

Ahmadis

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The Ahmadiyya community, also known as Ahmadis, is a reformist movement within Islam that has at least 12 million adherents in over twenty countries. It's named after its founder, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, a Punjabi religious teacher from the 19th century. He claimed to be the Mahdi, the promised Messiah who would establish universal peace.

Ahmad aimed to restore what he believed to be Islam's peaceful and tolerant origins. He also advocated 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 a prophet from God. Today the Lahore Ahmadis are a small minority within the Ahmadiyya community. Since the vast majority of Ahmadis are Qadiani, they do not consider the Prophet Muhammed to be the last prophet. This is a major point of contention and a significant reason why they are not widely accepted within the Muslim world.

Ahmadiyya is an international movement with large numbers in Pakistan, Indonesia, the United States, the United Kingdom, 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.

Ahmadis face stiff opposition in Pakistan, primarily for their alternative theology, their reformist views on traditional Islam and their more progressive interpretation of Islamic sources.

The Ahmadis 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.

Additionally, the group 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.

Ahmadis promote an overtly non-violent understanding of *jihad*. They underscore the Quranic principle that there must be no coercion 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 Ahmadiyya community has been constructed by some mainstream Muslims as not only heretical but also disloyal and traitorous. They are portrayed as '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 that are seen as distorting the 'true' religion of Islam. The suppression of Ahmadiyya is therefore justifiable for some Muslims, as it is done in the defence of Islam itself.

PAKISTAN: Reasons for the Persecution of Ahmadis

In July 2018, the US government estimated the total population of Pakistan to be 207.9 million. According to the provisional results of a national census conducted in 2017, 96% of the population is Muslim. Government figures indicate that the remaining 4% includes Ahmadis, Hindus, Christians, Parsis/Zoroastrians, Baha'is, Sikhs, Buddhists, Kalash, Kihals, and Jains. Most of the historic Jewish community has emigrated.¹

In 1956, Pakistan was established as an Islamic Republic. Islam is still the official state religion, but the Constitution protects religious freedom, at least nominally.

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 legislation has likewise become a tool to repress the Ahmadiyya community. These blasphemy laws have created a hostile environment and incited mob violence that targets members of minority religious groups such as Ahmadis.² If an Ahmadi declares to be a Muslim, they risk being charged with blasphemy.

Blasphemy laws have indirectly created 'a culture of impunity for violent attacks following accusations',³ as some religious fanatics believe that they are entitled to take the law into their own hands. There have been many instances where the local administration, the police and the judiciary have either colluded with perpetrators or have stood by and done nothing to assist the accused out of fear of the crowd.

Additionally, the use of blasphemy laws has become a quick way of resolving conflicts arising from business rivalry, honour disputes, and disagreements over money and property. These laws have been instrumentalised for private settlements of scores in many cases. The accused are often lynched or killed by mobs before authorities can place them under arrest. If, by chance, they are acquitted, they bear the stigma of 'heretic' for life and are often forced to move to avoid being killed.

¹ For more religious statistics, see U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Report on international Religious Freedom: Pakistan 2018*, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/pakistan/>.

² United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF- Recommended for countries of particular concern: Pakistan 2020*, 2020. <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Pakistan.pdf>.

³ Ibid.

Ahmadis in Prison in Pakistan

All Ahmadis in prison at the time of writing this report have been victims of Pakistan's blasphemy laws. This legislation is used and abused to serve as an outlet for pervasive anti-Ahmadi hostility and to settle private disputes.

Ahmadis behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 June 2020, HRWF documented **five cases** of Ahmadis in its Prisoners' Database.⁴ All of these individuals were either convicted of or charged with blasphemy. Three of them were sentenced to death for allegedly insulting the Prophet when in fact they were tearing down a poster with an anti-Ahmadi slogan. Two others are still under trial for sharing Quranic material on social media.

It is difficult for Ahmadis to find lawyers who will defend them. This is unsurprising considering the pressure placed by radical and violent religious groups on judges to convict, and the hostile targeting of lawyers and politicians alike.⁵ In the past, judges and lawyers have been attacked by mobs and sometimes killed, and two politicians who discussed reforming the legislation have been shot dead.

Articles of the Penal Code

Prisoners are typically charged under the blasphemy laws in the Pakistani Penal Code:

Section 295-A: 'Deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs. Whoever, with malicious and deliberate intention of outraging the religious feelings of any class of the citizens of Pakistan, by words, either spoken or written or by visible representations, insults or attempts to insult the religion or religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, or with fine, or with both'.

Section 295-B: 'Defiling the Holy Qur'an. Whoever willfully defiles, damages or desecrates a copy of the Holy Qur'an or of an extract there from or used it in any derogatory manner or for any unlawful purpose shall be punishable with imprisonment for life'.

⁴ Our Database is updated on a regular basis. For more details about imprisoned Ahmadis, see <https://hrwf.eu/prisonersdatabase/>.

⁵ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended for countries of particular concern: Pakistan 2020*, 2020. <https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/Pakistan.pdf>.

Section 295-C: ‘Use of derogatory remarks in respect of the Holy Prophet. Whoever, by words either spoken or written, or by visible representation, or by imputation, innuendo or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Mohammad (peace upon him) shall be punished by death and shall also be liable to fine’.⁶

In the last 20 years, Pakistani authorities have not executed individuals sentenced to death on blasphemy charges;⁷ instead they are incarcerated indefinitely.

International advocacy

In a resolution dated 15 June 2017 concerning human rights defenders and the death penalty in Pakistan, the **European Parliament** stated that it:

Is deeply concerned at the continued use of the ‘blasphemy law’, and believes this is heightening the climate of religious intolerance; notes the findings of the Supreme Court of Pakistan that individuals accused of ‘blasphemy’ ‘suffer beyond proportion or repair’ in the absence of adequate safeguards against misapplication or misuse of such laws; calls, therefore, on the Pakistani Government to repeal Sections 295-A, 295-B and 295-C of the Penal Code, and to put in place effective procedural and institutional safeguards to prevent the misuse of ‘blasphemy’ charges; calls also on the government to take a stronger position in condemning vigilantism towards alleged ‘blasphemers’.⁸

On 19 January 2018, the **European Commission** released a report for the European Parliament and Council regarding *The EU Special Incentive Arrangement for Sustainable Development and Good Governance ('GSP+') assessment of Pakistan covering the period 2016 – 2017*. In this report, the European Commission raised concerns about Pakistan’s blasphemy laws being used to persecute individuals on religious grounds several times, and the state of religious freedom in Pakistan more broadly. The European Commission stated that:

Pakistan is requested to follow up on the recommendation to repeal all blasphemy laws or to amend them in compliance with the strict

⁶ Pakistan Penal Code <http://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/legislation/1860/actXLVof1860.html> and <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/49b920582.pdf>.

⁷ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended for countries of particular concern: Pakistan 2020*, 2020. <https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/Pakistan.pdf>.

⁸ European Parliament, Resolution on Pakistan, notably the situation of human rights defenders and the death penalty (2017/2723(RSP)) June 15, 2017. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0268_EN.html.

requirements of the Covenant; and to ensure the investigation and prosecution of those involved in incitement of or engagement in violent acts against others based on allegations of blasphemy.⁹

In its 2020 Annual Report, the **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom** (USCIRF) recommended that the US State Department designate Pakistan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for ‘engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom’. Despite being listed as a CPC in 2019, the US State Department waived Pakistan from any sanctions due to “‘important national interest of the United States’”. USCIRF recommended that this waiver is rescinded in 2020 in light of the extreme abuses of religious freedom in Pakistan.¹⁰

USCIRF also recommended that the US government:

- release blasphemy prisoners and other individuals imprisoned for their religion or beliefs;
- and repeal the blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws. Until repeal is accomplished, enact reforms to make blasphemy a bailable offense, require evidence by accusers, ensure proper investigation by senior police officials, allow authorities to dismiss unfounded accusations, and enforce existing Penal Code articles criminalising perjury and false accusations.¹¹

CASE STUDIES

Three Ahmadis on death row since 2017

In mid-October 2017, **Mubasher Ahmad**, **Ghulam Ahmed** and **Ehsan Ahmed** were found guilty of insulting the prophet of Islam and sentenced to death by a court in Punjab. They were convicted of blasphemy under Section 295-B, which is punishable with life imprisonment or the death penalty.

The men were arrested in May 2014 in a remote village in Punjab province after residents filed a complaint accusing them of tearing down a religious poster with anti-Ahmadi slogans.

⁹ European Commission, The EU Special Incentive Arrangement for Sustainable Development and Good Governance ('GSP+') assessment of Pakistan covering the period 2016 -2017, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (SWD (2018, 29 final), January 1, 2018. https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2018/january/tradoc_156544.pdf.

¹⁰ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended for countries of particular concern: Pakistan 2020*, 2020. <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Pakistan.pdf>.

¹¹ Ibid.

Four men were arrested at the time. The fourth man, Khalil Ahmad, was shot dead by an angry man while in police custody just a few days after the incident.

This judgement came a few days after Muhammad Safdar, a prominent member of the ruling party and the son-in-law of ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, publicly denounced Ahmadi community members as a threat to Pakistan. Furthermore, he urged the country's institutions not to hire them in the military or the civil service.

Shortly after, Pakistan's Minister of the Interior Ahsan Iqbal denounced anti-minority rhetoric coming from politicians without mentioning Muhammad Safdar by name.

In 2017, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan published a report documenting 15 people arrested on charges of blasphemy in 2016, including 10 Muslims and five members of religious minorities.¹²

Conclusions

Ahmadis are a marginalised community in several Muslim majority countries. They have been stigmatised and depicted as infidels, not only by society at large but also by the state apparatus. Pakistan is at the forefront of this anti-Ahmadi persecution. Political interests are at stake, bolstered by extreme religious conservatism and an overall culture of intolerance. This all contributes to the creation of a toxic environment in which Ahmadis are forced to live.

Extremist Islamist forces especially target Ahmadis, as they are viewed as an offshoot religion, a reformist doctrine that challenges the official understanding of Islam. Authorities have been pressured by extremists to adopt policy demands that suppress Ahmadi activities so as 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.

Blasphemy laws are the main legal weapon of radical Islamist forces, as they abuse and misuse them to fulfil their anti-Ahmadi agenda.

Repealing the blasphemy laws, which cause harm to both religious minorities as well as the Sunni Muslim majority, is the only solution. Until repeal is

¹² Madeeha, Anwar, "3 Ahmadi Men Sentenced to Death in Pakistan on Blasphemy Charges," VOA News, 14 October 2017, accessed 25 June 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/3-ahmadi-men-sentenced-death-pakistan-blasphemy-charges>

accomplished, the government should ‘enact reforms to make blasphemy a bailable offense, require evidence by accusers, ensure proper investigation by senior police officials, allow authorities to dis- miss unfounded accusations, and enforce existing Penal Code articles criminalizing perjury and false accusations’.¹³ However, steps in that direction should not appear as a move pushed by ‘the West’ as it would trigger strong resistance by the extremist Islamists.

During a visit to Brussels in late June 2019, Pakistan’s foreign minister dismissed accusations of Christian persecution, claiming that there were ‘individual incidents’ comparable to the rate of and motivators behind knife crime in the UK. Shah Mahmood Qureshi then said that reports of religious minorities being targeted in Pakistan did not constitute a trend and the recent claims of Christian persecution relating to the case of Asia Bibi were an example of ‘western interests’ that ‘want to paint Pakistan in a particular way’.¹⁴

The persecution of Ahmadis is also proving to be increasingly counter-productive for Pakistan’s national interests as the Ahmadiyya movement has recently garnered more support from the international community. It has a growing reputation as a peace-loving community in a progressively hostile and violent world, typified by stark polarisation within Muslim communities. Governments that propagate or tolerate hostility towards Ahmadis may soon find themselves increasingly isolated.

¹³ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended for countries of particular concern: Pakistan 2020*, 2020. <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Pakistan.pdf>.

¹⁴ Boffey, Daniel, “Pakistan: Islamabad plays down accusations of Christian persecution,” *Times of Ahmad*, 25 June 2019, accessed 28 June 2010. <http://timesofahmad.blogspot.com/2019/07/pakistan-islamabad-plays-down.html#more>.