



PAK INSTITUTE FOR
PEACE STUDIES
KNOWLEDGE FOR PEACE

POLICY BRIEF

Religious freedom violations on Pakistan social media

QUARTERLY ISSUE | JULY-SEPTEMBER, 2022

CHALLENGES

- Big corporations entrusted with censoring hate speech are ineffective in checking online extremism
- Protecting religious freedom online is not a priority for government
- Social media aggravates sectarianism
- Alternate media play key role in highlighting extremism and religious freedom violations in Pakistan

Religious freedom violations on Pakistan social media

Social media is displacing old means of propaganda to gradually become the favored instrument of outreach for religious fundamentalists in Pakistan. Extremist narratives and xenophobic ideas are transmitted via virtual platforms like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube etc. to mass audience without much scrutiny or obstruction from the authorities. The state's nonchalance about online extremism results in inflammable situations in which non-adherents of state religion such as the Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, etc. suffer the most. Government watchdogs mandated to check faith-based hate speech have different priorities. While extremist contents proliferate on the Pakistani social media, state authorities like PTA usually remain obsessed with sexually explicit contents, for instance, tracking and blocking pornography etc. The authority tends to pose as a guardian of public morality in Pakistan.

Given that Pakistan has over 71 million active social media users, some argue that public sector lacks the means to effectively check hate speech or monitor immense amounts of data on social media, but evidence suggests it is more a question of interest and will rather than lack of expertise. For instance, government critics have been booked by authorities for criticism on social media. This indicates the government does have the surveillance capacity to keep an eye on users. Whatever the reason, however, Pakistan is amid a long-running crisis of social integration and cultural assimilation. And the crisis is worsening, threatening to upend whatever scanty cohesion has left in the society. In this scenario, only at its own peril can the state give free pass to online extremism because what happens in the virtual space impacts events in real life. Big corporations like Facebook, Twitter, etc. have already taken over the job of censoring hate speech, and evidence suggest they are ineffective in enforcing their own rules on hate speech. Therefore, there is a need for intervention by the government and civil society to make virtual spaces less toxic and safer for all.

✉ pips@pakpips.com

🌐 www.pakpips.com

🐦 PAKPIPS

f PakistanInstituteForPeaceStudies



What's at stake?

Pakistan social media spaces are toxic with hateful contents propagated by religious fanatics. Hate speech targeting vulnerable faith groups proliferate in the forms of organized campaigns as well as individual acts. From Jun to Aug 2022, 1.86 million posts on the Pakistani Twitter space were found to be propagating hate speech in varying degrees against minorities, notably the Ahmadis and Shias – communities that have faced persecution in Pakistan. Much of these contents were found to be inciting violence. Little surprise that on Aug 21, a religious fanatic, reportedly an adherent of TLP cult, stabbed and murdered an Ahmadi citizen in broad daylight in Sargodha. The extremists attack the Ahmadis, disparage their beliefs, and run demonization campaigns against them on social media with impunity.

In addition, blasphemy also springs up on Pakistani social media frequently as a hot issue. Previously, mostly members of minority faiths such as Christians and Hindus etc. used to be targets of blasphemy allegations. In many cases, the accused would get lynched even before the offence could have been established in a court of law. However, lately, blasphemy has been weaponized even more as mainstream politicians have also started using the blasphemy weapon against their rivals. It has been observed that while the politicians toy with blasphemy

for political purposes, the news of the alleged offence reaches millions of people in no time through the amplifying power of social media, putting the safety and security of the accused at risk. It is astonishing that Pakistani political parties and their leaders never learn that using blasphemy to discredit their opponents has always been a dangerous idea with devastating results. In the past, key leaders of PPP, PMLN, and other parties were murdered or injured by fanatic vigilantes on charges of blasphemy.

On the other hand, the forced conversions of Hindu citizens are also a constant feature on the social media in Pakistan. In this regard, the social media play a positive role by highlighting forced conversion cases because it has been observed that the problem is often overlooked by the press and electronic media. Victims and rights activists use social media to underline their plight and make their pleas for help heard by the national audience. In the Jun-Aug quarter, at least 34 cases of abductions or forced conversions of minorities surfaced on social media. The bulk of these cases occurred in Sindh with the Hindus as the principal victim. Raising voice for victims of forced conversions is not always received well on the social media as forced conversion apologists attempt to downplay the problem.

Religious fanaticism on virtual platforms aggravates Pakistan's extremism landscape and threatens societal coherence and rule of law. The state cannot ignore the intimidating power of the social media to boost extremism in Pakistan. Therefore, checking hate speech on social media is crucial for social cohesion and stability.

Research method

The findings presented in this brief are based on daily monitoring of the Twitter over three months period (Jun-Aug 2022) by an internal and an external group of young Observers established by PIPS.

Twitter was manually searched for keywords relating to violations of religious freedoms in Pakistan. Likewise, literature review was done and official Twitter pages of organizations and individuals working on similar issues were monitored for contents. Similarly, top trends on Twitter in Pakistan were analyzed for their relevance to the issue at hand. Online source exportdata.io was used to extract top 50 trends in Pakistan daily at 4pm. The analysis underlines the most critical challenges to religious freedoms posed through the social media in the country. Prominent among these were forced conversions, blasphemy, hate speech, and other forms of minority persecution, etc.



1 The extremists propagate violent ideas and commit hate speech against minorities with relative impunity.

1

3 hateful contents are barely taken notice of by relevant authorities.

3

Key findings

2

2 Some highly vulnerable communities such as the Ahmadis are constant target of online hate speech.

4

4 Some issues are recurring such as the forced conversions, blasphemy, hate speech, and faith-based discrimination etc.

Key findings

Monitoring of the Pakistani social media shows the extremists propagate violent ideas and commit hate speech against minorities with relative impunity right under the nose of the authorities that are supposed to check cybercrimes. Some highly vulnerable communities such as the Ahmadis are constant target of online hate speech that instigate contempt for Ahmadi religious figures. Such hateful contents are barely taken notice of by relevant authorities like the PTA, FIA Cybercrime etc.

While religious extremism is manifested in various forms on the Twitter, some issues are recurring such as the forced conversions, blasphemy, hate speech, and faith-based discrimination etc. The report at hand does not claim to be a comprehensive document on the issue given the immense amount of data generated daily on the social media, still it does provide a critical insight into online extremism in Pakistan. Key findings are given below:

1. Forced conversions

Sindh grabs the notoriety of being the epicenter of forced conversions

The continuing problem of forced conversion and the state's lackluster response to it indicates there is an organized program for the imposition of state religion on the Hindus of Sindh. In a slow and steady fashion, Hinduism is being swallowed up by the majority faith through the instrument of forced conversion. Teenage girls and young women of the community are abducted and forcibly converted. Once converted, the women usually cannot revert to their original faith due to prohibition in their new faith. The Sindh government is unable or unwilling to check this phenomenon. In some cases, the law enforcement has demonstrated some willingness to apprehend the perpetrators, yet the overall performance of the



police is poor in this regard.

In majority cases, the converted females are forced to marry their abductors. The system tends to side with the perpetrators instead of the victims. Apart from Sindh, few cases of abduction or rape of Hindu and Christian women were also reported in Punjab. In one instance, a Sikh girl Dina Kaur was abducted, converted, and married off to her abductor. However, the Hindus of Sindh remain the prime victim of forced conversions.

Forced conversion comes with multiple crimes against the victims and their families

Forced conversion does not come as a standalone offence as the perpetrators indulge in multiple crimes against the victims. For instance, in process of abduction, many victims face physical assault. Women who resist the culprits may face the fate of Pooja Kumari who was murdered for refusing to convert and marry a Muslim man in Sindh. Generally, the abduction is followed by rape in captivity. Sometimes the victims are subjected to gang rape by Muslim males before faith change and forced marriage.

But the suffering of the victim does not end with these crimes because when families of victims lodge complaints with the authorities or stage protest, they are threatened with further violence by the culprits or

their patrons. There have also been reports of police not cooperating with the victims in registering cases against the culprits who in almost all cases are Muslim men. During the monitoring process, it was noted that several victim families were threatened to back off from their complaints. The system's tendency to favor the culprits of the majority faith is the reason why the perpetrators have the audacity to intimidate the victims' families if the latter plead for justice. This audacity of the criminals is derived from the state's reluctance to protect the life, honor, and property of religious minorities.

Weaponizing rape

The offence of forced conversion is singularly based on the instrument of rape. Throughout history, rape has been used as a weapon to terrorize, humiliate, and subdue an enemy during wars and genocides. In Pakistan, rape is weaponized to force minority women into faith change and marriage. The monitoring reveals that many women from Hindu and Christian groups were gang raped by Muslim perpetrators. For instance, two minor sisters aged 16 and 17 were gang raped in Punjab. Another young girl was gang raped in Jhelum in early June. However, unfortunately, the atrocities against Hindu and Christian women often do not draw the same amount of empathy and reaction from society as in cases involving women of Muslim upper classes.

Humiliation and the psychological trauma

For the politically disempowered and abjectly poor Christians and Hindus life has many nightmarish possibilities. In Sindh particularly, Hindu families with young daughters or wives fear for the safety, security, and honor of their women. For instance, during the reporting period, five Muslim men beat up a Hindu man Chandar Kohlli over some petty dispute, took his wife and raped her one by one in Umerkot. Similarly, in Lahore, two Muslim men attempted to rape Safia Bibi – a pregnant woman and wife of a Christian Pastor Maqsood Rafiq. In the botched rape attempt, the Pastor's wife suffered miscarriage. In yet another case, a five-year old child girl of the Meghwar community was sexually assaulted by a group of Muslim men.

It is horrifying to imagine the pain, humiliation, trauma, and depression the victims and their loved ones go through after episodes of kidnappings, rapes, and forced conversions and marriages. None but those who helplessly watch their children being taken away and raped by adult criminals can feel the actual pain and dishonor. The constitution makes it a binding duty of the state to protect the life and honor of citizens without discrimination, yet the state is seen mysteriously short of meeting even these bare minimums.

Where do authorities stand?

The dismal performance of the state authorities in cases of forced conversions is self-evident by the growing number of incidents. The local police are generally ambiguous vis-à-vis the protection of the minority women. During the monitoring, it was noted that in several cases of abduction, rape, or forced conversions, the police were accused of not cooperating with the victims. A Christian person accused the police of freeing rape suspects and not registering case against them in Lahore. However, in another case, the police recovered a Hindu girl days after she was abducted and gang-raped by a local landlord Raja Zafar in June in Jhelum. It remains unknown if the suspect was proceeded against. Overall, minority faith groups particularly the Hindus of Sindh see no meaningful action from the authorities for their protection.

2. Blasphemy

Blasphemy: A handy weapon of the fanatics

The blasphemy law has become the perfect tool for the religious fanatics with which to attack members of minorities or practically anyone considered to have undermined the state religion in any sense. The extent of Islamist radicalism in Pakistan can be assessed by the fact that often mere an accusation of blasphemy can be an excuse for vigilantism. Evidence indicates that a tacit belief has taken root among the radical lots that rule of law or due procedures of justice does not matter when it comes to alleged acts of blasphemy. This latent belief frequently leads to mob justice in Pakistan.

The monitoring of social media shows blasphemy-related incidents are growing at an alarming rate across the country as is evident by the number of



cases surfacing on social media. From Sindh to Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, multiple incidents of alleged blasphemy were reported from Jun to Aug. In July, rumors made rounds that the Samsung company was using a QR code that allegedly contained some blasphemous shapes. This led to vandalizing of Samsung billboards across cities by Muslim mobs. Similarly, on Aug 21, a mob of Muslim vigilantes laid siege to the house of a Hindu sanitary worker Ashok Kumar after he was accused of desecrating the Quran in Hyderabad. Later, it came out that the false allegation was levelled by a Muslim man Bilal Abbasi who had an argument with Kumar over some business matter earlier. The police played a commendable job by dispersing the mob and saving Kumar and his family from lynching. However, this was not the first time that blasphemy was used as a weapon to settle personal scores. Similar incidents have happened before. In addition, several more blasphemy incidents happened in different areas including in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa where a drug addict was accused of blasphemy.

Other “utility” of the blasphemy law

In Pakistan, selective application, and manipulation of laws by executive and judicial authorities are not uncommon. And the blasphemy law is no exception despite its sensitivity. For instance, in late August, the pro-PTI Punjab government framed a journalist Waqar Satti in a blasphemy case after he posted a video speech of the PTI chief Imran Khan. A critic of PTI, Satti was charged for propagating allegedly blasphemous content on the social media. The move was censured by the media community and members of the public on Twitter.

3. Hate speech

Social media: The sectarian extremists’ virtual battlefield

Moharram inspires sectarian activism in Pakistan because the main Shia ritual of mourning the death of Hussain is performed in this month. Sectarian emotions run high in Moharram, and it remains the bloodiest month in the history of terrorist attacks on Shias. The month also energizes Sunni extremist groups and their followers. This past Moharram, online campaigns and trends targeting Shias and their belief systems ran on Pakistani Twitter. Hate speech against the Shias worsened after an attack on an ASWJ rally to commemorate the *Sahaba*. A video circulating on Twitter showed a suspected ASWJ member harassing and threatening a Sunni man for giving water to Shia mourners. Many Twitter users described their experiences of having witnessed ‘*Shia Kafir*’ slogans on social media as well as in religious gatherings of ASWJ. On the other hand, some Shias also indulged in hate speech against Sunnis. The state regulatory such as the PTA etc. largely failed to check online hate speech.

Anti-Ahmadi hate speech

On the social media, the Ahmadi community face the most organized and intense hate speech. During the monitoring period, Twitter campaigns demonizing the Ahmadis and their religious figures and symbols were witnessed. The community was dismissed as “*infidels*”, “*hypocrites*”, “*terrorists*” etc. in these online hate campaigns. There are Twitter accounts with thousands of followers that are exclusively dedicated to perpetuating hatred against Ahmadis on continuing basis. One such Twitter account warned its followers not to donate to a certain flood charity because it was reportedly owned by the Ahmadis. On the other hand, Christians, Hindus, and others also face hate speech and harassment online. For instance, on Twitter, a Pakistani Christian woman was bluntly asked by a Muslim user to convert to Islam. In reply, she had asked the Muslim man to convert to Christianity instead, triggering an argument.



4. *Faith-based persecution*

Disproportionate anger and vengeance directed at religious minorities

The quarterly monitor indicates that with growing radicalization, the persecution of minority groups is intensifying in Pakistan. Incidents abound in which members of majority faith display disproportionate anger towards followers of minority faiths. In the reporting period, members of minority faith groups were killed or injured over petty quarrels or for no crime at all. For instance, in July, two Muslim men beat up a Christian farmer Younis Massih to death over a small dispute in Sialkot. As if murdering him was not enough, the deceased's body was dragged around the village for the public to see. The heinous crime reflects the sense of impunity and entitlement felt by many members of the majority faith in Pakistan.

Similarly, in Sargodha, a religious fanatic of the TLP cult stabbed and killed an aged Ahmadi man for no crime other than being an Ahmadi. Reportedly, the fanatic had commanded the Ahmadi man to chant the TLP slogan. Upon refusal, he was stabbed multiple times and killed. Likewise, in another incident in Dadu district of Sindh, a Muslim shopkeeper brutally beat up a Hindu woman after an argument. In an identical case, a Hindu woman Jami Meghwar was physically assaulted and injured by police personnel deputed at a local bank where funds for flood victims were being distributed. In addition, a Hindu tailor Rano Meghwar was roughed up by Muslim customers over some petty matter.

Unsafe in their homes, at risk in their temples

Sindh is no land of Sufis anymore as it proudly used to be in the past millennium. Fanaticism is gradually overtaking whatever has been left of the Sufi traditions, and the emerging radicalism seems to have no bounds when it come to treatment of religious minorities. The period from Jun to Aug saw Hindu homes getting attacked by fanatics in different areas of Sindh. In Tando Allah Yar, a Muslim mob attacked the homes of Kohli community, beating the residents with sticks. Likewise, a home owned

by a Meghwar family was set ablaze in Mirpur Khas, forcing the family to flee the area.

Like their homes, the Hindu community's worship places also came under attack in at least five incidents in four different cities including Karachi, Ghotki, Rohri, and Tharparkar. In Ghotki, a Muslim mob ransacked a Shiv Temple and stole water motor and pipes from the premises. Similarly, robbers broke into two separate Hindu temples in Tharparkar and stole the money from the donation box. This phenomenon of attacking and looting Hindu temples can be, at least in part, attributed to school textbooks that have been glorifying the destruction and looting of Hindu temples in India by Afghan invaders like Mehmood Ghaznavi. Such lessons eulogizing belligerence have been taught to millions of Pakistani children for decades.

"Even after death, there is no peace for minorities in Pakistan"

While in Sindh the Hindus face persecution, in Punjab it is the Ahmadis who bear the brunt of religious extremism. Apart from the discrimination Ahmadis brave on continuing basis, they are not spared even in their graves. In a little span of three months (Jun-Aug), at least 53 Ahmadi graves were desecrated in Gujranwala and another 16 graves were demolished in the industrial city of Faisalabad by Muslim mobs. Commenting on the atrocity, a Twitter handle wrote, *"Even after death, there is no peace for minorities in Pakistan"*.

At certain times, this persecution touches darkly comic levels. For instance, during the Eid-ul-Azha, several Ahmadis were arrested by the police for performing the Islamic ritual of animal sacrifice in Faisalabad and Sheikhupura. The arrests were made on the ground that their perming Islamic rituals had "hurt the feelings of Muslims". The Twitter users' reaction to these incidents were mixed. Some condoned the arrests while many others condemned the police for the act. In yet another incident, a PMLQ politician Malik Ilyas Awan demanded the removal of security from around Ahmadi neighborhoods and the eviction of the community from Khushab.

Interventions to detoxify social media spaces in Pakistan

- » *Monitoring mechanism for hatemongering on social media*
- » *Re-defining goals for government watchdogs*
- » *Denying radical groups space on social media platforms*
- » *Criminalizing fake blasphemy allegations*
- » *Strengthening independent watchdogs*

In view of the growing radicalization in Pakistan, it is imperative for the state to exercise vigilance viz-a-viz extremism both in cyber and physical spaces. Certain interventions may help mitigate the prevalent toxicity on the social media in the country. This report recommends the following to help check online extremism in Pakistan:

- **Monitoring mechanism for hatemongering on social media**

Some rights activists are apprehensive that the task of censoring hate speech on virtual social platforms have been assumed by corporations instead of public entities. In Pakistan, feeble checks on proliferation of extremist contents on social media indicate these corporations' editorial checks on hate speech are ineffective. Therefore, the federal government needs to establish a dedicated monitoring unit to track and report propagation of hate speech and other extremist and xenophobic contents on social media platforms.

Under the Ministry of Information, the Press Information Department already has a press monitoring unit that screens the national press daily for news contents and opinions about government policies and generates a comprehensive daily press report for relevant authorities. This practice can be replicated for hate speech on social media. Based on such a report, the concerned authorities may proceed against users that indulge in hate speech on social media. Pakistan already has laws on hate

speech and cybercrime. Prosecutions may help deter would-be hatemongers.

- **Re-defining goals for government watchdogs**

Government agencies tasked to check sensitive contents on the internet such as PTA and FIA Cybercrime Wing have largely been ineffective in checking religiously hateful contents on social media. While the PTA has been fixated on eradicating blasphemous and pornographic contents from the internet, the FIA has usually invoked cybercrime laws against government critics including journalists. Pornography or criticism of the state may not pose a severe threat to societal harmony and security but hate speech calling for violence and anarchy surely does. In this scenario, the government may need to shake up the institutional outlook and behavior of PTA and FIA Cybercrime units to redefine their primary goals. These entities need to redirect their expertise and resources at countering religious extremism on social media sites.

- **Denying radical groups space on social media platforms**

There are extremist groups on social media that specifically target the Ahmadi community. The official Twitter and Facebook accounts of such groups have thousands of followers, and they post religiously offensive contents that disparage the Ahmadi faith and demonize the whole community. Rectification of the anti-Ahmadi laws might be unviable for the government or parliament at this point, still the law enforcement can, as a bare minimum, invoke the existing hate speech and cybercrime laws to deter incessant online hatemongering against this persecuted community.

- **Criminalizing fake blasphemy allegations**

Governments in Pakistan may continuously put off the rectification of blasphemy laws for fear of retribution from religious fundamentalists, however, it would eventually be compelled by circumstances to tackle the radicals head-on on this question. If this is to be the case at some point in distant future, a lot of damage would have already been inflicted on the social fabric of the society by that time. The best course for the parliament is to begin rectifying blasphemy laws now, despite fear of retaliation from the religious right. As a first, a clause criminalizing fake blasphemy allegations may be added to the law because cases abound of the law being used as a tool to persecute minorities or settle personal scores. Often, when a blasphemy allegation is

levelled, the extremists take to the social media to repeat the allegations mostly without evidence and call for punishment of the suspect. Therefore, given the gravity of a blasphemy charge, there needs to be provision in the law to make fake blasphemy allegation a cognizable crime. Such a clause would help deter abuse of the law and reduce blasphemy cases.

- **Strengthening independent watchdogs**

Local independent watchdogs and rights-based organizations are instrumental in highlighting issues that get overlooked by the mainstream media. Priorities of private media industry are influenced by corporate interests and factors of self-censorships and external pressures. Often, issues that may be critically important for the

society may not be financially viable for the industry. Here the problem of forced conversions may be considered as an example. The media usually report those cases that generate enough social media attention to boost viewership and ratings. This selective reporting may prevent the broader society or even the government from having an accurate reading of the problem. Thankfully, the information gap left by the mainstream media is bridged by locally based watchdogs and rights groups that report and document nearly all cases. Therefore, there is a need to strengthen alternate media led by rights advocates as their role is crucial in highlighting issues that might otherwise get overlooked by the press and electronic media.

This brief presents key observations and findings of a quarterly 'Social Media Monitoring' report developed by a group of youth observers established by PIPS. Brief developed by: Pak Institute for Peace Studies, Islamabad.



Pak Institute for Peace Studies Pvt Ltd. (PIPS) is a research and advocacy think-tank. An initiative of leading Pakistani scholars, researchers and journalists, PIPS conducts wide-ranging research and analysis of political, social and religious conflicts that have a direct bearing on both national and international security. The PIPS approach is grounded in field research. Our surveys and policy analyses are informed by the work of a team of researchers, reporters and political analysts located in different areas of conflict in Pakistan.