

ROLL CALL Opinion

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In its global struggle against violent religious extremism and terror, the United States has had an increasingly strained relationship with Pakistan, which has failed to counter these forces effectively, especially in recent years.

Last month, the U.S. responded by suspending \$800 million of its military aid to Pakistan's capital of Islamabad. It's time for the administration to take other steps, beginning with designating Pakistan a "country of particular concern" under U.S. law for severe violations of religious freedom.

For America, Pakistan's failure means a tougher job stabilizing neighboring Afghanistan and a greater instability in South Asia.

For Pakistan, it means no one is safe. Violent religious extremists are able to target their foes with impunity, including Pakistani officials such as Punjab Governor Salman Taseer, a Muslim, and Minister of Minority Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti, a Christian, both of whom were assassinated earlier this year for demanding reforms to Pakistan's blasphemy law.

For Pakistan's people, it means their nation has a security problem and also a serious human rights deficit, both of which call for solutions which bolster religious freedom.

The Taseer and Bhatti assassinations underscore Pakistan's failure to protect the right to freedom of thought, conscience or religion for even its most prominent citizens. In recent years, armed radicals have escalated attacks against Sufi and Shi'a Muslims and especially against religious minorities, including Ahmadis and Christians.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, on which we serve, has reported on a long chain of religiously related murders and violence dating back to 2001.

On Sept. 10, bombers attacked a Shi'a procession in Lahore, killing at least 40 and wounding as many as 200. Two days later, bombers attacked a similar procession in Quetta, murdering at least 70 and wounding 160. Scores of Ahmadis were gunned down in May 2010 in Lahore during Friday prayers. In July of that year, 40 Sufis were slain and hundreds wounded in the bombing of a shrine, also in Lahore. In 2009, violence in the village of Gojra was unleashed

against Christians, killing eight and injuring 18, and two churches and 75 homes were set on fire.

Not only does Pakistan typically fail to prevent or successfully prosecute such crimes, it fuels them through its harmful laws, including mandates that criminalize Ahmadis' practice of their religion and a blasphemy law that commonly is used to intimidate religious minorities or others with whom the accusers disagree or have unrelated conflicts.

These measures embolden religious extremists, fostering a climate conducive to vigilantism and other violence against unpopular religious minorities, women and even members of Pakistan's religious majority.

According to interviews our commission conducted during the past several months, more Muslims are charged under the blasphemy law than members of any other religious group in Pakistan, but religious minorities are targeted disproportionately.

Pakistan's educational system further fuels the problem. Our review of public-school textbooks and other materials has found intolerant references against religious minorities, particularly Hindus, Christians and non-Sunni forms of Islam. Fifth-grade-level textbooks have accused Hindus of dishonest dealings with Muslims. In addition, some of Pakistan's thousands of religious schools include texts with an interpretation of Islam that promotes religious extremism and provides ideological training to those involved in religiously motivated violence, both in Pakistan and abroad.

In response to this continued failure to protect freedom of religion or belief, the commission has strongly recommended the State Department officially designate Pakistan a "country of particular concern," one of the world's worst religious freedom violators and human-rights abusers.

Such a designation, which the commission has sought since 2002, would help the United States press Islamabad to undertake needed reforms. The United States also should urge Pakistan to reaffirm and reinforce the rule of law, aligning its laws with international human-rights standards; prosecute vigorously those committing violence against religious minorities; and release unconditionally those who are in jail for blasphemy while placing a moratorium on this law's use until it is reformed or repealed.

As a human-rights concern with serious security implications, the need for greater respect for religious freedom and related rights should be an integral issue in the U.S. bilateral relationship with Pakistan.

We have identified this as a problem, and the United States should be devising and demanding solutions. While it is complicated and awkward to do so in the case of an ally, the abuses and threats posed by a growing religious extremism threaten both countries.

Designating Pakistan a "country of particular concern" will help the United States turn its efforts to new solutions and practices to address Pakistan's endemic religious freedom problems.

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