported nearly 30,000 Hazaras have migrated from Balochistan in the last five years to escape the violence. LeJ claimed responsibility for a January 21 suicide bomber attack on a bus carrying Hazara Shia pilgrims in Balochistan's Mastung District. The attack killed 24 and injured 40. An October 4 suicide bombing at an Eid market in Quetta's Hazara Town killed five and injured more than 20. On October 23, a gunman fired on a bus of Hazara traders traveling to a vegetable market in Quetta, killing eight people.

Violent extremists also used social media to intimidate religious minorities. On February 2, the TTP released a video threatening two minority groups in KP, the Kalash and the Ismailis, with death if they refused to convert to the TTP's interpretation of Islam. Declaring the video to be a violation of the constitution, then-Supreme Court Chief Justice Tassaduq Hussain Jilani directed the KP provincial government to submit a report on protecting the Kalash. The KP government complied on March 13 with a report outlining how law-enforcement agencies would enhance security in the area.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Throughout the year assailants targeted and killed Shia, Sikhs, and Ahmadis. Accusations of blasphemy sometimes resulted in mob violence and death of the accused. Throughout the year assailants also desecrated places of worship belonging to minorities. Citizens frequently used blasphemy laws to harass religious minorities and vulnerable Muslims, and to settle personal scores or business

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rivalries. Societal elements also used “anti-Ahmadi” provisions of the penal code to justify abuse and discrimination of Ahmadis. Human rights and religious freedom activists and members of minority religious groups reported they were at times hesitant to speak in favor of religious tolerance due to a climate of intolerance and fear.

Some religious leaders condemned attacks on religious minorities. During a May 2 workshop on the rights of minorities, Sunni Barelvi leaders urged clerics and prayer leaders to develop religious harmony and encourage coexistence amongst all segments of society. At this same event, Raghib Hussain Naeemi, principal of Lahore’s Jamia Naeemia University, urged religious scholars to highlight human rights.

On May 8, in Multan, Punjab an unidentified gunman shot and killed Rashid Rehman, who had alerted the police that he had been receiving death threats while defending Junaid Hafeez, a university lecturer accused of blasphemy. At a court hearing on the case prior to his murder, two lawyers and two other persons reportedly threatened Rehman, telling him he would “no longer exist” to appear at the next court hearing. There were no arrests in connection with Rehman’s murder. On December 4, gunmen opened fire on the residence of Hafeez’s new lawyer, Shahbaz Gormani, and left a letter warning him to withdraw from the case.

On November 4, in Kot Radha Kishan, Punjab, an estimated mob of 1,500 villagers accused a Christian couple of blasphemy and burned them alive in a brick kiln. Media, government, and civil society organizations reported the kiln owner accused the couple of desecrating a Quran after the couple failed to repay a loan, and locked them in a room while announcements from local mosques rallied the crowd. According to press reports, police arrested 59 suspects and filed cases against 468 others. Political and religious leaders criticized the attack, with both the prime minister and the Punjab chief minister calling for justice for the victims. On December 16, the Supreme Court rejected the police report on the incident, deeming it incomplete, and ordered action against police who were present when the attack occurred for negligence.

The Ahmadiyya community reported that aggressors killed 10 Ahmadis for their faith. On May 16, local media reported that a teenager walked into a police station and shot and killed an Ahmadi, Khalil Ahmad, accused of blasphemy in Sharaqpur, Punjab. On May 26, two unidentified men shot and killed an Ahmadi cardiac surgeon, Mehdi Ali Qamar, at an Ahmadiyya cemetery. On July 27, a mob

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gathered in response to allegations that an Ahmadi, Saqib Din, had committed blasphemy in Gujranwala, Punjab. The mob set a house on fire, killing a woman, Bashira Bibi, and two children and injuring nine others.

Violence against Shia continued. On January 20, in Peshawar, two gunmen shot and killed Shia scholar Allama Alim. On February 28, in Karachi, a gunman shot and killed nine Shia, including prominent scholar Allama Syed Taqi Hadi Naqvi. On June 8, the banned Jaish-ul-Islam claimed responsibility for an attack on Shia pilgrims returning from Iran that killed 30 Shia in Taftan, Balochistan. On July 24, two men killed Ghulam Mustafa Sherazi and his son, Waseem Sherazi, in Abbottabad. The same day a gunman shot and killed senior Shia lawyer Syed Mubarak Raza Kazmi, son-in-law of prominent Shia scholar Allama Taiib Johari, in Karachi.

Throughout the year violent extremists also targeted and killed religious minorities belonging to the Zikri Muslim and the Hindu communities. On July 1, unidentified gunmen killed Bhagwan Das, the president of the local Hindu association in Khuzdar, Balochistan, as he was opening his shop. On July 29, Dawn News reported seven people were injured when a remotely detonated bomb destroyed a bus carrying Zikri pilgrims in Balochistan's Khuzdar district.

Throughout the year, gunmen targeted and killed a number of Sikhs. On January 23, two gunmen killed Bhagwan Singh, a Sikh shopkeeper in Tangi Bazaar, Balochistan. On September 6, Dawn News reported that unidentified assailants shot and killed Harjeet Singh inside his shop at Nothia Bazaar, Peshawar.

Coerced conversions of religious minorities to Islam occurred at the hands of societal actors. Religious minorities expressed concern that government action addressing coerced conversions of religious minorities to Islam by societal actors was absent or inadequate. According to the National Commission for Justice and Peace, an estimated 1,000 Christian and Hindu women are forced by kidnappers or malefactors to convert and marry Muslim men in Pakistan every year. According to a report by the Movement for Solidarity and Peace in Pakistan, up to 700 of these women are Christian and 300 are Hindu. On March 4, Muhammad Aslam and a group of assailants abducted and forced 15-year-old Komal Yousaf, a Christian girl, to marry him. Following the abduction, Yousaf's parents filed a case against the culprits but the police refused to register it, stating the girl had voluntarily converted to Islam and willingly married. An NGO and a Muslim lawyer assisted the family in securing the girl's release from her abductors.

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Conversion to minority religions generally took place in secret to avoid societal backlash.

There were numerous reports of attacks on holy places, cemeteries, and symbols of religious minorities in which police failed to prevent the attacks. On February 10, assailants set fire to the Shrine of Mast Twakali, a popular Sufi poet of Balochistan.

On March 16, a group attacked and set fire to a Hindu temple in Larkana, Sindh, in response to the alleged desecration of a Quran by a Hindu. The group burned furniture, statues, and other religious articles. The police reported they arrested those involved.

Following this incident, hundreds from the Hindu community and some human rights activists staged a protest to demand more protection from the police. On March 20, the Supreme Court appointed a Larkana judge to investigate the temple attacks. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif also announced, on March 17, that protection of minorities' places of worship was the government's responsibility.

Discrimination against Christians in employment was widespread. Christians had difficulty finding jobs other than those involving menial labor, although Christian activists stated the situation had improved somewhat in the private sector and in the military in recent years.

Observers generally reported that the media's coverage of issues facing religious minorities was improving. There were, however, instances where media used inflammatory quotes or inappropriate references to minorities. For example, on December 22, cleric Syed Arif Shah Owaisi, while appearing on a Geo TV talk show as a guest, referred to Ahmadis as "enemies of Pakistan." Five days after the show, gunmen killed Luqman Ahad Shehzad, a member of the Ahmadiyya community near Gujranwala, Punjab. Although there was no apparent direct link between the two incidents, Geo TV issued an apology and noted that the cleric's remarks had violated the network's code of conduct.

Many observers agreed that journalists needed more training on how to report on religious minorities.

Religious minority community leaders said the government failed to take adequate action to protect minorities from bonded labor in the brick-making and agricultural

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sectors, an illegal practice in which victims were disproportionately Christians and Hindus.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In May the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State visited the country and discussed religious freedom concerns, including sectarian violence and blasphemy laws, during meetings with government officials. The Department of State's Principal Deputy Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan visited the country in February and July and raised religious freedom concerns both times with government ministers, other senior officials, and civil society.

Senior embassy officials, including the Ambassador and consuls general, and visiting Department of State officials attended and hosted meetings with government officials, as well as with leaders from communities of all religious groups and NGOs working on religious freedom issues. They advocated interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance, and religious freedom. Embassy officials also explored with these groups the development of programs and projects to promote religious tolerance.

In April the U.S. Special Envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation visited the country, where he held meetings with government officials, religious leaders, academics, and civil society leaders from all religious backgrounds to discuss the importance of its prioritization of religious freedom, including for minority Muslim groups and Christian communities. He spoke about the negative impact of blasphemy laws on minority religious communities, and argued that such restrictions on speech are detrimental to Muslim communities and to the country.

In May the Ambassador convened the inaugural meeting of the Interfaith Advisory Group, a diverse collection of religious and civil society leaders who represent different Islamic groups and other religions. The group discussed the embassy's ongoing efforts to engage religious leaders in programs that seek to counter violent extremism and promote more pluralistic and tolerant expressions of faith.

In November following the killing of the Christian couple in Kot Radha Kishan, the Ambassador issued a statement to condemn the religious intolerance and mob violence.