

# The Ahmadis

The Ahmadiyya Muslim community, also known as Ahmadis, is a reformist movement within Islam that has at least 12 million adherents in more than 20 countries. It draws its name from its founder, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, a Punjabi religious teacher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who claimed to be the Mahdi, the promised Messiah who would come to establish universal peace.

Ahmad wanted to recover what he believed to be Islam's peaceful and tolerant origins. He also appealed for reason and critical thinking to be exercised when reading the Quran. In particular, he cautioned against irrational interpretations and the misapplication of Islamic law. Such pronouncements would evidently run into conflict with the established religious authority in many countries. Indeed, Ahmadiyya has been condemned as blasphemous and non-Muslim by many mainstream Muslims.

Six years after the death of Ahmad, the movement divided into two streams: the Lahore branch, which regards Ahmad as a reformer and not a prophet, and the Qadiani branch, which believes he was indeed a prophet from God. Today the Lahore Ahmadis are a small minority group within the Ahmadiyya community, meaning that the vast majority of Ahmadis would not consider the Prophet Muhammed to be the last prophet, a major point of contention in view of wider acceptance within the Muslim world.

Ahmadiyya is an international movement with large numbers in Pakistan, Indonesia, America, Britain, and Nigeria. There are also significant communities in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Tanzania, Niger, Cameroon, and Ghana.

## Teachings

Ahmad claimed to be God's appointed Prophet and Mahdi, appearing in the likeness of Jesus (Isa) in fulfilment of ancient prophecy. He declared that his was an Islamic movement, although his teachings differ from traditional Islamic doctrine on several key points. He

The Ahmadiyya also have a distinctive narrative concerning the death of Jesus. Within Islam there are varying interpretations of Jesus' crucifixion. The mainstream view is that he did not die on a cross but was lifted bodily to heaven and will physically return before the end of time. In contrast, Ahmadis believe that Jesus escaped crucifixion and then later died a natural death. Now in the modern era, Ahmad has come in the likeness of Jesus to restore Islam's true and essential nature, to end all wars and to establish God's reign of justice and peace.

Ahmadis promote an overtly non-violent understanding of *jihad*. They underscore the Quranic principle that there must be no compulsion in religion, strongly rejecting the use of violence and terrorism in any form and for any reason. For the Ahmadiyya community, violent jihadism is an affront to the peaceful nature of Islam.

The group also endorses a clear separation of state and religion. In fact, Ahmad taught his followers to protect the sanctity of both religion and government by becoming righteous souls as well as loyal

citizens.' Today, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community is a strong advocate for universal human rights and protections for all religions and other minority groups.

## Controversies

Ahmadis have faced stiff opposition in several predominantly Muslim countries, primarily for their reformist views on traditional Islam and the need for a more progressive interpretation of Islamic sources. They have been especially targeted in **Pakistan, Indonesia** and **Bangladesh**, where openly professing their religious identity could lead to threats to their personal security, and legal restrictions on their rights to basic freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and participation in public life.

In **Pakistan**, Ahmadiyya have been systematically repressed for decades. A 1974 amendment to the Pakistani Constitution declared that the Ahmadis cannot be considered Muslim. An ordinance passed in 1984 made it illegal for Ahmadis to 'pose' as Muslims, prohibiting them from using Islamic greetings in public places or calling their places of worship 'mosques.' To obtain a passport, Ahmadis must declare that their founder is a false prophet. The 1986 blasphemy law has likewise become a tool of repression of the Ahmadiyya community. Anyone convicted of defiling the name of Prophet Muhammed is subject to the death penalty. Life imprisonment can be imposed on anyone found guilty of insulting the Quran.

This legal framework, together with the strong influence of religious extremists within the political system, and a culture of intolerance towards religious diversity, creates a permissive environment for extremist attacks in Pakistan. While violence is generally perpetrated by non-state extremist groups, the police and judiciary are routinely accused of complicity in maintaining a system of discrimination and violence towards the Ahmadiyya community.

Ahmadis in **Indonesia** face similar legal and social hurdles, fuelled by ongoing resistance to Ahmadiyya's teachings from conservative Islamic groups. The repression of religious freedom for Ahmadis was institutionalised by the government's 2008 Joint Ministerial Decree, which explicitly bans Ahmadis from engaging in any activity that spreads or promulgates their teachings or doctrine. Violators are subject to imprisonment of up to five years. Regional and administrative strictures followed, further narrowing the scope of legal protections provided to Ahmadis in Indonesia.

In **Indonesia**, regional regulations and administrative decisions banning the activities of Ahmadiyah have not only increased in number since the introduction of the Joint Ministerial Decision 2008, but they have also grown in intensity and scope. Such regulations issued by regional authorities reflect the increasingly conservative positions of local governments on the issue of Ahmadiyah. In the absence of initiatives from the national government to protect the rights of Ahmadis, local governments are free to restrict religious freedom, leaving Ahmadis without the protection of the legal system.

Indonesian law forbids the Ahmadiyya from giving deviant interpretations of Islamic teachings and proselytizing their beliefs, but it is often more widely interpreted such that Ahmadis can observe their religion only in their private houses but cannot hold religious gatherings and appear in public

showing their beliefs.

Speeches held by mainstream Islamic religious leaders clearly denouncing Ahmadiyah and its teachings as deviant have fomented attacks against the group, frequent and well documented by NGOs. There are many cases in which Ahmadis victims of persecution were jailed, while the perpetrators were left unpunished.

Although the right to religious freedom in theory also applies to religious minorities, in Indonesia it is often used to justify the protection of the rights of the religious majority.

Ahmadis are also harshly persecuted in other countries such as **Bangladesh**, where the Ahmadiyya community is perceived as a conflicting identity with the majority Muslim population. Sporadic violence against them has taken place for some years; however, since 2004 anti-Ahmadiyya extremists have been publicly demanding that the government pass legislation to contain their activities and restrict their daily lives. For instance, doctors and healthcare providers have been pressured to not provide treatment to Ahmadis. Also, many Ahmadiyya families have lost their profession and livelihood due to their religious commitment.

The explanations for Ahmadiyya's persecution and discrimination are multifaceted although interrelated. Some are more related to 'religious unity,' others to 'political interests,' but the reasons converge and are used to gain legitimacy in political and religious discourse.

The Ahmadiyya community has been symbolically constructed by some mainstream Muslims to be not only heretical but also disloyal and traitorous, 'the enemy within' and a threat to the moral stability of the nation. The Ahmadis, even if a relatively small community, threaten the perceived unity of Islam and introduce values and teachings which distort the 'true' religion of Islam. The suppression of Ahmadiyya has therefore become for some Muslims justifiable, as it is done in defence of Islam itself.

In **Indonesia** the persecution of Ahmadis can be linked to the country's history of struggle for legitimacy by various political actors since 1998. The mass riots and subsequent regime change of 1998 opened the possibility for the democratisation of Indonesian society, including a strengthened role for Islam in the social and political affairs of the state. A number of radical Muslim movements have proliferated since this period and have grown in numbers and influence along with increased intolerance toward the Ahmadiyya community and even incidents of violence. The government response to such incidents has been tepid at best.

## **Ahmadis in Prison**

While the Ahmadis are mainly victims of social hostility, restrictions to their religious activities and discrimination in many Muslim countries, one country has imprisoned two Wahhabi Muslims who converted to Ahmadiyya: **Saudi Arabia**.

On 14<sup>th</sup> May 2012, **Sultan Hamid Maarzouk al-Anzi** and **Saudh Faleh Awad al-Anzi** were arrested for the sole reason that they had joined the Ahmadi community, which they considered a better understanding and practice of their faith as Muslims.

The men are residents of a small settlement of Ahrar near Al Azizya close to the northern border of Saudi Arabia. Both were handed over to clerics who repeatedly tried to persuade them to abandon their Ahmadiyya faith and return to 'true Islam.' They were told that they would be charged for apostasy and punished with death.

The two were then shuttled from one prison to another without charge and denied access to their families and legal advice. At the time of printing, their whereabouts and condition remain unknown.

## **Conclusions**

Ahmadis are an unwanted community in several countries. They have been stigmatised as defiled and infidels, not only by society at large but also by the state apparatus. Political interests are obviously at stake, bolstered by extreme religious conservatism and an overall culture of intolerance, all contributing to the creation of a toxic environment in which the majority of Ahmadis are forced to live.

Islamist forces especially target Ahmadiyya, as it is viewed as an offshoot religion, a reformist doctrine that challenges the official understanding of Islam in their countries. Particularly in Pakistan and Indonesia, radical Islamists have advocated for anti-Ahmadi policies. The institutionalisation of privilege granted by certain regimes to Islamist groups is linked to their need for political survival. Authorities have felt pressured to adopt policy demands to suppress Ahmadiyya activities just to stay in power.

Ahmadis have endured persecution for many years. Their mosques have been burned, their graves desecrated and their very existence criminalised. As a result, thousands of Ahmadis have fled their countries and sought asylum abroad.

At the same time, the persecution of Ahmadis is proving to be increasingly counter-productive, as the movement has garnered more and more support from the international community. Its growing reputation as a peace loving community in an increasingly hostile world, typified by stark polarisation in the Muslim world, is strong in many places. Governments that propagate or tolerate anti-Ahmadiyyism may find themselves increasingly isolated.