



**PAK INSTITUTE FOR
PEACE STUDIES**
KNOWLEDGE FOR PEACE

POLICY BRIEF

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM VIOLATIONS ON PAKISTAN SOCIAL MEDIA

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INTRODUCTION

Pakistan has a history of religious freedom violations. The Constitution guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as equal rights to all citizens regardless of faith. However, constitutional safeguards have not translated into actual freedom for religious minorities who continue to face social and legal discrimination as well as persecution. Certain laws and regulations are in place that restrict freedom of religious beliefs in the country. The legal system bars non-Muslim Pakistanis from holding high public offices and discriminates against them in opportunities for decent employment or upward mobility. The Hindu, Christian, and Ahmadi minorities also face hate speech both online and offline that aggravates their persecution. The blasphemy law which has often been manipulated and abused is also used to target religious minorities or anyone who challenges the socio-religious status quo. Furthermore, in the last decade, women of minority communities have become particularly vulnerable due to forced conversion and marriages.

Currently, Pakistan is confronted with political instability characterized by economic woes, insecurity, ethnic tensions, and religious and sectarian divides. It is in these circumstances that social cohesion is most important in order to reduce the levels of tension and violence that accompany instability. One way of achieving social cohesion is to check hate speech that underpins faith-based persecution and violence. Therefore, Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) takes a proactive approach to monitoring social media for hate speech and other malicious activity that tend to undermine freedom of religious beliefs in Pakistan. PIPS monitors Twitter daily for religiously hateful or offensive posts and keeps an eye on potential threats emanating from such hateful online posts. The monitoring data feed into quarterly social Media Reports issued by PIPS. And the findings of these Social Media Reports inform this policy brief in hand. As an organization, PIPS aims at promoting a safe, healthy, and inclusive online environment for everyone in Pakistan.

This policy brief is based on monitoring research examining religious freedom violations particularly hate speech on Pakistani social media. The research was conducted by a team of observers to identify different forms of online hate speech and their potential consequences for public safety and basic rights. The research included a comprehensive review of the Pakistani Twitter for hate speech and other forms of religious freedom violations, and the analysis of data collected. The Twitter was searched on daily basis from Sep 1, 2022, to Nov 30, 2022 (three months) for specific terms to assess the consistency of the problem and its effects on society. The findings are used to formulate policy recommendations that can be adopted to mitigate harmful effects of online extremism and increase public safety. Overall, this policy brief is intended to provide insight into the current landscape of online hate speech in Pakistan and offer solutions for addressing it.

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THE PROBLEM

Social media platforms provide an easy and efficient way for people to speak out about social issues, regardless of their location or social status. It allows people from all walks of life to have access to an audience and make a point. In Pakistan, mainstream media is often limited to the voices of celebrities, politicians, and other members of the elite, while social media amplifies the voices of those not normally heard. Social media can help amplify the voices of religious minorities and ethnic peripheries by giving them an online platform to broadcast their stories and share information without the need of traditional news outlets. This can provide a space for them to express their grievances, advocate for their rights and connect with supporters to further their cause. This makes it a powerful tool for highlighting social issues. Additionally, the speed and agility of the online platform can help to spread the word quickly and bring attention to pressing issues in a timely fashion.

However, on the other hand, social media can just as easily have the opposite effect by undermining social cohesion and damaging relationships among religious communities. It can create an echo chamber of hate speech directed at the Ahmadis, Hindus, Christians, and others. Hate speech and other forms of online extremism and bullying can have devastating impacts on social cohesion and interfaith relations. For instance, the Twitter is a case in point. In Pakistan, Twitter has become a platform where extremist views are routinely shared, allowing them to reach a larger audience and potentially strengthening religious radicalism in the country. Propagation of hate speech and violent ideologies on social media can lead to violence. Furthermore, there are certain accounts that are linked to extremist religious and sectarian groups. Usually, social media platforms do implement policies to check or limit extremist contents, but those measures are far from being adequate.

Despite growing threats to religious freedoms posed by social media, successive government have failed to check the problem, and in some cases political leaders and law enforcers have been complicit in reinforcing faith-based discrimination. The problem is exacerbated mainly through hate speech against minorities. Hate speech has emerged as a major issue primarily due to proliferation of and easy access to the internet. Millions of Pakistanis access the internet including social media platforms on daily basis, and hate speech propagated on social media gets amplified and reaches an immense audience across the country. This real-time connectivity and global reach of the social media led UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres to call social media 'a global megaphone for hate speech'. In Pakistan, online hate speech is routinely used to defame and demonize religious minorities and delegitimize their rights as equal citizens. As hate speech targeting religious groups proliferates in the cyberspace, it tends to manipulate public opinion negatively and sustain the cycle of faith-based violence.

Pakistan is a culturally diverse state that has adopted freedom of faith as a constitutional guarantee. However, despite this guarantee, religious freedoms have progressively been under attack due to a combination of government and societal limitations. The official policy of the government is to promote interfaith harmony and peace amongst the various religious communities in the country. This is reflected in several legislations over the past decades which provide general mechanism for the protection of the rights of religious minorities. Article 20 of the Constitution states that "every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice and propagate his religion," and the government has declared that it is committed to ensuring the religious freedom and human rights of all citizens.

The Pakistani citizens are largely free to practice the religion of their choice, though religion is often used as an instrument of political and social control by the traditional ruling elite. Besides, the government also



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restricts any activity that is deemed antagonistic or contrary to Islamic values and teachings. And religion has a significant role in shaping up national politics and public policy. Over the years, religious freedoms have progressively been truncated various legislative means. In addition, the Constitution also suffers from inherent contradictions. For instance, it guarantees equal citizenship to all, and then goes on to declare that no non-Muslim can become head of the state or government. Such inconsistencies in the legal structure often also inform the general behavior of the majority population towards minorities.

Due to its wrong policies, the country is currently embroiled in political instability and economic insecurity. As a result, matters like religious freedom violations do not constitute a priority for the government because it is focused on issues of security, economic survival, and natural disasters that has affected millions across the country. On top of these challenges, powerful religious parties and groups further push for enforcement of more religious laws. Even a terrorist group like TTP is attempting to carve out a territory from Pakistan where it could establish what it considers an Islamic caliphate. In this pursuit, the outfit is committing acts of terror in Pakistan, further intensifying the prevailing instability.

Similarly, sectarian groups are also vying for a comeback after years of relative peace in the country. Previously, these outfits operated with impunity due to ineffective enforcement actions by the state. Still worse, at times, these militants have received tacit support from powerful and influential political figures. Today more than ever, there is ample room for militant groups to tap into existing deep-seated religious and cultural prejudices, hatred, and suspicions against religious minorities, making it exceedingly difficult for the law enforcement to tackle these violent groups. Due to the country's ideological orientation and historical strategic interests, governments in Pakistan have been reluctant to challenge radical groups and their violent ideologies that are widely propagated on the social media. These challenges coupled with prolonged governance failures have created survival issues for Pakistan as a normal and coherent state.

Therefore, the state needs to realize that religious radicalism is a significant challenge to the security

and stability of Pakistan. Extremism fuels terrorism, sectarian violence, human rights abuses, and persecution of religious minorities. It creates conditions in which violent groups and criminal gangs can flourish, and it can undermine efforts to promote democracy and the rule of law. For these reasons, it is essential that Pakistan takes decisive steps to tackle religious extremism not only in the physical world but also in the cyberspace particularly the social media.

ANALYSES OF THE FINDINGS OF SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING

This section provides an overview of the periodic monitoring of the Pakistani Twitter, its importance, and how the authorities and other stakeholders can utilize it to address the growing extremism on social media. The monitoring involves the use different tools to track and analyze Twitter contents and conversations for faith-based hate speech and other forms of religious freedom violations. The monitoring gives valuable insights into how religious hatred is peddled on social media platforms, and how users engage with such contents. This policy brief also provides recommendations for de-radicalizing the cyberspace and address online extremism in Pakistan.



HATE SPEECH

Religious hate speech is prevalent on Pakistani social media including Twitter which is also a preferred social media platform for the Pakistani elite including ministers, political leaders, state institutions, etc. Hate speech is perpetrated online in various forms such trolling, organized hate campaigns, and hateful comments directed against vulnerable religious communities. By and large, the authorities are indifferent to abusive language, derogatory comments, and insulting tweets about religious minorities. Though political hate speech is also becoming common on Pakistan social media, yet the most extreme forms of hate speech are usually faith-based that target the Ahmadis, Shias, Hindus, Christians, and others. Due to a strong sense of impunity, hate speech is routinely amplified by radical groups to manipulate public sentiments on certain religious and political issues.

During the monitoring period, the extremist

sectarian outfit Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ) held a huge gathering in Pakistan's capital where extreme anti-Shia speeches were delivered, and hateful slogans were chanted. Currently, Pakistan stands at a crossroads where it is suffering from a myriad of paralyzing challenges such as a sinking economy, political instability and uncertainty, social tensions, and growing terrorism. In such a grim scenario, there is a need for concrete steps to control and prevent extremism in all forms and manifestations order to ensure stability and security in the country. Extremism has a negative impact on the country's social and economic development, so it is important for the Pakistani government to take measures to tackle the problem including preventing hate speech.



There are many factors behind the prevalence of religious hate speech on Pakistani social media. For instance, Pakistan has a long history of religious and sectarian animosity and violence. These tensions also manifest on the social media as members of radical groups and ordinary users engage in online hate speech and campaigns. Secondly, hateful religious rhetoric is also promoted by political and religious leaders. Additionally, the social media also provides a cover of anonymity to users which aggravates hate speech propagation. Furthermore, it is highly likely that many Pakistani social media users have scanty knowledge of the laws on online hate speech which result in the spread of hate speech. And lastly, there is also a mass unawareness about the perilous consequences of hate speech and its potential to fuel social and political tensions and violence.

However, amongst all vulnerable religious communities in Pakistan, the Ahmadis remain the prime target of online hate speech. The community is routinely discriminated against and treated as

second-class citizens. The growing access to the internet and social media platforms has magnified anti-Ahmadi hate speech. Online hate speech and campaigns against the community often include conspiracy theories accusing them of blasphemy and treason. Such hateful contents have often led to acts of violence against the Ahmadis. Ahmadis have been shot or stabbed in broad daylight by fanatics in recent past. The discriminatory laws specifically targeting the Ahmadi faith have put limits on the rights of Ahmadis, leading to their vulnerability to online hate speech and campaigns. In July 2021, The Diplomat published a piece titled "Pakistan's Social Media is Overflowing with Hate Speech against Ahmadis", detailing the wide prevalence of hate speech targeting the Ahmadi community.

What is even worse is that mainstream political leaders also routinely engage in hate speech against Ahmadis. Many center-right politicians target Ahmadis as part of the usual political strategy to create an atmosphere of religious tension and use the Ahmadis as a scapegoat for their political gains. Disparaging the Ahmadi community is an old method for them to gain support from a large part of the population who subscribe to such bigoted views. For instance, during the monitoring period, Punjab Chief Minister Pervez Elahi announced that his government would build a huge mosque where "Qadiyanis"

will not be allowed entry. In a similar way, PMLN leader Javed Latif accused his political rival Imran Khan of attacking the basic tenets of Islam by supporting the "Qadiyanis". These statements were amplified on social media.

The ruling elite seem oblivion to the immense cost of religious extremism in the country. Mainstream political parties have been targeted by extremists and terrorists in the past, leading to the deaths of many key political leaders. Despite that, the blunt display of religious bigotry by political leaders is mindboggling. Given the anti-Ahmadi rhetoric by politicians, it is little surprise that members of the Ahmadi community are routinely apprehended by the law enforcement for practicing their faith including using Islamic terminologies, symbols, or rituals. Many members of the community have been murdered for their faith by radical elements. The police have been observed to be overwhelmingly committed to enforcing anti-Ahmadi laws.

But there is a glaring lack of understanding on the

part of the government that online religious hate speech is causing serious damage to the social fabric of the country. In fact, it has undermined religious harmony and respect for religious freedoms. Through social media platforms, hate speech has become a dangerous tool for instigating hatred and violence towards religious minorities, not to mention it has further emboldened radical ideologies and narratives. The situation has put the country at high risk of social and political instability.

FORCED CONVERSIONS

Forced faith conversion of Hindu women and girls is a continuing challenge for the Pakistani government, and a constant feature on the social media. Since the mainstream media give only limited coverage to the problem, the social media users fill the void by highlighting most, if not all, cases of forced conversions. The presence of extremist groups and the overall environment of religious intolerance prepare the perfect ground of religious conversions. Sindh remains the epicenter of forced conversions as it has the largest Hindu population in Pakistan. The forced conversion is carried out in an organized manner by radical groups in Sindh. The victims are forced to convert to majority faith through physical and emotional coercion. Laws concerning forced conversions and marriage are rarely enforced, and the minority victims are mostly left without protection or recourse to justice.



It is true that in some cases the conversions may be voluntary rather than forced as there may be incentives for conversions such as marriage or financial benefits etc. Extreme poverty and lack of education may encourage some Hindu women to change faith in hopes of a comparatively less painful life. However, most reported cases of conversions are not voluntary as reported on the social media. Throughout the monitoring quarter from Sep to Nov 2022, cases of forced conversions of Hindu women and minor girls kept popping up on the Twitter. The monitoring reveals that the forced conversion is carried out ruthlessly because minor girls as

young as 10 and married women with kids were kidnapped and forcibly converted across Sindh. In majority cases, the victims were immediately issued conversion certificates and married off to their abductors. In one of the cases, a converted girl Maria Meghwar is seen in a video dismissing her conversion and marriage, saying that she had been taken against her will.

The standard scene after almost every case of kidnapping and forced conversion depicts victims' parents and relatives weeping and staging a protest on the road or outside some local press club. In most cases, the local law enforcement is accused of biasness or inaction by the victims. Given the brutal continuity of the forced conversion problem, it is hard to miss the political purpose of the conversions. The willful paralysis of the system to curb this menace may be construed as an implicit policy to further Islamize the country and impose state religion over members of minority faiths. This is probably done to maintain power in certain areas of the country where non-Muslim citizens have a sizeable population. No doubt forced conversion is religious persecution, and it has been used to suppress dissent and diversity and consolidate the power of state elite and religious institutions.

However, the policymakers and runners of the country may spare some moments of contemplation over this problem. The forced conversion issue is strengthening religious tensions and mistrust among social groups. It is seriously undermining social cohesion and stability at a time when the country needs these most. The ensuing instability is creating a breeding ground for more radical and violent ideologies, threatening not only the safety and security of the minorities, but the entire country. Pakistan has already landed itself in an unprecedented economic quagmire. It can ill-afford to let religious fanaticism further impede economic development and obstruct social integration. The minorities have already been too marginalized to contribute significantly to the socio-economic development of the country. Any further marginalization and persecution would be another nail in the coffin of its sinking economy.

BLASPHEMY

There has been unusual rise in blasphemy-related crimes in Pakistan in recent years, and social media has become a critical platform for conversations around the country's blasphemy laws. The blasphemy laws are loosely interpreted and misused to target minority faiths and their followers. Often, members of the majority faith are also accused of blasphemy on social media which gain traction easily. Besides, the growing religious conservatism

in society and a frail criminal justice system have enabled many blasphemy related crimes to go unpunished, providing further incentive to the radical lots to take matters into their own hands. Likewise, the political exploitation of religious issues to garner votes or divert public attention from pressing matters further contribute to such crimes.



During the reporting period, several cases of blasphemy surfaced in the country including the high profile assassination attempt on the life of former Prime Minister Imran Khan. In the latter case, in a confessional video, the accused said he wanted to murder Khan because he had allegedly committed blasphemy. In another heart-wrenching incident, a physically disabled man was murdered in a water pond by a young fanatic on accusations of blasphemy. And in yet another case, a Christian staff at a local hospital was accused of blasphemy by a Muslim patient. Reportedly, the female patient accused the Christian staff after he refused to give her a priority treatment.

The rising tide of blasphemy-related crimes indicates that blasphemy has become a formidable tool at the hands of Muslim vigilante groups and powerful religious lobbies that have created a culture of extreme fear and intolerance in the country in which blasphemy is used to persecute minorities or settle personal scores. Broad interpretations of blasphemy laws by individuals or groups rather than courts of law have led to a culture of mob justice and a sense of impunity among perpetrators. Rule of law is the first casualty of blasphemy cases because a person accused of blasphemy is often deemed guilty before even the case is duly investigated. In the past, blasphemy has also led to high profile assassinations notably of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer, Federal Minister Shahbaz Bhatti, etc.

Steadily and dangerously, vigilantism and mob justice are being normalized in Pakistan. This threatens internal security and stability as it encourages people to take the law into their own hands and commit violence. Such a culture undermines the rule of law, encourages societal lawlessness, and can lead to more armed militancy

that ultimately challenges the state's sovereignty. The more the state tolerates mob justice, the more it reduces its ability to perform its fundamental job i.e., protecting the lives of citizens.

CONCLUSION

Online religious extremism including hate speech continues to remain a serious issue in Pakistan, still there are practical ways to challenge it and reduce its prevalence to insignificant levels. Despite the challenges, incorporating clear and concrete policies to prevent hate speech and responding with awareness and dialogue can contribute to improved outcomes with more inclusive environment for all on social media. The problem can be addressed by promoting constructive exchanges and healthy public discourse. The government and civil society must recognize the urgent need for a balance between preserving free speech and curbing hate speech particularly on the social media platforms. Likewise, more coordination is needed between the state and civil society to challenge the contextual factors that underpin hate speech in Pakistan. Finally, social media corporations should improve their moderation techniques to ensure that their platforms do not become engines of hate speech propagation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The government needs to create mass awareness about the nature and consequences of religious radicalism particularly hate speech on social media platforms. Such an initiative may entail running social media campaigns for awareness and campaigns for specific social groups such as youth etc. on the dangers of online extremism.
- The government should also work with civil society organizations to develop counter-narratives that specifically combat the typical messages of hate shared on the Pakistani social media platforms. This may include creating targeted messages that expose the fallacies of extremist messages on internet.
- Pakistani authorities concerned with curbing online extremism and hate speech need to work together with social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, etc. to develop and improved moderation system to instantly recognize and remove contents that promote extremist narratives.
- Authorities such as PTA, PEMRA, and others should prepare and publish a list of words and terms that indicate hate speech in Pakistan. These may be disseminated widely as part of mass awareness drive about online hate speech. The public may also be educated about laws prohibiting online hate speech.
- The Pakistani civil society, rights organizations, and ordinary citizens should call out any public figure who indulges in religious hate speech. If needed, such persons should be reported to authorities for prosecution under relevant laws. There should be zero tolerance for public figures committing or amplifying hate speech.
- The government and civil society should promote inclusive voices and amplify the voices of those who advocate for inclusion and diversity. Such voices need to be celebrated at all relevant platforms.
- The government and civil society should engage the Pakistani youth and promote an open and honest dialogue on the perils of online extremism and hate speech. The youth may be trained and mobilized to observe social media and report hate speech and other incidents of extremism.

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.

About PIPS:

Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) is an Islamabad-based research and advocacy organisation. The Institute offers a range of consultancy services through a combination of independent research and analysis, innovative academic programmes, and hands-on training and support that serve the following basic themes: Conflict analysis and peace-building; dialogue; prevent/counter violent extremism (P/CVE); internal and regional security; and media for peace and democracy.

PIPS conducts structured dialogues, focused group discussions, and national and international seminars to understand the issues listed earlier and also strengthen partnerships. The outcomes of PIPS research and planned events have extensively been reported in the mainstream media which adds to its credibility as an active and well networked civil society organisation. PIPS policy reports and recommendations on security and CVE have frequently been cited in various works, and also included in state policy debates and documents.

Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) conducted a research study in 2018 on freedom of faith in Pakistan which identified universities, teachers and students critical agents that could improve freedom of faith in Pakistan. The youth for interfaith harmony program was designed to engage Pakistan's educated youth on educational campuses with an aim to improve in them support for freedom of faith, and religious tolerance and harmony. It builds upon the philosophical approach that youth is part of a solution to challenges thrown by violent extremism and communal and sectarian discord.



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