



General Assembly

Distr.: General
XX January 2024

English only

Human Rights Council

Fifty-fifth session

26 February–5 April 2024

Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Jubilee Campaign, a non- governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[30 January 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.

Blasphemy and Forced Conversions: Unravelling the Human Rights Crisis in Islamic Republic of Pakistan

Item 3: Interactive Dialogue on the report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

Jubilee Campaign, recognized with special consultative status by ECOSOC, submits this written statement on religious freedom and human rights within the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. This contribution aims to shed light on the deteriorating situation, presented during the 55th session of the Human Rights Council's General Debate. This written submission functions as both a fact sheet and an exploration of individual case studies, illustrating our ongoing legal assistance to those accused of blasphemy and victims of forced conversion.

Blasphemy Defined: Legal Framework in Pakistan

Blasphemy is defined as the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God or sacred things. The following presents key facts about blasphemy laws in Pakistan:

Legal Framework

The laws addressing offenses relating to religion, Sections 295-298 of the Pakistan Penal Code, are known as blasphemy laws in Pakistan. These laws have been utilized to punish expressions, acts, words (spoken or written), or visible representations deemed blasphemous, defamatory, or contemptuous towards religion. Punishments range from fines to imprisonment, life imprisonment, and even the death penalty. Notably, Sections 298-B and 298-C criminalize the practice and propagation of the Ahmadi faith.¹

Data – Accusations and Extra-Judicial Killings

According to data from the Pakistan-based NGO, Centre for Social Justice, at least 2,120 individuals were accused between 1987 and 2022 under blasphemy laws. The majority of cases (76%) were reported in Punjab. Extra-judicial killings related to blasphemy allegations and apostasy numbered at least 88 persons between 1987 and 2022.²

Concerns of International Human Rights Bodies

During Pakistan's 3rd and 4th cycles of Universal Periodic Review, fifteen countries in 2017 and twelve countries in 2023 made recommendations calling for measures to protect religious freedom, prevent abuse of blasphemy laws, and curb violence against religious minority communities.

Notable cases

Name	Arrest (year)	Period behind bars	Punishment/Status
Anwar Kenneth	2001	Over 23 years	Death penalty
Shagufta Kiran	2021	Over 3 years	Under trial

Anwar Kenneth was accused of sending an objectionable letter to religious scholars, ambassadors, and heads of state involving derogatory remarks against Prophet Muhammad, in reply to a communication received from a Muslim cleric who believed that Jesus Christ is a prophet, but he denied believing that Jesus was crucified on the cross, buried, and resurrected on the third day from the dead. In 2001, he was arrested and booked for an

¹ Al Jazeera, "Pakistan's blasphemy law: All you need to know", 18 August 2023.

² The Friday Times, "Killings By Blasphemy Lynch Mobs: Punjab Most Violent Province", 27 January 2022.

offense under section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code. In 2002, an additional session judge, Lahore awarded him the death penalty and a fine of 5,00,000 rupees, and he was sent to jail right after the verdict was delivered. On 30 June 2014, a two-member bench of the Lahore High Court bench upheld the verdict of the trial court. He has been on death row for over 23 years, as five state lawyers recused from the case to avoid representing the convict before the court.³

Shagufta Kiran, a Christian mother of four children, was accused of forwarding problematic content to a WhatsApp group in July 2021. Police arrested her an armed raid on her home in Islamabad, and confiscated all cell phones, laptops, and other valuables, and booked her under sections 295-A, 295-C, 298, 298-A, 109 of the Pakistan Penal Code, 11 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016. Police also arrested Shagufta's two sons and a daughter without an arrest warrant, however, they were released by the next day. The family members of Shagufta are bound to take refuge in safer places ever since she has been arrested.⁴

Challenges Faced by Juvenile Girls in Pakistan

Numerous cases in Pakistan highlight the distressing trend of predominantly juvenile girls from religious minority communities being abducted, forcibly converted to Islam, and compelled into marriage with the very individuals responsible for their abductions. Although "forced conversion" itself is not considered an offense in Pakistan, both abduction and forced marriage are recognized as criminal acts.⁵

In accordance with existing laws, it is a criminal offense to formalize marriages involving children, for adults to marry minors, for parents or guardians to facilitate such marriages, and for officials to solemnize child marriages. However, a significant gap in the legislation lies in its failure to explicitly declare child marriages as null and void.

Despite forced conversion being a clear violation of human rights and a severe infringement on the right to religious freedom, Pakistani authorities consistently deny the existence of such practices, asserting that all conversions to Islam are voluntary. The incidents recounted below directly challenge these claims and are indicative of the hundreds and thousands of cases involving abductions, conversions, and child marriages.

Notable cases⁶

Mishal Rasheed 15 years old Christian October 2023	Was abducted at gunpoint on October 25, 2022, and taken to an unknown locality, where she was gang-raped by four men and was then forcibly converted to Islam and married to one of the kidnappers, Abdul Sattar. After six months, Mishal managed to escape from the captivity of her abductor.
Suhana Kumar 14 years old Hindu June 2023	Was kidnapped at gunpoint by three armed men, Akhtar Gabol, Faizan Jat, and Sarang Khaskheli, forcibly converted to Islam, and married to one of the perpetrators.

Conclusion(s)

- Blasphemy laws are inconsistent with universal human rights standards and violate the right to freedom of religion and expression;

³ Shafique Khokhar, "Supreme Court to hear case of Christian jailed for 21 years for blasphemy", *Asia News*, 28 February 2023.

⁴ Shafique Khokhar, "Christian woman still jailed in Islamabad on blasphemy charges after more than nine months", *Asia News*, 19 May 2022.

⁵ Voice for Justice & Jubilee Campaign, *Conversion without Consent*, November 2022.

⁶ Marco Respinti, "Pakistan: Abducted and Forcibly Married Christian Girls Seek Justice in Courts", *Bitter Winter*, 24 October 2023. ; Subodh Kumar, "Hindu teen in Pakistan kidnapped, converted to Islam and married off by tutor", *India Today*, 8 June 2023.

- Pakistan’s blasphemy laws are vaguely worded and broad, failing to define insult and lacking consideration of intent or evidence against the alleged, necessary to meet international standards of law;
- Nearly all blasphemy cases, online or offline, are based on false accusations stemming from property disputes, political rivalries, or personal vendettas rather than genuine instances of blasphemy;
- Blasphemy laws have contributed to a climate of religious bigotry, resulting in discrimination, harassment, and violent attacks against minorities and their places of worship.

Recommendation(s)

1. Revise national legislation to align with international conventions safeguarding the individual's right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Specifically, amend Penal Code Article 295 through 298, criminalizing blasphemy in violation of Article 18 and 19(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;
2. Implement an immediate moratorium on the death penalty and abolish the sanction for blasphemy;
3. Guarantee the protection of defendants' rights to due process, including legal counsel and family contact. Conduct thorough investigations to enhance detention conditions for faith minorities and eliminate instances of torture, denial of medical treatment, and prolonged pre-trial detention;
4. Ensure independent and impartial investigations into cases involving allegations of kidnapping, forced religious conversions, and forced child marriages of girls from faith minority communities. Thoroughly examine coercion, threats, or violence associated with such marriages and conversions. Rigorously prosecute perpetrators, criminalizing forced religious conversions.
