

Shunned by Pakistan’s Muslims, Ahmadis Find Refuge in a City of Their Own

Date : 29th December 2017



RABWAH, Pakistan — The guard inched open the metal gate of the giant mosque compound, cast a wary glance at the empty street and with a cagey wave of his hand said, “Come in.”

It was a Tuesday afternoon in Rabwah, the time for the midday prayer performed daily by Muslims, but the sprawling halls of Masjid-e-Aqsa, the largest mosque of the Ahmadi sect in Pakistan, stood empty. Paint peeled off the walls. A giant clock near the dusty pulpit read 8:44, no longer keeping time.

Though Ahmadi beliefs are deeply rooted in Islam, orthodox Muslims consider them heretical. The Pakistan Constitution declared them non-Muslims after anti-Ahmadi riots in 1974, and a 1984 ordinance forbade their “posing as Muslims” — performing the Muslim call to prayer, publicly using Islamic greetings, disseminating religious literature or even calling their places of worship mosques.

The legal changes have left the sect particularly vulnerable, and attacks on Ahmadi businesses, places of

worship and graveyards are common. Since twin attacks on Ahmadi mosques in Lahore in 2010 left 93 people dead, Rabwah's Masjid-e-Aqsa, where 20,000 people would gather at a time, has been abandoned for smaller neighborhood mosques.

“The congregations were a time to meet friends, catch up and laugh,” Amir Mehmood, who works in the community's press office, said as he walked through the mosque's echoing halls. “Now this emptiness, it makes my heart weep.”

Photo



Students waiting for their parents outside their school in Rabwah. The few, overcrowded schools run on two shifts. Credit Mohsin Raza for The New York Times

Mr. Mehmood's mood matched that of the city, where a tenuous sense of security holds even as the specter of violence hovers just outside the city walls. Rabwah is filled with those who have suffered decades of violence. Some are here to find sanctuary. Others are waiting to flee abroad.

The sect moved its headquarters to Pakistan from India in 1948, purchased a barren stretch of desert land from the government and resolved to populate it. Thus was Rabwah born.



Today the city contains about 70,000 Ahmadis. The roads are paved and lined with greenery. An Olympic-size swimming pool, state-of-the-art library, free eye and blood banks and a world-class cardiology hospital have been set up. Much of the community is affluent, and the literacy rate is over 85 percent. The city is small enough that people, even those who can afford cars, cycle everywhere.

Rabwah — where portraits of the Ahmadi sect’s turbaned founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, are ubiquitous — has a veneer of calm, even affluence, that is at odds with the growing hatred against the sect elsewhere in the country. (In November, anti-Ahmadi demonstrators paralyzed the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, for weeks and an attempt by the government to clear out the protest site ended in deadly clashes that spilled over to other parts of the country.)

In a bustling bazaar on the busy Aqsa Road, women in thick button-down loose robe abayas distinctive to the Ahmadis could be seen smelling oranges at fruit stalls, haggling with jewelry store owners and hailing yellow taxis. In neighboring towns like Faisalabad and Chiniot, shop signs warn Ahmadis not to enter: “First enter Islam, then enter this shop!” But here in the bazaar, almost every second store had the word Ahmadi in its name: Ahmadi Tailors. Ahmadi General Store. Ahmadi Hardware.

After nightfall, children played cricket in well-kept parks while their fathers gathered around coal heaters. Others could be seen walking back from school, bowed under the weight of colorful knapsacks. Rabwah’s few, overcrowded schools must run on two shifts — morning and evening — to make sure everyone gets an education.

Photo



Mirza Khursheed Ahmad, whose grandfather founded the sect, heads the Ahmadi missions in Pakistan. Credit Mohsin Raza for The New York Times

Yet hard-liner Muslims come to Rabwah, too. When the annual processions to mark Eid Milad-un Nabi, birthday celebrations for the Prophet Muhammad, roll through the city, the authorities warn Ahmadis to shut their businesses and lock themselves inside their homes, as procession leaders hurl “unrepeatable” expletives against Ahmadi leaders and declare them “worthy of being murdered.”

“We have to cover our children’s ears, lock them up in the back rooms, put the TV on really loud,” said Farhat Ata, a teacher at Rabwah’s Maryam Siddiqa School, whose library has no Qurans or Ahmadi literature. “The hardest question I have to answer as an educator and as a mother is: Why is this happening to us? And why can’t we fight back?”

No Ahmadis are employed in government departments or the police, or represented in local government. The small city provides few job opportunities, and Ahmadis from Rabwah are turned away when they look for work in neighboring towns.

Mirza Khursheed Ahmad, a nattily dressed octogenarian who heads the Ahmadi missions in Pakistan and whose grandfather founded the sect, had the tired, phlegmatic air of someone who has seen it all. But

good humor underpinned his manner.

“After the 1974 riots, when people fled to Rabwah, our caliph would say no matter what happens, don’t let them take away your laughter,” he said as he fixed the pin on his lapel, the black-and-white flag of the sect. “So no, you cannot rob me of my smile.”

Humda Ahmed was all smiles. She lived in Jhelum until November 2015, but rumors that a security guard at the family’s chipboard factory had burned pages of the Quran in a boiler set off an angry mob that burned down the factory and the family’s house. She now lives in Rabwah.

Photo



An Ahmadi mosque known as Bait Al Mehdi. Credit Mohsin Raza for The New York Times

Flipping through pictures on a laptop, she came to an image of the green-and-white Pakistani flag draped over burned furniture. “I took my kids back there a few months ago to see for themselves what had happened, and we found the flag in the rubble, left over from Independence Day celebrations,” she said. “So I spread it out and took a picture to send my parents.”



She laughed: “Because you know, the heart is still Pakistani.”

In the corner of the cozy living room, a dim light illuminated scars on the face of her father, Qamar Suleman, who was shot in the mouth about two decades ago.

He offered me fresh fruit ice cream in paper cups that read “Mannan Ice-Cream Shop.” When I declined on account of the cold weather, he insisted: “This ice cream is famous here. The same clerics who hate us by day come to Rabwah in the evening to eat it. It’s the only bridge between us.”

Across the city, in a poorer part of Rabwah, Ruby Tabassum lives in a two-bedroom flat with her in-laws. In March 2016, she watched as a young man plunged a knife through her husband’s heart outside their house. Just weeks later, her 5-year-old daughter, born with a heart condition, died in her sleep.

As Ms. Tabassum showed me pictures of her deceased husband, the television in the background played footage of the sect’s caliph giving a sermon in Urdu. The subtitles read: “I cannot refrain from saying the truth for fear of dying.”

“There is not one day when I wish I were not Ahmadi,” Ms. Tabassum said.

I asked her if she felt safe in Rabwah.

“The day I arrived here with my children, a strange peace came over me and I thanked Allah that we have this place,” she replied. “At least we have Rabwah.”

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