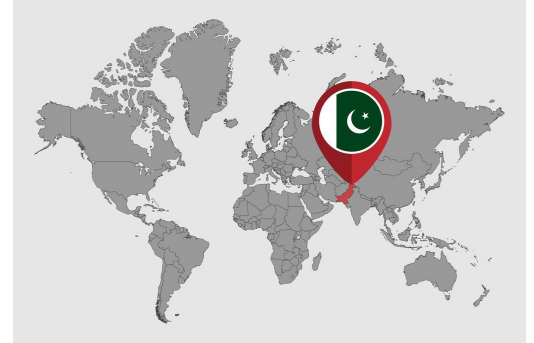


PAKISTAN

Pakistan is a place of incredible diversity and beauty, but also a place of rampant human rights violations impacting people of all faiths. With an estimated 240 million people in a country twice the size of California, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan is the second-largest Muslim country in the world. Of the total population, over 80% are Sunni Muslims. Shia Muslims comprise roughly 15% and Ahmadi Muslims only 0.2%. Non-Muslim minorities include Hindus, Christians (from Roman Catholics to Protestants), Baha'is, and Zoroastrians, among others.



Extreme religious persecution is rampant in Pakistan and intolerance to any forms of religious diversity pervasive. The suffering remains great for many people of faith, even to the point of death. Both government repression and terrorist attacks victimize not only religious minorities but also Muslims who challenge state-imposed ideologies or the terrorists' violent beliefs.

Pakistan has the notorious distinction of having the harshest blasphemy law in the world, which can lead to life imprisonment or even the death penalty. Through extreme surveillance, the government monitors both internet traffic and reports of "blasphemous or offensive comments" related to Islam. Many individuals convicted and sentenced to death in blasphemy cases remain in terrible prison conditions for years as they await their appeals.

Hazara Shia and Ahmadi Muslims face regular persecution. Hazara Shia are regularly targeted by the Pakistani Taliban and ISIS for being Shia. For Ahmadis, the Pakistani state does not consider them Muslims, criminalizing their assertion of core Islamic practices under Pakistani law. Ahmadi graves and places of worship have been desecrated by extremists, at times with the assistance of authorities. Many Ahmadis are also held as prisoners of conscience for blasphemy-related offenses, like 55-year-old Ramzan Bibi. Bibi, an Ahmadi mother of six, was charged in 2020 under blasphemy laws for simply donating money to a non-Ahmadi mosque in her village. Her offense carries the death penalty.

For other religious minorities, including Christians, the Pakistani government regularly abuses (or fails to protect) communities with respect to claims of blasphemy offenses. Indeed, reports of arbitrary arrests, disappearances, and even killings at the hands of police are widespread. Mob violence and targeted killings also go unchecked against minority faiths. In August of 2023, a mob of hundreds stormed a Christian colony in the Punjab province of Pakistan, ransacking and burning churches and adjoining buildings over false accusations of blasphemy by two local Christian residents. Many Muslim leaders condemned the violence.

Today, diverse forms of intimidation, discrimination in employment and education, and even "religious apartheid" across some communities make Pakistan a dangerous place to practice one's beliefs. Abductions and forced conversions remain a long running problem for adherents of minority faiths on top of blasphemy laws. For example, in 2022, a Muslim couple abducted a 14-year-old Christian girl from her family home and forced her to renounce her faith and marry the Muslim man (as his second wife). After police did not file charges against her kidnappers, the girl was forced to remain with the couple as a judge ruled the girl had married and converted to Islam "of her own free will." This same story has occurred repeatedly for Hindu girls.



APRIL SCRIPTURE

Psalm 68:4-6 (NIV)

- 4** Sing to God, sing in praise of his name,
extol him who rides on the clouds;
rejoice before him—his name is the Lord.
- 5** A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows,
is God in his holy dwelling.
- 6** God sets the lonely in families,
he leads out the prisoners with singing;
but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.

PRAYER

Lord God, we pray today for the nation of Pakistan and its people. We pray that the violence and discrimination there would cease so that all can live out their faith according to their conscience without fear of discrimination or violence.

Lord, we know from Isaiah chapter 25 that you are a refuge for the poor and a strong shelter in times of distress. Today, so many of your own children are in distress and under attack for bearing your name in Pakistan. However, not only Christians face persecution but many others who adhere to different beliefs and likewise suffer for it. Lord, we know that you are a God of peace, of justice, of compassion and mercy. We know that with you nothing is impossible. So we come before you now, boldly and with faith, asking you to protect your followers as well as Ahmadi families, Hindus, human rights advocates, and anyone who faces oppression for their beliefs in Pakistan. We pray for the protection of individual Shia and Sunni Muslims who face attacks by terrorists. Each human being you have formed in your own image has dignity and worth.

We ask that you change the tide in Pakistan, beginning with the hearts of officials, leaders, and members of the police force who commit violence or ignore violence.

We also pray specifically that you would give strength to those imprisoned right now on blasphemy charges and other arbitrary rulings. We pray you would similarly protect Hindu and Christian women forced into marriages and help them find a way out, whether legally or otherwise. Let us not turn our hearts from their cries but respond in a way that would reflect your Son and his love towards all.

We trust you and we ask you to grow us in a way that makes us stronger advocates for your justice, advocates who stand up for the marginalized and the oppressed, no matter who they are.

Amen.

