



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

November 2024

NAVIGATING CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN PAKISTAN

Stephen Schneck
Chair

Eric Ueland
Vice Chair

Commissioners

Ariela Dubler
Mohamed Elsanousi
Maureen Ferguson
Susie Gelman
Vicky Hartzler
Asif Mahmood
Meir Soloveichik

Erin D. Singhsinsuk
Executive Director

USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international
freedom of religion or
belief, by independently
assessing and unflinchingly
confronting threats to this
fundamental right.*

On August 29, 2024, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a hearing, [*Navigating Challenges and Opportunities for Religious Freedom in Pakistan*](#). Chair Stephen Schneck, Vice Chair Eric Ueland, and Commissioner Asif Mahmood led the hearing, which featured testimony by representatives from the U.S. government, academia, and Pakistani civil society to discuss religious freedom conditions in Pakistan and potential policy options for U.S. policymakers to address the evident challenges. Commissioners Vicky Hartzler and Meir Soloveichik also participated in the hearing.

[*Chair Stephen Schneck*](#) opened the hearing by calling attention to the current use of Pakistan's blasphemy law to target religious minorities. He explained that blasphemy accusations require little evidence, and Pakistani officials exploit them to detain individuals of a variety of faiths. He emphasized that blasphemy accusations also often lead to mob violence, as the August 2023 Jaranwala attacks and more recent violence in Sargodha demonstrate.

[*Vice Chair Eric Ueland*](#) then offered remarks about the persecution of Pakistan's Ahmadiyya Muslim community. He explained that the Pakistani government does not recognize this community as Muslim and, as a result, members of this community face severe restrictions on practicing their faith. He described how Ahmadiyya Muslims face prohibitions on citing the Qur'an, referring to their places of worship as mosques, or making the public call to prayer. He pointed to the example that Pakistani authorities detained several Ahmadis in 2024 for participating in Eid-al Adha celebrations.

[*Commissioner Asif Mahmood*](#) then highlighted USCIRF's policy recommendations regarding Pakistan. He explained that while the U.S. Department of State has accepted USCIRF's recommendation to designate Pakistan as a Country of Particular Concern, it has consistently failed to lift a National Security Waiver that exempts the Pakistani government from accompanying sanctions. He emphasized that USCIRF has repeatedly called for the repeal of Pakistan's blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws. He further reiterated the need for the United States and Pakistan to enter into a binding agreement to facilitate incremental changes to advance religious freedom, including releasing religious prisoners of conscience and enforcing punishments for false blasphemy accusations.

Anjali Kaur, Deputy Assistant Administrator for the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) Asia Bureau, provided an overview of the types of programming that USAID provides to facilitate social cohesion in Pakistan, including engagement with religious leaders. She explained that USAID's work in Pakistan utilizes a community-based approach to mitigate conflict and address drivers of radicalization. She described how USAID works with implementing partners to amplify the voices of marginalized populations, including religious minorities. By supporting the U.S. Institute of Peace's (USIP) "Building Peace Project," for example, USAID has helped facilitate peace and inclusion dialogues and policy seminars at over 600 schools and *madrasas*. She further noted that USAID's Asia Bureau's Asia Religious and Ethnic Freedom Activity currently supports efforts to expand the freedom of religion or belief in Asia through community partners across 10 countries. She also stated that USAID has partnered with the Pakistani government to strengthen the country's education system to address literacy challenges, and school attendance rates, with an emphasis on girls and underprivileged communities.

[Peter Jacob](#), Director of the Center for Social Justice, summarized the challenges to religious freedom that Pakistan's blasphemy law poses. He recounted that there were nearly 400 instances of false allegations between 2018 and 2023, explaining that while Muslims fall victim to blasphemy accusations, the law disproportionately impacts religious minorities. He argued that the government of Pakistan should form a commission of inquiry to assess how blasphemy laws have transformed society to allow for an "infrastructure of hatred."

[Asif Aqeel](#), Founding Director of the Center for Law & Justice, explained the issue of forced conversion of women and girls from religious minority communities, mainly impacting the Christian and Hindu populations. He presented several illustrative cases of young girls who forcefully converted to Islam under the threat of violence from Muslim men. He further explained that when forced conversion cases arise in court, authorities often dismiss them and characterize them as "love marriages" rather than cases of forced conversion.

[Amjad Mahmood Khan](#), National Secretary for Public Affairs for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community USA, provided an overview of systematic oppression and violence against Pakistan's Ahmadiyya Muslim community. He explained that Pakistan's penal code criminalizes the activities of Ahmadiyya Muslims, including preventing them from self-identifying as Muslim. He described in detail the frequent desecration of Ahmadi gravesites and mosques as well as the arrest of hundreds of Ahmadis in 2023 alone.

Following witness testimonies, Chair Schneck led a discussion among participants regarding how the U.S. government can engage with Pakistani officials to advance religious freedom in the country. During this discussion, Anjali Kaur elaborated on how USAID's implementing partners have successfully launched 900 projects across Pakistan aimed at promoting peace and tolerance, including efforts to counter hate speech. Commissioners posed additional questions to witnesses on ways to effectively counter hateful rhetoric and misinformation, including through Pakistan's education sector, the use of legislation to curb forced conversions, and the role of evidentiary burden in blasphemy cases.



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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.