

Persecuting Pakistan's minorities: state complicity or historic neglect?

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On the frontline: minorities under threat

Religious freedom is a human right. It is as critical to the development of a nation as its economy and security, given that it reflects moral values and a sense of identity. The right to religious freedom for all religious groups constitutes the freedom to practice without threats from those organizations and individuals rejecting the beliefs of minority religions and sects. Freedom of religion takes on greater importance when communities and diverse ethnic groups co-exist, especially in countries where intolerance and religious extremism is rife. In Pakistan, there exists a co-relation between the lack of freedom of religion and the dissemination of violent religious extremism. When the government refuses to protect its people and represses religious freedoms, permits laws that are misused (laws used to prosecute for blasphemy) and target minorities and other vulnerable groups, it not only fuels rising extremism, but emboldens those who spread violence with impunity.

It was in 2013 when Pakistan witnessed an unprecedented transition of democratic power that the changing of guard between two democratically elected governments was acknowledged as a critical political milestone. To be watchfully steered towards increased stability and national pluralism, it drew consensus among most political stakeholders that increasing internal conflict fuelled by sectarianism and extremist attacks against religious minorities would need to be addressed as an urgent priority. Religious tensions would need to be quelled by the state—through a process that would engage religious leaders and combined with inter-faith dialogue and confidence and tolerance-building at the local level within diverse religious and ethnic communities where the slightest spark of dissent is liable to cause violence and distress. Given the spectre of sectarianism, much of it perpetuated by religious and other sect-based intolerance tearing at the fabric of human rights and democracy, it was thought the government would proceed and commit resources, appoint special officials/ ministers and intelligence to curb right-wing hardliners from conducting terror attacks and vigilante justice. But sadly that did not happen. Government assurances, especially articulated in the aftermath of an attack targeting a minority community or a place of worship, did not go beyond visiting the scene of violent incidents/attacks, and ensuring a committee investigate the attack. Activists in Pakistan and other international watchdogs have reminded that minorities lack police protection and legal assistance. Perpetrators of hate crimes are not charged and punished. In a 2013 Pew survey, fifty-seven percent of Pakistanis said that they considered religious conflict a national problem.¹

¹ *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society* was conducted by Pew Research Centre's Forum on Religion and Public Life and published in April 2013, the main objective being to examine the social and political views of Muslims worldwide.

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Vali Nasr² explains sectarianism as the single most important issue in the Muslim world, including the Middle-East. It is the oldest dispute with 1,400 years of difference between the two sects of Islam – Sunni and Shia – that interpret history, law and philosophy differently. Because diversity doesn't have currency in religion, it is not easy to define the Shia-Sunni conflict as being about religion [alone] but it has a socio-political dimension, therefore has a political side. Nasr claims that the 2003 Iraq war brought into sharper focus the Iranian-Saudi rivalry which meant that an Arab-Shia power with oil money in the Middle-East became a lot more dangerous than even an independent Najaf (considered the third holiest city of Shia Islam and the center of Shia political power in Iraq) According to his analysis, Pakistan has the world's second largest Shia population at 30 percent. Nasr points out that Pakistan, despite its resilience was the canary in the coalmine (Nasr, 2006).

Post-1977 Pakistan witnessed the state adopting a Sunni version of Islam and this was reason for growing discord among minority religious communities that became targets because of their sect and ethnicity. Religion when misused in a multi-ethnic and religious society polarizes more than it unifies communities. Of the various factors that perpetuate such polarization, political power games and the desire to hold onto geographical and ideological space can be attributed as reasons (Rais, 2007). The religious group in the majority – Sunni Muslims – has been turned into a dangerous weapon in the hands of proxy extremist players, as they attempt to reshape society, culture, social institutions and the politics of the state according to their doctrine.

According to authoritative indicators used in the "Peoples under Threat 2013" analysis by Minority Rights Group International, Pakistan, Syria, Yemen and Egypt have all risen significantly in the global ranking table (global ranking that documents threats), with religious minorities at particular risk. Eight out of ten states are identified in the index as being most at risk subject to recent or decades-long foreign military interventions. The report points out that foreign armed intervention is now the norm in states with peoples at risk, but there is a widespread failure to track the effect on civilians (MRGI, 2014). In the case of Pakistan, although the 2013 election was hailed as the first where the transfer of power from one democratic government to another marked a milestone in the country's historical past, there has been deepening resentment among certain political and religious groups on Pakistan's role in the war on terror; its complex relationship with America, and the drone war that continues to affect communities in the tribal areas. Operating in such a backdrop of insecurity and terrorism, Pakistan has willfully turned a blind eye to home-grown extremist groups threatening its internal security and economic progress, allowing proxies to regroup and train on its border with Afghanistan and attack foreign troops across the Durand Line. Internally militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and other sectarian extremists have intensified a campaign against Shia and other religious groups, operating with complete impunity.

Pakistan celebrates National Minorities Day on August 11 ever since Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif made a comeback for a third inning in 2013. If this was meant to be a commended reminder of an increasingly tolerant democracy where minorities are accorded rights and a voice as equal citizens, then it can be

² Having written extensively on politics and Islamic activism in Pakistan and Iran, Vali Nasr highlighted the importance of Shia politics in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq war and the current power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle-East, while speaking on the growing role of sectarianism in politics at the Yohsin Distinguished Lecture at Habib University, in Karachi, Pakistan in November 2014. Nasr is currently the Dean of the Paul H Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at John Hopkins University, USA. Among other numerous professional appointments, he has served as a senior advisor to the US Special representative for Pakistan and Afghanistan, the late Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, between 2009 and 2011.

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vehemently reiterated that is not the case given the constant anguish and endless threats non-Muslim communities must endure. Their situation and treatment defies all norms set by humanity: a potent reminder of the harsh reality that is Pakistan for most minority groups, including Muslim minority communities that continue to face alarming levels of hate, violence and intolerance and are forced to leave the country. Economic deprivation, political divisions, weak laws and poor governance practices and other factors all contribute to their suffering, but an underlying element is the Islamization of thought that propels this ongoing discrimination and marginalization. And very often, targeted violence has a purpose as an instrument of oppression. It sends a message not only to individuals but to entire communities. The role of religion has become so greatly politicized that it adversely impacts the status and situation of minorities and the question of security. This, in itself, has led to greater internal instability and caused sectarian and communal violence.

Religious minorities comprise 9 million out of the 183 million Pakistanis. Christians and Hindus, making up 2 percent of the population are the largest group of minorities, while the remaining include Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Baha'is, Buddhist, Jews and Ahmadis.³ It is clear that the state of security and protection for all citizens has come under greater threat as Sharif's government grapples haplessly with political machinations while the reigniting and regrouping of various militant assortments means ceding further space for extremism to take root. As the Sword of Damocles hangs over Pakistan's minority groups, the future for religious communities and the younger generation appears insecure and threatened than previously.

What does it mean to belong to a minority religion in Pakistan? This report examines the socio-political views and notable challenges faced by Pakistan's largest minority communities – Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs – analyzing findings from a countrywide survey conducted by the Pak Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS) in 2014. Based on interviews with 327 respondents from Pakistan's four provinces – Sindh, Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan – the survey is focused on groups according to educational qualifications and religious affiliation. Findings reveal that discrimination against minorities – within the social and cultural mainstream, undermining economic livelihoods and political participation – is connected with overall inequality and government inattention.⁴

As extremist views take hold of the mainstream, persecution of religious minorities is often enacted under the guise of the blasphemy law. A record number of blasphemy accusations have surfaced over the past years, having resulted in nearly 500 families leaving the country (JI, 2014). Young children and handicapped individuals are punished for their words and their religion while those who seek to inflict inhumane harm against vulnerable, poor communities without influential, political support are permitted to do so with impunity.

³ Pakistan's population is estimated to be around 183 million according to the population census in 2011. Over 181 million (97%) are Muslims, while the remaining include Christians (1.8%), Hindus (1.6%), Ahmadis (0.22) and other smaller religious groups including Buddhists, Parsis and Sikhs. Studies have suggested that a very small group (few hundred) of Jews also live in Pakistan.

⁴ The PIPS October 2014 survey, *Minority Rights in Pakistan: Historic Neglect or State Complicity?* discusses the lives of minorities and their relationship with other religious groups within an inter-faith milieu; explores social, cultural, economic and political aspects of various minority groups with emphasis on historic challenges; and identifies inter-faith and inter-cultural connectors from Pakistan's existing composite cultural heritage. A summary of the findings can be downloaded at <<http://san-pips.com/download.php?f=257.pdf>>

What does it mean to be a religious minority in Pakistan

Historian James Mill when writing the 'The History of British India' in the 1818 marked its history into three distinctive phases – the Hindu, Muslim and the British.⁵ Even in early times, it was noted that intra-religious discord was not alien to traditions, whether Islamic, Hindu or Christian. Historically minority identities in Islamic societies distinguished themselves from the Muslim majority by features such as culture, language, religion, literature, symbols, communal memory, rather than by politics. But with geopolitical and social changes in recent times, factors impacting the role of religion in minority-identity formation would include political organization. Complex historical and social factors have formed the nexus between religion and politics in Pakistan. Religion was at the heart of the political struggle for a separate Muslim homeland pre-1947 and has remained integral to the functioning of the state since Partition. Religious identities and definitions are often mutually inclusive, varying across overlapping temporal, regional, linguistic, economic and sectarian vectors. This relationship between religion and state is complex and at times unclear. It brings in varied explanation and interest from mainstream political parties, religious leaders, military and other stakeholders. Perceptions are tailored in accordance with political interest – and it is this conflict whether Pakistan should develop as a liberal secular democracy or an Islamist state with conservative leanings that has left its real identity up for grabs and caused civil liberties and economic progress to remain on the backburner.

The Muslim majority tends to perceive poverty and the low social status of certain minority groups as one of the reasons for disqualifying them from full citizenship and preventing them from political participation by enacting discriminatory laws that persecute the vulnerable. With religion more than any other factor remaining at the core of Pakistan's identity, Huntington's thesis (1996) is compellingly applicable as he observes "in the modern world, religion is central, perhaps the central force that motivates and mobilizes people." Any civilization that bears markers of religious traditions predominates among its people. This clash between civilizations becomes a struggle between religions and not people, and the conflict is intractable. He notes that 'what is universalism to the West, is imperialism to the rest' which in essence makes even positive interventions of peace and development by the West – or what appear less conservative forces of religion – seem structured to evoke violent reaction.

Further, Pakistan's ethnic diversity has given rise to sectarian violence against a backdrop of intolerance and historically entrenched hatred for non-Sunni groups – the aftermath of Zia's Islamization policies led to the exclusion and persecution of non-Sunni groups. Though population statistics reveal a multi-ethnic and religious mix, it is clear the space for all other religious groups is shrinking rapidly.

Was Pakistan defined as homeland for Muslims and non-Muslims or an Islamic state is a question further spotlighted when Zia promoted religious organizations that blatantly advocated violence – Harkat-ul-Ansar Pakistan linked with the Deobandi school of thought emerged in the 1980s to fight the anti-Soviet war and lent support to the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) which views all Shias as infidels.⁶ As early as the 1980s such organizations demanded that Pakistan not only become an Islamic state but promote Wahhabi Islam in society – and this has meant little space for minorities in state governance and how they

⁵ Scottish historian and economist, James Mill published 'The History of British India' in 1818 and the following year was appointed an official in India House to take charge of all correspondence from India.

⁶ The SSP, founded in 1985 by Maulana Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, targets Shias as one of the Sunni militant organizations allegedly attacking and intimidating non-Sunni communities through their campaign of violence.

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see themselves fitting into a larger national identity. This is an example of how Sunni Islamism has an urge for purification and the tendency in Sunni fundamentalism to be exclusive and puritanical in their interpretation of Islam. Furthermore, the Iranian Revolution in 1979 was a jolt to the region and brought Islam into the political process as it emboldened Shias in the region. It raised the question as to who defines what an Islamic state constitutes. It was at that time when Shias went from being seen as passive and backward to demanding their place in the sun.⁷

This report provides an overview of ways in which minority groups continue to remain politically and socially marginalized and targets of violence. Faith-based violence, targeted killings and kidnapping for ransom, and incitement of hatred are not confined to non-Muslims alone; minority Muslim sects, mainly Shias, including the Shia Hazara community in Balochistan, are frequently attacked for their religious beliefs. State complicity is yet another factor which makes minority persecutions more rampant and left unpunished. Discriminatory laws and socio- economic and political isolation which has historically categorized minorities has found endorsement through various democratic governments and military rule. The blasphemy laws have served to silence and intimidate the weak, settle personal scores against enemies when misused – including Muslims. It is the effects of adverse laws that leave an impression on the character of society, its thinking and merging ideologies, its prejudices and youth.

Human Rights Watch's 2014 report on the killing of Shia Hazaras in Balochistan reiterated that the Pakistan government 'should take all necessary measures to stop Sunni extremist groups in Balochistan province from committing further killings and other abuses against Hazara and other Shia Muslims (HRW, 2014).'⁸ Several hundred Shia Hazaras have been killed since 2008 in incidents of targeted violence, the worse attacks in January and February 2013 that killed at least 180 people.⁹ It is well established that civilian and military forces have done little to investigate such attacks against the Hazara community which allows perpetrators to kill with increasing impunity and attack Shia processions, pilgrimages and neighbourhoods.

Additionally, the threat of ethnic or sectarian killing is spreading across the country, including risks from inter-ethnic political violence in Sindh, sectarian clashes between Deobandi and Barelvi militant groups, violent repression of Balochi activists in Balochistan, continued persecution of Christians and Ahmadis, and an exterminatory campaign against Hazara and other Shias by LeJ, SSP and the Pakistani Taliban, which claimed the lives of hundreds of victims last year (MRGI, 2014). In October 2014, eight men were

⁷ Vali Nasr on sectarianism in the Muslim world, Karachi, November , 2014.

⁸ This 62-page Human Rights Watch report documents attacks on the Shia Hazara community in Balochistan, targeted by Sunni militant groups. HRW interviewed more than 100 survivors, members of victims' families, law enforcement, security officials, and independent experts for the report. HRW's Asia director, Brad Adams states: "There is no travel route, no shopping trip, no school run, no work commute that is safe for the Hazara. The government's failure to put an end to these attacks is as shocking as it is unacceptable."

⁹ Ongoing attacks against the Hazara community in Quetta by Sunni extremists has meant that the half a million Hazaras live under constant threat of attack, restricting their movement, facing economic challenges and hardships and with curtailed access to education and employment, members of this community have begun to leave Pakistan seeking refuge in other countries, states the 62-page Human Rights Watch report. It reminds of the two brutal attacks mentioned above: "On January 10, 2013, the suicide bombing of a snooker club in Quetta frequented by Hazaras killed 96 people and injured at least 150. Many of the victims were caught in a second blast 10 minutes after the first, striking those who had gone to the aid of the wounded. On February 17, 2013, a bomb exploded in a vegetable market in Quetta's Hazara Town, killing at least 84 Hazara and injuring more than 160. The LeJ claimed responsibility for both attacks, the bloodiest attacks from sectarian violence in Pakistan since independence in 1947."

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killed and two others wounded – the victims belonging to the Shia Hazara community – when gunmen opened fire on a bus in Quetta, in a wave of violence that has left hundreds dead, children orphaned and families bereaved in recent years. With the police unable and unwilling to either apprehend the killers, or provide adequate protection, many Hazara families have left the country seeking asylum abroad.

According to statistics provided by Pak Institute for Peace Studies, a total of 220 incidents of sectarian violence were reported in Pakistan in 2013, including 208 sectarian-related terrorist attacks and 12 sectarian clashes, seven more than such incidents reported in 2012. As many as 687 people lost their lives in these incidents—a 22 percent increase in fatalities compared to 2012—and another 1,319 were injured—46 percent more than in 2012 (PIPS, 2014).

The situation for the country's larger minority groups—Christians, Hindus and Sikhs—remains no different as it continues to deteriorate with the government's limited capacity and will to investigate attacks, persecute perpetrators and promote a culture of tolerance. Religious communities remain under direct threat from religious extremists and individuals spreading a milieu of vigilantism and horrific brutality. In the latest manifestation of the threat of vigilante violence, a brutally violent attack on the outskirts of Lahore resulted in an enraged mob killing a Christian couple and burning their bodies in a brick kiln where they worked. Rumours had circulated the day before that the couple had desecrated the Quran but to date the evidence is not clear and the circumstances surrounding this incident remain unexplained. Although the Punjab government has announced a committee to investigate this incident, the government must ensure the safety of vulnerable Christian communities that are threatened persistently. There have been angry protests that those responsible for the killing of this young couple must be brought to justice and that protection be accorded to minorities living in poor districts where the Muslim majority wield the power to take law into their own hands – but if this horrific killing could address the inaction of the authorities nothing noteworthy has happened to date. This climate of impunity is pervasive and perpetrators hardly brought to justice, which sends the message that anyone can commit outrageous atrocities and misuse the blasphemy law to take matters into their own hands.

Hindus in Pakistan remain a struggling community in socio-economic and political terms. Treated as second-class citizens, Hindu women have become victims of sexual assault, kidnapping, forced conversions and marriages, given the minimum safeguards within the legal system for their protection. The unchecked abuse of women's human rights among the Hindu and Christian communities point to the suffering of those who are already marginalized but face rape, persecution and are forcibly married to abductors or sold to a third party. With two million Hindus living in Pakistan, the majority belonging to Sindh, many families have said their daughters are being forcibly kidnapped and married to Muslim men but they can do nothing to reverse their plight – this sense of unease has intensified in the past few years with over 300 women converted to Islam in Pakistan every year.¹⁰ Under the Hudood Ordinance, rape is equivalent to fornication – or to adultery, if the victim is married – and because of the lack of investigation and number of witnesses required women often fail to register complaints against their attackers for fear of retribution. The Hudood Ordinance is used to discriminate against and persecute women in general but more recent cases of non-Muslim (Christian and Hindu) women in particular have become cause for action. Additionally, forced conversions to Islam has enraged the Hindu community that have repeatedly registered complaints against influential perpetrators identified to have kidnapped, forcibly converted and

¹⁰ These figures are cited by the Movement for Solidarity and Peace that states 100 to 700 victims forcibly converted are Christian women each year and 300 are Hindu women.

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married off their young women. Furthermore, most of those working as bonded labour belong to religious minorities – Christians in Punjab and Hindus in Sindh – are trafficked, raped, sold and suffer economic exploitation.

Besides forced conversions and marriages, underrepresentation in political institutions and discriminatory legislation persecuting religious groups, another underlying issue for most minority communities is the lack of access to educational opportunities that takes away from economic development, social status and integration. This is reflective through the PIPS survey results where most respondents – from all provinces polled – said they felt they were not integrated into the larger cultural and social mainstream and lacked equal economic opportunities. In Punjab, 81 percent overwhelmingly stated they felt excluded from the mainstream; 98 percent polled in Sindh stated the same, although 95 percent in the same province did say they participated freely in cultural and religious festivities along with followers of other religions. Here 93.3% of Hindus polled stated that they were not part of the mainstream, whereas in the same province only 5% of Christian respondents stated the same, reflective of the minority population which has a larger presence in this district.

96.7 % polled in Balochistan stated they were excluded (and treated as second-class citizens) although respondents in this province also said they celebrated religious festivities freely.

In KPK, 77.4% stated they did not feel they were part of the social and cultural mainstream which corresponds with results obtained from other provinces where members of minority communities were posed the same question. However, as noted in all provinces, over 90%polled as participating freely in cultural and religious festivities along with members of other religious groups. When asked about the response of members of other religious groups when it came to celebrating their (respondent communities) religious festivities and holidays, 66% did not respond to the question, whereas 21% stated that the response they received was positive. When asked whether they had experienced challenges while doing business or other transactions with those of other religious groups, 82% said they had not, although 54% remained neutral when responding about inter-community relations and only 37% described inter-community relations within their neighbourhood as closely-knit. These results, unlike those obtained from other provinces reveal the lack of security for all groups as well growing conservatism in society (regarding minorities, religious practices and tolerance levels) with special focus on the Islamization drive in the tribal region, including urban districts in KPK.¹¹

Promoting a culture of tolerance is not prioritized as urgent by the state, which if implemented through step-by-step processes would decrease the incidence of violent attacks. The journey from moderate conservatism to violent extremism has transformed Pakistan into a state that is failing to protect its minority groups. Churches are bombed, temples vandalized, worshipers attacked and killed, buses targeted, homes

¹¹ It is important to note the survey titled, *Minority Rights in Pakistan* polled respondents with varied educational qualifications ranging from matriculation to a Master's degree. It appears that those respondents with higher educational qualifications had more awareness of social, political and economic issues that plague minority communities and condemned the recent wave of terror attacks that have targeted their groups. Also note that this group belongs to the middle-to-upper strata of society or that some members that have perhaps migrated for jobs and security to larger cities feel less persecuted than others belonging to the same religious community but have a lower economic status and lesser opportunities and live in semi-urban or rural locales.

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destroyed and social gathering attacked. In September 2013, the Christian community in Peshawar faced its deadliest attack when the All Saints Church was targeted by a suicide attack leaving 127 dead and scores injured. When respondents were asked whether they practised their religion freely, it appeared the more educated polled did not practise their customs as openly as much as they might have but the lesser qualified (or those with fewer economic opportunities) or the matriculated individuals stated they did attend their places of worship more frequently. This could be because of fear or the knowledge that if they attend churches or temples, they could be attacked by conservative/sectarian rightist groups. So the awareness of intolerant behaviour towards minorities appears more prevalent when the respondent is educated at a certain level and informed of the possible threat.

In KPK, most of the respondents included Christians (27.4%) and Sikhs (72.6%) but unlike those polled in other provinces over 40% had an intermediate degree which is obtained after a matriculate qualification and right before a Bachelor's degree. 98.4% were over 25 years. Here, 90% polled as participating freely in cultural and religious festivities along with members of other religious groups. When asked about the response of members of other religious groups when it came to celebrating their (respondent communities) religious festivities and holidays, 66% remained neutral, whereas 21% stated that the response was positive.

Having said that the dynamics of traditional communities where religious tolerance is a given hasn't completely lost ground in KPK as respondents claimed they did not face social, political and economic problems while residing and interacting with diverse religious groups. 80% of the respondents said that security and terrorism threats were critical, threatening all religious communities given their overall vulnerability to terror attacks, kidnapping and extortion rackets. Faith-based persecution on a day-to-day basis was at a low with only 25% answering in the positive. 72% polled said the government does cater to their needs unlike in Punjab, for example, when minority communities were asked the same question.

Audacious and horrific attacks, symptomatic of the state of the nation, taking on increased frequency means there is little social and political space accorded to minorities and no meaningful dialogue and understanding between non-Muslim and Muslim communities. Well-known religious leaders belonging to mainstream Muslims communities, religious parties and sects have rarely been encouraged to take on positive roles in bringing about inter-faith resolutions that could foster tolerance and peace and put an end to attacks that target Shias, Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus and Sikhs. Interestingly, these results have shown that when questioned regarding faith-based persecution in their everyday lives, most respondents have answered in the negative. This could be because within tight-knit multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities where families have lived together for generations traditional ties are binding and religion does not divide. However, outside intervention in many instances causes violent attacks. For example, in Balochistan, 33.3% polled (matriculated/educated respondents) said they faced daily discrimination, but 63.3% disagreed. When asked if they faced any particular terror threats or was it the same for all minority communities, 66.7% stated the threat of a terror attack was the same for all, but 23.3% said they were particular to their community which could indicate awareness (and fear) regarding attacks on churches or mob/vigilante violence against Christians.

In Sindh, 92.4% of Hindus were polled, compared to 5.8% of Christians given the larger Hindu community. Hindu communities have complained regarding forced marriage and abduction of their girls and women as well as lack of job opportunities and discriminatory laws which have also adversely affected both Christian and Hindu communities in Sindh and Punjab. Poll results in Sindh among Hindus and Christians show that communities live together without facing any religious, social and political integration issues.

61% say there are no faith-based persecutions where they live, whereas 31% state there has been persecution.

In Punjab, all three religious minority communities polled stated that they did face religious, economic and political problems that other communities might not necessary encounter (58%). Although 60% said that security and terrorism related all communities. The data aspects of life among multi-ethnic instance, visiting among various occasion such as weddings reflect. However, 41% polled stated they persecution on a day-to-day basis not - which makes these figures the ongoing persecution and Christians in this province.

Living under the Sword of blasphemy law

The most common tool of Muslim communities has become. Currently found in Pakistan's prohibition of blasphemy or persons, culture and artefacts, laws were first introduced under drafted in 1860. Under the Indian prepared by the First Law legislature stated that the act of place of worship or a sacred object criminal act. In 1947 after Pakistan by then had an additional Section outraging religious feeling - over decades. Under Zia's modifications were made when amended Section 295-B to include "whoever wilfully defiles, copy of the Holy Quran or any any derogatory manner or for any

punishable with imprisonment for life." The victims of blasphemy-related vigilante attacks are often minority communities - including Christians, Hindus, and Ahmadis - although members of the mainstream Muslim majority have also been targeted. Allegations of blasphemy and the prosecution are often not issued by the police but by individuals. In instances, the accused have been injured or killed in prison by policemen or other inmates. Lawyers and judges fear reprisals and several cases are pending and victims languish in prison without legal representation.

Historical trail: Pakistan's controversial blasphemy laws

- *The British colonial administration formulated four laws to deal with blasphemy because of communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims prior to Partition and supported even at the time by political interests of various groups. Therefore, general laws against trespass and defiling monuments were first codified in 1860 by India's British rulers*
- *These laws were amended in 1927 to include 'deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion and religious believers' which meant words, insults would be punished with imprisonment and with a fine. This law was inherited by Pakistan after Partition in 1947. The ensuing tensions and tussle between the powers that led East and West Pakistan allowed the conservative religious right to further fuel hatred and intolerance of the other. This resulted in a movement led by Majlis-e-Ahrar in West Pakistan against the Ahmadi community, which was eventually declared non-Muslim and heretic under the Islamization process that was gradually taking root*

threats were the same for collected regarding shared communities reveal for communities on special a sense of satisfaction. faced faith-based whereas 51% said they did higher in the Punjab given attacks on focused on

Damocles: the

persecution against non-a charge of blasphemy. Penal Code (PPC) as the irreverence towards holy Pakistan's blasphemy British colonial legislation Penal Code in 1860, Commission, this piece of damaging or defiling a under Section 295 was a inherited this law - which 295A adding the offence of amendments were sought Islamization, the PPC Ordinance 1982 life imprisonment if damages or desecrates a extract thereof or uses it in unlawful purpose shall be

Misusing the blasphemy laws to vigilante justice is of grave concern yet to amend the law. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan notes that 34 individuals were charged with blasphemy in 2013. Although no one has been executed for blasphemy in Pakistan as yet, 16 and 20 are serving life sentences. The minority Ahmadi community is a frequent target for Sunni extremist groups and officers are known to support protecting the community, its mosques and graveyards.¹²

When Professor Muhammad Asghar Khan expressed his moderate views on Islam – he was not mandatory to remove make-up prayers – he began to face threats years; some more sinister than others. Dean at the Faculty of Islamic Studies of Karachi remained stoic and in 2014, the 54-year old professor was with a female student to attend an Iranian Cultural Centre in Karachi.

Attempts through the past decade amending the blasphemy law have met with backlash from the religious right.¹⁴

¹² The Human Rights Watch World Report 2014 notes that Ahmadi Muslims are a major target for blasphemy prosecution, increasing social discrimination as militancy against Muslims, forced the demolition of Ahmadi mosques in Rawalpindi, and vandalized Ahmadi graveyards.

¹³ It has been widely reported that Professor Khan was attacked in 2012 by four colleagues belonging to the Pakistan Branch of the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) One of the same department. The four men who were charged with blasphemy.

¹⁴ In 1986, the Criminal Law Act III provided that blasphemy against the Prophet was a criminal offence. The amended version noted: "Whoever by words, either spoke or written, or by visible representation, or by any other imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) shall be punished with death or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to a fine." Aasia Bibi, who is the first Christian woman to be sentenced to death, is accused under this clause. Interestingly, in May 1998, during Nawaz Sharif's previous government, there was talk of amending the blasphemy law but in September of that year Justice Nazeer Akhtar from Lahore is known to have said that there was no reason to amend this law and that all blasphemers should be killed. This statement caused public uproar but the religious right supportive of the blasphemy law in its existing form led by Maulana Shah Ahmed Noorani warned the government of dire backlash, if it amended the Penal Code. The Action Committee of the Namoos-e-Mustafa was mobilized to hold countrywide protests. In 1992, when Sharif's government removed the option of life imprisonment

- *The blasphemy laws were Islamised under 1980s Zia-ul-Haq regime with more than 80 cases reported to the courts between 1977 and 1988 according to a report by the Islamabad-based Center for Research and Security Studies.*
- *Further amendments to the blasphemy law were made between 1980 and 1984. These were: 295-B (defiling the holy book); 295-C (the use of derogatory remarks in respect to the Holy Prophet; 298-A (using derogatory language for holy personages); 298-B (misuse of holy titles, epithets and titles reserved for holy personages and places); 298-C ('Qadiani' or Ahmadis were forbidden from calling themselves Muslims or preaching and propagating their faith)*
- *Highlights of the controversial amendments under Zia: 1982: Life imprisonment introduced for desecration of Koran.*
- *1984: Ahmadi sect barred from calling themselves, and behaving as, Muslims.*
- *1986: Death sentence for blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad.*
- *High rate of conviction in lower courts, but usually overturned in higher courts.*
- *No accused has been executed for blasphemy but jailed persons have been killed and threatened in prison or murdered when released on bail.*

promote intolerance and as the government has Rights Commission of were charged with one has been executed for people are on death row for blasphemous activity. has become a frequent as Punjab's provincial extremists instead of mosques and

Shakeel Auj propagated had suggested that it was before saying one's which continued for other messages. But the Studies at the University defiant.¹³ In September murdered as he travelled evening invitation at the

and previously at been rejected fearing In April 2001,

the Ahmadi community continued to be persecuted across Pakistan. They faced violent attacks against Ahmadi Muslims from "posing as Muslims" from using their mosques in

Shakeel Auj also been accused of blasphemy. He had given in the US insulted the Prophet Muhammad. He previously held his position in Pakistan and was only out on bail.

Shakeel Auj meant defamation against the Prophet was a criminal offence. The amended version noted: "Whoever by words, either spoke or written, or by visible representation, or by any other imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) shall be punished with death or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to a fine." Aasia Bibi, who is the first Christian woman to be sentenced to death, is accused under this clause. Interestingly, in May 1998, during Nawaz Sharif's previous government, there was talk of amending the blasphemy law but in September of that year Justice Nazeer Akhtar from Lahore is known to have said that there was no reason to amend this law and that all blasphemers should be killed. This statement caused public uproar but the religious right supportive of the blasphemy law in its existing form led by Maulana Shah Ahmed Noorani warned the government of dire backlash, if it amended the Penal Code. The Action Committee of the Namoos-e-Mustafa was mobilized to hold countrywide protests. In 1992, when Sharif's government removed the option of life imprisonment

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Musharraf's regime had attempted to regularize the registering of cases by amending procedures which meant that each case was to be initially investigated and verified by the District Commissioner before being submitted to court. This would immediately remove false accusatory cases for lack of evidence and curtail the misuse of the law. This process would have further identified unscrupulous complainants who have used the law to settle grudges and personal scores against members of minority communities. This suggested amendment that had come after recommendations made across the board during a national Human Rights and Dignity Conference was rescinded in May of the same year because of fervent religious opposition. The state has failed to intervene and protect those minorities and falsely accused victims who have suffered because of powerfully supported persecutors. While not punishing those who misuse the law and violently attack communities and places of worship, the state had turned away, while mobs kill hundreds in horrific incidents such as the Gojra riots in Punjab in 2009 and the Joseph Colony violence in March 2013 that torched an entire Christian neighbourhood. On July 30 and August 1, 2009, 7 Christians were burnt alive and dozens injured, their homes gutted when riots broke out over allegations of blasphemy. In another incident, an accused in a blasphemy case was shot dead in November 2010 outside his house after being granted bail.

In 2013, the Ministry of Law, Justice and Human Rights informed Pakistan's parliament about 8,648 rights violations that had occurred across the country. These included violence against women, sectarian violence and target killings, sexual harassment and other violations that were reported to the police. This figure also included 141 cases of missing persons, 47 of which were from Balochistan, the Ministry stated. However, rights violations related to the blasphemy laws were not stated as such, but what was noted in the list (and is open to interpretation) was that there had been '20 minority-related issues.' There is a lack of state acknowledgement that unpopular victims of violations need legal counsel, advice and in many cases, protection (Sethna, 2014). Pakistan as a hotbed of Islamic militant organizations augmented by the long Afghan war and an assortment of militant and extremists ideologies is fertile ground for recruiting disillusioned youth and changing their perceptions towards religious minorities. Violence against minorities is on the rise as is the misuse of the blasphemy law with extremist and semi-literate groups sharing a narrow world view, readily providing tacit support to militant agendas.

The consequences of the blasphemy law has left the Christian community exposed to abuse—and law enforcers as the police collude with unjust accusations as a climate of fear pervades. Individuals—including mentally handicapped minors and young girls under the age of 6 years—belonging to minority communities have been charged with blasphemy and imprisoned with no access to legal assistance. Reported incidents have shown that those accused have been killed in jail even before being sentenced. Questioning the state's capacity and will to establish the rule of law, Sam Zarifi, the Asia Pacific Regional Director at the International Commission of Jurists, says the country is conceding space to extremists (Ibid). "A government that cannot protect its people is systematically failing in its responsibility and cannot call itself a sovereign state," he says. Zarifi believes that when it comes to representation, the legal community must unite and sign up to represent unpopular defendants needing legal assistance. But in an atmosphere in which extremists threaten and murder with impunity, this is easier suggested than implemented (Ibid).

Destined to death: the fate of human rights defenders

from Section 295C and inserted the mandatory death penalty it meant more power was given to those who wished to misuse this law.

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Even committed and brave individuals advocating for minority rights and justice, including judges, lawyers and rights activists have been threatened by colleagues (for providing legal assistance to those accused in blasphemy cases) and religious groups; and more often than not targeted and murdered for their work. In May 2014, a 55-year old lawyer representing an academic accused under the blasphemy law was shot dead in his office in the city of Multan. Rashid Rehman, a staunch defender of human rights had worked for more than twenty years with the HRCP representing women, peasants, minorities and other vulnerable groups. It was because of this commitment to provide legal assistance when no other lawyer would take on controversial cases that he had agreed to represent university lecturer Junaid Hafeez.¹⁵ However, Rehman had been threatened openly in court by the complainants in this case. This incident showing that it is more than evident Pakistan's blasphemy laws support religiously motivated violence that goes beyond persecuting minorities but also targets the protectors of human rights and justice. Often lawyers state that it is difficult to find judges to hear appeals when it comes to high profile cases because of the unwillingness due to fear to be associated with blasphemy cases.

I. A. Rehman writes in *Dawn* about his nephew's commitment to the vulnerable and voiceless: "He did not wait to be asked for his services. He was the first to take up Mukhtaran Mai's case and it was he who fought off Sherry Rahman's persecutors up to the high court level. We, at the HRCP secretariat, had often to curb his enthusiasm for taking up cudgels on behalf of the meek and the voiceless...what matters more now is the sight of a society that seems to have lost all sense of shame or responsibility. It does not have the courage to look into the mirror on the wall" (Rehman, 2014).

A 2012 study by the Islamabad-based think tank, the Center for Research and Security Studies shows an increase in blasphemy accusations with 80 complaints in 2011, up from a single case in 2001 (CRSS, 2012). Extremist groups are successfully targeting ethnic and religious minorities and anybody who dares to speak out in their defence, right up to a government minister is targeted, which means strategically isolating these communities so that they don't have any allies.¹⁶ "Many believe that some accused don't have a right to representation by lawyers," notes HRCP chairperson Zohra Yusuf, citing the murder of Justice Arif Iqbal Bhatti who acquitted two Christian boys in a 1995 blasphemy case.¹⁷ Bhatti, who had received numerous death threats, was murdered in 1997. In its 2014 annual world report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom explains: "Pakistan's laws and practice are particularly egregious [with regards to blasphemy], with its constantly-abused law penalising blasphemous acts with the death penalty or life in prison. In addition to state enforcement, mobs feel enabled, under the cover of this law, to mete out vigilante justice against individuals deemed to have committed blasphemy" (Sethna, 2014).

Although high-profile government ministers have advocated for minorities and their legal rights in blasphemy cases, they have also suffered intimidation and court cases, some have been targeted and murdered for their convictions. When in November 2010, when Aasia Bibi, a young Christian farm labourer was sentenced to death for blasphemy, the then President Asif Ali Zardari sought a presidential pardon for her, but his decision was overruled by the ruling party's coalition partner, the JUI-F. Interestingly, the

¹⁵Junaid Hafeez who taught at Multan's Bahauddin Zakariya University had been accused of defaming the Prophet on social media last year. Reports stated the accusations were levelled by hardline university students who had pushed for him to be charged. Mr Rehman took on the case after no other lawyer would represent the lecturer.

¹⁶ Author's interview with Sam Zarifi, Asia Pacific Director of Amnesty International, June 2014.

¹⁷ Author's interview with Zohra Yusuf, June 2014.

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law minister failed to seek amendments to the blasphemy law that rights advocates state are critical when reviewing the misuse of this law targeting vulnerable individuals and communities. In 2011, Punjab's Governor Salman Taseer who had earlier visited Bibi in prison and advocated openly against the discrimination of minorities was murdered by one of his own police guards in Islamabad.¹⁸ He had also backed a private member's bill in the moved by parliamentarian Sherry Rehman, to amend the blasphemy law to ensure miscarriages of justice less likely and remove its death penalty.¹⁹ Taseer's murderer was hailed a hero by certain extremist religious groups and offered pro bono legal assistance such is the tolerance level for first-degree murder seen as a legitimate act to cut down support for an accused blasphemer. Later, an Islamabad-based mosque was named after the man sentenced to death by a court of law.²⁰ Taseer's targeted killing was followed with that of Shahbaz Bhatti, the Federal Minister of Minorities, who like the liberal Governor of Punjab was a vocal advocate for fighting for greater and equal minority rights and had supported amendments to the blasphemy law.

Bibi, who is a Christian and a mother of five, has spent five years on death row accused of making derogatory remarks against the Prophet as she was picking fruit with Muslim women in a field. She was also accused of taking a sip of water from a well and making the water impure. She was awarded the death penalty in October 2014 and her lawyers are now appealing against the verdict in the Supreme Court. Despite international calls that she be pardoned and the blasphemy laws repealed, there has been no progress to ensure human rights are preserved in the case of Bibi and other accused under this law.

Human rights groups have long campaigned against these laws also frequently used to settle personal scores. Evidence is rarely presented in court and judges are reluctant to hear cases. There is no penalty for false accusations. The scope of the law seems to be widening, as seen in the recent example where the Punjab police registered a case of blasphemy against 68 lawyers who publicly protested after a police officer detained one of their colleagues.

As a lawyer who has defended an accused in a blasphemy case explains, the immediate reaction was shock when other associates heard he was involved in such proceedings. "It was as if I deserved to be attacked [if that happened] for providing legal assistance," he recalls, requesting anonymity. He says he was warned and roughed up by a group of lawyers within the premises of the Supreme Court for his involvement. It is

¹⁸ Punjab's Governor Salman Taseer was the first senior government official who visited Aasia Bibi, a mother of five, in prison and appealed to President Zardari for clemency. Taseer had told the media at the time that she was a poor woman who belonged to a minority community and should be pardoned. Bibi was arrested on blasphemy charges in June 2009 when she was picking fruit in the field. When she drank from a well, other women laborers objected saying she was a non-Muslim so should not touch the water that she had contaminated. She was later arrested when they complained that she had made derogatory remarks about the Prophet. Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti who had been asked by President Zardari to investigate the case was also murdered after the killing of Taseer.

¹⁹ Ms Rehman submitted a bill for amending the Blasphemy Act in November 2010 seeking an end to the mandatory death penalty, urging constitutional protection for minorities. Reformers like Ms Rehman cannot call for an outright scrapping of the blasphemy law as that would be akin to committing suicide in an emotive and extremist-driven milieu but have sought procedural amendments in the past so that miscarriages of justice are stopped. However, since the murder of high-profile rights activists and ministers advocating on behalf of blasphemy accused persons, there has been no public talk of amending the Act.

²⁰ Mumtaz Qadri, a police guard who was sentenced to death by a court of law in 2011 confessed to murdering Salman Taseer because he objected to the Governor's calls to amend the blasphemy law. No Pakistani politician has since dared openly criticize the blasphemy laws or call for an amendment.

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common to hear of lower courts convicting the accused in blasphemy cases, sometimes on little credible evidence, due to the fear of mob violence if there is no conviction.²¹

“Blasphemy cases are in a league of their own because of the kind of emotions they evoke, often followed by violent vigilante actions. While legally representing vulnerable groups, there is pressure and intimidation, but the insecurity felt as an advocate while defending a blasphemy case is unlike anything else,” notes senior advocate, Salman Raja (Sethna, 2014).

When looking for ways to ensure victims accused in blasphemy cases have access to justice, Raja suggests the need to think along the lines of the mafia trials in Italy that were transferred from ordinary courts to secret locations along with lawyers and judges whose identities were protected. It would be radical, he concedes, but with an effective witness protection programme, this approach could administer justice without fear. Measures to protect rights defenders against abuses and investigate instances of such abuses brought to its notice with a view to bringing perpetrators to justice is something the government has systematically ignored and so to fight injustice many more defenders will risk their lives (Ibid).

Targeted mob violence, hate crimes, murder, desecrating places of worship, verbal abuse and intimidation against Pakistan's minorities has become a daily reality, often reflective of the socio-political exclusion of vulnerable religious groups and communities and the consequence of acceptable, intolerant extremist ideologies supported by the state. Violence against Hindus and Dalits, especially in rural Sindh, including kidnapping young women, forced conversions and marriages to Muslim men has become widespread with activists voicing concern at relentless inhumane practises. In its proposals over the past decade, HRCP has recommended the repeal of the Penal Code Section 295-B and C besides other urgent measures to restore citizenship and security to non-Muslim Pakistanis. It has been stated that 295C should be further amended because it could create ‘ambiguity and legal complications.’ “Three unsavoury facts were established: a) in many cases the law was invoked to deal with a business rival, to grab property or to settle a personal score; b) that filing FIRs against vulnerable persons had been adopted as a lucrative business by quite a few clerics; and c) that the conservative elements subjected courts to unbearable strains by laying siege to them” (Rehman, 2010).

Official authorities have paid minimal, if no attention to protecting certain communities at risk with state complicity evident at the judicial, executive or legislative level. Trial courts fail out of fear to acquit accused who remain unsafe in prison and at police stations, and even outside the courts. Those acquitted by high courts leave Pakistan and a judge who had acquitted a child was killed when he retired.

Minorities in an Islamic state: who will protect them?

The PIPS survey poses two critical questions with regard to the rights of minorities:²² Why has the government failed to prevent violent atrocities against certain minority groups, persecuted under laws that

²¹ Author's interview with a Supreme Court lawyer quoted here on condition of anonymity, conducted in June 2014.

²²According to the survey, *Minority Rights in Pakistan: Historic Neglect or State Complicity?* respondents in Punjab included Hindus (6.7%), Christians (83.8%) and Baha'is (9.5%). Among those polled, 33.3% had a matriculation degree; 12.4% were uneducated; 10.5% had a Master's degree and 19% had a primary level education. Over 68% were aged 25 years and above. A summary of the survey findings can be downloaded at <<http://san-pips.com/download.php?f=257.pdf>>

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are misused, despite certain communities having lived historically in integrated and diverse neighbourhoods? And why does it continue to collude with extremist groups from the majority to target vulnerable communities of non-Muslim faith? Why have minorities been relegated to the social and economic periphery of a nation state that needs to promote national pluralism or else risk being enshrouded in an extremist, intolerant worldview? When poll results were examined, 42% of respondents polled in Punjab said the law of the state was not discriminatory, whereas 50% said discrimination was faced by certain groups. Job-based discrimination was prevalent (49.5%) and 43% felt threatened while visiting their places of worship; although 65.7% said they could openly celebrate their religious festivities without interference. In Sindh, when asked if the law of the state was equal for all, 49% polled agreed whereas 45% said it is discriminatory for certain groups. 64.2% said they shared equal opportunities when it came to getting jobs. In Balochistan, when asked if the law was discriminatory, 60% of all religious minorities polled agreed whereas 73.3% said it is discriminatory towards them when seeking jobs. 43.3% of Christians especially state that they have faced discrimination.

As a countrywide survey of four provinces with respondents divided on the basis of educational qualifications (respondents range from having a Matriculation to a Master's degree) and religion (Hindus, Christians, Baha'is, Sikhs), it is particularly interesting to document that in certain provinces overall responses appear reflective of the level of awareness, concern, experience and fear regarding rights issues, the law and ongoing discriminatory practises. In Sindh where more respondents of minority groups remain uneducated in greater numbers and belong to poorer, deprived communities, it appears that persecution and marginalization of certain minorities is so rife – and has continued for decades – that many low-income and weak groups when discriminated against do not feel the need to identify or discuss their views openly for fear of reprisal. Many fear their local political representatives will disapprove of their criticism which emboldens those in powerful places. Many Hindu families work as bonded labour under Muslim landlords and therefore fail to voice their suffering – kidnapping, rape and forced labour is the norm for such groups. Additionally, without trust in the police or the justice system, they realize their voices will be shunned. The concept of equal citizenship and rights, education, and non-discrimination in everyday life and work situations are unavailable to Hindu and Dalit communities in rural Sindh and the Christians of Punjab.

Take three minority communities in the Punjab – Christians, Hindus and Baha'is that state they are dissatisfied with the manner in which the government caters to their needs when compared to how it assists other religious groups. But when questioned about the law of the state as being discriminatory against minorities, 42 percent of the poll respondents stated that was not the case.

This survey also finds that most respondents although deeply committed to their faith are able to integrate and live peacefully with other religious groups but feel threatened by the overall deteriorating security situation countrywide and the wave of extremism that threatens their existence. There is also strong backing for intercommunity relations that appear to be peaceful, traditionally rooted and functional for most minority groups in various parts of the country as respondents have stressed. Harmony within religiously mixed neighbourhoods is a positive indicator for peaceful relations, promoted and supported by those communities who have a stake in the security and progress of their areas. Although many respondents from all four provinces also believe that they are not part of the larger social and cultural mainstream as is clearly the state of the nation's minority population. It can be deducted that because minority groups are excluded from political decision-making matters that in the long-term not only affects

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them – extremism and how to tackle its spreading – that this further marginalizes those communities persecuted by the religious right.

One factor that has caused further alienation is the lack of political representation for minorities which is historically found in the separate electoral system. Very few minority representatives serve in the national and provincial assemblies and under the separate electoral system, members of each minority group gets to elect representatives from their own religious communities on a proportional basis.²³

Conclusion: no home for minorities

The issues of minorities in pluralistic democracies is fraught with problems and challenges, but most know about the importance of preserving these rights, the cultural and religious identity of minorities, and accord them freedom to profess and practice their faith, and participate in politics and economic life. At Partition because Pakistan was not envisaged as a theocratic state, its founders – Jinnah, Liaquat Ali Khan and Allama Iqbal – had similar aspirations. The Pakistan Resolution of the Lahore session of the All India Muslim League on March 23, 1940 aptly stated: “The adequate, effective and mandatory safeguards should be specifically provided in the constitution for minorities in these units and in the regions for the protection of their religious, cultural, economic, political, administrative and other rights and interests in the constitution with them and in other parts of India where the Mussalmans are in a majority.” However, there appeared an impending coalescence of national and religious identity and future events would dictate the same, steering the direction of the nation.

The 1973 Constitution states: ‘Adequate provision will be made for the minorities *freely* to profess and practice their religions and develop their cultures.’ Also, the Objective Resolution in Zia’s time was brought into the main body of the Constitution and the word ‘*freely*’ in the earlier quotation omitted. Though all these provisions refer to freedom of worship and freedom from persecution, it is clear that these rights are far from guaranteed in an Islamic state that is listed by the Minority Rights Group International as the seventh among ten countries where people remained the most under threat in 2014. It concludes that the increase in threats to minorities has been the result of governments and societies overlooking or tolerating ‘entrenched patterns of discrimination against particular communities.’²⁴ Noting the threat from sectarianism, including inter-ethnic political violence in Sindh, clashes between Deobandi and Barelvi militant groups, violent repression of Balochi activists in Balochistan, continued persecution of Christians and Ahmadis and an exterminatory campaign against Hazara and other Shi’as across the country waged by LeJ, SSP and the Pakistani Taliban, which claimed the lives of hundreds of victims last year, this ranking is a stark warning to the government that it must buckle up and act. In its annual report, *State of the World’s Minorities and Indigenous People 2014 – Freedom from Hate* the group notes: ‘Hostility towards minorities and indigenous peoples can range from intimidation or denigration to murder and indiscriminate attacks.’

²³ In Pakistan’s National Assembly, Christians have 4 seats, Hindus and other groups have 4, Sikhs, Buddhists and Parsis have one seat.

²⁴ “Peoples under Threat” is Minority Rights Group’s annual authoritative rankings table which highlights those countries around the world where the risk of mass killing is greatest. Based on current indicators of authoritative sources, it has been compiled annually since 2005 to warn of potential future mass atrocities as it states in an introduction to the rankings report. The report states that the number of states which rose prominently in the index over the last two years – including South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Pakistan and Syria – subsequently faced episodes of extreme ethnic or sectarian violence.

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Despite such continuous warnings, brutal violent attacks and overwhelming evidence of hate and murder targeting minority groups forces most to continue to endure religious, social, economic and political discrimination given the all too acceptable milieu of extremism in the country. This has sparked off political implications for the government and led to mass internal and external migration given its apathetic response.

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