

Summary

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recently published its 2021 Annual Report. In this report, USCIRF once again recommended Pakistan be designated a “Country of Particular Concern” due to its worsening religious freedom conditions for Christians and other religious minorities.

“Religious freedom conditions in Pakistan continued to worsen. The government systematically enforced blasphemy laws and failed to protect religious minorities from abuses by non-state actors. There was a sharp rise in targeted killings, blasphemy cases, forced conversions, and hate speech targeting religious minorities,” USCIRF’s 2021 Annual Report stated.

Despite this and other severe violations of human rights against religious minorities, Pir Noor-ul-Haq Qadri, Minister for Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony, claimed in March that religious minorities enjoyed total freedom of religion in Pakistan.

The first three months of 2021 proved to be another challenging time for Christians in Pakistan. Despite the PTI-led government’s lofty claims of complete religious freedom, the country’s Christian community continued to suffer discrimination, intolerance, and incidents of outright persecution.

International Christian Concern (ICC) documented at least 25 incidents of persecution against Pakistan’s Christian population between January 1 and March 31, 2021. The documented incidents included false blasphemy accusations, abductions, forced conversions, forced marriages, physical violence, religiously motivated murders, and instances of intimidation.

Section three of this report contains a chart of the incidents of persecution documented by ICC.

Over the first three months of 2021, ICC documented a continued escalation in blasphemy accusations against Christians. At least four blasphemy incidents were recorded between the end of January to early March. As a result, five Christians, including Salamat Masih and Haroon Ayub from Lahore, Tabitha Gill from Karachi, an older Christian woman from Kasur, and a female tutor from Quetta, were falsely accused of committing blasphemy against Islam.

On January 28, Tabitha Nazir Gill, a Christian nurse, was falsely accused of committing blasphemy while working in Karachi. According to a local ICC source, the head nurse at Sobhraj Maternity Hospital issued orders that medical staff may not receive tips or deal with patients’ money. Gill reportedly reminded a Muslim coworker of these orders when she saw the coworker collect money from a patient.

In response, the Muslim coworker falsely accused Gill of committing blasphemy and incited violence

against her Christian colleague. Videos of hospital staff beating Gill surfaced on social media and showed her tied up with ropes, physically assaulted, and locked in a room before being taken into police custody.

Police released Gill and handed her over to her family after a short investigation found no evidence that she had committed blasphemy. However, on January 29, a mob of hundreds of Muslims gathered at the local police station demanding the official filing of blasphemy charges against Gill. In response, local police registered FIR # 74/21 against Gill, claiming that she had committed blasphemy under Section 295-C of Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

Gill and her family are currently in hiding as the accusation against Gill remains under police investigation.

On February 3, a Christian tutor (name withheld for security reasons) was accused of committing blasphemy against Islam in Quetta. Muslims accused the Christian tutor when she refused to remove Christian images from her house, where primarily Muslim students were attending tutoring sessions. The tutor fled to another part of the country after a mob began making threats against her.

On February 13, Haroon Masih and Salamat Mansha were charged with violating Pakistan's blasphemy law in Lahore. The pair were accused of making derogatory remarks against Islam, the Quran, and offending the religious sentiments of a Muslim while discussing Christianity in a public park.

According to the First Information Report (FIR # 61/21), the two Christians gave a Muslim a Christian book entitled "Water of Life" and discussed the prophets' divinity and Jesus Christ. This discussion turned into an argument that ended with the Muslim accusing the Christians of making derogatory remarks against Islam.

On March 8, an older Christian woman in Kasur (name withheld for security reasons) was falsely accused of blasphemy after a conversation with another woman was overheard and misinterpreted as derogatory remarks against Islam. Local police were able to resolve the situation peacefully without registering a blasphemy violation. However, the victim and her family were forced to flee the area due to continued threats against her.

In addition to these blasphemy allegations, ICC also documented 21 other incidents of persecution, including incidents of forced conversion/forced marriage, discrimination, physical violence, religiously motivated murder, attacks on places of worship, and intimidation/threats.

Methodology

The incidents documented in this factsheet were gathered from various sources in Pakistan, including news reports, social media posts, and personal testimonies. ICC verified each documented incident through direct fact-finding visits, telephone calls, or an examination of documents held by local authorities.

Verified cases were sorted into one of seven incident categories: blasphemy allegation, forced conversion/forced marriage, discrimination, physical violence, religiously motivated murder, attacks on places of worship, and intimidation/threats.

In the chart below, all verified incidents of persecution are dated, categorized, and geographically located. In some incidents, the name of the victim is not reported due to security concerns. ICC is aware that a

significant number of incidents in Pakistan go unreported. The data reflected in the chart below can only be viewed as a small reflection of the plight of Pakistani Christians documented and verified by ICC.

Incident Chart

No.	Date	Victim Name	Location	Incident Type	Brief Details
1	January 4, 2021	Abida Qaisar	Lahore	Religiously Motivated Murder	On December 11, 2020, Abida's sister Sajida was kidnapped and murdered because she refused to convert from Christianity. Approximately one month later, Abida experienced the same fate when she too was abducted and killed for her faith.
2	January 5, 2021	Ansar Masih	Sheikhupura	Physical Violence	Ansar Masih, a brick-kiln worker, was brutally beaten by his Muslim employer after taking leave to attend a prayer service.
3	January 5, 2021	Mishal Rafique	Rawalpindi	Forced Conversion / Forced Marriage	Mishal Rafique was kidnapped by a Muslim boy named Hamza.
4	January 20, 2021	Rubi Bibi	Lahore	Physical Violence	When Rubi Bibi, a Christian domestic worker, refused her Muslim employer's sexual advances, he accused her of stealing valuables from his home and had her arrested.
5	January 28, 2021	Tabita Nazir Gill	Karachi	Blasphemy Allegation	Tabita Gill, a Christian nurse, was falsely accused by coworkers of committing blasphemy against Islam.

6	February 3, 2021	A Female Tutor	Quetta	Blasphemy Allegation	A Christian tutor was accused of committing blasphemy against Islam after she refused to remove Christian images from her house, where primarily Muslim students were attending tutoring sessions. She was never officially accused but was forced to relocate.
7	February 9, 2021	Sanghar Incident	Sanghar	Physical Violence	The homes of 15 Hindu and Christian families were set on fire after they protested a false blasphemy allegation against a Christian woman.
8	February 10, 2021	Mishal Adnan	Karachi	Forced Conversion / Forced Marriage	Mishal Adnan was kidnapped and forcibly converted to Islam by a Muslim man in Karachi.
9	February 13, 2021	Salamat Masih and Haroon Ayub	Lahore	Blasphemy Allegation	While discussing Christianity in a public park, the two Christians were accused of making derogatory remarks against Islam, the Quran, and offending the religious sentiments of a Muslim. They have both been charged with committing blasphemy.
10	February 14, 2021	Barki Village Family	Lahore	Physical Violence	A mob of Muslims attacked a Christian family in Barki village because they unblocked a sewer drain coming from their home.

11	February 14, 2021	Neelum Bibi	Sialkot	Physical Violence	A Christian college professor was attacked in her home by Faisal Bushra, a Muslim man who had been harassing her for months.
12	February 17, 2021	Sawera Khalid	Lahore	Forced Conversion / Forced Marriage	Sawera Khalid was kidnapped by a Muslim and forced to convert to Islam. She reunited with her Christian family after a court-ordered her to be returned.
13	February 18, 2021	Mehwish Bibi	Gujranwala	Forced Conversion / Forced Marriage	Mehwish Bibi was kidnapped by two Muslims while on her way to school.
14	February 19, 2021	Shakaina Johnson	Lahore	Forced Conversion / Forced Marriage	Shakaina Johnson, a 13-year-old Christian girl, was kidnapped from her workplace and forced to convert and marry a Muslim.
15	February 22, 2021	Aneel Masih	Lahore	Physical Violence	A group of Muslims physically attacked a group of Christians in a bid to take their property. One of the Christian youths, Aneel Masih, was kidnapped during the dispute.
16	February 28, 2021	Independent Church	Lahore	Attack on Place of Worship	Muslims forced Christians to stop worshipping because they were disturbed by Christian psalms and prayers.
17	February 28, 2021	Abbas Masih	Sheikhupura	Physical Violence	Abbas Masih, Christian father of three, was tortured by 11 Muslim men over a dispute between Christian and Muslim children.

18	March 6, 2021	Samuel Masih	Sahiwal	Religiously Motivated Murder	Samuel Masih was poisoned by his Muslim colleagues following a religious dispute.
19	March 7, 2021	Irum Masih	Karachi	Physical Violence	Irum Masih, a Christian nurse, was raped by a Muslim man when caring for a patient at his home.
20	March 8, 2021	An elderly woman	Kasur	Blasphemy Allegation	An elderly woman was accused of making a derogatory statement against the Prophet of Islam and accused of blasphemy. The accusation was proved false before the woman was arrested.
21	March 8, 2021	Samreen Bibi	Faisalabad	Physical Violence	Police tortured and sexually harassed a Christian girl in front of her father and recorded it.
22	March 11, 2021	Anosh Masih and Raza Shehzad	Christian	Physical Violence	Police brutally tortured two young Christians after they were falsely accused of selling drugs.
23	March 21, 2021	Shamim Mehmood	Islamabad	Physical Violence	Shamim Mehmood, a Christian journalist, was kidnapped and interrogated by unknown people for four hours.
24	March 22, 2021	Sajid Masih	Lahore	Blasphemy Allegation	Sajid Masih received the death sentence for sending text messages that defamed the Prophet Muhammad.
25	March 23, 2021	Beenish Javaid	Lahore	Forced Conversion / Forced Marriage	Beenish Javaid was kidnapped by a Muslim family, forcefully converted to Islam, and married off to a Muslim man. She was rescued after one week and reunited with her family.

Issue Highlight

Over the first three months of 2021, ICC noted a continued escalation in blasphemy accusations against Christians in Pakistan. This trend started in December 2020, with three charges reported in that month, and continued throughout the reporting period.

In total, at least ten Christians, including three women and seven men, were accused of committing blasphemy against Islam, its holy book, its holy prophet, or its sacred personages between December 2020 and March 2021. In one incident, reported in December 2020, a Christian named Arshad Masih was accused of blasphemy after being murdered by his Muslim coworker. It is likely Arshad's murderer used the blasphemy accusation as a justification for his criminal actions.

According to the Center for Social Justice (CSJ), a human rights organization in Pakistan, at least 200 people were accused of committing blasphemy in 2020. Of that number, 75% were Muslims, 20% were Ahmadis, 3.5% were Christians, and the remaining 1.5% were from other religions or were unidentified.

Christians and other religious minorities suffer greatly under Pakistan's blasphemy laws and account for 54% of all blasphemy accusations, despite making up just 3.6% of the population. In many cases, blasphemy accusations have their roots in personal, professional, or business disputes where the false allegations are the final trump card for a member of Pakistan's majority community.

Blasphemy allegations against minorities are highly inflammatory and can spark mob lynching, vigilante murders, and mass protests. In most cases, Christians accused of blasphemy must go into hiding and relocate even if the allegation is proven false.

Attempts to repeal or reform Pakistan's blasphemy laws have been met with highly charged opposition. In recent years, entire political parties whose sole platform is the protection and proliferation of the blasphemy laws have formed and won representation in Pakistan's government. Pakistani Christians will likely continue to suffer false allegations of blasphemy in future reporting periods.

U.S. Policy Recommendations

Advocacy on persecution issues in Pakistan must carefully consider the context within which each individual case takes place, both locally and in the country as a whole, and will take different forms depending on context.

The advocacy audience usually includes the Pakistani government, the religious majority and minority communities, the U.S. government, like-minded Western governments, and other stakeholders.

ICC recommends consistent, targeted, and specific advocacy on issues around Pakistan's blasphemy laws. The laws are inherently flawed and used as a tool of suppression against religious minorities. It is essential that religious freedom advocates highlight shortcomings of the laws, their societal impact, corrupt and inconsistent judicial proceedings, communal violence spurred on by allegations, and the methods by which members of the majority religious community use the laws against religious minorities.

ICC recommends the following policies:

First, it should be standard for American diplomats to advocate for Pakistani prisoners of conscience in every meeting with Pakistani officials. This practice should be applied to known blasphemy cases. Bilateral meetings offer a unique context where officials can engage one another on priority issues. According to ICC's [*The Voiceless Victims of Pakistan's Blasphemy Laws*](#), 28 Pakistani Christians are currently in prison on blasphemy charges. These 28 individuals would benefit from consistent discussion of their cases.

Second, the U.S. Departments of State and Treasury should consider how their sanctioning authorities could be brought to bear on the pattern of unjustified imprisonment regularly imposed on Pakistan's religious minorities. Individual sanctions on those involved in the abuse of Pakistan's blasphemy laws could have great effect. In addition to the sanctioning authorities, the U.S. should include visa flags and specific travel bans on individuals known for abusing the blasphemy laws or who are otherwise complicit in persecuting religious minorities.

Third, the U.S. should communicate that Pakistan must swiftly and fairly adjudicate blasphemy cases and others like them as a condition of removing Pakistan from the CPC list and for other human rights sanctions to be lifted. While this message can and should be communicated in direct, bilateral discussions, relevant institutions such as the U.S. Department of State and USCIRF should share this publicly as well.

Fourth, the U.S. should press the Pakistani government to enact procedural reforms that will slow down the process by which authorities book allegations. These reforms would combat the communal violence often associated with blasphemy allegations and demand detailed investigations before an allegation is accepted as genuine by authorities.

Fifth, the U.S. should press the Pakistani government to impose substantial consequences against individuals who make false blasphemy allegations. Many spurious blasphemy allegations lead to communal violence while accusers face no consequences for defaming innocent people.

Sixth, the U.S. should advocate for far-reaching reforms to the Pakistani education system to eliminate bigoted and prejudiced educational material from the curriculum. Currently, much of the educational material available includes language that marginalizes religious minorities and depicts them incorrectly, leading to widespread bias. Programs encouraging dialogue between religious communities should be encouraged to help eliminate existing biases and promote greater equality.

Finally, the U.S. should use its foreign aid to Pakistan, including military aid, to tangibly and visibly advance the above policy priorities. The U.S. should use its economic power to create realistic conditions for Pakistan's improvement, especially in the areas of religious freedom and the country's blasphemy laws.

