



## **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing**

### **Navigating Challenges and Opportunities to Religious Freedom in Pakistan**

*Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery*

#### **Stephen Schneck, USCIRF Chair**

Good morning, everyone and welcome to today's hearing on religious freedom in Pakistan. Thank you to our distinguished witnesses for taking the time to join us today. My name is Steve Schneck and I am the Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this important hearing.

Religious freedom in Pakistan remains concerning. Religious minorities continue to be subjected to discriminatory laws, arbitrary arrest, and mob violence. Of these, Pakistan's blasphemy law remains one of the most pervasive challenges to religious freedom and is repeatedly used to detain individuals of various faiths. Blasphemy accusations require little to no evidence, and often result in lengthy prison sentences or solitary confinement for those accused of blasphemy. As demonstrated over the last year, in particular, blasphemy accusations can also foment violence towards religious minorities by vigilante groups and are even made spuriously to settle disputes or to target minorities.

This month marks the one-year anniversary of the Jaranwala attacks, one of the largest attacks against Pakistan's Christian community in recent years. These attacks left dozens of churches damaged and destroyed by mob violence in response blasphemy accusations against two Christians. While hundreds were initially arrested for participating in the violence, most have now been released. Unfortunately, such patterns of violence have continued in 2024, as we saw in June, in Sargodha [Sar-gode-ah], when a 70-year-old Christian man was killed by a violent mob after being accused of blasphemy.

We will hear even more from our witnesses about the systematic challenges with Pakistan's blasphemy law and potential policy options to address this problematic and dangerous law. With that, I'll now turn the floor over to Vice Chair, Eric Ueland to discuss some of the additional concerns that USCIRF is tracking with respect to Pakistan.

## **Eric Ueland, USCIRF Vice Chair**

Thank you, Chair Schneck. I would like to join in welcoming everyone to today's hearing. And thank you to our witnesses for taking the time to join us today. I'd like to briefly highlight some of the other key challenges to religious freedom in Pakistan.

In addition to its harsh blasphemy law, Pakistan's Penal Code includes strict punishments against the country's Ahmadiyya Muslim community, which prohibits them from identifying as Muslim. Ahmadis are additionally prohibited from citing the Qur'an, referring to their places of worship as mosques, or making the public call to prayer. In order to register to vote, Ahmadis must either renounce their faith or be placed on a separate electoral list.

Over the last year, violence and intolerance towards the community has intensified, as shown by increasing numbers of attacks and arrests. In June alone, Pakistani authorities arrested dozens of Ahmadis to prevent them from sacrificing animals during Eid-al-Adha.

In addition, Christian and Hindu women and girls continue to be vulnerable to kidnappings and forced marriage and conversion. In these cases, victims are often taken from their provinces, and then forcibly married and forced to convert to Islam. Perpetrators often evade justice, and in the rare instances that such cases are prosecuted, the court system often reinforces the practice and justifies keeping victims with their abductors.

These are just some of the religious freedom issues that USCIRF continues to closely track and that our witnesses will discuss in more detail today. With that, I'll now turn the floor over to my colleague, Commissioner Asif Mahmood to discuss some of USCIRF's policy recommendations related to Pakistan.

**Asif Mahmood, USCIRF Commissioner**

Thank you, Vice Chair Ueland. In USCIRF’s 2024 Annual Report, we recommended that the U.S. Department of State redesignate Pakistan as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under IRFA. In December 2023, we were pleased that the State Department accepted our recommendation to redesignate Pakistan as a CPC; however, it did not take our recommendation to lift the national security waiver so that commensurate sanctions would be imposed.

USCIRF has also recommended that the U.S. government work to enter a binding agreement with the Pakistani government to encourage concrete steps to address religious freedom violations, including releasing prisoners held under the problematic blasphemy law and others imprisoned for their religion or belief.

USCIRF has repeatedly called for the repeal of blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws, and until such repeal, we call for making blasphemy aailable offense and ensure proper investigations and punishment for false accusations.

We further urge that individuals be held accountable for inciting or participating in vigilante violence, targeted killings, forced conversion, and other religiously-based crimes. This includes imposing targeted sanctions on Pakistani government officials and entities responsible for severe religious freedom violations.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses, and with that will turn the floor back over to Chair Schneck.

**Stephen Schneck, USCIRF Chair**

Thank you, Commissioner Mahmood. I would now like to introduce our witnesses.

In our first panel, we will hear from Anjali Kaur. Ms. Kaur is the Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Bureau of Asia at the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Then, in our second panel, we will hear from Peter Jacob. Mr. Jacob is the Director of the Centre for Social Justice.

Our next witness will be Asif Aqeel. Mr. Aqeel is the Founding Director of the Center for Law & Justice.

Our final witness will be Amjad Mahmood Khan. Mr. Khan is an Adjunct Professor at UCLA School of Law and the National Secretary for Public Affairs for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community USA.

Thank you all for being here. Ms. Kaur, please begin with your testimony.