

Christian Community Responses to the Failure of Constitutional and State Safeguards Against Blasphemy, Apostasy, and Violent extremism in Pakistan

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Abstract

Christians in Pakistan are living under consistent fear and with remarkable distress of minimization in their community and property. They are being mistreated and exploited socially, culturally, and monetarily. Legal mechanisms-related issues are associated with the negative attitudes of government, and law enforcement agencies, and the neighborhood dominance of Muslims having a conservative mindset toward Christians and towards their social, and religious events. This paper discusses the circumstances under which they have been facing serious life threats based on blasphemy, apostasy, and violent extremism. The Paper further discusses the Islamization drive which resulted in the community's under-estimation and savagery of Christians. Practices of violent extremism are witnessed where churches are being defiled and their land is being taken from them on an accusation of blasphemy. Christians are confronting religious and social confrontation. This policy paper argues the failed role of law enforcement agencies to counter violent extremism, and the conservative mindset of the Muslim community toward Christians. The Paper concludes with a recommendation to stratify the ambiguity regarding on-ground timeline(s) of incidents of apostasy, and blasphemy laws in correlation with ICCPR articles and the Pakistan Penal Code. The Paper also emphasizes the net-security framework for Christians and the re-structuring of security mechanisms for Christian communities residing in Pakistan.

Keywords: Apostasy, Blasphemy, Christian community, Islamization, Pakistan Blasphemy Laws, Violent Extremism.

Introduction

Pakistan, carved out of India in 1947, is primarily a Muslim-majority country. Pakistan is a multi-religious and ethno-linguistically diverse

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country. Throughout its existence, continual population shifts have shaped this variety. In general, however, the share of religious minorities in the population has decreased dramatically. Pakistan has had a plethora of problems since its inception. One of the most pressing issues facing the state was ensuring that religion played a role in statecraft. Religious minorities faced widespread discrimination as global tolerance for religious diversity dwindles (Ahmed, 1967). Policymakers were split into two camps: those who wanted religion to play a bigger role in Pakistani laws and policies, and those who did not. Others advocated for a state with a largely secular orientation. This debate has only gotten hotter since the 1980s when the former gained significant control over the state narrative. The Muslim conservative mindset has had a significant impact on the fate of Pakistan's religious minorities, the majority of whom live in constant fear from a variety of sources such as blasphemy, apostasy, and violent extremism, including the state (Andrew Buncombe, 2014). Therefore, it can be said that the Christian community, Pakistan's largest, bears the brunt of the problem. In recent years, the situation for religious minorities in Pakistan has deteriorated. Hindus, Christians, and Ahmadis have long struggled to belong in Pakistani society and fully participate in the country's political life, and despite occasional signs of improvement, the situation for minorities, especially Christians continues to deteriorate (Daraz, 2016). Hate speech, frequent use of blasphemy laws, apostasy, and increasingly violent attacks on places of worship characterize the climate in which minorities find themselves. This repressive atmosphere has made it more difficult for religious groups to live in peace and safety in areas where they have frequently lived their whole lives (Forte, 1994). As a result, they are frequently pressured to migrate to more secure areas inside the nation or overseas, or continue living in a shadow by not disclosing their identities and religion, using Muslim names to not get in the limelight of hate speech, blasphemy accusations, or life threats.

Objectives

This paper aims to highlight the attitudes and attributes of law, law enforcement agencies, and the Muslim community as a whole towards the minority; Christian community residing in Pakistan. This paper takes a deep dive to understand the loopholes and ambiguities in Pakistan's constitution which protects minorities. On the other hand, based on the historical violent events on Christians, this paper highlights how the Christian community is

still vulnerable in Pakistan. The contradiction between the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), Pakistan blasphemy laws, and Pakistan's acceptance of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) do not fill fit historical episodes of blasphemy and/or apostasy. The objective of this paper is to highlight such contradictions, and radical behavior towards the Christian community at the micro, meso, and meta-level; I-e from personal, society, community, law, and state levels.

Literature Review

In its capacity as an ICCPR member, Pakistan bears witness to some of the world's worst cases of discrimination and persecution of religious minorities. The USCIRF issued a report on international religious freedom for the first time in 2017 (USCIRF). Pakistan has been placed on a "Special Watch List" and labeled a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) due to its history of severe restrictions on religious freedom for its minority populations. Statement No. 7 from the South Asian Democratic Forum, Persecution of Pakistan's religious minorities has been facilitated by the country's top-down and bottom-up jihad nexus (Yousaf, 2016). Three things are symptomatic of top-down jihad: the military's pervasive influence in all spheres of social life; civilian and military governments that have contributed to the Islamification of the nation; and a judiciary that supports religious conservative groups and challenges the executive over textualism. (Vries, 2020). Islamic extremist organizations and religious leaders support the bottom-up jihad of minority persecution. This connection allowed Pakistan to legitimize the separation of its Muslim majority from its religious minority.

Shaun Gregory's book (Gregory, *The Christian Minority in Pakistan: Issues and Options*, 2008) is an incredible record of Pakistan's Christian community. This is, in fact, the first inside and investigative work on any minority network in Pakistan, and it is genuinely leading the charge (Forte, 1994). The book vividly depicts incidents and issues of concern to religious groups in Pakistan. It categorizes the issues faced by Christians in Pakistan and the options available to them in dealing with issues that could lead to their death.

Blasphemy has emerged as one of the most pressing issues facing Pakistan's Christian community. Only six cases of blasphemy were recorded from the country's independence in 1947 to the 1980s. The maximum sentence of two years was rarely imposed. However, at least 100 blasphemy charges

were brought against Ahmadis, nine against Muslims, and sixteen against Christians between 1986 and 1995. By June 1997 (International, 1997), five people (three Christians, one Sunni Muslim, and two Shi'a Muslims) had been given the death penalty for defiling the name of Prophet Muhammad under Section 295-C I-e. All of them were later exonerated after an appeal (Ganai, 1991). Since the accuser has nothing to lose and the accused has everything to lose when it comes to blasphemy laws, it has become a weapon employed in private conflicts. Everything, even his own life, was overturned after an appeal.

The reasoning behind the support of conservative groups by the judiciary, law enforcement bodies, government, and society at large is not argued deeply earlier. Examination and stratification of human beings on the base of religious groups as a larger umbrella and communities/castes as a smaller one may answer the reasoning behind the government, and/or judiciary and other government bodies look helpless. The pressure group from the top-bottom-top act as a conservative religious catalyst which might jeopardize the rationality of decision-making bodies.

Research Methodology

The project generally adheres to the guidelines for descriptive study to forge a general explanation of Christian minorities' responses to the violent extremism towards themselves from the Muslim majority on the bases of blasphemy and apostasy. The methodology for this Policy Brief was designed on a two-pronged data collection and collation exercise (Daraz, 2016). After conducting a thorough literature analysis to determine which topics would best serve as the basis for our investigation, we zeroed down on the most relevant stakeholders from whom to draw primary research.

Instruments for primary data gathering, such as focus group discussions (FGD) and key informant interviews (KII), were developed. The author (s) interviewed 17 people from Christian communities who faced religious discrimination from Muslim majority groups residing in 4 townships; Joseph colony, Yuhanand, Nawaz Sharif Colony, and Cavalry kachi abadi, Author(s) also interviewed pastors of two Catholic Churches, and different members of counter-terrorism department (CTD), and the JIT who handled cases. Additionally, wherever the data permitted, a comparison of social cohesion between Muslim and Christian communities living together in different settlements was also noted.

The key findings of this gender analysis can be summarized across 4 tiers; Meta, Macro, Meso, and Micro. On the Meta level, it was observed that traditional Christian minorities are largely unyielding due to a Muslim conservative mindset and a history of a series of incidents. On the Macro level, an assessment of the current laws and policies regarding minorities, equal human rights, and a failed security net and protection by police and law enforcement agencies showed a limiting legal framework. On the Meso and Micro level, issues about thin religious non-tolerant lines such as accusations of blasphemy and apostasy, create a cycle of disenfranchisement for the Christian population at hand; leaving limited options in terms of pursuing well-being, life, and economic security, remain at risk.

The incommensurability of Pakistan's blasphemy laws with the ICCPR

Pakistan accepted ICCPR and so agreed to "reverence, safeguard and live up to the rights established in this truce and to implement the appropriate parliamentary, executive and judiciary, organizational, and other metrics available." However, the blasphemy laws in Pakistan are inconsistent with the ICCPR. and hence the current national laws. The blasphemy laws have been the subject of reform efforts to limit their misuse. Each effort, however, was met with threats, even murder, directed at those who attempted it (International A. , Pakistan: Time to take human rights seriously, 1997). Alternatively, authorities who tried were made to adopt fake changes to maintain legislators' public perception that they are concerned about human rights violations. However, the Penal Code of Pakistan already has provisions that "criminalize creating or providing false evidence." Section 211 of Pakistan's Penal Code specifically states,

“A person who purposefully stimulates a falsified criminal case or falsely charges another individual for an infraction without a legal basis faces a 2-year prison sentence, a fine, or either. If the conviction for the wrongfully charged crime is death, life imprisonment, or 7 years or more in prison, he could also be put in jail for 7 years and fined. This is a huge disincentive to the filing of civil suits.” (OECD, 2007)

After reports coming out of Pakistan regarding strengthening the laws to protect religious minorities, still the country fails to implement a bill that falls by the lines of human rights, religious rights of minorities, and safeguarding them. Result in Pakistan facing huge mob violence and violent

extremism demanding to kill the accused, an increase in several blasphemy accusations by Muslims towards Christians, and a weak security net by police and law enforcement agencies to safeguard the accused. This resulted in a large number of apostasy and fear in the minds of Christian minorities resulting in using Muslim names and hiding their religious identities.

The following Articles of the ICCPR are particularly violated by Pakistan: Articles 2 and 26: the right to equality and non-discrimination, respectively. Articles 6 and 9 prohibit arbitrary imprisonment, Article 14 guarantees an impartial trial, Article 19 guarantees the liberty of thought and speech, and Article 18 guarantees the autonomy of religion or faith. (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1976)

Political, Constitutional, and Institutional Discrimination against minorities

Various policies, constitutional changes, and pieces of legislation have been implemented in Pakistan that promote discrimination against religious minorities. This discrimination, which assigns religious minorities a lower status at the institutional level, has a significant influence on the everyday lives of members of religious minorities and limits their involvement in Pakistani politics. Even though Pakistan's Constitution provides equality before the law for all people, religious minorities' involvement in Pakistan's political arena is restricted. (International M. R., n.d) Religious minorities are not completely engaged in the political process, job opportunities net, and security system and as a result, they are withdrawn and do not feel part of the system as a directly proportional reaction they don't feel the authorities are to be trusted. Based on the interview with Yousaf Zakria, who is DSP Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) while narrating about the intra-community-based relations among Muslims and Christians after the incidents of blasphemy and attacks on Churches in Yuhanabad, he said,

“I was performing my duty at Chung when I got a call from the CCPO office. I was directed to reach Youhanabad. Being from the same Christian community I facilitated the Police to enter in church and take the lead in collecting evidence, collecting dead bodies, samples, etc. At that time emotions were high, and the crowd was furious. I negotiated with them and pushed them back and made way for Police to do their job.”

While talking about the inclusion of Christian minorities in the political and institutional net, Yousaf Zakria said,

“They can only live a better life when they are provided with basic human facilities and jobs. Those who were martyred in attacks based on blasphemous accusations or suicide attacks were poor. Their families are living hand to mouth. Government should help them permanently so that their life standard could be improved.”

Not only Christian minorities, but Ahmadis are also not able to exercise their right and freedom to profess, profess and promote their faith. The decision by the Lahore High Court in the CrI. Misc. No.27057/B/2021 case of Zaheer Ahmed Vs the State etc. argued that a WhatsApp group was created to promote teachings of the Qadiani faith. (Zaheer Ahmed Vs The State etc., 2021) It was under the name and style of “Sindh Salammat” for the propagation of the Qadiani community’s faith in contravention of law and dissemination of literature that was strident to the teachings of Islam, including the translation of the Holy Quran proscribed by the Government. The alleged people were arrested and a FIR was lodged against them under sections 295-A, 298-C of the Pakistan Penal Code, 1860 (“PPC”). This case shows a clear contradiction between the constitution and Pakistan Penal Code. A proper constitutional policy guideline and framework is needed of the hour to clear the ambiguities between article 20 of the constitution, sections 153-A, 295-A, and 298-C of the Pakistan Penal Code. Articles 41(2) and 91(3) of the Constitution expressly prohibit non-Muslims from occupying the country's two most powerful government offices, namely the President and Prime Minister.

Social Pressure, Mob Violence, and Violent Extremism against Christians

Section 295-C, which makes it necessary to execute anybody found guilty of defaming the Prophet Muhammad, has heightened tensions. Many times, throngs have attacked Christian villages but when they were unsuccessful in killing the claimed blasphemer, they set fire to the cities. In other cases, like those involving Salmaan Taseer and Clement Shahbaz Bhatti, mob violence has involved "shooting those accused of blasphemy." Religious sermons in mosques often catalyze mob violence by justifying the violence of their listeners. Some law enforcement personnel decline to visit the scene and instead encourage the victims to leave. The police allege they lack the

support and resources of the state to prevent violent assaults, according to a 2016 Amnesty International study on violent religious minority extremism. Every person has an inherent and inalienable right to life, which the State should protect and promote by the requirements of international law (Article 6 of the ICCPR). The Pakistani government's inability to stop the violence has given vigilantism more credibility.

The religious clergy incites enmity in the Muslim public to protect and shield Section 295-C. Mumtaz Qadri, for instance, said she was motivated to act after hearing a lecture by cleric Mufti Muhammad Hanif Qureshi, who advocated for vigilante justice by declaring that anyone who sought to change Pakistan's profanity (blasphemy) laws—including Salman Taseer—was "Wajibul Qatal," meaning "subject to death". In 2016, it was reported that a preacher in Okara asked his congregation to elevate their hands if any of them do not have affection towards the Prophet. There were a lot of public outcries over this. Mishearing the question, a 15-year-old youngster put up his hand. He was threatened with death by the priest who had just accused him of blasphemy. The indictment came from a religious priest who assumed that the boy was a blasphemer, and as punishment, he severed his hand. This was one of the few times when a preacher was arrested on terrorist charges.

This is in light of the 2015 suicide bombing in Yuhanabad, a mostly Christian neighborhood, as worshipers were gathering for Sunday services. At the Yuhanabad police station, SHO Shahzada Saleem was doing his job. While talking about coping with psycho-emotional and response to violent extremism acts towards Christians, he said,

"I was the first one who reached the site of the blast. The most challenging thing at that time was controlling the mob, letting the Police take the charge and look for dead bodies. Families of the victims started protesting, and it was very difficult to enter in Church. However, we negotiated with the families and Church administration and comforted them by showing our full support to the victims. I kept visiting the families and helped them in the process of getting aid to normalize by providing security."

According to Rev. Reuben Qamar, Moderator of the Lahore Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church of Pakistan and Priest in Service of the Presbyterian Church at F. C. College in Lahore, Pakistan, Christians' reversion to negative coping mechanisms in the face of blasphemy accusations, apostasy, and suicide attacks is deeply troubling. According to her,

“Being a priest and having the responsibility of ministering to the people in grief, I visited the families of the injured and bereaved after the different events of terrorist attacks. There was a history and series of terrorist attacks throughout Pakistan in the past twenty years. I could visit the victims of a few of them like the burning of Christian colonies in Gojra in 2009, the burning of Joseph Colony in 2013, suicide Attacks on a Church in Peshawar in 2013, Youhanabad in 2015, and later in Gulshan Iqbal Park on an Easter evening in 2016. I made frequent visits to the funeral of the Martyrs to strengthen their faith in a time of disappointment. I comforted them with counseling and teaching from the Bible about their response to this kind of persecution.”

Apostasy and Blasphemy in Islam

Apostasy (riddan) is an offense in the prevalent ridding of traditional Islamic law, or Shari'a, in which the punishment is fixed and no variation is permitted. The majority of other infractions are punishable by flexible (ta'zir) penalties, or, in the instance of homicide or violence, by retribution (Qisas) after the offender has been found guilty. (Lippman, 1989) Apostasy is a deadly crime and is especially severe under Shari'a law. The renegade is condemned to eternal torment in the Qur'an, yet no worldly penalty is imposed. The death punishment appears to have emerged later in the legislation. The apostate was put to death because of the Prophet's Sunna Traditions, which were formed and institutionalized later as part of an attempt to Islamize the early Islamic kingdom. To put it another way, (Jordan, 2003) The punishment for apostasy is death, and the method of execution is usually beheading, but atonement and annihilation were also used. Some jurists argue that a renouncer should be allowed to step back towards Islam. Many institutions necessitate that apostates be willing to return to the faith.

The harshness of the punishment for blasphemy, on the other hand, is up to the discretion of the court since it is a ta'zir offense. When stated by a Muslim, blasphemy may be an indication of apostasy and warrant the hadd penalty, but when spoken by a non-Muslim, it is separate from the hadd crime of apostasy. (Ganai, 1991) But other Islamist jurists argue that the mandatory (hadd) penalty for apostates is the same as the discretionary

(ta'zir) penalty for blasphemers. Both are seen as dangerous to the Muslim community at large.

Apostasy and Blasphemy in Pakistan

Although there is no law specifically prohibiting apostasy in Pakistan, those who publicly express their disagreement with Islamic teachings and practices are often punished for blasphemy instead. A decision from the Lahore High Court said that "if one affronts any of God's prophets, he ceases to be a Muslim, i.e., he is an apostate." From the start, the ulama have pushed on reinstating the death forfeit for apostasy. The statute prohibiting blasphemy appeared to have gratified their desires. A prominent Pakistani jurist named S.A. Rahman saw the ulama's plans unfolding in 1968 and wrote a lengthy article explaining why he believed the death punishment for apostasy was unjust. to Islamic principles (Vries, 2020). When asked about the possibility of large conversions of Muslims to Christians in the absence of the previous norm, M.S.H. Masumi, director of the Islamic Research Institute, expressed alarm. While voicing jingoistic humiliation that there are more Christian adherents in Pakistan than in the majority of the Islamic world. Masumi penned,

"If the Ummah's [the Muslim community's] clear majority on the penalty for apostasy had been accompanied in Pakistan, the convenient transition of Muslims in the Punjab and Sind to Christian faith for small materialistic benefits would have ceased many years ago." (Sookhdeo, 1999)

According to the law of leaving Islam or obscenity, the suppression mechanism is self-enforcing. Whoever resists Sharia's imposition has admitted to apostasy. When Benazir Bhutto was in opposition in Pakistan and criticized the Sharia Court for toughening the sentence for blasphemy, the ruling government's religious affairs minister called her a "kafir (infidel) who is susceptible to the death penalty." (Forte, 1994)

A person who kills an apostate does no crime and is not responsible to the community of the one murdered in blood or money. As a result, the implementation of the prohibition of apostasy in Islam ends up depending on self-help as a cure, undoing one of the most beneficial legal benefits Muhammad bestowed on the Arab tribes. The majority of blasphemy persecution in Pakistan has been focused on the Ahmadis and Pakistan's largest minority, Christians. Furthermore, the blasphemy legislation contradicts the customary, if limited, safeguards that Islamic law is intended

to offer to dhimmis, or people of other faiths who live in protected status under a Muslim state (Ganai, 1991). A simple complaint (a FIR, or first investigation report) under the Pakistani criminal process leads to an arrest without a warrant and indefinite imprisonment, because bail is sometimes difficult to get or not granted at all. Blasphemy is technically a non-bailable crime. A Muslim judge presided over the trial (Forte, 1994). The legislation against blasphemy and apostasy is in clear contravention of international human rights treaties guaranteeing religious freedoms, yet it is popular due to its value in political and personal vendettas. It can be trusted even at the state level.

Persecution of Christian minorities in Pakistan

When the discussion is about the oppression of Christian minorities in Pakistan, it is generally the poor Christians that are targeted, not the Christian elite. As a result, poverty and helplessness play a major influence and role (Ahmed, 1967). Christians are frequently discriminated against and have difficulty finding respectable employment; they often end up accepting occupations inferior to their academic and social status, such as sweeper or janitor roles, which hinders their social growth and development in life, society, and community. Furthermore, they are frequently denied the right to rent a home merely because they are Christians. (Shaffer, 2020) Ryan Shaffer further breakdown the theology and illustrate it as,

“Because of the constitutional and legal positions, Christians are de facto unequal under the law, with Christian deposition being banned from some tribunals at the prudence of the judges, and their evidence is given less weightage than Muslim testimony. The punishments for guilty Christians are harsher than those for Muslims for a comparable offense.”

Christians' uneven legal standing conveys a powerful message of inferiority to Pakistani society, thereby establishing legalized apartheid. According to Open Door USA figures from 2018, about 3.9 million Christians live in Pakistan out of a total population of 196 million. Even though Pakistani Christians constitute just 1.5 percent of the overall population, more than one-fourth (187) of the 702 blasphemy cases reported between 1990 and 2014 were against Christians (Ganai, 1991). Furthermore, Muslims, Christians, and other religious minorities accused of blasphemy have been executed extrajudicially; nevertheless, Christians have been

disproportionately afflicted. 51 individuals convicted of blasphemy were executed extra-judicially between 1990 and 2012, with 20 of them being Christians. (Yousaf, 2016) Extrajudicial executions began in 1991, the year in which the Federal Sharia Court declared the death penalty mandatory for blasphemy under Clause 295-C. This seemed to have provided instigators with legitimate as well as theologians' rationales for taking matters into their own hands and deciding the fate of their own will (Gul, 2021).

Females (including minors and teens)	Accused	Killed
Christian	57	10
Ahmadi	5	3
Sunni	38	3
Buddhist	0	1
Hindu	2	0
Unknown	5	0
Total	107	17
Males (including minors and teens and one unborn)		
Sunni	600	39
Christian	168	19
Ahmadi	169	10
Hindu	18	1
Ismaili	0	1
Shia Muslim	309	2
Buddhist	1	0
Pervezi	0	0
Sikh	1	0
Unknown	42	0
Total	1279	72

Source: Center for Research and Security Studies (Nafees, 2021)

Figure 1: Distribution of alleged blasphemers by religion

The content of Pakistan's blasphemy laws, as well as the religious intolerance they foster, have an especially heinous impact on religious minorities. Accusations of blasphemy are regularly leveled against religious minorities. For example, a Christian man, Sawan Masih, was condemned to death at the end of March 2014 after being found guilty of religious defamation a year earlier. Though blasphemy laws are widespread around the globe, those in Pakistan have been extensively condemned for their

content and application, as well as the excessive violence that has followed their enforcement. These laws have been criticized in particular for their lack of clarity in terms of what establishes a breach, as well as harsh penalties, a low standard of proof, and a lack of mechanisms to hold individuals who bring false claims responsibly. Indicters have been allowed to apply their religious definitions and understandings while filing a complaint since there are no clear criteria for what constitutes blasphemous conduct. (Joelle Fiss, 2017)

As a result, blasphemy laws have been utilized to settle peculiar subjects, such as land disputes. The relatively low threshold of proof required to charge someone of blasphemy, the challenges involved in establishing or disproving these claims, and evidentiary rules in the nation that endure discriminating against religious minorities and women have all aided in the abuse of this law (Forte, 1994)s. As a result of these obstacles, many of individuals convicted of blasphemy stay imprisoned pending trial or appeal. Due to the utilization of blasphemy laws and apostasy against Christians to settle personal scores, the Christian community no longer holds any confidence in law enforcement agencies and doesn't trust them truly. While interviewing Iqbal Shah; DSP CTD (JIT Member of Youhanabad incident), he said,

“As this incident of Youhanabad happened, Christians went violent. There was no writ of Police in Yohanaabad. The situation was very bad. CCPO himself visited and monitored the situation. At that time rehabilitation was tough but we managed and met the Priest of the Church and had negotiations with them. Initially, Christian misbehaved with Police and did not let us enter but we managed Police with plain dresses to hide our identity. We visited the bereaved families and offered them our full support and remained there till their rehabilitation process. I controlled the charged Christian and Muslim mob and dispersed them. Later on, we held meetings with the representatives of both communities and tried to settle the issue”

The first Pakistani Christian woman; Asia Bibi, was condemned to death under Section 295-C in 2010. This happened after Muslim women with whom she worked gathering berries in rural Punjab accused her of religious defamation. Despite persistent demands from activists, foreign organizations, and other groups to commute the sentence, Lahore's high court upheld the conviction in October 2014. (Gregory, 2012) Though many

people accused of blasphemy are exonerated at trial, this does not guarantee their safety: Rimsha Masih, a 14-year-old Christian girl with cognitive difficulties who was unjustly accused of burning holy texts in 2012, is an example of this. Even though the prosecution against her was dismissed once proof was obtained that a cleric had falsified evidence, Rimsha's family faced threats and sought refuge in Canada in 2013. (Rimsha Masih, Pakistani girl accused of blasphemy, finds refuge in Canada, 2013)

This isolation and risk of life make Christian minorities not engage in regular daily activities and don't expand their social circle. They don't feel comfortable engaging with members outside of their community member. While interviewing Dr. Ayra Inderyas; head of the Catholic Church in Lahore, she said,

“Families experiencing pain need to get themselves engaged in productive activities like increasing their social circle, daily walking, exercise, and healthy eating. They need to meet people to talk about their grief and sorrow. Sometimes, changing the situation is also a good remedy and psychiatric help can also be sought to prevent the outburst of depression. But the mindset towards Christians makes them fall more into the net of depression.”

Furthermore, religious groups allegedly put pressure on police officers to file blasphemy charges in many instances. Because of the risks involved, it has frequently been exceedingly difficult to find a lawyer prepared to represent persons convicted of blasphemy. The murder of lawyer Rashid Rehman (Andrew Buncombe, 2014) in May 2014 as a result of his defense of a university professor convicted of blasphemy is likely to make obtaining a fair trial much more difficult when blasphemy laws are involved (Gul, 2021).

Failure to put legal safeguards and protection in place

While Pakistan's discriminatory legislation and constitutional demands create troubling legal gaps for the country's religious minority, it is crucial to emphasize that, in theory, some safeguards preserve religious freedom within the present legal system (Andrew Buncombe, 2014). But having been added to the scholarship by Buncombe in 2014, the gap between theory and implementation still seems remotely distant. For example, Article 20 of the Constitution grants all citizens the "freedom to profess, practice, and

promote his faith, but Section 153-A of the PPC makes all types of hate speech a criminal offense.

Then there's the issue of how to put it all together. Despite the legal protection afforded to minorities in Pakistan, respondents observed that these rules are frequently misunderstood or simply ignored, and hence have not helped to alleviate the awful conditions religious minorities suffer. Rather, the current scenario may be regarded as a continuation of a "strategy of division between Muslims and non-Muslims," as well as the promotion of an exclusionary type of nationalism defined by religion. (Daraz, 2016)

The issue is exacerbated by the conduct of some law enforcement officials, such as police officers, who have allegedly engaged in activities that jeopardize the safety of religious minorities. For example, it has been established that when the victim of a crime is a member of a religious minority, the police frequently fail to submit a First Information Report or fully investigate the case (Gul, 2021). In December 2011, a young Hindu lawyer, Mohan Lal Menghwar, was kidnapped allegedly by Muslim religious organizations while on his way to the Sindh High Court in Hyderabad. The event was treated lightly by the police, and no officials in Hyderabad would record the complaint due to a lack of clarification about whether the crime occurred in their area or not (Andrew Buncombe, 2014). Registering a police report from a minority against a person belonging to the Muslim community is still an uphill task. Even after the evolution and transformation of Pakistan from a conservative mindset to an adaption of secularism.

Another case of blasphemy arose in April 2021 in Faisalabad, when a Muslim co-worker at a government hospital in Faisalabad accused Christian nurses of desecrating Islam by removing and desecrating a wall hanging with Quran verses. The claims rapidly circulated across the office, prompting a rally by dozens of employees demanding legal action against their Christian coworkers. Later, an outraged Muslim mob mostly made up of Islamist activists from a neighboring locality, joined the throng. A furious demonstrator allegedly struck one of the nurses, Mariyum Lal, with a knife, injuring her and leaving her to bleed. Lal allegedly told authorities that she had been instructed to clean up the Muslim female head nurse's cabinet. Lal said she removed the adhesive wall-hanging while on the job and handed it over to the head nurse before ending the night shift with the other alleged Christian colleague and going home. The next morning, the chief nurse accused Lal of desecrating the sacred inscription in front of other Muslim employees. Police came to the scene and took both Christian nurses with

them to calm down the mob but Lal was seriously injured and manhandled badly before police intervened and no first investigation report was initiated on the mob, people who injured Lal with a knife. (Gul, 2021)

Alongside that, social protection and economic safety are other aspects that affected Christians are in dire need of. While taking an interview with Kalsoom Bibi whose husband was a rickshaw driver and was killed in a suicide attack on Church while attending Sunday prayer. She said,

“I struggled financially and tried to keep up the shortfall by doing daily tasks for various individuals. I only made enough to get by. My children are too young to work, so I must do odd jobs for other people to make ends meet,”

she further added,

“We haven’t recovered. Instead, things are far worse than before. The community still lives in a constant state of fear. Most of all, we need financial help. My son’s rickshaw has recently been stolen and our financial situation has worsened. Most of what I earn goes into paying for my kids’ school fees. We want economic assistance from the government, alongside a safe social environment to live without any fire of death.”

Recommendations

After in-depth analysis and synthesis, a detailed policy proposal has been drafted keeping given the ground realities, history of the incidents, and violent extremism towards Christian minorities. The recommendations drafted from the study have been listed down:

Profound scrutiny of blasphemy laws, particularly Section 295-C, reveals that they are exploited to oppress religious minorities. Furthermore, these laws also disrupt Pakistan's internationally permissible accountabilities to deference and defend liberty of mind, ethics and integrity of all religion(s) and/or principle(s), liberty of views and discourse; parity before the law; the prevention of acumen and discernment and right to a just and impartial trial.

Minority-discriminatory legislation should be changed: Reform discriminatory legislation, such as the PPC's sections 298-B and 298-C that prevent religious organizations from freely practicing their beliefs in the short term. Clauses 295-B and 295-C on blasphemy should be changed to

prevent misuse by raising proof requirements, removing the death penalty immediately, instituting jail sentences for individuals who make false charges, compensating victims, and clarifying ambiguous wording.

Meet the obligations imposed by international treaties to which Pakistan is a signatory: Align all laws with the numerous conventions that protect the religious freedom that Pakistan has signed. Ensure that any laws that protect religious freedom are properly implemented.

Safeguard human rights defenders: Take steps to guarantee that human rights defenders, particularly women, who actively advocate and protect religious minorities' rights and human rights, in general, are adequately protected to carry out their work.

Ensure that victims of extremist violence receive justice: Investigate targeted assaults on Christian minorities and activists in an unbiased and impartial manner, working transparently with Christian minority communities and civil society organizations to ensure that protocols and best practices are followed.

Ensure that places of religious worship have appropriate access and security: Assist the necessary governmental entities in securing religious places for all communities so that they can freely and safely practice their beliefs. Furthermore, discriminatory rules governing the building and maintenance of religious sites should be repealed.

Ensure that law enforcement authorities do not ignore or engage in minorities' persecution: To guarantee that officers respond effectively to cases of prejudice, conduct police monitoring, and reform. Officers should also get sensitivity training on minority and gender problems.

Conclusion

The law against blasphemy promotes the xenophobic fear of alien religions typical of primitive societies, diminishes the credibility of competing Islamic traditions, muzzles political dissidents, and threatens the whole basis of democratic government. From Muhammad Iqbal to Muhammad Ali Jinnah, no important intellectual person in Pakistan's pre-major history would have been safe under the severe understanding of what blasphemy means. The blasphemy laws have developed a mind of their own.

Even the government and the opposition are hesitant to demand its repeal because of the widespread religious terror it has unleashed due to the ease

of accusation and detention, the typical lack of bail, and the tradition of legitimizing self-help. The Pakistani government may benefit from state-level, direct diplomatic pressure from outside as it confronts the mullahs. However, this can only happen if the government officially recognizes all of the many Islamic traditions as legitimate branches of Islam.

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