

PAKISTAN

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom: 2013 Annual Report

Bottom Line: Religious freedom violations in Pakistan rose to unprecedented levels due to chronic sectarian violence particularly targeting Shi'i Muslims. The government continues to fail to protect Christians, Ahmadis, and Hindus. Pakistan's repressive blasphemy laws and anti-Ahmadi laws are widely used to violate religious freedoms and foster a climate of impunity.

The government of Pakistan continues to engage in and tolerate systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief. Sectarian and religiously-motivated violence is chronic, especially against Shi'a Muslims, and the government has failed to protect members of religious minority communities, as well as the majority faith. Pakistan's repressive blasphemy laws and other religiously discriminatory legislation, such as the anti-Ahmadi laws, have fostered an atmosphere of violent extremism and vigilantism. Pakistani authorities have not consistently brought perpetrators to justice or taken action against societal actors who incite violence. For these reasons, USCIRF recommends in 2013 that Pakistan be designated as a "country of particular concern" (CPC). Since 2002, USCIRF has recommended Pakistan be named a CPC, but the State Department has not followed that recommendation. Pakistan represents the worst situation in the world for religious freedom for countries the U.S. government has not currently designated as "countries of particular concern."

Religious Freedom Conditions

Religiously-motivated violence: The exceedingly poor religious freedom environment worsened during the reporting period (January 2012 - January 2013). The Pakistani government failed to effectively intervene against a spike in targeted violence against the Shi'a Muslim minority community. Authorities failed to prevent attacks and have not consistently brought the perpetrators of such violence to justice. The following examples of sectarian or religiously-motivated violence illustrate the numerous attacks against innocent Pakistanis by religious extremists.

- **Shi'a:** Militants and terrorist organizations targeted Shi'i processions and mosques with impunity during the reporting period. Organizations put the number of Shi'a killed across Pakistan over the past year at over 400. Information collected by USCIRF during the reporting period, which is not exhaustive, documented approximately 50 incidents of violent attacks causing death, as well as 10 different attacks with explosive devices or suicide bombers. Shi'a activists have referred to the level and severity of attacks as constituting genocide. The response by the Pakistani government has been grossly inadequate. While at times police were present when attacks occurred, they were unable to stop attackers before people were killed.
- **Ahmadis:** In recent years, scores of Ahmadis have been murdered in attacks which appear to be religiously motivated. During the reporting period, USCIRF received reports of 44 different attacks targeting Ahmadis, with 22 incidents resulting in the death of 23 individuals. In addition to attacks on individual Ahmadis, local police repeatedly forced Ahmadis to remove Qur'anic scripture from mosques and minarets. There were also at least seven instances of Ahmadi graves being desecrated, some by local police.
- **Christians:** Violence against Christians continued, usually perpetrated by banned militant groups or other societal actors, but also at times at the hands of government officials. USCIRF received reports of 16 different incidents of violent attacks against Christians during the reporting period, with 11 individuals killed. While the murders could not always be definitely linked to religious animus, five churches were attacked by mobs during the reporting period, as were one Catholic hospital and one Christian village.

- **Hindus:** Due to their minority status, Pakistan’s Hindus are vulnerable to kidnapping, rapes, and forced conversions of Hindu women, including minors. Allegations of kidnapping of Hindu women, followed by the forced conversion to Islam and force marriage to Muslim men, consistently arose throughout the reporting period. USCIRF received reports of 250 Hindu families having left Pakistan for India, due to concerns of violence and impunity.

Discriminatory laws: Blasphemy laws and severe legal restrictions on Ahmadis have fostered an atmosphere of violent extremism and vigilantism in Pakistan.

- **Blasphemy laws:** The country’s blasphemy law, used predominantly in Punjab province but also nationwide, targets members of religious minority communities and dissenting Muslims and frequently results in imprisonment. USCIRF is aware of at least 17 individuals on death row and 20 more serving life sentences. The blasphemy laws do not require proof of intent or evidence to be presented after allegations are made, and do not include penalties for false allegations. Further, the laws do not provide clear guidance on what constitutes a violation, empowering accusers to apply their personal interpretations of Islam. Two individuals were sentenced to death during the reporting period: Sufi Ishaque and Hazrat Ali Shah (the latter was also sentenced to 10 years in prison). Manzarul Haq Shah Jahan was sentenced to life in prison and a fine of 200,000 rupees during the reporting period. In addition, USCIRF has received reports of more than 40 individuals currently in jail for violating the blasphemy law; a detailed list of these individuals is included in the appendix to this Annual Report.
- **Legal Restrictions on Ahmadis:** Ahmadis are subject to the most severe legal restrictions and officially-sanctioned discrimination. They are prevented by law from engaging in the full practice of their faith, may face criminal charges for a range of religious practices, including the use of religious terminology, and are prevented from voting. In 1974, the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto amended the constitution to declare members of the Ahmadi religious community “non-Muslims,” despite their insistence to the contrary, and in 1984, during General Zia-ul-Haq’s dictatorship, the penal code was amended, making basic acts of Ahmadi worship and interaction criminal offenses. During the reporting period, USCIRF received reports of 10 Ahmadis being charged under Article 298. Many arrested were released on bail, but will likely spend years in the backlogged Pakistani court system as their cases are tried and possibly appealed.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

- Designate Pakistan as a “country of particular concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act;
- Articulate clearly that upholding religious freedom and related human rights is an essential element of the U.S. policy toward Pakistan, and include discussions on religious freedom and religious tolerance in U.S.-Pakistan dialogues and summits;
- Urge the Pakistani government to:
 - Protect religious minorities from violence and actively prosecute individuals and militant groups committing acts of violence against Shi’a, Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus, and others;
 - Unconditionally release and pardon individuals currently jailed for blasphemy or for violating anti-Ahmadi laws;
 - Repeal or reform the blasphemy law and rescind anti-Ahmadi provisions of law; and
 - Set national textbook and curricula standards that actively promote tolerance towards all religions and introduce into the curriculum for all students the “Ethics for Non-Muslims” course.

Please see USCIRF's 2013 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Pakistan.