

Feb 2023 Report



# Monitoring Pakistani Social Media for Religious Freedom Violations

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## Forced Conversions

According to minority activists, forced conversion incidents have steadily continued in the past month. A vast majority of reported cases especially in Sindh and Punjab follow an established pattern of the abduction, forced marriage and conversion of young women and girls from minority faiths. Lax police and legal interventions in addition to political pressure and intimidation from religious groups against marginalized minority communities allow the incidents to continue unabated.

Usually, after extended periods of disappearance, abductees are finally presented in official court proceedings where many deny being abducted or forcefully converted and married. According to minority group observers, this can be attributed to practices of brainwashing, violence, and intimidation during disappearance periods. Minor girls from Hindu and Christian communities are largely targeted especially those from poor socio-economic backgrounds whose families have little recourse to justice.

On February 7, the alleged abduction of 13-year old Hindu minor Roshni Meghwar from Nasarpur, Tando Allahyar in Sindh was reported on social media. The case was not officially covered in media reports but was only circulated online among minority watchdog accounts on Twitter and Instagram with calls to recover the missing girl before her forced conversion. On February 13, a 12-year-old Hindu girl, Meena Bhat was reportedly abducted and forcefully converted to Islam.



On February 11, the National Commission for Justices and Peace (NCJP) - a human rights body of the Pakistan Catholic Bishops conference, demanded the provincial and the federal governments to recognize the gravity of the situation and help in curbing forced conversions, abduction and underage marriages. They said that the authorities have to move towards stronger legislation and ensure its implementation to curb this practice.

“We urge the government to implement the constitutional guarantees of Article 20, 25 and most importantly the Article 36 which guarantees and ensure the protection of the rights of the religious minorities,” Father Sarfraz Simon said. He added that every year many minor girls and women belonging to the Hindu and Christian communities become victims of abduction, forced marriage and forced conversions particularly in Punjab and Sindh.

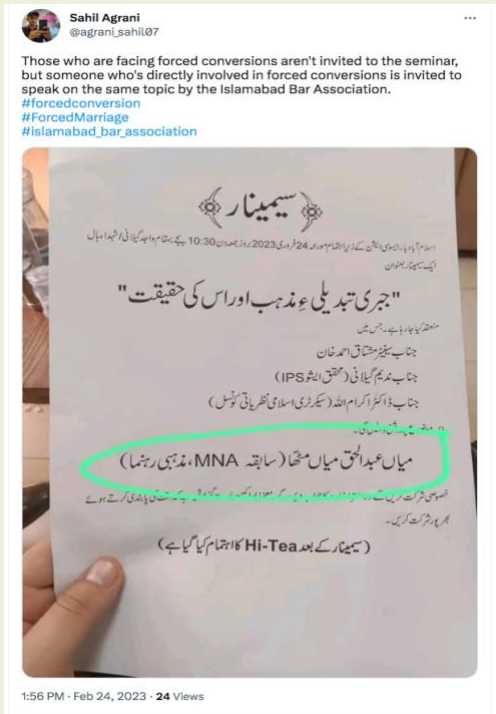
On February 18, Hindu teenager Karishma Bheel was held at gunpoint and abducted from her home by armed men. The minor girl’s father informed press that his daughter had been forcibly converted to Islam and that the conversion certification falsely depicted her age as 19. According to Bheel’s father, police had neglected their duties and had not registered a case against the abductors. In a news report a police official said that Bheel had converted of her own “free will,” a claim which has been strongly denied by her family. According to activists Bheel was presented in court and allowed to remain in the custody of her captors.



In its recent report the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) called attention to the continued marginalization of religious minorities in the country. Its report, A Breach of Faith: Freedom of Religion or Belief in 2021-22, observes that incidents of forced conversions in Sindh remain worryingly consistent. Reports of religious minorities’ sites of worship being desecrated

have also continued but with no response from the state, especially when such incidents involved sites associated with the Ahmadi community.

On February 24, social media users largely criticized the Islamabad Bar Association for inviting cleric Mian Abdulhaq for a talk on forced conversions. The pir, popularly known as Mian Mithu, is notorious in upper Sindh for his alleged involvement in the forced conversion and marriages of minor Hindu girls. He has denied the allegations on several occasions and even claims to have promoted religious harmony in Sindh. Abdulhaq remains blacklisted on a UK sanctions list which ensures that designated individuals will be unable to do any business or undertake economic activity with UK citizens or businesses, and that they will be denied entry to the UK.



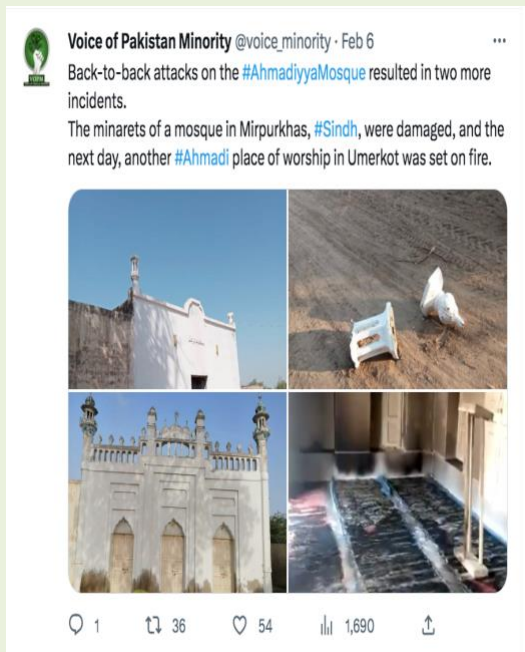
In a similar instance, a 19-year old Christian woman, Suneeta Munawar was attacked with acid after rejecting the romantic advances of her Muslim neighbor who had been stalking and harassing her for years. Munawar survived the attack and a case was registered by police against the perpetrator.



### Faith-based Persecution

On Feb 3, five men were arrested for vandalizing an Ahmadi mosque in Karachi earlier that week on February 2. Police lodged a report against 15 people who had attacked the place of worship and had damaged its minaret. According to social media reports, the suspects were members of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) and had vandalized and demolished the minarets of an Ahmadi Mosque allegedly in the presence of the police.

The suspects were booked under Sections 147 (rioting), 148 (rioting, armed with deadly weapon), 149 (every member of unlawful assembly guilty of offence committed in prosecution of common object), 295 (injuring or defiling place of worship, with intent to insult the religion of any class), 506 (criminal intimidation) and 34 (common intention) of the Pakistan Penal Code.



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In the following week two additional attacks on Ahmadi mosques were reported in Mirpurkhas and Umerkot where its minarets were set on fire.

Several instances of violence against religious minorities were reported across February. On February 6 a Christian farm labourer was beaten to death by a Muslim landowner for allegedly stealing oranges from his orchard. On February 7, Joharabad's Christian community protested against an incident where a pastor's house was targeted by armed men. The women and children present in the house were threatened and harassed.



Ahmadi activists reported that on February 18 two Ahmadi were surrounded by a mob in Kasur. The mob threatened to close their mosque. These two individuals were rescued by the intervention of local residents. According to community leaders, the police did not register a report of this incident and shortly after it occurred, members of the Ahmadiyya community were still not allowed to go to their mosque in Kasur.

On February 19, an elderly Ahmadi man, Dr. Rasheed Ahmed, a homeopath, was shot dead in the clinic at his residence in Gutriala area of Gujrat district.



## Blasphemy Related Incidents

A mob of 800 people lynched and killed a blasphemy accused person on February 11. They attacked the accused man in Warburton Police Station in Nankana Sahib District of Punjab. Videos circulating on social media showed protesters dragging the victim's naked body through the streets.



Mohammad Waris who was lynched, was recently released from jail in a blasphemy case registered in 2019. The deceased had been declared innocent by the court of law. Local residents accused Waris of practicing “witchcraft” and said that he had desecrated the Quran. Overwhelmed by the large crowd, some police personnel allegedly escaped the scene to save their lives. Taking notice of the incident, Punjab Inspector General of Police (IGP) Dr Usman Anwar suspended the station house officer and Nankana Sahib Circle Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) for their failure in preventing the situation from turning violent. 60 of the perpetrators were arrested for the incident. The incident occurred two weeks after Pakistan assured a meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Council that it was taking steps to counter misuse of blasphemy laws.

Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Hina Rabbani Khar told the January 30 Geneva meeting the government had instituted safeguards against the misuse of the blasphemy law. She cited legal provisions calling for action against anyone falsely accusing someone of blasphemy.

On January 17, an amendment to the state’s blasphemy law which was proposed by Maulana Abdul Akbar Chitrali of the Jamaat-i-Islami, was approved without appropriate due course of parliamentary proceedings in the presence of just 15 ministers. The amendment raised the punishment for uttering derogatory remarks against revered personalities, including the Holy Prophet, his family, wives and companions, and the four caliphs, from imprisonment of three years to 10 years. Furthermore, it has made the offence non-bailable.

On February 10, just a day before the Nankana Sahib incident, Human Rights Minister Riaz Hussain Pirzada urged the Prime Minister to undo the amendments saying that they had been made to “please a specific group” and that they had been approved without “fulfilling the norms of parliamentary proceedings.” He also reaffirmed the state’s duty to protect religious minorities.

HRCP condemned the Nankana Sahib incident, stating that it represented “yet another failure of the state to prevent ‘mob justice.’ Lip service and weak measures against law enforcers gives the state the appearance of a helpless observer, not a protector of citizens lives and property.”

In another incident of blasphemy related allegations, a blasphemy case was registered against a Shia Muslim man by Sunni activists in Gojra on February 26. They accused the man for writing “countless curses on Muawiya” under his house stairs.



**Hate Speech**

The HRCP’s latest report said that more than half of all online hate speech (53 percent) in Pakistan is directed at the Ahmadi community and made several recommendations to protect the country’s minorities.

On February 3, the hashtag #Ahmadis was featured as one of the top twitter trends in the country ranking at number 12 out of 50 top trends on the day with a little less than 10,000 tweets. The trend continued until February 24 and largely presented mixed views with some tweets espousing anti-Ahmadi hate speech while others emphasized incidents of Ahmadi persecution in Pakistan. The trend coincided with the Feb 2 desecration of the Ahmadi mosque in Karachi. A spike of the trend once again in mid-February coincided with the incidents of the harassment of two Ahmadis and the murder of an Ahmadi doctor on February 18 and 19 respectively.

Anti-Ahmadi sentiments questioned the status of the community as Muslims, called for their deaths and referred to them as “infidels.” Despite the “#Ahmadis” hashtag’s higher trend ranking, the Urdu hashtag of the religious slur “قادینائی” against Ahmadi Muslims produced less variations with the vast majority of tweets indicating highly inflammatory content against the minority group.





HRCP also recommended that the controversial national curriculum must be revised to ensure that secular subjects do not contain any religious content or “any material that discriminates against religious minorities and sects or their faiths”.

“Unless these measures are implemented urgently, Pakistan will continue to foster a climate of impunity for perpetrators of faith-based discrimination and violence, allowing the already-narrow space for religious freedom to shrink even further,” the HRCP said in its statement.