

POLICY BRIEF  
APRIL-JUNE, 2022

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REFORMATION AND  
REVALUATION OF POLICIES  
ADDRESSING MINORITY AND  
RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

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Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS)

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### CONTEXT

This policy brief is based on the findings from second issue of PIPS' Quarterly Social Media Report covering period from March-May 2022. The report comprises findings and recommendations drawn from regular monitoring and analysis of violations of freedom of religious beliefs and hate speech in Pakistani social media space.

For Quarterly monitors, a dedicated team in PIPS office as well as the members of the PIPS network of youth observers collected Twitter data on four key themes: forced conversions/abductions; faith-based discrimination/violence, hate speech, and blasphemy-related events.

In this quarter, the monitoring of the social media resulted in finding of 69 cases of forced conversions/abductions, 58 incidents of faith-based discrimination, 6 Blasphemy-related events and about 390,004 tweets having hate speech mainly against Ahmadis and Hindus.

This brief aims at highlighting violations of freedom of faith and hate speech in Pakistan. The brief notes that contrary to the claims made by the committee on Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony in 2020 that religious minorities were granted rights, minority faith groups continue to face discrimination, persecution, and violence. The situation merits urgent attention and prioritization in policymaking. Brushing the issue aside on one pretext or another may risk aggravating the problem. Therefore, it is imperative for policymakers to reconsider the current legislation in place to protect the rights of different religious groups and to contribute to their equal freedom as enshrined in the constitution. Considering these, the brief underlines the importance of acknowledging the prevailing injustices against minorities while providing policy recommendations for the government and lawmakers to aid in lessening the disparities between the rights of majorities and minorities.

## CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

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Religious extremism is a continuing threat to human rights in Pakistan. Although it undermines peoples' basic rights in general, still minority faith and sect groups such as the Hindus, Christians, Shias, Ahmadis, Sikhs and others are disproportionately affected. Despite constitutional safeguards for equality of citizens, non-Muslims are looked down upon as second-class citizens and victimized in various forms. Historically, persecution has taken both physical and

non-physical methods of expression e.g., via hate speech or more brutal attacks and abductions.

In 2020 a Bill to protect the rights of the religious minorities was introduced in the Senate by PML-N's Senator Javed Abbasi. The Bill called for several changes including: alterations to the educational curriculum, prohibition of forced faith conversions, prohibition of inter-faith forced marriages and more. However, the Senate standing committee on Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony turned the bill down in February 2021 arguing that minorities were already enjoyed full religious freedom in the country, and that legislation should have been focused on granting more rights to Muslims in Pakistan. Contrary to Senator Hafiz Abdul Karim's claim that "Minorities in Pakistan have already been granted several rights", persecution of minorities is a persistent challenge for the state. According to PIPS databases the last three months have seen more than 127 incidents targeting religious minorities:

- 69 forced conversions/abductions
- 58 Faith-based discrimination
- 6 Blasphemy-related events
- 390,004 tweets promoting hate speech targeting mainly Ahmadi and Hindu families.

Forced Conversion is a prevalent social issue that affect mainly girls, especially minors forcing them to convert and accept Islam. Between April 2022 to May 2022, more than 15 cases of forced conversions of Hindu and Christian girls were reported. Among them was Kavita Kohli who was reportedly abducted twice and married off to different men. These forced conversions are often also characterised by physical violence. In addition to persecution, ideological hatred directed at minority faith groups also result in attacks, torture and even death. Cases of sexual assault and abuse are recurrent and demonstrate the need for authorities to intervene and take more action to protect these people.



## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:**

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The Pakistani policymakers need to comprehend the disturbing reality of faith-based persecution in Pakistan. The problem merits serious attention and stern action. PIPS offers the following recommendations for improving freedom of religious beliefs in Pakistan:

1. Reassessment of blasphemy laws and redefinition of blasphemy
2. More intensive check on hate speech on social media.
4. Collaboration with religious figures to preach tolerance and acceptance

### **1. REASSESSMENT OF BLASPHEMY LAWS**

Blasphemy laws in Pakistan have long sparked controversy and increasingly necessitate reassessment. Due to the low threshold required to register a blasphemy case and the highly sensitive and serious nature of the crime, critics argue that blasphemy laws are often manipulated by individuals to settle personal scores. Likewise, human rights activists argue that the blasphemy law in its present form is incompatible with international law. This is mainly due to the ambiguity surrounding the definition as to what, in precise and concrete terms, constitutes as an act of blasphemy. As a result, the law is highly prone to misuse and manipulation.

In 2010, a PPP lawmaker, Sherry Rehman, introduced a private bill to amend the blasphemy law. The bill sought to amend the blasphemy law and change procedures of religious offences so that they would be reported to higher police officials and have the courts take direct action. It was because blasphemy cases often do not require a thorough investigation, resulting in individuals being punished who may not be guilty of the crime. Rehman's bill, however, was overturned after pressure from religious parties. This brief emphasises the need for policymakers to:

- a) Revisit the law to include a provision to investigate the nature of the crimes in a more thorough and unbiased judicial manner to reduce the potential for abuse. While people have thus far not been executed for blasphemy crimes, they have been sentenced to death. However, because the nature of the crime results in a serious punishment the government should do more to establish the crime with concrete and verifiable evidence as otherwise the law risks sending innocent individuals to prison and legitimising discriminatory practices.
- b) Policymakers need to come up with a crystal-clear and concrete definition of blasphemy and what constitutes as a blasphemous act. Such a highly sensitive law that can carry death penalty cannot afford to be vague.
  - i) It would be important to collaborate with religious parties on the matter of definition of the term. This would mitigate risks of antagonising religious parties while also having their best judgement to create a more specific definition.

## 2. CHECKING ONLINE HATE SPEECH:

In Pakistan, social media has emerged as the key medium through which people propagate hate speech and incite violence against religious minorities. Considering the mass penetration of the social media in Pakistan, the government needs to undertake concerted efforts to restrict sensitive material in the cyberspace. Laws concerning hate speech need to be enforced in letter and spirit to prosecute individuals that use social media to spread hatred based on religion or faith. In addition, social media accounts that indulge in faith-based hate speech should be reported by state authorities for quicker actions by social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube etc. Likewise, research is key to keeping an eye on online hate speech. The government should observe trends and flag inappropriate accounts and hashtags to check hate speech.

### 3. ENGAGING RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS FOR SOCIAL COHESION

The Pakistani society has a propensity for division on religious and sectarian lines. Religion forms the foundation of the country's constitution and informs normative behaviours. In view of this, the following is recommended:

- i) There should be efforts to collaborate with religious leaders and encourage them to preach values of tolerance and acceptance towards religious minorities and promote constitutional rights.
  - a. Religious leaders have great influence on their followers. They may be engaged to promote diversity and peaceful coexistence.
  - b. The government may devise a mechanism for local prayer leaders to include relevant parts of the Paigham-e-Pakistan in their routine speeches and sermons.

### CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY:

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- Religious radicalism is growing in Pakistan and manifesting itself in various forms including the persecution of minorities.
  - Political leaders and policymakers need to recognise the severity of this issue and engage in addressing it through both direct and institutional measures.
  - The government, clergy, and civil society need to forge a coalition to tackle the menace of extremism
  - Key recommendations for policymakers are:
    1. Re-assessment of blasphemy laws and redefinition of blasphemy
    2. More intensive crackdown on online hate speech
    3. Collaboration with religious figures to preach tolerance and acceptance
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