

## January 17, 2001: Commission Hails Pakistan's Abolition of Discriminatory Electoral System

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WASHINGTON - Michael K. Young, Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, today praised as "a victory for religious freedom and tolerance" Pakistan's abolition of an electoral system that discriminated against religious minorities there. The Commission is an independent federal agency advising the Administration and Congress.

In its May 2001 report, the Commission noted that the "separate electorate system is inconsistent with democratic principles, the right to equal citizenship, and the protection of political rights without discrimination on the basis of religion as provided for in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights...", and urged the U.S. government to raise this issue with Pakistani government officials. The Commission also raised the issue on many occasions with U.S. officials and representatives of the Pakistani government in the United States and Pakistan.

The system provided for separate at-large seats in the national and provincial assemblies and local councils for four categories of non-Muslims: Christians, Ahmadis, Hindus, and others (Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, etc.). Muslims, on the other hand, voted for Muslim legislators on a territorial basis. Members of religious minorities held that this system of "religious apartheid" rendered them second-class citizens and placed them outside the mainstream of Pakistani political life. They believed that local Muslim legislators did not respond to the concerns of religious minorities in their districts, but would do so if they identified minorities as part of their constituency. In effect, the system disenfranchised the Ahmadi community, which strongly disagrees with the government's contention that Ahmadis are not Muslims; Ahmadis would not vote in a system that separated them from Muslims.

"We're grateful to the U.S. government for any actions it took to explain the inequities of this system to the Pakistani government," Chairman Young said. "We're very pleased that President Musharraf understood how this system sidelined millions of loyal Pakistani citizens and took steps to correct it. We hope this move - along with steps Pakistan is taking to improve its education system and to curb violence in the name of religion - will lead to increased tolerance of and justice for religious minorities in that country."

Young called upon the U.S. government to continue to work with Pakistan to reduce and eliminate abuse of Pakistan's blasphemy law, which has been used to harass and unjustly imprison moderate Muslims, as well as Christians and Ahmadis.

Michael K. Young, Chair

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