

Pakistan's Ahmadi Muslim community releases damning persecution report

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(Reuters) - Pakistan's disenfranchised Ahmadi community released an annual report on Saturday that detailed growing hostilities against the minority sect, including indiscriminate arrests and impediments blocking them from voting in general elections.

Ahmadis are forbidden from calling themselves Muslims or using Islamic symbols in their religious practices. They face discrimination and violence over accusations their faith insults Islam and community leaders say that open vitriol and calls for violence against the community intensified in 2017.

"Under pressure from religious extremists, the Ahmadis were denied registration in joint electoral lists," community leaders said in a news release accompanying the "persecution report".

"The preparation of separate electoral lists being prepared specifically for the Ahmadis in Pakistan is the worst kind of discrimination," they said.

With a general election due in 2018, politicians from both the religious fringe and established parties have had the Ahmadis in their sights.

The ultra right-wing Tehreek-e-Labaik party began a political furor late last year after lawmakers from the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) approved apparently small changes to the election law that discarded a requirement for Ahmadi voters to declare they are not Muslim.

Protests ended after the government met its demands, scrapping the proposed amendments and accepting the law minister's resignation.



Labaik has since staged smaller protests and openly denounced the Ahmadi community.

The Ahmadis consider themselves to be Muslims but their recognition of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who founded the sect in British-ruled India in 1889, as a "subordinate prophet" is viewed by many of the Sunni majority as a breach of the Islamic tenet that the Prophet Mohammad was God's last direct messenger.

Legal restrictions began in 1974, following a constitutional amendment declaring Ahmadis non-Muslim. A decade later military dictator General Zia ul Haq barred Ahmadis from identifying themselves as Muslim.

The report says that 77 Ahmadis were booked under discriminatory religious laws in 2017, with nine still in prison "on faith-related allegations", and four Ahmadis were murdered in hate crimes in Pakistan.

A separate report on Pakistani media listed 3,936 news items and 532 editorial pieces from Pakistan's Urdu-language media that contained "hate propaganda" against the Ahmadi community.

"There is need for the government in Pakistan to take formidable steps to remove religious discrimination from the country and thus put an end to sectarianism and biased attitudes of the population," community spokesman Saleemuddin said.

A Pakistani court ruled last month that all citizens must declare their religion when applying for identity documents, a move human rights advocates say is another blow for the country's persecuted minority communities, particularly members of the Ahmadi sect.

(Reporting by Saad Sayeed)

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