

**House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**Briefing
On
Human Rights and Religious Freedom – The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community**

**June 28, 2018 – 10:00 a.m.
2255 Rayburn House Office Building**

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The total population of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan is 207 million. It is 96 percent Muslim, with Ahmadis comprising around 0.22 percent of the population (around 4.5 million)

Pakistan is considered one of the worst violators of religious freedom in the world.

At the time of partition in 1947, almost 23 per cent of Pakistan's population (which then included Bangladesh) comprised non-Muslim citizens. The proportion of non-Muslims has since fallen to approximately 3 per cent.

Ahmadis, a relatively small percentage of the Muslim population, have been declared non-Muslim by the writ of the State since 1974 through a constitutional amendment.

They are forbidden by law from describing themselves as Muslims, from using the term mosque for their places of worship and from publicly calling the azan before prayers. They risk a stiff jail sentence for violating ordinances that forbid them from any act that might identify themselves as followers of Islam.

In January 2018, a student in Pakistan shot his high school principal dead after being reprimanded for skipping school to attend a sit-in organized by one of Pakistan's Islamist parties. The killer argued that the principal had committed blasphemy by questioning his right to attend the sit-in condemning "blasphemers."¹

¹ 'Pakistani student kills school head in blasphemy law row,' *The Guardian*, January 22, 2018
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/22/pakistani-student-kills-school-head-in-blasphemy-law-row>

The sit-in had been organized by Tehreek-e-Labaik-ya-Rasool-Allah (TLYR), or the Movement for the Call of Allah's Prophet—only the latest addition to Pakistan's pantheon of extremist groups.²

Instead of enforcing the law against the small number of TLYR protestors, the civilian government was forced to accept their demands. With the country's army chief acting as negotiator, a truce was signed between the government and the extremists' leader.³ Witnesses spotted military officers giving money to some of the protestors, raising suspicions that the protests had been engineered to further undermine the authority of the civilians.

One of the protestors' demands was not to allow Pakistan's Ahmadi citizens to vote alongside the majority Muslim population.

² '2 dead, 250+ injured in Pakistan as police try to clear massive protests,' CNN wire service, November 25, 2017

³ 'COAS asks PM Abbasi to tackle Islamabad protest 'peacefully,' *Dawn*, November 25, 2017

Ahmadis already bear the brunt of Pakistan's repressive laws and the widespread antipathy towards religious minorities in Pakistani society. They are effectively disenfranchised and constantly targeted for repression.

In March 2018, the Islamabad High Court ruled "that all citizens must declare their religion when applying for identity documents" and re-emphasized the need for a declaration that set Ahmadis apart from Muslims.

According to the judgment of the court, "citizens who disguised their religious affiliation were guilty of betraying the state," "The Government of Pakistan shall take special measure ensuring availability of correct particulars of all the citizens," and "It should not be possible for any citizen to hide his/her real identity and recognition." ⁴

⁴ Saaz Syed, 'In blow to minorities, Pakistani court orders citizens to declare religion,' *Reuters*, March 9, 2018

The Human Rights Watch representative in Pakistan pointed out that the judge was “not only attacking everybody’s religious freedom in Pakistan but he is also focusing on one particular sect, which is the Ahmadis.”⁵

Prejudice against Ahmadis has only increased over the last few years and Justice Siddiqui’s judgment, as well as the army chief’s indirect support for TLJR, shows how the Pakistani state endorses that prejudice.

The beginning of the holy month of Ramadan in 2018 was marked by extremist Sunni Muslims in the town of Sialkot to destroy a hundred-year old Ahmadi mosque.⁶ They were led by a local politician belonging to the Tehrik-e-Insaf party of cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan.⁷

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Saad Sayeed, ‘Pakistani mob destroys 100-year-old minority Ahmadi mosque,’ Reuters, May 24, 2018 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-ahmadis/pakistani-mob-destroys-100-year-old-minority-ahmadi-mosque-idUSKCN1IP20H>

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How did Pakistan arrive at this point?

Much of the prejudice against religious minorities can be traced to the effort by Islamist radicals to make Pakistan 'purer' as what they conceive to be an Islamic state.

Pakistan's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah had advanced the case for a secular, albeit Muslim-majority, Pakistan. That vision outlined by Pakistan's founder remains sadly unfulfilled.

In all, except the First Phase, the Ahmadiyya or Ahmadi community has often been a major target of bigotry. After the partition era violence, the first major religious riots in Pakistan targeted the Ahmadi community in 1953.

As home to the largest Ahmadi community, and the first country to constitutionally and legally discriminate against Ahmadis, Pakistan is the Center of anti-Ahmadiyya prejudice and violence, which has now unfortunately spread to other Muslim-majority countries. .

Ironically, the Ahmadis had actively supported Jinnah and the demand for Pakistan and one of the sect's members, Sir Zafrulla Khan, served as Pakistan's first foreign minister. Ahmadi military officers have fought for Pakistan with distinction in its several wars with India and the community's members have been prominent in several fields of achievement, including getting Pakistan its only Nobel Prize in the sciences, which was won by Dr Abdus Salam in Physics.

The Ahmadis were first targeted in 1953 when religious riots broke out in Punjab. They were targeted again after a violent incident in May 1974 at Rabwah, the small Punjab town that served as the Ahmadiyya Movement's International Headquarters. During the ensuing riots in Punjab, forty-two persons died, twenty-seven of whom were Ahmadis.

Parliament was asked to debate the status of Ahmadis and in September, both houses of Pakistan's parliament passed the second amendment to Pakistan's Constitution, pronouncing Ahmadis non-Muslims.

The constitutional amendment created a religious dilemma for the Ahmadis and effectively took away their freedom of religion.

Their faith required them to insist that they were Muslims, albeit with some beliefs which departed from those of other Islamic denominations. The law, however, would now deem them non-Muslims. Now, if they stated Islam as their religion on government documents, as their faith dictated, they would be breaking the law.

This meant that no Ahmadi could get a passport or national identity card as a Muslim without denouncing his denomination's founder as an imposter. On the other hand, accepting a passport or national identity card that described them as non-Muslim also ran against the Ahmadi religion.

Things became worse with the rise to power of General Zia-ul-Haq. Ordinances issued by Zia allowed an Ahmadi to be subjected to criminal proceedings based on little more than the whim of a member of the religious majority. An orthodox

Muslim could go to the police and simply complain that an Ahmadi had outraged his religious feelings, and the Ahmadi in question could be arrested.

Since the passage of anti-Ahmadi ordinance XX by General Zia in 1984, more than 264 Ahmadis have been killed for their faith. 182 of these happened in Punjab.⁸ Since Ahmadis were declared to be non-Muslim: 27 of their mosques have been demolished, 33 sealed, 21 set on fire, 17 forcibly occupied, and authorities prevented construction of 17 Ahmadi mosques.⁹

The injustice and blatant disregard for international norms in treating a person from a religious minority is exemplified in the case of Abdul Shakoor, an optician who was 80 years old at the time and was arrested in 2015 for possessing Ahmadi religious literature.

Mr. Shakoor was charged with propagating the Ahmadiyya faith, a crime under the Pakistani Penal Code, and stirring up “religious hatred” and “sectarianism,” a crime

⁸ HRC Report 2017, 85

⁹ HRC Report 2017, 85-86.

under the 1997 Anti-Terrorism Act. He is now 82 years old and remains in prison for nothing more than keeping books pertaining to his religion at his opticians' shop.

I will stop here so that we can move forward with the discussion....