

Flashpoint Pakistan in Crisis: Religious Minorities under Pressure

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To approach Rabwah, home to Pakistan's minority Ahmadi sect, it is necessary to pass through Chiniot, an ancient town said to have been first populated by Alexander the Great of Macedonia, in 326 BC.

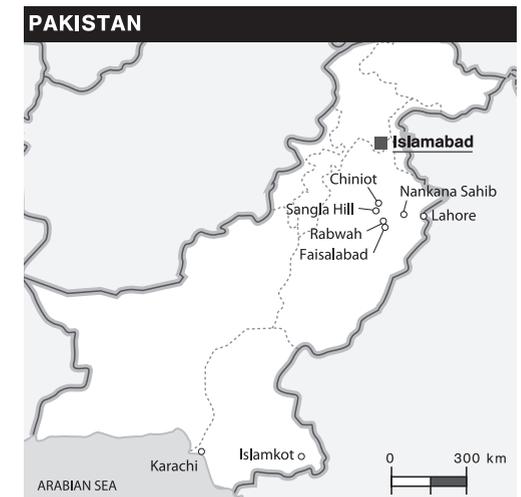
Today, Chiniot, which stands amidst the lush green countryside of the Punjab province, is known chiefly for its skilled furniture craftsmen. The town is a bustling, but run-down urban centre – the cascading monsoon rain failing to wash away the grime and squalor that hangs all around.

It is on the peeling, yellow-plastered walls of Chiniot that the first signs of the hatred directed against the Ahmadi community appear. The movement – named for its founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian (located in the Indian Punjab) – broke away from mainstream Islam in 1889. The slogans, etched out in the flowing Urdu script, call on Muslims to 'Kill Ahmadi non-believers'.

Rabwah, a town of some 50,000 people, houses the largest concentration of Ahmadis in Pakistan. Overall, there are an estimated 1.5 million Ahmadis in the country amongst a population of 55 million people. Rabwah was built on 1,000 acres of land purchased from the Pakistan government in 1948 by the Ahmaddiya Muslim community, to house Ahmadis who were forced to leave India amidst the tumultuous partition of the subcontinent in 1947, which resulted in the creation of the mainly Muslim state of Pakistan. Today the country is an Islamic Republic with Islam as its state religion.

While theological opposition to the Ahmadi school of thought, and its offshoot, the Lahore Ahmaddiya Movement, created in 1914, has existed for over a century, and centres on its founder's claims to be a messiah, it was in 1974 that the community's difficulties began in earnest. At the time, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, caving in to pressure from orthodox Islamist forces, declared the group 'constitutionally non-Muslim', effectively making them, as per law, a minority in Pakistan where over 95 per cent of the population is Muslim.

'It was absurd; a government deciding on the faith of people. The problems created by that decision have lingered on,' said Qamar Suleiman, the articulate media spokesperson for the Central Ahmaddiya Organization at Rabwah. The well-maintained office is surrounded by greenery – all planted after Ahmadis moved onto the previously barren stretch of land in 1948. Incongruously, amidst the oasis-like setting, it soon becomes



apparent every official building is heavily fortified – even the holy places and the parks – testifying to the fact that Rabwah remains a town under siege.

While the 1974 decision against Ahmadis was met by anger within the community, worse was to come. In 1984, military dictator General Zia ul-Haq, as part of policies aimed at 'Islamizing' the country, introduced a set of laws that, among other restrictions, barred Ahmadis from preaching their faith, calling their places of worship 'masjids' (the term used by mainstream Muslims) and from calling themselves Muslim. The situation was aggravated by the toughening of anti-blasphemy laws in 1986, with section 295-C introducing the death penalty for 'defiling' the name of the Prophet Muhammad. A term of life imprisonment for defiling the Qur'an, the book believed by Muslims to be of divine origin, was already in place.

Victimization of Ahmadis

Since then, hundreds have fallen victim to these laws. They are most often misused by accusing a person of defiling the Qur'an or uttering words against the Prophet Muhammad, often to settle a petty dispute over business, property or a personal matter. Orthodox clerics typically jump swiftly into the fray, with police, more often than not, immediately arresting the accused person. Non-Muslims remain most vulnerable to such accusations, though they have increasingly been used against Muslims as well.

Among the victims of the blasphemy laws is Mansoor Ahmed, 35, an Ahmadi who has recently come to live in Rabwah after being in prison for

two and a half years. In 2004, he was accused of blasphemy.

'I was caretaker of an Ahmadi masjid in the town of Hafizabad in the Punjab. While cleaning the area, I burnt some old magazines lying there. I was accused by a rival sect of setting the Holy Qur'an on fire,' said Mansoor.

What followed was sheer hell. Mansoor, facing a life term, was jailed. He says that he was beaten, abused and for many months held in small 'punishment cells', into which no light filtered and where prisoners were held in isolation.

'Jail officials said this was to protect me from other prisoners, who would beat me up, since I was accused of blasphemy,' said Mansoor.

Today, finally freed on bail, he is still recovering from his ordeal and trying to rebuild his life, as is his wife, Kausar Perveen, and their three children aged 13, 12 and 9 years.

'We suffered terribly when Mansoor was in jail. In Hafizabad neighbours taunted us, and teachers victimized my children,' said Kausar. She adds, 'My youngest daughter, Qamar Nisar, still wakes up screaming because of the nightmares she has.'

Mansoor however is among the more fortunate. Others have been beaten, maimed or killed because of their belief.

According to the Central Ahmaddiya Organization, in April 2007, in a village in Kasur district in the Punjab, an elderly Ahmadi, Chaudhry Habibullah Sial, 82, was found strangled, his arms and legs bound together. Ahmadi groups stated his home had been used regularly as a prayer centre by Ahmadis and alleged he had been killed by local extremists. The incident is not an isolated one. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) reported that in 2006, three Ahmadis were killed and at least four others escaped attempts on their lives.

Over the past two decades, according to records maintained by HRCP, an autonomous rights monitoring body, hundreds of Ahmadis have been murdered, assaulted or intimidated. Graveyards and holy places belonging to the community have been attacked and Ahmadis denied jobs, education or promotion on the basis of their faith.

Ahmadis face 'worst discrimination'

'The Ahmadis, among Pakistan's minority communities, face the worst discrimination,' said I.A. Rehman, director of the HRCP.

The situation for Ahmadis is aggravated by the official attitude to their problems. In April 2007, attempts by Ahmadis in Lahore to fence a piece of land they had bought to build a graveyard, were violently stopped by local orthodox clerics. Police claimed they could 'do nothing'. Similar incidents are reported each year.

Indeed, in 1999, Rabwah was re-named 'Chenabnagar' by the Punjab government, against the will of the community. Community leaders say that the neglect of the infrastructure in the town is due to 'official indifference' – and the fact that Ahmadis have no representation on local government councils.

Ahmadis have not voted in any election in Pakistan since 1985, when they were asked to enrol as non-Muslims under a system introduced by General Zia, in which people of various religious beliefs voted only for candidates sharing the same faith. In this system of 'separate electorates', a set number of seats in assemblies were to be filled only by non-Muslim voters, effectively ousting minorities from the political mainstream. Separate voting lists were created on the basis of belief. When the joint electorate, in which all adult citizens voted collectively, was restored in 2002 by the government of President Pervez Musharraf, Ahmadis were optimistic they would now be able to take part in polls again. However, under pressure from orthodox religious groups, the government capitulated – and within months went back on its decision to retain a single voting list for all eligible citizens. Instead, a 'non-Muslim' list was reintroduced for Ahmadis, while all other groups remained on a combined list. Today, an affidavit as to religious belief must be signed by all Muslim voters – a measure to filter out Ahmadis.

'Because we refuse to vote as non-Muslims, we are the only community in Pakistan that is disenfranchised,' said Captain (retired) Shamim Khalid, who runs the human rights desk for the Ahmaddiya Movement.

'We have no voice,' said Abdul Qadeer Qamar, 35, a resident of Rabwah. He too has faced prison and years of litigation for preaching his faith.

Those who do have a voice are the fanatically anti-Ahmadi groups, including the Khatm-e-Nabuwat (Finality of Prophethood) Movement headquartered in Chiniot. These organizations are permitted each year, by the district authorities, to hold a meeting in Rabwah – where the population

Right: A Hindu girl with her brother during a ceremony at the Krishna Mandir in Lahore.

Photo by Muhammad Ayub

consists almost exclusively of Ahmadis. In contrast, Ahmadis themselves are not allowed to organize gatherings, within the town or elsewhere.

'We are forced to listen to the hatred these clerics belch out. The cries to kill Ahmadis ring out across this town each year,' said Qamar.

He also pointed out that while 'Ordinary Pakistanis are not against Ahmadis and live peacefully with them in many towns and villages,' it is the fanatical groups who carry on, and try their best to expand, the campaign of hatred against them.

Growing intolerance towards minorities

While the Ahmadis face the harshest discrimination, under laws directed specifically against them, other minority communities in Pakistan have also been victims of increasing intolerance over recent decades. Historically speaking, Pakistan, which until 1947 included a Hindu and Sikh population of at least 15 per cent, underwent a kind of ethnic cleansing when the Indian subcontinent was divided at the end of British colonial rule. The sectarian tensions that broke out in the run-up to the creation of Pakistan, a separate country demanded by India's Muslims, saw a series of massacres. Most Hindus and Sikhs fled over the new border to India, while tens of thousands of Muslims moved in the opposite direction.

Yet, despite this wave of hatred, in many parts of Pakistan – which today comprises a Muslim population of over 95 percent, with Christians, Hindus and Ahmadis making up most of the rest – communities continued to live harmoniously together. This was particularly true in Sindh, which has significant Hindu populations, and in the Punjab, where there are scattered pockets of Christians.

'Islamization' policies

Much of this changed under the harsh, 'Islamization' policies introduced by Zia ul-Haq in the 1980s. The content of schoolroom curriculums was altered, reflecting the new, hard-line tone of government. Dr A.H. Nayyar and Ahmad Saleem, the authors of a much quoted 2003 report, titled *The Subtle Subversion: A Report on Curricula and Textbooks in Pakistan*, released by the Sustainable Policy Development Institute (SPDI) in Islamabad,



found that, among other issues, textbooks promoted 'insensitivity to religious diversity' and encouraged bigotry.

Madrassahs (seminary schools) began to spring up across the country. According to Arnaud de Borchgrave, director of the Transnational Threats Initiative at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, most of these are funded from Saudi Arabia and number at least 10,000. Other estimates suggest the seminaries, the growth of which has been encouraged by the sharp decline since the 1970s of Pakistan's public sector school system, could number twice or even three times as many. In 1947, the year Pakistan appeared on the map of the world, there were only a few hundred seminaries in the country.

Since the 1980s, hard-line factions within Islam, including the Salafis and the Deobandis, have also opened up many madrassahs. This has introduced a new dimension to religion in a part of the world where Islam, influenced over the centuries by its close contact with other religions in the Indian subcontinent, traditionally followed a tolerant path incorporating much from a shared past with other faiths. Today, the Salafi and Deobandi seminaries are believed to be the most proactive in preaching militancy.

'In the schools, children are taught that Muslims are good, and those of other faiths bad,' said Amarnath Motumal, a lawyer and President of the Hindu Panchayat (Gathering), Karachi division.

He believes the biggest problem Hindus suffer today is that of forced conversion. 'We have on



Left: Mansoor Ahmed and his family are Ahmadis. Mansoor was accused of blasphemy in 2004 (see pp. 21–2). Photo by Muhammad Ayub

average 70–80 cases each year of Hindu girls, aged under 18, being lured away, and coerced into converting to Islam,' he said.

One such girl was Deepa, 17, the daughter of Besham Das, allegedly taken away in December 2006 from the town of Islamkot in Tharparkar, Sindh. Das said his daughter had been 'kidnapped by her tutor, Ashraf Khaskheli, a Muslim'. Ayub Jan Sarhandi, who runs a seminary in the area and sheltered Deepa and Ashraf, was quoted by the Press at the time of the incident as saying that she 'married of her free will and accepted Islam'.

Hindu community leaders, such as Motumal, point out that 'when girls who are minors are taken away, authorities should intervene'. He also says that due to the 'pressure of extremists', the 2.5 million or so Hindus living in Pakistan are 'unable to play any prominent role'.

There are at least as many Christians in Pakistan as Hindus. Historically, while they have suffered acute social and economic discrimination, often relegated to the lowest-earning jobs in society, violent attacks have been relatively rare.

Impact of 9/11

This changed quite dramatically following the events of 11 September 2001. As the Muslim world found itself plunged into conflict with the West in the aftermath of the deadly terrorist attacks in New York, Christians in Pakistan were unexpectedly cast as villains and labelled as allies of leaders in powerful world capitals such as Washington or London. Through 2002, as the global conflict accelerated, attacks were staged on the consulates of Western governments, churches, Christian-run organizations and on foreign visitors. At least 36 Christians were killed. Suddenly, as a result of events quite beyond its control, the Christian community found itself in the sights of militants' guns.

Though this terrifying surge of hatred has partially receded, violent attacks on Christians still occur. The site of one such outbreak was the innocuous looking town of Sangla Hill, located around an hour's drive from Lahore, and named for the isolated hillock that looms over it.

Sangla Hill attacks on Christians

In November 2005, the town, with a population of around 10,000, hit world headlines after a mob set ablaze three churches, a missionary school and several Christian homes. The violence was triggered by the accusation that a Christian man, Yousaf Masih, had committed blasphemy. As a frenzied mob of around 2,000 Muslims rampaged through the streets, the town's 1,000 or so Christians cowered in terror within their homes. The Punjab government ordered an inquiry and the HRCP blamed police for failing to prevent the violence.

In the weeks that followed, peace was restored, blasphemy charges – apparently motivated by a gambling dispute – dropped and the damaged churches rebuilt. But the wounds remain. Perhaps they will never heal.

It is Sunday in Sangla Hill and small groups of Christians, dressed in their best *shalwar kameez* (tunic and pants worn throughout Pakistan) or pressed suits, walk to church in the warm, late September sunshine – some attend Roman Catholic services, others go to the large Presbyterian church. The children laugh and play, kicking a stray pebble along the dusty road, ignoring rebukes from their mothers, until, on reaching the church compound, they fall into a respectful silence and file quietly into the building.

But beneath the calm façade, there is fear. 'Pakistan is too dangerous for us Christians. When I grow up, I will shift to Australia and take my mother as well,' says Dilawar Masih, aged 10, one of the children in the church. He can recall vividly the terror of that day two years ago when frenzied men banged on the doors of Christian homes.

Misapplication of laws and forced conversions

Dilawar's talk of moving overseas is rooted in reality. Thousands of non-Muslims moved away in the 1980s, at the height of the Islamist zeal inspired by General Zia ul-Haq. Under the relatively more liberal regime of President Musharraf, there have been some concessions to minorities, including the restoration of the joint electorate and an administrative change introduced in the blasphemy law in 2004, intended to make it harder to press criminal charges.

But leaders of the Christian community, such as Joseph Francis, National Director of the Centre for Legal Aid, Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS), a

non-governmental organization (NGO) which works for the rights of minorities, maintain that things are no better.

'More Christians have been killed and more blasphemy cases registered against them under Musharraf than ever before,' Francis asserted. In July 2005, the Pakistani Catholic bishops' Justice and Peace Commission reported that, since 1998, some 650 people had been falsely accused and arrested under the blasphemy law. Francis also identified forced conversion as a major problem for Christians: 'At least 10 cases have been reported this year alone. Many others go unreported.'

Two of the most recent incidents took place in the giant, textile manufacturing centre of Faisalabad, the second largest city in the Punjab province. On 5 August 2007, an 11-year-old Christian girl, Zunaira, was kidnapped, allegedly by a Muslim man, Muhammad Adnan, who was helped by his sister. The child was reported to have been forcibly converted to Islam and made to marry her kidnapper.

In an interview with Asia News Network, a Bangkok-based online publication, her mother, Abida, alleged that police refused to help. Just 10 days later in the same city, another Christian girl, Shumaila Tabussam, 16, was allegedly lured away by a Muslim man identified as Mazher. Her father, Salamat Masih, who immediately reported the abduction to police, stated he believed his daughter had been kidnapped and forcibly converted.

Christians also face other risks. In May 2007, Walter Fazal Khan, 79, a wealthy car salesman in Lahore, the Punjab's capital city, was accused of blasphemy by an employee, Raja Riaz. Walter was jailed for over a week, but subsequently bailed by the sessions court, which found no evidence against him. Investigations suggested the charges had been brought in an attempt to seize valuable property.

Work and educational progress impeded

Christians also face entrenched discrimination that holds up their ability to access better jobs and better education. Francis traces this discrimination back to 1965, when Pakistan went to war with its neighbour, India. 'At the time, there were many Christians who were accused of being Indian agents, and that approach continued into the post-war days,' he said.

Such attitudes have been key factors in the fate of Pakistan's religious minorities. Apart from Ahmadis,

Christians and Hindus, these include small populations of Sikhs, Parsis (Zoroastrians), Buddhists and Baha'is – a breakaway faction from Islam with roots in Iran – each of which numbers around 20,000 to 30,000. In most cases, they have stayed out of the spotlight by consciously assuming a low profile. Despite this, there have been incidents of violence. In September 2004, the Gurudwara Janam Asthan in Nankana Sahib close to Lahore, one of the holiest Sikh temples in the region, was attacked by an angry mob and at least two Sikhs injured. The rioters were protesting a move to hand over a government-run college to the Sikh community to house pilgrims. A number of arrests were made and the unrest faded away.

Campaigners for minority rights

While growing intolerance and discriminatory laws have worked greatly to the disadvantage of Pakistan's religious minorities, there are also brave campaigners who have spoken up for them. Indeed, in their efforts, these activists often cite Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the man known as the founder of Pakistan and the country's first Governor General. Until his death in 1948, only a year after the birth of Pakistan, Jinnah, a man who held liberal, secular views, consistently called for all citizens to be treated equally, regardless of belief.

As the tide of obscurantism began to close in around Pakistan in the decades after the 1970s, other activists have taken up the same plea. They include the late Justice (ret'd) Dorab Patel, one of Pakistan's most respected jurists. A Zoroastrian by birth, Patel led the battle against intolerance during the Zia years – a period that marked Pakistan's descent into the abyss of religious extremism that has today emerged as among its most critical problems.

More recently, leading lawyer and chairperson of the HRCP, Asma Jahangir, also the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, has spearheaded the struggle. She has faced death threats and a constant barrage of criticism from orthodox elements for taking on cases of those accused under blasphemy laws or insisting that the state not favour a particular religious faith. Indeed, Asma Jahangir, with her reputation for bold dissent, was one of the first persons to be detained at her home when a state of emergency rule was declared in Pakistan on 3 November 2007 by President Musharraf, and many basic rights suspended.

State discrimination

Prominent members of non-Muslim communities remain immensely angry and dissatisfied with the structure of this state. 'The thing about the political system in Pakistan is that, as a non-Muslim, I cannot contest the poll for president. I am barred from doing so by law,' said Joseph Francis of CLAAS.

The situation in Pakistan has attracted consistent international concern. The US State Department, in its *International Religious Freedom Report* for 2007, released in September, noted that while the government took 'some steps' to improve its treatment of religious minorities over the past year, 'serious problems remained'.

The political uncertainty that has persisted in Pakistan since November 2007, with all the major political players caught up in the turmoil, of course makes it more unlikely that sufficient attention will be given to such concerns.

Other organizations have taken a tougher line. Also in September 2007, the UN's International Convention on Elimination of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) secretariat asked Pakistan to submit by 31 December reports on efforts to purge its society of racial discrimination, which have been pending since 1998. ICERD warned that a further failure to hand them in could lead to 'necessary' action – since, as an ICERD signatory, the country is bound to submit biannual reports.

But, for non-Muslims, who face day-to-day hostility from the society within which they live, this means little. 'Today, my son, aged 6, was told by a teacher he would burn in hell because we are Christian. I do not know how to comfort him,' said Bertha Jones, 34, a nurse. She scoffs at the talk of reform in Pakistan, saying bleakly, 'For us, the only reality is constant fear and constant pain. This is the reality I know, that my children know, and I very much fear that it will be all that the generations that come after us will know – if, at all, they are allowed to live in this country we call our home.' ■