

**POLICY BRIEF**

## Tackling the Epidemic of Anti-Ahmadi Hate Speech on Social Media

### **Summary**

This social media revolution has transformed the way information is disseminated and consumed by mass of people. The social media influences public opinion and shapes political discourse. In Pakistan, while social media has empowered the voiceless by giving them platforms to express their viewpoints, it has also exposed the serious social and political challenges. The impact of social media goes beyond the virtual platforms and affects events in real life. Over the years, social media in Pakistan has become a conduit for spreading religious hatred and intolerance, adversely affecting the already fragile social fabric in the country. Contents targeting religious minorities particularly the Ahmadi community have proliferated, often resulting in physical harassment and violence. This trend not only undermines the values of religious freedom but also endangers the safety and security of religious minorities. Likewise, the historical Shia-Sunni differences have found a new battleground on social media. Platforms are often used to disseminate sectarian hate speech that only exacerbates the tension and sometimes incites violence.

The religious and sectarian polarizations are manifested in various forms including misinformation, hostile rhetoric, and virtual confrontations between followers of different faiths and sects. Unfortunately, the extremist ideologies and narratives pushed on social media platforms often lack accountability and contribute to a climate of fear and discrimination against minorities. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that involves various stakeholders including government bodies like PTA etc., civil society organizations, and social media platforms. This policy brief aims to outline a cohesive strategy that acknowledges the complexity of these issues and proposes effective solutions. The goal is to leverage the positive potential of social media while mitigating its negative impacts to ensure the protection of minority rights.

## **Anti-Ahmadi sentiments on social media**

In recent times, Pakistani social media platforms have seen a significant surge in content that targets the Ahmadi community. This disturbing trend is characterized by negative expressions such as derogatory comments, offensive memes, conspiracy theories, and outright hate speech. Such contents portray the followers of the Ahmadi faith in a negative light, promoting stereotypes and misinformation about the whole community. The anti-Ahmadi posts on Twitter and Facebook contain derogatory remarks, ridicule, or mockery of Ahmadi beliefs and rituals. This includes making fun of their religious texts or faith leaders in highly offensive ways.

What's concerning is that hateful and offensive contents are shared widely which means they reach a large number of people. People's exposure to such posts contribute to strengthening of harmful anti-Ahmadi sentiments in the society. The religious extremists who target the community often also dismiss or downplay the reports of the prevalent persecution faced by the Ahmadis. By making light of the community's plight, the radical elements attempt to undermine the severity of the problem. Such trivialization tends to reduce public empathy for the persecuted community.

From Jan to Sep 2023, the HRCP recorded at least 34 incidents of attacks or desecration of Ahmadi places of worship. In some cases, the local police aided in dismantling Ahmadi worship places. The HRCP urged the government to ensure the security of the community. In Daska, Punjab, the community has faced open threats from the extremist religious political outfit i.e., the TLP. The TLP has been rallying against the Ahmadis and spreading hatred without much obstruction from the authorities. Likewise, in 2022, at least three Ahmadis were murdered for their faith and 108 others were booked in legal cases relating to their faith. In addition, 14 Ahmadi workshop places and as many as 197 Ahmadi graves were desecrated. Since its emergence, the TLP has become the most formidable threat to the Ahmadi community in Pakistan. Researchers say there is a direct correlation between the rise of TLP and the increase in anti-Ahmadi hate speech and violence.

## **Conspiracy theories**

In Pakistan, conspiracy theories portraying minority communities as enemy of the country abound. Such conspiracy theories are usually speculative narratives that suggest secret and malicious activities against the country by individuals or groups. In this context, the Ahmadi community has long been subjected to conspiracies theories not only by extremist lots but also by mainstream politicians and rightwing press. For instance, in 2014, the Khatm-e-Nabuwat Conference blamed the Ahmadis for the PTI protest sit-in in Islamabad. Similarly, a senior PMLN leader Nihal Hashmi accused the Ahmadis of orchestrating the PTI protest inside the Masjid Nabawi in Medina in April 2022 that sparked a controversy for violating the sanctity of the holy mosque. The contents of these conspiracy theories can vary but typically they involve allegations that paint the Ahmadi community as a threat to national security or as participants in clandestine operations against the state.

The spread of such conspiracy theories can have a serious impact on how the Ahmadi community is perceived by the wider Pakistani public. They fuel distrust and suspicion towards the community, leading to social alienation and paranoia. When people are influenced by these theories, they may view the Ahmadi community with unwarranted skepticism and fear, damaging social relations and trust within the society. As such ridiculous conspiracy theories gain traction, they contribute to the social and economic isolation of Ahmadis. Members of the community routinely find themselves ostracized, discriminated against, or subjected to hostility based on such baseless accusations. And the social boycott can extend to various aspects of life including social exclusion, discrimination in the workplace and schools, and in worst cases targeted killings.

In addition to impacting the Ahmadi community, wild conspiracy theories can also harm the overall fabric of society. They discourage rational discourse and contribute to a culture of fear, suspicion, and violence with even wider consequences for national cohesion. Continuous exposure to online hate speech aggravates the hostility and animosity towards Ahmadis and makes shared spaces like workplaces, schools, and public spaces less welcoming and safe for the community.

### **The adverse psychological effects of hate speech**

Persistent propagation of hate on social media can have profound psychological effects both for the perpetrator and the victim. Ahmadis facing such relentless negativity are at risk of developing mental health issues like anxiety, stress, depression, and other mental disorders which increases the disease burden on the country's underperforming health sector. The psychological toll of living in a constant state of fear and anticipating discrimination or hostility can be significant. The hostile climate can discourage Ahmadis from fully participating in social life. It can manifest in reluctance to engage in community activities, avoidance of public spaces, and even withdrawal from educational or professional opportunities. Such self-isolation is often a coping mechanism against potential discrimination and harassment.

Therefore, hate speech or extremist rhetoric against the Ahmadis is not just about physical safety. It also concerns their social identity and place in society. The environment can lead to a community feeling marginalized, misunderstood, and alienated from the broader society which in turn can have ramifications for social cohesion and national unity.

### **Ahmadis at the altar of dirty politics**

It is extremely unfortunate that some political parties and leaders in Pakistan indulge in the practice of deliberately using negative sentiments against the Ahmadi community as a tool to garner votes or support from radical segments of society. This criminal practice usually involve making statements, proposing policies, or engaging in rhetoric that aligns with the pre-existing prejudices against Ahmadis. For instance, in September 2022, Punjab chief minister Pervez Illahi announced his government's plan to build a replica of Istanbul's famous Blue Mosque, saying that "Qadianis" (a slang for Ahmadis) would not

be allowed to enter that mosque. Back in October 2017, Capt. Safdar, a PMLN leader and son-in-law of Nawaz Sharif, delivered a hate-filled speech on the floor of the National Assembly, calling the community a threat to Pakistan's security and interests. He said, "these people (Ahmadis) are a threat to this country, its constitution, and ideology."

In areas or populations where there is widespread bias against the Ahmadi community, taking a stance against Ahmadis can be seen as a way to appeal to these biases, and thus consolidating a political party's or figure's support base. Such theatrics are also used to divert public attention from pressing issues or to stir a certain segment of voters. When political figures engage in this kind of rhetoric, it legitimizes and normalizes anti-Ahmadi sentiments. Their status and influence mean that their statements and positions can shape public opinion. As a result, these prejudiced views become more deeply embedded in public discourse. Instead of being challenged or condemned, they are repeated and endorsed.

Scapegoating vulnerable communities like Ahmadis for petty political gains has proved to have severe social consequences. It sends a message that such bigoted and discriminatory attitudes are not only acceptable but also commendable. It undermines the democratic principles by promoting intolerance. Additionally, such questionable practices detract from constructive political dialogue and policymaking as it focuses on divisive societal issues rather than inclusive governance.

### **Scanty check on hate speech**

While online hate speech continues to pose a serious challenge for the government, there is a conspicuous absence of effective regulatory measures, even though laws exist that penalize hate speech and incitement to violence. Curbing hate speech is also part of the National Action Plan that was formulated in the wake of APS attack in Peshawar in 2014. The existing regulations are either inadequate or not properly enforced by authorities like the PTA.

The lack of the government's capacity or will to enforce the regulatory measures results in the unchecked spread of hate speech on social media platforms. In other words, without effective rules and enforcement, harmful content can circulate widely and freely on digital platforms. This proliferation can happen rapidly and reach large audiences. The government's inability to curb online hate speech is a major contributing factor to the normalization of hostility and prejudice against the Ahmadi community. The social cost of this continuing inability cannot be overlooked as it creates a toxic online environment, stifle healthy discourse, and harm the mental and emotional well-being of individuals and communities targeted by hate speech.

## **Recommendations:**

- The PTA needs to be strengthened with a clearer mandate and objective as well as more resources and skills. This may involve providing the PTA with advanced technological tools, specialized training of its staff, and improving its existing processes in order to enable the authority to deal with online hate speech more effectively.
- Government authorities dealing with hate speech cases like PTA and FIA etc. need to act proactively by not only identifying and flagging hate speech but also removing hateful contents from social media platforms. The process involves not only the technical act of deleting contents but also the legal and procedural aspects of such crimes. These authorities need crystal clear guidelines on what constitutes hate speech under Pakistani law and a mechanism to enforce content removal in cooperation with digital platforms.
- While enhancing the professional capabilities of PTA, FIA, etc. care needs to be taken that any such empowerment initiative is aligned with legal and ethical standards. Freedom of speech must be ensured while curtailing hate speech that incites discrimination or violence. Such a balancing is crucial to avoid censorship.
- Both the government and civil society need to carry out public awareness campaigns to increase understanding about the Ahmadi community. The focus needs to be on educating people about the basic rights of Ahmadis as citizens and as a religious group as provided in the Constitution. There is also a need to counter disinformation about the community and highlight the adverse impacts of religious intolerance on society. These campaigns can utilize various media channels including social media, television, radio, and press.
- In addition to advocacy campaigns, there is need for structured and long-term interventions. Values of tolerance and peaceful coexistence can be integrated into school curriculums, university courses, community education initiatives, or professional development programs for various sectors e.g., government, law enforcement, judiciary etc.