



General Assembly

Distr.: General
29 February 2024

English only

Human Rights Council

Fifty-fifth session

26 February–5 April 2024

Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Victorious Youths Movement, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[30 January 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Religious Minorities in Pakistan: Challenges and Concerns

The constitutional framework in Pakistan designates Islam as the official state religion, mandating that all legal provisions align with Islamic principles. It explicitly recognizes the right of citizens to profess, practice, and propagate their religion within the boundaries of law, public order, and morality. Nevertheless, the penal code imposes severe penalties for blasphemy, ranging from ten years imprisonment to the death penalty, with specific targeting of the Qadiani and Lahori groups identifying as Ahmadis.

Restrictions extend to Ahmadis assuming Muslim identities, creating a complex legal landscape. The penal code also penalizes incitement of religious hatred, punishable by a maximum of seven years in prison. Despite these legal provisions, instances of law enforcement failing to protect religious minority members have been reported, with cases involving physical abuse and, at times, lethal force.

Blasphemy laws, enforced by the courts, have led to death sentences, particularly affecting Ahmadi Muslims. In 2022, four individuals, two Christians and two Muslims, received death sentences for blasphemy. Civil society organizations have raised concerns about police negligence in protecting those accused of blasphemy, prompting government responses that, at times, resulted in actions against NGOs under the pretext of "anti-government propaganda."

The UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion has criticized Pakistan's blasphemy laws, citing human rights and religious freedom violations. Discrimination against the Ahmadiyya community extends beyond legal matters, affecting their access to essential rights such as national identification cards and representation on the National Commission for Minorities.

Violence against religious minorities persists, with government officials engaging in anti-Ahmadi rhetoric. Sectarian attacks and killings, including those against Shias, have increased, with societal violence linked to blasphemy allegations, coerced conversions, and harassment of religious minority communities.

The United States of America Department of State has engaged with Pakistani counterparts, emphasizing the need for progress on religious freedom issues. The United States of America government has designated Pakistan as a "Country of Particular Concern" for severe violations of religious freedom.

The Shia community, particularly the Shia Hazara community in Quetta, continues to face targeted attacks. Enforced disappearances of Shia community members have become a disturbing trend, with allegations lacking substantiated evidence. Discrimination against Shias, such as demands for the removal of individuals based on their Shia identity, adds to their challenges.

The Christian community faces persistent violence, discrimination, and blasphemy allegations. Incidents of violence, including attacks on individuals and churches, along with false accusations leading to legal consequences, highlight ongoing challenges. The Hindu and Sikh communities also encounter violence, forced conversions, and attacks on places of worship. Christians residing in Pakistan have endured persistent discrimination and persecution spanning several decades. The nation's blasphemy laws and an anti-Christian worldview prevailing in the country have subjected a significant portion of Pakistani Christians to extreme poverty, along with the constant threat of imprisonment, violence, and even death merely due to their faith in Jesus. Furthermore, specific Christian women and girls are vulnerable to forced marriages with limited legal safeguards.

Comprising less than 2% of the 229 million population, Christians in Pakistan are often relegated to second-class status, facing disdain and bias. The 'Christian sweeper community,' responsible for sanitation work, including hazardous sewer maintenance, bears the brunt of this discrimination. Reports reveal the grim reality of individuals like Jamshed Eric, who, while describing the challenges of their work, highlights the unsanitary conditions they confront, such as swarms of cockroaches in sewers.

The discrimination extends beyond employment, as many Christians grapple with dire poverty, resorting to borrowing money from corrupt loan brokers. Exploitative practices make it nearly impossible for them to repay their debts, leading to employment in brick kilns under appalling working conditions. This dire situation contributes to a broader culture of systemic discrimination against Pakistan's Christian minority, exacerbated by the misuse of blasphemy laws to target and punish individuals based on their beliefs.

The blasphemy laws, initially introduced during the presidency of Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq and subsequently made more stringent in 2023, criminalize any criticism of the Prophet Muhammad with severe penalties, including imprisonment and death. While official executions for blasphemy charges have not been carried out, those accused often endure prolonged imprisonment or face violent attacks through mob justice.

The tragic case of Safoora Bibi, a school teacher murdered after false accusations of insulting the Prophet Muhammad, underscores the dangers faced by innocent individuals. The prevalence of false accusers exploiting the blasphemy laws for personal motives further compounds the pervasive abuse faced by Pakistan's Christians.

The global community must exert pressure on the Pakistani government to address and halt these systemic abuses against Christians. Ending this long-standing acceptance of persecution and discrimination is crucial to restoring the fundamental liberties of Pakistani Christians, who have endured prolonged suffering. International Christian Concern seeks support through prayer for the well-being of these courageous individuals standing firm in their faith in the face of daily mistreatment in Pakistan.

The Ahmadiyya community experiences targeted violence and discrimination, even on digital platforms. Incidents of attacks on Ahmadiyya places of worship underscore the need for increased protection. The government's failure to address intolerance and curb violence against minority groups raises concerns about its commitment to safeguarding minority rights. Since July 2020, there have been at least five targeted killings of Ahmadiyya community members in Pakistan, with authorities downplaying and, at times, encouraging violence against them. Amnesty International's South Asia head, Omar Waraich, highlights the severity of threats faced by Ahmadis and criticizes authorities for indifference. The recent killing of Dr Tahir Mahmood in Punjab underscores this issue. Other incidents in Peshawar involve Mahmood Khan's fatal shooting, Dr Naeemuddin Khattak's murder after a religious dispute, Meraj Ahmed's killing in Peshawar, and Tahir Ahmad Naseem's courtroom murder amid blasphemy accusations.

Pakistani governments have consistently failed to protect Ahmadiyya's rights with discriminatory penal codes and arbitrary arrests for blasphemy. The government's inaction enables religious persecution, contradicting international human rights obligations. The UN Human Rights Council and various special rapporteurs have expressed concern. Pakistan's promotion of discriminatory practices, such as passport statements against Ahmadis, further violates international legal commitments. Human Rights Watch calls for immediate measures to address discrimination, urging the repeal of blasphemy laws and anti-Ahmadiyya provisions.

The Hindu community faces challenges, including forced conversions and attacks on places of worship. The lack of reliable statistics on forced conversions impedes effective addressing of this issue.

In one of the cases, the brother of the pir claimed with pride that "we've converted countless Hindus to Islam," though he couldn't provide an exact figure. A local human rights activist revealed, "In Umerkot's Kunri and Samaro talukas alone, a minimum of 25 conversions involving young Hindu girls and women occurs each month." The activists emphasized the deprivation in this area, where the majority of people belong to scheduled castes and lack significant influence, making families reluctant to report forced conversions to the police or raise objections. Consequently, only a negligible number of alleged forced conversion cases find their way into the media.

A breakdown of the Hindu population in Sindh provides an insightful perspective on the challenges faced by the community in Pakistan. According to Krishan Sharma, a human rights activist based in Mithi, northern and central Sindh are inhabited by affluent Hindu business families belonging to the upper caste. These families reside in prime locations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the detailed examination of religious minorities in Pakistan reveals a complex landscape marked by pervasive challenges, including discrimination, violence, and forced conversions. The constitutional framework, while recognizing the right to religious freedom, coexists with stringent blasphemy laws that disproportionately affect minority communities. The Ahmadiyya, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, and Shia communities face targeted violence, legal discrimination, and societal biases.

The international community's engagement and advocacy for religious freedom in Pakistan are deemed crucial. The systemic abuses against Christians, Ahmadis, Hindus, Sikhs, and Shias require comprehensive and sustained efforts to uphold fundamental liberties, protect minority rights, and address discriminatory practices. Urgent measures, including the repeal of blasphemy laws and anti-minority provisions, are essential to ensure a more inclusive and tolerant society in Pakistan. The global community's continued attention and pressure on the Pakistani government are vital for fostering a climate of religious harmony and respect for diversity.

-
1. International Christian Concern. (2023, November 25). Pakistan's Long History of Discrimination Against Christians. Retrieved from <https://www.persecution.org/2023/11/25/pakistans-long-history-of-discrimination-against-christians/>
 2. International Christian Concern. (2023, November 25). Pakistan's Long History of Discrimination Against Christians. Retrieved from <https://www.persecution.org/2023/11/25/pakistans-long-history-of-discrimination-against-christians/>
 3. Religion News Service. (2023, June 9). Christians in Pakistan Are Struggling to Survive Barbaric Persecution. Retrieved from
 7. The News International. (2015, October 24). 1,000 Girls Forcibly Converted to Islam in Pakistan Every Year. Retrieved from <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/51401-1000-girls-forcibly-converted-to-islam-in-pakistan-every-year>
 8. The Express Tribune. (2017, December 26). Sikh Community in Hangu Forced to Convert. Retrieved from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1585150/1-sikh-community-hangu-forced-convert/>
 9. Sikh24. (2020, July 28). Takeover of Bhai Taru Singh Ji Gurdwara in Pakistan: SGPC and PSGPC Presidents Condemn Incident. Retrieved from https://www.sikh24.com/2020/07/28/take-over-of-bhai-taru-singh-ji-gurdwara-in-pakistan-sgpc-and-psgpc-presidents-condemn-incident/#.Xy_IFIgzbiU