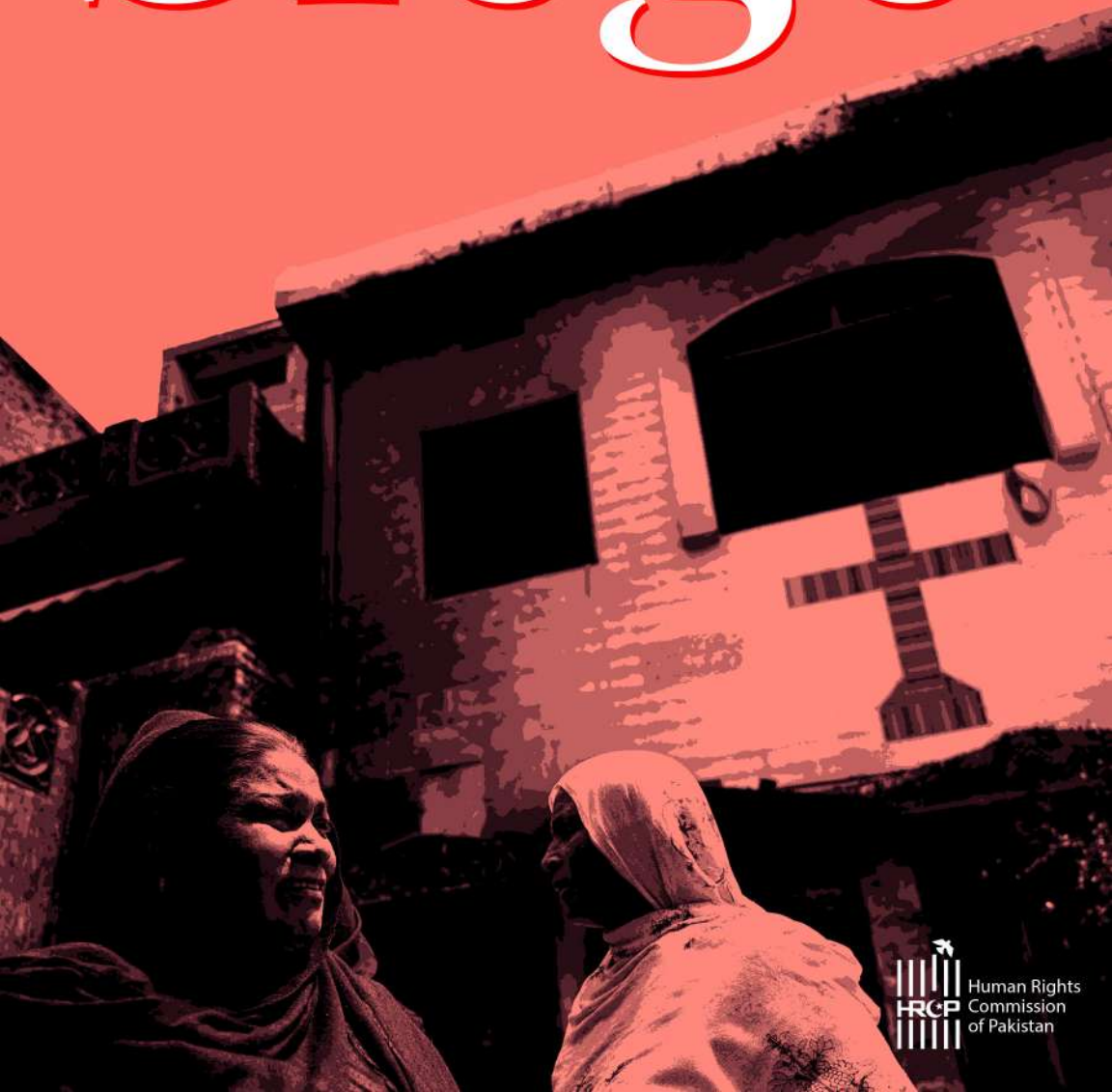


Freedom of Religion or Belief in 2023/24

•under Siege



Under Siege

Freedom of Religion or Belief in 2023/24



Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

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1 Introduction

Freedom of religion or belief (FORB) remains under constant threat in Pakistan, with religiously motivated violence and discrimination increasing yearly. Marginalized minorities bear the brunt of these violations as protections diminish further. This report, covering FORB-related rights violations between July 2023 and June 2024, highlights pervasive incidents of religious bigotry. Orthodox and regressive interpretations of the majority religion continue to be weaponized to target individuals, destroy lives and suppress freedoms. State authorities, lacking political will and often using religious unrest for political manipulation, have failed to address this crisis. Indeed, Article 20 of the Constitution, which guarantees citizens' right to profess, practice and propagate their religion, appears to have been hijacked by the far-right.

The period has witnessed mob-led attacks on worship sites, the desecration of graves, lynchings, sectarian violence, forced conversions of Hindu and Christian girls, the displacement of persons accused of blasphemy, and the widespread registration of blasphemy cases, often fuelled by disinformation on social media. Far-right groups have continued to exploit platforms to incite violence, as seen in the mob-led attack on Christian homes and churches in Jaranwala, Punjab. Impunity for perpetrators of hate and violence persists, with the state and judiciary perceived as beholden to external influences if and when offering relief to persons accused of blasphemy.

The number of blasphemy cases has continued to spike due to complaints filed against allegedly blasphemous expression on social media, messenger apps and text messages. Despite investigations by the Special Branch in Punjab, no concrete and effective measures have been taken against networks suspected of entrapping individuals in false blasphemy cases, reflecting the entrenched environment of impunity and zealotry. While bail has often been granted to those accused of blasphemy in these and similar cases, a return to normal life remains impossible, even in cases of acquittal. Another troubling trend has been the shoddy

police investigation and weak prosecution of Muslim mob participants in cases of lynchings and attacks.

Human rights defenders have continued to raise the issue of prolonged trials and lack of accountability for the perpetrators of mob violence, many of whom are either affiliated with or support far-right religious political parties. Social media platforms and WhatsApp are used widely to incite violence against individuals accused of blasphemy, spread hate speech against religious minorities, and circulate fake news about alleged blasphemy incidents, resulting in dangerous consequences for the victims. Meanwhile, sectarian violence, predominantly targeting Shia communities, has intensified in Pakistan, with ongoing unrest and insecurity in Kurram (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), tensions in Gilgit-Baltistan, and violence in parts of Karachi.

Hindu and Christian women and girls, particularly in northern Sindh, remain highly vulnerable to grooming and abduction. As identified earlier by a Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) fact-finding mission, discrimination against religious minorities in Sindh—home to the majority of Pakistan’s Hindus—continues to rise. Religious minorities face unemployment, arbitrary legal cases and assaults, compelling them to remain silent out of fear of retaliation. The 2023 census has also been a source of dissatisfaction for religious minorities, who believe their numbers were underreported, reducing their demographic representation.

Civil society groups working on FORB campaigns faced significant obstacles, including restricted access to funding, increased surveillance, and scrutiny. Even churches cannot receive foreign funding without approval from the Economic Affairs Division. Nonprofit organizations and human rights defenders advocating for civil liberties, democracy and human rights have been significantly impacted by these restrictive measures.

On the positive side, there were occasional instances of the judiciary and law enforcement providing relief to suspects and victims in religious cases and attacks, although these remained rare. The appointment of two minority legislators to the post of deputy speaker in Sindh and provincial minister in Punjab was a welcome development.

2 Methodology

HRCP has documented violations of the right to FORB and related abuses for several decades. This is the organization's fourth annual brief on the subject, covering the period between July 2023 and June 2024. The report is based on in-person and remote interviews with human rights defenders and victims of rights violations, analyses of HRCP investigations, official documents, legal records, media reports, open-source data, social media posts on X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Tiktok, and visual evidence.

Videos of discriminatory or violent attacks against religious minorities or their properties, whether received via WhatsApp from credible sources or first seen on social media, were verified by speaking with the affected groups, human rights defenders and eyewitnesses, by consulting police documents where available and by determining time stamps where possible.

Sources have been anonymized where necessary to ensure their safety. HRCP also contacted the provincial authorities for data on blasphemy cases and prisoners but found it difficult to obtain a complete response. As before, HRCP notes with some concern the limited access to government documents and official statistics.

To highlight the scale of religion-related offences, HRCP also reviewed data on blasphemy cases and forced conversions compiled by independent organizations and minority communities. The findings have been assessed against Pakistan's Constitution, domestic laws and international human rights obligations.

3 Violent restrictions on FORB

3.1 The powers that be and FORB

It would not be inaccurate to say that the Pakistani state has continued to appease the sensibilities of people professing the majority religion.

The integrity of the February 2024 general elections, held amid a long period of political turmoil, was compromised, as documented by HRCP and other independent observers.¹ On the FORB front, the Ahmadiyya community was yet again discriminated against via a separate electoral roll, despite the elections being conducted across a joint electorate.² More minority candidates were, however, allotted tickets to contest the election. Nonetheless, Scheduled Caste Hindus raised concerns over not having enough resources to participate in the electoral process, alleging that upper-caste Hindus acquire more representation at the cost of the former.³ The far-right Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) fielded a high number of candidates across the provinces, received 2.89 million votes across the country and partially divided the majority parties' vote bank.⁴

After the election, a few encouraging developments have been the appointment of Anthony Naveed, a Christian member of the Sindh Assembly, as the deputy speaker.⁵ In Punjab, Ramesh Singh Arora was appointed the minister for human rights and minorities' affairs—the first Sikh minister for the province.⁶ The new government in Punjab also announced 'development schemes' for the Christian community.⁷

An intense smear campaign against Justice Qazi Faez Isa, the then chief justice of the Supreme Court, was unleashed in early 2024 for granting bail to an Ahmadi man accused of offences against

religion.⁸ The Jamiat-e-Ulema Islam (Fazal) spearheaded the campaign with the support of the Jamat-e-Islami and other parties. On the ground, the TLP also used this as an opportunity to physically threaten the former chief justice, challenge judicial authority and incite violence against the Ahmadiyya community. Despite making threats, no TLP leader was arrested. In February 2024, a rioting mob also breached the security of the 'red zone' in Islamabad, where the Supreme Court is located. During the smear campaign, threats to the lives of the chief justice and his family were reported. HRCP raised concern over sections of the media and political leaders who had jumped on this dangerous bandwagon.⁹

3.2 The misuse of the blasphemy laws

Blasphemy cases

The filing of blasphemy cases continued throughout the reporting period. Data compiled by the Centre for Social Justice shows that from January to mid-August 2024,¹⁰ at least 225 individuals were accused of blasphemy, whereas in 2023, there were 329 such cases.¹¹ From July to September 2023, Sargodha and parts of central Punjab remained tense with anti-Christian campaigns and violence.¹² An HRCP mission to the city revealed that a series of blasphemy-related first information reports (FIRs) were filed against Christian youth.¹³ As discussed in Section 3.4, the tension eventually manifested much more violently in Sargodha.

In March 2024, a 22-year-old Christian youth was awarded a death sentence and a 17-year-old was given a life sentence for sharing 'blasphemous' content via WhatsApp.¹⁴ In September 2023, four men were awarded death sentences by a Rawalpindi court on similar charges.¹⁵ In August 2023, eight Ahmadi men were arrested in Lahore on charges of preaching their faith.¹⁶ While some accused persons did obtain relief from the courts, acquittal or bail does not guarantee security against further violence and discrimination.¹⁷

Meanwhile, Aneeqa Attiq, a young woman accused of sending blasphemous messages by WhatsApp, and Junaid Hafeez, an academic convicted of blasphemy on digital platform Facebook, have remained on death row since 2022 and 2019, respectively.¹⁸ However, in a rare case of getting justice from the court, Nautan Lal,

a Ghotki-based Hindu teacher imprisoned for life on blasphemy charges, was released in March 2024.¹⁹ In November 2023, the Supreme Court granted bail to a ‘mentally unwell’ man accused of blasphemy.²⁰

Blasphemy prisoners in numbers ²¹

Punjab remains the province with the highest number of blasphemy-accused prisoners in its jails. As of October 2024, there were 566 under-trial prisoners—543 men, 22 women and one juvenile—accused of blasphemy offences under Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) Sections 295 A–C in prisons across the province.²² The number of convicted prisoners was reported to be 47. While the number of unconfirmed condemned prisoners was 23 (of which three were women), there were six condemned prisoners, all men.

Box: The ‘blasphemy business’ project

HRCP has already identified the presence and operation of an informal commission named the Legal Commission on Blasphemy Pakistan (LCBP), comprising pro-blasphemy law advocates and members of various far-right collectives who manage a concerted campaign of filing cases and inciting hate against alleged blasphemers by social media and electronic communication.²³ In early 2024, an internal investigation report by the Special Branch of the Punjab Police titled *The Blasphemy Business—A suspicious gang is trapping youth in blasphemy cases and extorting money from them after approaching FIA in Rawalpindi and Islamabad* was shared with the FIA authorities of the two districts in January 2024. It revealed that the said perpetrators were part of a racket that was tricking individuals into fabricated cases of blasphemy via blackmail.²⁴ A staggering revelation of this investigation is that the said ‘gang’ of perpetrators was the complainant in 90 percent of the blasphemy cases ‘reported to and registered’ by the FIA. It is worth noting that over the years, Rao Abdur Raheem, chief of the LCBP, has publicly claimed to have a working relationship with the FIA’s Cyber Crime Wing and that his collective boasts of having prepared hundreds of cases of tech-facilitated blasphemy.²⁵

As per the Special Branch report, there were at least 300 victims of the ‘blasphemy business’ network, and most of them were young Sunni Muslim men. The group’s modus operandi is to share doctored pornographic images and videos in WhatsApp groups targeting youth. If individuals make any comments or engage with these materials, they may be blackmailed with false allegations of blasphemy. In case

they fail to pay the perpetrators, the case is forwarded to the FIA. The investigation also revealed the complicity of officers from the Cyber Crime Wing, stating that blasphemy cases were 'prepared by FIA through connivance of some elements of the agency as well.'²⁶ No disciplinary action against them has been taken, despite the documentary evidence.

Members of religious minorities have long sounded the alarm on the possible involvement of individuals within the FIA who either work with organized extremist collectives in alleged cases of blasphemy or have been criminally negligent in investigating cases of online blasphemy fairly. However, these concerns have been ignored and unaddressed for years. The consequence of neglecting the grievances of religious minorities is that perpetrators were emboldened, and a criminal racket grouped to eventually carry out an operation that has ruined the lives of hundreds of young people.

In Sindh, 87 prisoners, of which 37 were under-trial prisoners, were in provincial jails on charges of blasphemy as of 31 July 2024.²⁷ Of the 87 prisoners, 40 were imprisoned on charges under PPC Sections 295 A-C and 47 for blasphemy in digital spaces under Sections 9-11 of the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act 2016. A troubling trend is that as many as 43 out of 47 persons accused of blasphemy in digital spaces were additionally charged under 295 C, which carries the death penalty. As of 25 July 2024, the number of people incarcerated on charges of blasphemy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan were 64 and 2, respectively.²⁸

The number of online or digital blasphemy cases registered and investigated by the Cyber Crime Wing of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) has not been reported in its annual report for 2023.²⁹ However, investigations by the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR), HRCP and independent media indicate that the Cyber Crime Wing has filed cases and enabled arrests of suspects of online blasphemy seemingly without following due process.

Timely action by police in countering religious violence

Law enforcement personnel have often failed to pre-empt hate crimes in the name of religion, counter violence and rescue persons accused of blasphemy from lynch mobs. However, there are rare instances of courage. In February 2024, an assistant superintendent of police rescued a young woman accused of blasphemy by a violent mob in a Lahore market.³⁰ The mob had accused the woman of blasphemy for wearing an outfit with Arabic words printed on it. The police officer pacified the mob and managed to extricate the victim from its clutches, although she was criticized for making the victim apologize to the accusers. The police officer's courage was celebrated widely.³¹ Despite this incident showing how timely action can save lives and maintain law and order, law enforcement in Punjab and elsewhere in the country have often failed to rescue blasphemy suspects from vigilante violence.

3.3 The Jaranwala mob-led attack

We were given a warning by the attackers to vacate our homes, with a threat that if we did not, we would be physically hurt. Our priests were told the same. The mob were shouting, 'We will not forgive these Christians. We will finish their lineage.' One of my sons hid in a garbage dump to save his life when he returned home from work. My only concern at the time of the mob's impending arrival was to save my daughters-in-law and their dignity. One of them had just given birth. When we returned, I saw that our furniture was damaged, our jewellery and other belongings were stolen. Even our pet pigeons had been burnt alive. Now, we are borrowing utensils from others to eat and drink. After my husband fell terminally ill, I washed dishes and cleaned people's homes to provide for my sons. Our entire life's savings were destroyed.

-Shamim Zulfiqar

A survivor of the mob attack in Jaranwala³²

In what would be one of the starkest assaults on Christian Pakistanis in years, a mob of Muslim men vandalized, set on fire, rampaged, desecrated and looted houses in Christian settlements, churches and other properties in Jaranwala and its suburban villages on 16 August 2023, following false accusations of blasphemy against two Christian brothers, Rocky Masih and Raja Salim Masih, who were later acquitted by a Faisalabad anti-terrorism court in 2024.³³ At least 1,200 Muslim men were part of the mob, which partially or fully damaged at least 80 Christian households, 24 churches and dozens of smaller chapels.³⁴ Loud speakers at the Mehtab Mosque, near the Christian settlements in Jaranwala, were used to incite rioting.

An HRCP fact-finding mission found that the allegation was initiated when a Muslim woman found 'blasphemous material affixed to a gas meter' outside the house of the Masih brothers. The police report registered at 7 am of 16 August 2023 states that the Masih brothers had 'distorted' Islamic scripture and used it as a calendar.³⁵ Most of the residents of these Christian settlements are domestic help, daily wage workers, and permanent or contractual cleaning staff in government departments. They had also been residents of Jaranwala and its suburban villages for many decades.

The string of mob attacks went on for a day and was live streamed in parts and posted on social media in real time. Social media sites, including TikTok, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube, were also used to incite hatred and violence and spread disinformation about the alleged blasphemy. The attacks on homes and churches continued into the night, and people were vulnerable on the roads and in the fields without protection despite police and Rangers being called in.³⁶ A few survivors saw houses damaged, and property and churches torched in front of their eyes. Some who were trying to flee even had their bags and belongings snatched from them by the mob.

HRCP and other civil society collectives carried out a mission to Jaranwala to determine the facts and scale of the attack. Their findings established that TLP leaders and workers had approached the police to register an FIR against the Masih brothers and that

erupted, the police had delayed their response. An investigation carried out by the NCHR found that the police strength was limited and that the incitement by clerics was organized and deliberate. Survivors and eyewitnesses verified this claim in interviews. Both the HRCP and NCHR missions found that communal tensions had, in recent years, risen in those areas of Jaranwala where Muslims and Christians had previously coexisted.

Box: Use of social media to incite violence

At the core of the Jaranwala incident was the malicious use of social media and a disinformation campaign. Here is what real-time digital monitoring of social media showed on 16 and 17 August 2023 as churches and Christian settlements in Jaranwala were targeted.³⁷

A video of a man inciting the crowd to gather at Mehtab Mosque at Cinema Chowk to 'tackle the Christian blasphemers' was one of the first shared on social media, especially Facebook. It was widely shared through WhatsApp. Elsewhere on Facebook, videos of the mob, accompanied by captions detailing the alleged blasphemy by Christian brothers and even their father, were uploaded as early as 10.36 AM. Eyewitnesses on the ground confirmed witnessing and recording mob violence around the same time.

Cable television channels and local digital journalists shared these videos. Between 11 AM and 12 noon, a video report by a private television channel, recorded earlier in the day, was broadcast. This report included opinions from neighbours and mob participants who were allowed to incite violence. During the broadcast, the journalist offered his own opinion, stating that the alleged blasphemy by the Christian brothers had in fact taken place. The video was also shared on Facebook, where it garnered over a million views, thousands of reposts, 30,000 interactions, and more than 2,000 comments.

Within hours, accounts based in Jaranwala and Faisalabad had begun condemning the alleged blasphemy on Facebook by pledging to protect the sanctity of Islamic scripture.³⁸ Social media and WhatsApp were abuzz with videos of clerics and leaders affiliated with the TLP inciting crowds of people against Shaukat Masih Sindhu, the Christian assistant Commissioner, who had been serving in Jaranwala since 2022. The following day, on 17 August 2023, this content remained on various platforms, with more videos uploaded to YouTube and TikTok. Several hashtags based on allegations were among the top trends, with posts exceeding 46,000 in the initial days.

On 16 August 2023, by 8.39 PM, a digital outlet with millions of followers uploaded a video discussion targeting Sindhu, who then had to be evacuated from the area due to death threats. While this video discussion superficially condemned the violence, it still endorsed the allegations against the Christian brothers. Multiple posts and comments inciting people to 'play their part' in ensuring that the suspects received their comeuppance and endorsing religiously motivated violence were posted to Facebook and TikTok.

In its briefing, the NCHR reported that at least a million social media posts had been published across platforms within 24 hours of the Jaranwala attack, most of which were subsequently removed by the platforms. A social media review for this report shows that multiple posts with hashtags frequently used for incitement, videos from the day and disinformation about the incident remain online.

Police response

The HRCF mission reported that the police delayed responding to the violence on 16 August 2023. Videos from earlier on the day of the attacks show police officials appeasing the mob by assuring them of a raid and arrest of the suspects.

The role of the police in controlling mob violence, specifically on issues as sensitive as blasphemy allegations in Pakistan, goes beyond upholding law and order. Instead, it extends to appeasement of the mob. While confirming the arrest of the two Christian suspects, Dr Usman Anwar, the inspector general of police in Punjab, in his video statement³⁹ said that as Muslims, the police would not tolerate any 'insult' to Islam. This statement was issued to appease the far-right. During his statement, he spoke about the protection of religious minorities and vowed to prosecute the perpetrators. Yet he also pledged to hold the alleged blasphemers to account by referring to them as *mujrim* (criminals). As the provincial police chief, he declared the suspects criminals without due process, further amplifying the disinformation that is at the core of all blasphemy accusations. In a separate statement on 28 August 2023, Dr Anwar also accused Indian intelligence of orchestrating the Jaranwala attacks to divert attention away from the treatment of minorities in India.⁴⁰ This appears to be an attempt by the Punjab law enforcement to divert attention away from the targeting of religious minorities in Pakistan instead.

Status of the Jaranwala investigation

In February 2024, the Supreme Court of Pakistan rejected the Punjab government's report on the Jaranwala attacks and ordered the police to resubmit the report. However, the updated report had not been submitted to the court as of the end of HRCP's reporting period.

As of end-June 2024, two men had been imprisoned for the Jaranwala attacks. One is a Christian man, Pervez Kodu, accused of contributing to the fabricated allegation of blasphemy against the Christian brothers; the second is a Muslim man. Up to 300 individuals arrested for mob violence have been released, highlighting the lack of accountability. Two of the lawyers engaged to represent the affected Christian families have confirmed that the faulty police investigation is one of the reasons the accused were granted bail and then released.⁴¹ The investigation officers have repeatedly failed to determine the role of mob participants. A man identified as Yasin,⁴² one of the main perpetrators of incitement against the two Christian brothers, was arrested but eventually granted bail by the Lahore High Court. Hundreds were nominated in the five FIRs registered by the police as complainants. According to caseworkers of NGOs campaigning for justice and accountability for the victims, the accused who were affiliated with the TLP and other religious parties and nominated in at least two FIRs, were not arrested. These included Mufti Muhammad Yunas Rizvi of the Ahle-Sunnat Wal Jamaat and a TLP leader named Asifullah Shah Bukhari, who, along with six other men, allegedly led a mob of over 500 (according to the FIR filed against them).⁴³

Blasphemy allegations and the issue of disinformation

A careful examination of various blasphemy allegations shows that these are invariably based on fabrications, malicious disinformation and fake news. Such allegations are disseminated through social media platforms, electronic and digital messaging apps and mosque loudspeakers. Cable platforms, online portals and citizen journalists tend to amplify the allegations simultaneously among social media users. This is especially true for accusations that lead to acts of extreme violence, including murder and lynching. Unfortunately, the disinformation and fake news that centres on blasphemy accusations are neither discussed nor considered a

criminal act by government authorities or the mainstream media. The Jaranwala attacks are a glaring example of the dangers and devastation caused by such disinformation campaigns.

3.4 Religiously motivated killings

During the period under review, one Christian senior citizen was lynched in Sargodha, following blasphemy allegations. Sargodha has long been a hotbed of anti-minority violence and hate crimes: in 2023, Christians of the city were repeatedly targeted with blasphemy cases. In June 2024, a Muslim tourist from Sialkot was lynched in Swat for the alleged desecration of the Quran.⁴⁴ Three Ahmadiyya men accused of religious offences were also killed in cities across Punjab. Even when perpetrators of targeted faith-based killings are arrested, people who preach and incite violence are not held accountable.

Box: Anatomy of a blasphemy lynching

On 25 May 2024, videos of the brutal beating of a Christian senior citizen in the city of Sargodha, Punjab, who was accused of having committed blasphemy by allegedly disrespecting the Quran, emerged on social media platforms, including Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, Instagram and YouTube. The man was identified as Lazar Nazeer Masih Gill, the owner of a small shoe factory, who had moved back to Pakistan six years ago from the UAE. His family also owned multiple properties in a mixed Christian and Muslim neighbourhood. An HRCF fact-finding mission found that the Masih family was targeted due to a personal dispute and an act of blasphemy had not occurred in the area.⁴⁵

The videos uploaded on social media showed multiple men beating a helpless grey-haired man with sticks as others looked on. Men had their turns in beating the unarmed man with stones, bricks and steel rods, and dozens were shown sloganeering for his death. It was later established that most of the perpetrators were neighbours of the Masih family. A new occurrence in this lynch mob was the presence of a group of women standing in the street and chanting, 'The blasphemer must be beheaded.'⁴⁶

Since the spike in targeted killings and blasphemy lynch mobs began across Pakistan, this is the first such case in which women are visibly part of the mob. As with earlier such incidents, children and teenage boys were also part of the mob. After severe beatings, Lazar Masih was

rescued by the Sargodha police. They had earlier moved his family from their home to a secure place. An ambulance meant to shift him was partially damaged by the mob and several policemen were injured.

Lazar Masih was initially taken to the government hospital in the city, but due to security concerns, he was shifted to the Combined Military Hospital in Sargodha and then to Rawalpindi. The injuries to his head were such that he could not be operated on; he succumbed to his injuries on 3 June 2024.

Interviews with his family and community members revealed that police action in dispersing the raging mob was inadequate, and Lazar Masih was beaten in the presence of the police. This was corroborated by videos uploaded to social media sites.

The HRCP mission found that the police had received the complaint of alleged blasphemy and failed to pre-empt any untoward incident.⁴⁷ After the first visit of the police to the Mujahid Colony, a loudspeaker at the mosque in Masih's neighbouring street was used to gather the mob, in addition to forwarded WhatsApp messages. Ayub Gondal, a resident of the area who had contested the provincial election on a TLP ticket, was campaigning for the construction of a mosque on the property next to Masih's residence. Gondal's family members were also involved in registering an FIR against Lazar Masih.

Ahmadiyya killings

'My elder daughter kept asking me, "Where is Papa? When will he return? Why is my Papa not back?" Then, she fell sick. Her fever would not stop. Until now, she has been unable to return to school.'

— Wife of a slain Ahmadi man ⁴⁸

Thirty-year-old Ambreen (not her real name) is the wife of an Ahmadi man killed in Saadullah Pur, Punjab. She and other Ahmadi residents of their village were used to social exclusion, but they did not know that violence would manifest in the murder of her husband. She says her husband's catering business was boycotted, and their Barelvi relatives continuously opposed them. Days before her husband's targeted killing in June 2024, clerics had gathered in a show of strength in the area. She says there was a general increase in public gatherings by the Barelvi groups in their locality in the guise of a 'mehfil'.

Ambreen has now relocated from Saadullah Pur due to the lack of security and financial protection at home but has developed health complications, including depression. Her two daughters, aged four-and-a-half years and two, are her responsibility now. Her older daughter has not been able to rejoin school due to the lingering trauma of her father's absence. 'I lied to her initially and said he had moved to another city, but then she asked why we visited the graveyard. And I cannot lie to my daughter anymore,' she told HRCF in an interview by telephone.

Ambreen's husband is one of the Ahmadi men killed in the reporting period. Another Ahmadi senior citizen was killed in a separate incident by a teenager on 8 June 2024 in Mandi Bahauddin.⁴⁹ In March 2024, an Ahmadi faith leader was killed by a young man in Hasilpur. According to an HRCF fact-finding mission, the police compelled his next of kin to lie and publicly state that the man's murder was not faith-based but an honour killing instead.⁵⁰

3.5 Ahmadiyya-specific targeting

The NCHR issued a report in April 2024 on the Ahmadiyya community's plight.⁵¹ It highlighted that the Ahmadiyya community's rights to life and property were at severe risk in Pakistan and emphasized the urgent need to prosecute those inciting hate and violence against them. It urged the government to institute an oversight mechanism for their protection. The NCHR also specifically addressed the hopelessness, insecurity and trauma inflicted on Ahmadiyya youth and children due to pervasive societal bigotry and institutionalized discrimination.

The smear campaign against former chief justice Qazi Faez Isa was also due to the bail he granted an Ahmadi man, Mubarak Sani, which put the Ahmadiyya community further at risk. Sani had been accused of distributing proscribed religious text that could ‘hurt religious sentiments’ in 2022. Charges against him included Sections 295 B and C of the PPC and Section 9 (1A) of the Punjab Holy Quran (Printing and Recording) (Amendment) Act 2021.⁵² The complainant in this case was Ahmad Muawiya, whom HRCP’s previous report for 2022/23 has identified as an active anti-Ahmadi hate campaigner.⁵³ Muawiya is also part of the ‘blasphemy business’ group investigated by the Special Branch in Punjab (see Section 3.2).

Eid-al-Azha and the Ahmadiyya community

As has been the case for the past years, the members of the Ahmadiyya community were subjected to discrimination on Eid-al-Azha in 2024. They were specifically barred from engaging in ritual sacrifice. A string of arbitrary arrests, detentions and raids were reported from cities across Punjab and Sindh under Section 3 of the Maintenance of Public Order (MPO) Ordinance 1960.⁵⁴ At least 36 Ahmadi men were detained for observing Eid-al-Azha rituals.

Some 12 FIRs pertaining to cases booking Ahmadi men under Section 298 C of the PPC (which prohibits them from ‘posing’ as Muslims) were examined for the purposes of this report.⁵⁵ The cases were filed in Bhikaiki-Sheikhupura, Khanpur, Toba Tek Singh, Rahim Yar Khan, Khushab, Gujranwala, Sargodha, and Dera Ghazi Khan in Punjab and Karachi in Sindh. The complainant in FIR 687/24 registered in Raza Abad, Gojra, district Toba Tek Singh, was a TLP office bearer named Mohsin Raza. This FIR, which accused an Ahmadi man of carrying out ritual animal sacrifice, was registered on 17 June 2024 within a few hours of the alleged offence. In Gujranwala, another FIR (591/24), registered on the complaint of a TLP office bearer named Naseer Ahmad, was filed on the same day. This FIR states that the complainant received news of the Ahmadi man’s Eid preparation via another local TLP member. These are just a few examples hinting at the speed and level of organization with which the anti-Ahmadiyya campaign unfolded in specific regions to prevent the community from celebrating Eid.

It is worth noting that the complainants in at least four FIRs against the Ahmadiyya community in Punjab were police officers. One such case was in Rahim Yar Khan, where the complainant of FIR 1032/24, registered on 18 June 2024, was ASI Nasrullah Abbasi of Thana Saddar Khanpur. Separately in Bhikaiki-Sheikhupura, SI Muhammad Yasin of Thana Police Lines was the complainant in FIR 1840/24 against an Ahmadi man's Eid ritual animal sacrifice. FIR 1872/24 was registered on 17 June 2024 on the complaint of ASI Maqsood Ahmad of Thana A-Division of Sheikhupura. SI Mahmood Ali of RPO Office Sheikhupura, Thana City A-Division, was the complainant in FIR 1871/24, also registered on 17 June 2024 against a member of the Ahmadiyya community.

The President of the Lahore High Court Bar Association also sent a letter to the provincial government demanding a prohibition on Ahmadiyya ritual sacrifice.⁵⁶

Arbitrary detention of an Ahmadiyya man on Eid

The arbitrary detention of an Ahmadi man in the Baghbanpura area of Gujranwala district is emblematic of the treatment meted out to the Ahmadiyya community during Eid. It also highlights the conduct of district administrations and law enforcement in bullying an already persecuted group. On the night of 16 June 2024, Muhammad Tahir, an Ahmadi homoeopathy professional, was arbitrarily rounded up from his home after a raid over the family's possession of a kid goat. In an interview for this report, his wife explained that on the day of her husband's detention, six to seven armed police personnel forcibly entered their home, violating the family's privacy as she observed purdah.

'I was sitting with my head bare when the policemen came. They spotted the goat and began taking photos of the animal. One person was constantly on a call with a senior official, informing him of the presence of the goat. He told me rudely that I was lying about the purpose of purchasing the goat,' she said. She explained that they had bought a lamb, which was not permissible as an Eid-al-Azha sacrifice. According to Tahir's family, the police officer intimidated them and hurt her elder daughter while forcibly opening the door. When her husband entered the house, he was slapped in front of his children.

Tahir was taken into custody allegedly without a search warrant or an FIR. At the time of the interview, Tahir's family and the Ahmadiyya community's focal person for Baghbanpura could not ascertain his whereabouts through any official channel. It was later established that the detention was carried out on the orders of the district administration. In a phone interview for this report, a general affairs officer stated that the orders for the detention of Ahmadi men suspected of preparing for ritual Eid sacrifice were issued under MPO laws at the request of the district police.

However, the detention order signed by the district commissioner of Gujranwala was dated 19 June, and the detention took place on 16 June. The law enforcement and district authorities placed the burden of maintaining peace and harmony in the area on the Ahmadi individual as the order stated that in case of non-detention, 'sectarian peace and harmony will be breached in the area.'

Recording anti-Ahmadiyya abuse on video

A video of policemen⁵⁷ confiscating ritual sacrifice meat from Kashmir Colony in Karachi emerged via WhatsApp on Eid, in which men identifying as TLP supporters are informally part of the police raid. The address of the victim's residence can be seen in the video and is repeated by the self-proclaimed TLP supporter as he compliments his party fellows' contribution in ensuring that an Ahmadi family was barred from celebrating Eid-al-Azha. Another video from Gujranwala shows a cow confiscated from an Ahmadi family on the night of Eid.

Before Eid, videos uploaded and shared by TLP supporters (based on a review for this report) showed explicit public incitement and threats to the police force in case the Ahmadiyya community was permitted to observe Eid-al-Azha. One such incident took place in Jhelum in May 2024, when Asim Ashfaq Rizvi, a local TLP leader, used a Palestine solidarity rally to threaten the execution of Ahmadi men performing ritual animal sacrifice. A video of the event shows police personnel present as Rizvi issued his threats.⁵⁸ According to the Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya press section, Rizvi also changed the rally's route, redirecting it outside an Ahmadiyya worship site to target the community.

Desecration of graveyards and worship sites

Hundreds of Ahmadiyya graves were desecrated across Pakistan in the reporting period. In 2023, eight graveyards were desecrated in Jhelum, Bhalir, Mirpur Khas, Sialkot, Kotli, and Multan. In 2024, seven incidents of desecration were reported in Sialkot, Kotli, Dera Ghazi Khan, Attock, and Bahawalpur. The police were directly engaged in four of these incidents. In district Sialkot, the police were recorded as breaking the tombstones in a graveyard on the orders of the district authorities in January 2024. The TLP's Asim Ashfaq Rizvi (see above) also campaigned for the demolition of minarets at an Ahmadiyya worship site in Jhelum in July 2023.⁵⁹

Hundreds and thousands of Ahmadiyya have been barred from praying in congregation due to discriminatory anti-Ahmadiyya laws. However, worship site vandalism appears to appease the hardliner clergy and creates a climate of fear among the community. According to data from the Ahmadiyya community, between 1 July 2023 and 30 June 2024, at least 42 attacks against Ahmadiyya places of worship took place in different cities, of which at least 24 were either carried out by law enforcement or supervised by them. Days after the Jaranwala church attacks, law enforcement and district authorities in Sambrial city, Sialkot, desecrated an Ahmadiyya worship site in August 2023. According to an Ahmadiyya spokesperson, a worship site vandalized in Lahore had been constructed in 1970. On 17 June, the day of Eid-al-Azha, dozens of armed men opened fire on the premises of the community's worship site in Kotli, AJK, before sunrise, harassing members of the community residing in the area and damaging the building.

3.6 Systemic violence and discrimination

Vulnerability of Pakistani Sikhs

The targeted killings of Sikhs in 2023 left a question mark on the lives and survival of the community, forcing many of them to flee Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and relocate to other provinces, and in some cases even leave Pakistan.⁶⁰ Sikh women and girls are also vulnerable to forced conversions, which has made the community fearful of encouraging its women's mobility and access to education. Moreover, the development of Nankana Sahib, despite its importance for the Sikh faith globally and funds available to the

Waqf Board, leaves much to be desired, as the funds are allegedly not allocated to the progress of residents and locals.⁶¹ Global Sikh bodies also sounded the alarm on the allocation of gurdwara land for undisclosed projects, asking the central Pakistani Sikh body to resist this reported government scheme.⁶²

Anti-Shia violence

The rise in sectarian violence directed against the Shia community is an issue that the authorities have failed to tackle. It also has the potential to spill over into several parts of the country. The dispute in Kurram, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which has been rearing its head at intervals for the past three years, began over land issues but has fuelled sectarian hate and violence. HRCP has called for arms control in the region.⁶³ Gilgit-Baltistan has also grappled with unrest over sectarian tension in the past year.⁶⁴ Sectarian strife in Gilgit-Baltistan resulted in the government's decision to disconnect internet services in September 2023.⁶⁵ Both Shia and Sunni sides also clashed over the demand for the registration of a blasphemy FIR against a Shia leader.⁶⁶ Eventually, a ceasefire agreement was signed between the two parties.

Anti-Hindu discrimination

In July 2023, a temple frequented by the Madrasi Hindu community was razed in Karachi's Soldier Bazaar.⁶⁷ The building was demolished reportedly with plans to build a commercial entity on the land. However, due to the subsequent pushback, the Sindh government eventually announced it would not build a commercial property on the temple site.⁶⁸

In Narowal, the Hindu community does not have access to a functional temple in the district, which has made it difficult to perform religious rites.⁶⁹ The community also alleges that the Evacuee Trust Property Board had rented Hindu temple properties to other entities. In Sanghar, the Hindu community's land for burial was encroached on, and Scheduled Caste Hindus who traditionally bury their deceased had to travel a distance to find burial sites.⁷⁰ In July 2023, dacoits launched a rocket at a Hindu worship site in Kashmore.⁷¹ After repeated dacoities targeting Hindus in Sindh, the then-caretaker government assured them of the protections guaranteed in the Constitution.⁷² However, the issue persists.⁷³

Forced conversions

Forced conversions and the pursuit of justice for victims remain a critical problem in Sindh.⁷⁴ An HRCP fact-finding mission had highlighted earlier ‘the growing trend of underage marriages... to stave off the likelihood of forced conversions’—a trend that appears to have continued into 2023/24.⁷⁵ Seminaries in the region actively involved in the conversion of Hindu and Christian women are still operating with impunity. The threat of forced conversions is so severe that some families have reportedly started sending young women and girls to local community-based vocational training centres, which has affected their educational attainment.

In 2024, Laiba Suhail, a Christian minor, was abducted with the intention of conversion by a Muslim man in Faisalabad.⁷⁶ The same year, a family court in Pattoki gave respite to a Christian woman who had been forced to marry her abductor as a minor. However, many families still await justice for young girls who have been abducted.

In April 2024, United Nations Special Procedures experts highlighted the issue of forced marriages and religious conversions of girls from religious minorities in Pakistan.⁷⁷ ‘Christian and Hindu girls remain particularly vulnerable to forced religious conversion, abduction, trafficking, child, early and forced marriage, domestic servitude and sexual violence’, they said. The experts urged Pakistan to protect its religious minorities from ‘such heinous human rights violations’ and uphold its international human rights obligations.

Internal displacement and migration

For many members of religious minorities, internal displacement and relocation from their homes, neighbourhoods, cities and even country appear to be one way of ensuring their security. Individuals from various Islamic denominations accused of blasphemy or those acquitted have been forced to flee Pakistan, go into hiding, or relocate within the country due to security concerns.

The trend of fleeing faith-based persecution and religiously motivated violence began over a decade ago with the rise of extremism and militancy. Despite the hardships of relocation and

asylum abroad, some minority members have made the difficult decision to leave their homes. In the period under review for this report, several Christians, Hindus and Ahmadiyya citizens had relocated within the country and some had migrated abroad. Many Pakistani victims of faith-based violence, hate crimes, institutional discrimination, and blasphemy accusations facing financial hardships, are stranded abroad with their families, hoping for a safe and dignified life.

Increasingly, Hindu families in Pakistan are also choosing to migrate, many to India, not only due to the increase in targeted crime and forced conversions of their female family members, but also for economic reasons. Hindus in Sindh feel insecure as their livelihoods remain at risk due to crimes including extortion and kidnapping for ransom.⁷⁸ Experts say it is difficult to count the number of families leaving Pakistan for India, as this is a 'silent migration.' From Jacobabad, Ghotki, and Kashmore, Pakistani Hindus have migrated to Madhya Pradesh, Nagpur and Raipur. Those with financial means from upper castes have also moved their assets and investments to India.

Even minority Pakistanis who are living as UNHCR refugees abroad or stranded for years in second countries while their applications are decided by their preferred country of asylum choose not to return due to the worsening political and security situation and the actively uncertain nature of the threat against them.⁷⁹

4 Recommendations

- Federal and provincial governments must prosecute individuals who incite hatred and violence, ensuring they do not enjoy impunity.
- Law enforcement agencies must investigate and punish hate speech and incitement to violence, pre-empt incidents of assault and mob violence in case of even verbal blasphemy accusations, and must curb the use of loudspeakers and mosques for disseminating hate speech.
- The relevant religious authorities must ensure that clergy or any other individual do not use mosque loudspeakers for incitement and must take responsibility when an incident of hate speech and/or incitement takes place via mosques.
- Authorities must address the concerns of Christian civil society and Jaranwala residents over the lack of action against the mob, TLP members and other far-right religious outfits, who incited violence and were at the forefront of the mob as per two FIRs. As a first step, provincial authorities must compile and publicly release a comprehensive report on the August 16, 2023, attacks, ensuring accountability without scapegoating any member of the Christian community.
- The judiciary, law enforcement, and prosecution must enforce relevant sections of the Pakistan Penal Code and other laws to penalize false accusations.
- Political parties and the security establishment must refrain from exploiting religion for political gain. Law enforcement, with the support of provincial authorities, must investigate and prosecute officials involved in fabricating blasphemy cases.
- Authorities must consider the Special Branch Punjab's investigation into the 'Blasphemy Business Gang', and prosecute individuals including lawyers and officials, for trapping people into blasphemy cases via doctored images, and for blackmailing suspects. As suggested by the Special Branch,

forensic must be performed on devices of the complainants of blasphemy accusations. Officers from the Federal Investigation Agency in Islamabad and Rawalpindi must also be held accountable for failing to investigate cases by the said gang. Those wrongfully accused must be released immediately, and their trials expedited to ensure fairness.

- Authorities must investigate the recurring pattern of filing template-based blasphemy FIRs, often targeting members of minority faiths. Those responsible for exploiting blasphemy laws must be held accountable and brought to justice to prevent further misuse of the blasphemy law.
- Law enforcement authorities must stop the decades-long practice of appeasing far-right groups that pressure them to target persecuted religious communities.
- The government must establish an independent statutory national commission for the rights of minorities, ensuring equal representation for all religious communities.
- Federal and provincial authorities must implement recommendations by the NCHR to protect Ahmadiis, Christians, Hindus, and other vulnerable groups and ensure justice for victims falsely accused of online and offline blasphemy.
- Judicial and government authorities must enforce the 2014 Supreme Court judgment and other Supreme Court precedents on religious freedoms.
- District authorities and law enforcement's arbitrary raids, arrests and intimidation of the Ahmadiyya must cease immediately.
- Law enforcement must stop complicity in the vandalism of Ahmadiyya worship sites and graves, especially in Punjab and Sindh. Authorities must immediately end this practice and ensure the community's properties are fully protected.
- The government, with input from experts and civil society, must establish mechanisms to combat online disinformation used to incite violence over blasphemy accusations.

- Authorities must stop placing the responsibility for maintaining social order and religious harmony on persecuted groups and instead hold complaining clergy accountable to promote interfaith harmony.
- Interfaith groups and peace committees formed during Eid and Muharram must ensure equal participation of religious minority leaders and avoid intimidating them.
- Media outlets, both mainstream and independent, must end self-censorship and provide consistent coverage of religious discrimination and persecution.

Endnotes

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³⁵ FIR 1258/23 (registered in Jaranwala by area police).

³⁶ Interviews conducted for this report with survivors of the Jaranwala attack, clergy and Muslim eyewitnesses.

³⁷ Since this monitoring was carried out in real time, many of the inflammatory posts viewed then have since been removed.

³⁸ See examples of Facebook posts from 16 and 17 August 2023:

https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=782981387165593&set=a.496515989145469&type=3&locale=en_GB&paipv=0&eav=AfY74nQgJF4yondoXsxuNtVVS8vHsyJkU4I0r8HFRRe2fKPJJ0YG4JuswLCUZwhMxrrIo&_rdr;

https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1463503701130573&set=a.252236012257354&type=3&locale=en_GB&paipv=0&eav=AfaTHNtMMcAxnNzAywjegyW2wsOYTxhjgeNJJFEEx_Xp7xvn-hEuYxqOukId8k99njqc&_rdr

³⁹ Video accessed here, but also shared on social media platforms of the Punjab police:

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=169994239384764>

⁴⁰ See the Punjab Police statement here: <https://punjabpolice.punjab.gov.pk/node/14252>

⁴¹ Interviews with two lawyers conducted for this report via WhatsApp.

⁴² The Punjab Police and mainstream media repeatedly claimed that Yasin was the main instigator and the video of his announcement from Mehtab Mosque was widely circulated on mainstream, digital and social media. See video in Urdu here:

https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=search&v=1065490314826166&external_log_id=c7d1233c-0242-4aea-b99e-c16ced523b66&q=%D8%AC%DA%91%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%81%20%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A2%D9%86

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<https://hrcf-web.org/hrcfweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2024-Allegations-of-blasphemy-and-mob-violence-in-Mujahid-Colony-Sargodha.pdf>

⁴⁶ Review of videos posted on social media on the day that Lazar Masih was lynched in Sargodha.

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