

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 twenty countries. It draws its name from its founder, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, a Punjabi religious teacher of the 19th 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.

While Ahmadis consider themselves to be Muslims, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation declared in 1973 that the Ahmadiyya community was not linked to Islam.

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.

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 peace, 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, Algeria** and **Bangladesh**, where openly professing their religious identity can 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 structures 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.

A number of radical Muslim movements have proliferated in the last decade 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.

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.

In **Algeria**, Islam is the state religion, where Sunni Muslims make up the majority. The Ahmadi movement did not spread to Algeria until 2007, when an Ahmadi satellite television channel reached the country. It now numbers approximately 2,000 members in the country.

Freedom of religion is guaranteed by law in Algeria, but preachers and places of worship must be licensed by the government. The Ahmadis have never applied, believing they would face certain rejection.

Accused of heresy by Islamist extremists and targeted by the authorities, members of Algeria's small Ahmadi community say they have been forced to go underground to worship. Few in Algeria had even heard of Ahmadis until last year, when the government crackdown began.

Around three-hundred Ahmadis in Algeria have faced investigation and imprisonment since the beginning of the persecution.

In July 2017, Algeria's Religious Affairs Minister Mohamed Aissa told journalists that the Ahmadis were involved in a plot masterminded by Israel - where the community is allowed to worship openly, with a big mosque in the city of Haifa and a television channel - to destabilise the country. Sirine Rached, an Amnesty International researcher, said these accusations were "baseless" and accused the Algerian government of a crackdown that is unprecedented in the wider region.

Ahmadis are also harshly persecuted in **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.

Ahmadis in Prison

Algeria

In 2017, Ahmadis were particularly persecuted in Algeria.

Arrests of twelve (unnamed) Ahmadis in February 2017¹

The Algerian police on 22nd February 2017 announced the arrest of twelve members of the Ahmadiyya religious community who have been accused by authorities for promoting the outlawed movement. The men were arrested in Chief, in the north of the country, and were apparently in possession of documents that promote Ahmadi doctrine. The leader of the group and four other members have been imprisoned, while another four have been placed under court supervision. The three others were released.

Arrests of nineteen (unnamed) Ahmadis in January 2017

In the last two weeks of January 2017, many Ahmadis were arrested during multiple police crackdowns in Algeria. Their names have not been made public. In Sidi Bel Abbès, two individuals were sentenced to three years in prison, three others were arrested in Tipasa, a group of seven was arrested in Alger, and seven others in Oran. Their sentences remain unknown.

Arrests of nineteen (unnamed) Ahmadis in November 2016

In November 2016, nineteen Ahmadis were arrested and subsequently sentenced to unknown prison terms.

On 25th November, Algerian security forces raided a house in the coastal town of Béni Saf and arrested six Ahmadis while they were performing Friday prayers. Beni Saf is located in the northern province of Aïn Témouchent, around three-hundred miles to the west of capital Algiers. Security personnel seized prayer mats, books, and other documents related to the Ahmadiyya belief as

¹ Source: <http://me-confidential.com/15185-algeria-police-arrests-12-members-of-ahmadiyya-religious-community-for-proselytism.html>

evidence.

Arrests of twenty (unnamed) Ahmadis in September 2016

In early October, **twenty** Ahmadis were arrested in the city of Skikda for performing Friday prayers at a private villa. In November, Skikda's circuit court sentenced the (unnamed) Imam of Ahmadiyya community to eight months in prison and fined him 300,000 Algerian Dinars (approximately €2,568 Euro). The other arrested individuals were sentenced three months in prison and fined 30,000 Algerian Dinars (approximately €256 Euro).

Arrests of nine (unnamed) Ahmadis in June 2016²

In June, the Research Division of the National Police (SRGN) shut down the community's main headquarters in the city of Bida and arrested six Ahmadis from Blida. Soon after the security forces also arrested the National President of Ahmadiyya Community in Algeria from Bou-Ismaïl (Tipasa) and two other individuals from the capital Algiers. The nine individuals were charged with endangering state security and undermining social integrity. Sentences are not known.

Pakistan

In **Pakistan**, five Ahmadis were in prison at the end of 2017.

Three of them were arrested in 2015 for propagating their faith: **Abdul Shakoor** and **Mazhar Sipra** were subsequently sentenced to five years in prison while **Tahir Mahdi Imtiaz** was repeatedly denied release on bail and was to be tried by an anti-terror court.

Qamar Ahmed Tahir was arrested in 2015 for allegedly desecrating the Quran. Tahir was the head of security at a factory. A fellow worker at the factory accused him of throwing copies of the Qur'an into the boiler. Following his arrest, a mob burned the factory and Ahmadi places of worship.

Idrees Ahmad was arrested in 2017 and sentenced to three years in prison for distributing banned material.

Conclusions

Ahmadis are an unwanted community in several Muslim majority countries. They have been stigmatised and defiled as 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. The

² Source: <https://themuslimtimes.info/2017/02/15/human-rights-without-frontiers-is-calling-upon-the-algerian-authorities-to-stop-harassing-imprisoning-ahmadis-muslims/>

institutionalisation of privileges 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 and violent world, typified by stark polarisation in the Muslim world, is strong in many places. Governments that propagate or tolerate hostility towards Ahmadis may find themselves increasingly isolated.