Minorities packing their bags as religious freedom plunges in Pakistan

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Thousands of Christians, Ahmadis and Hindus are fleeing as the government turns a blind eye to Islamic groups' harassment of other faiths and beliefs; even atheists have now gone quiet

Pakistan has been put on a US watch list for countries of concern over "severe violations of religious freedom" – and a closer look at the situation reveals that religious minorities and atheists are at a higher risk than ever.

The State Department's move came after a tweet by President Donald Trump in New Year accusing Pakistan of providing "safe haven to terrorists". However, the list is significant given the state's surrender to protests by the Islamic political party Tehreek Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLY) at the end of last year.

Islamabad's capitulation to the radical Islamist mob has endangered the Ahmadiyya community, which has been the target of death threats made openly since the party besieged the capital a few months ago.

The Ahmadis, an Islamic sect excommunicated by the second amendment to Pakistan's Constitution in 1974, have faced a severe backlash over the initial changes made regarding Khatm-e-Nabuwat (finality of prophethood) in the Elections Reforms Bill passed in October. According to the Pakistan Penal Code, an Ahmadi can be imprisoned for reading the Koran or even using Islamic titles.

Ahmadis face the sword of blasphemy

"What's ironic is that those ideologues who were against the creation of Pakistan not only accuse us of heresy, but also call Ahmadis – who played a crucial role in Pakistan's freedom struggle – anti-nationals," Ahmadiyya spokesperson Saleem Uddin said to *Asia Times*. "We have been the convenient scapegoats for the state since Pakistan's inception. What was a breach of freedom of religion in 1974 [through the Second Amendment], was transformed into apartheid a decade later when the state slashed and barred us from 'posing as Muslims'," he went on.

While Ahmadis are constantly under the sword of blasphemy – a 'crime' punishable by death in Pakistan – owing to their interpretation of Islamic theology, the state has recently begun targeting atheists.

Last year, a judge in the Islamabad High Court maintained that "blasphemers are terrorists". That prompted the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) to not only block local Facebook pages that questioned religion, but also to send text messages to cell-phone users nationwide throughout the year, warning against blasphemy.

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