

## **Church Attacks in Jaranwala and the Issue of Religious Intolerance in Pakistan**

Imran Ahmed and Hatizah Rashid

### **Summary**

*Pakistan has grappled with religious intolerance, fuelled by the intertwining of politics and blasphemy laws. The recent incident in the small town of Jaranwala in Punjab, which led to a series of attacks on churches, following accusations of blasphemy, spotlights this ongoing issue. Weak governance structures and unchecked clerical power worsen the problem. Repealing or amending blasphemy laws is essential, though challenges to do so remain formidable.*

A [recent controversy](#) around the torn pages of the Quran near a Christian colony in the small town of Jaranwala in Punjab culminated in a series of attacks on churches and accusations of blasphemy against two Christian residents. While Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) flags were spotted amidst the chaos, the party has [denied involvement](#). This incident is reminiscent of the mob attack and [burning of a Hindu temple](#), led by local Muslim clerics in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, following claims of blasphemy against a Hindu boy in December 2020. In both incidents, the autonomy enjoyed by religious clerics in politicising Islam and instigating violence against religious minorities presents a prevailing problem. It also highlights the more concerning issue of weak governance structures, a dearth of legal mechanisms to counter false allegations and a concentration of unchecked power in the hands of people in positions of responsibility.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan's (HRCP) fact-finding mission to Jaranwala [found local Muslim clerics](#) and religious leaders complicit in the brutal mob-led attacks and the burning of 24 churches in the town. [According to the HRCP](#), "this was not a spontaneous or random crowd [that led the attacks], but a part of a larger campaign of hatred against the local Christians." A [detailed report](#) on online hatred by Bytes for All, a Pakistan-based human rights organisation with a focus on information and communication technologies, found that "people are more charged with religious sentiments after attending Friday sermons." An inherent problem is how Islam is taught across Pakistan focused on [fuelling discrimination](#) against a religious 'other', as well as the role religious leadership plays in fostering a culture of intolerance.

Pakistan is home to [multiple minority](#) communities who are often the victims of proselytisation and other forms of systematic oppression, persecution and opportunistic violence. For Christians, in particular, Pakistan is considered the seventh most dangerous country to live in by the [World Watch List 2023](#). Moreover, the International Christian Concern has documented more than [300 cases of persecution](#) against the Christian community from 2019 to 2021, ranging from accusations of blasphemy to forced conversions and mob-led violence. The legally ambiguous nature of the blasphemy laws is

often misused with impunity, fostering an unfortunate culture of mob mentality and vigilantism across the country.

The [data collected](#) by Pakistan's Centre for Social Justice confirms that 1,855 people have been accused under the blasphemy-related clauses between 1987 and 2020, with the highest number of 200 cases reported in 2020 alone. The TLP emerged in 2015 as staunch defenders of the blasphemy laws and [mobilised mass support](#) by encouraging incendiary narratives against anyone accused of blasphemy. The hardline religious party has been [notorious](#) for chanting slogans to behead alleged blasphemers, glorifying their killings, and celebrating their killers. While no one has been executed under the controversial laws, [78 people](#) have become victims of extrajudicial killings. The supporters of the TLP have been at the forefront of inciting violence during the acquittal of the high-profile [Asia Bibi case](#), the killing of the renowned politician [Salman Taseer](#) for opposing the blasphemy laws, the lynching of [Mashal Khan](#) and the lynching and burning of a [Sri Lankan factory manager](#), in addition to various other overlooked cases of mob violence and target killings.

To curb the rise of religious intolerance, Pakistan needs widespread reforms, starting from the reassessment of the Islamic reforms introduced under Zia-ul Haq's regime and the strengthening of the legislative mechanisms to counter the culture of impunity with which Muslim clerics incite episodes of violence against minority groups. The government must also take steps to regulate and monitor the weekly Friday sermons and religious edicts and revise education curricula across madrassahs and public schools that propagate intolerance towards religious minorities.

While repealing the blasphemy laws would be ideal, in practice, this has proven difficult. With Pakistan's current economic and political instability, it is yet to be determined if the country can allocate resources towards good governance mechanisms to ensure the protection of marginalised communities.

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Dr Imran Ahmed is a Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute in the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at [iahmed@nus.edu.sg](mailto:iahmed@nus.edu.sg). Ms Hatizah Rashid is a research intern at the same institute. She can be contacted at [Hatizah.Rashid@anu.edu.au](mailto:Hatizah.Rashid@anu.edu.au). The authors bear full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.