

Pakistani Minority Victimized in Name of Fighting Extremism.

September 07, 2016 5:34 AM

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CHANAB NAGAR, PAKISTAN —

Her hands shook slightly — a sign of age — as she held her thin, long dupatta scarf in front of her face and turned slightly away. Years of covering her face in front of men had made her shy.

In her 53 years of marriage, this was the first time she was alone. Her 80-year-old spouse Abdul Shakoor had been convicted on charges of selling banned books and is serving a five-year jail term. The books, which Nayeema claims he removed from the shop after a government notice, were comprised of religious literature intended for their own sect.

Nayeema and Abdul Shakoor belong to Pakistan's Ahmadiyya community, one of the most persecuted religious minorities in the country according to human rights activists.

Shakoor's small shop, which sold books and spectacles, was in the main bazaar of Chanab Nagar, a town of 60,000 — 95 percent of them Ahmadiyyas. The town, in the heartland of Pakistan's most populous Punjab province, is the de facto headquarters for the million or so Ahmadiyyas living across Pakistan.

New actions

Community representatives claim that while they have faced decades of government-sanctioned discrimination, it has recently increased under the country's new National Action Plan (NAP), a comprehensive strategy introduced to counter years of religious terrorism and growing violence in the country.

The plan calls for banning all materials, books, CDs, DVDs, even pamphlets that could be labeled hate speech, or that were deemed to incite violence against any group.

Ahmadiyyas complain that the government of Punjab, the country's most populous province, has used this as a pretext to ban most of their religious literature, including all the books written by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, a man they consider their messiah and the founder of their religious sect. The banned material also includes community newspapers and periodicals, including those catering to children.

Copies of legal notices provided to VOA state that the books are "treasonable and seditious" and intend to "promote feelings of enmity and hatred between different classes of citizens."

"We wrote to the government and asked the chief minister to at least pin point what part of our literature was hate speech? Why were they banning it all?" said Syed Qamar Suleiman Ahmed, a senior member of the community who heads the press coordination committee. "But they did not respond. They usually don't bother responding to us."

Ahmed added that while various official notifications had been issued to ban some of these books before the NAP, no one took action on them until after the plan was introduced in late December 2014.

Starting in 2015, the community claims they noticed a renewed vigor to go after their literature, with reminders and new notices in the newspapers. Shakoor was arrested in December 2015.

As a result of such actions, members of the community can no longer purchase these books from their bookshops and can no longer keep them in their community library. Even websites carrying this literature have been blocked.

“I cannot obtain these books for my children. How am I supposed to teach them about our founder?” asked Amir Mahmood, who is in charge of the press section for the community.

Muhammad Nasir, the librarian for the main Ahmadiyya library in Chanab Nagar, said he had to get rid of almost 75,000 books out of the 200,000 previously displayed.

Islamic teachings

Unlike the country's other religious minorities, the Ahmadiyyas insist they are followers of Islam and its Prophet Muhammad. However, they also consider their founder Mirza Ghulam Ahmad a metaphorical second coming of Jesus as well as Imam Mehdi, a messiah whose advent was foretold by Muhammad. That irks many mainstream Muslims who believe Muhammad was the last prophet and the Ahmadiyyas are muddying their religion.

Posters, pamphlets, and booklets by certain far right religious groups openly declare that Ahmadiyyas should be killed.

Islamist political movements against the Ahmadiyyas resulted in a change in the country's constitution in 1974 to declare them non-Muslims, followed by a 1984 law that barred them from "posing as a Muslim." They are not allowed to use the Muslim call to prayer "azaan" or call their houses of worship mosques. Such actions could result in a jail term of up to three years.

Over the years, various Ahmadiyya places of worship have been torn down, sometimes under court orders, because their structures included domes and minarets, which are associated with mosques.

Critics say the Ahmadiyyas invite the ire of mainstream Muslim clerics because they propagate their beliefs as the true version of Islam.

However, Ahmed said there was no way for people in his community to clarify their position. "Whatever the mullah (Muslim religious cleric) claims we believe is not true. But we're not even allowed to defend ourselves as per law."



FILE - Members of the Ahmadi Muslim community dig graves for victims in Chenab Nagar, located in Punjab's Chiniot District, about 200 km (124 miles) northwest of Lahore. At least 70 people were killed in the attack.

Legal marginalization

The ban on their books, Ahmadiyyas say, is the latest in a long list of government actions designed to ostracize them.

An advertisement for a low-income government housing scheme near Chanab Nagar placed in local newspapers earlier this year by the Punjab government's Housing and Town Planning Agency clearly specified that anyone participating would have to take an oath that he or she was not Ahmadiyya.

Constitutional law expert Salman Akram Raja was surprised to hear about it.

"I've not seen this but I'm shocked and this is completely unconstitutional," he said.

However, Muhammad Khurram Agha, the secretary of Housing, Urban Development & Public Health and Engineering Department of the Punjab government said the ad in the newspaper was placed erroneously and as soon as it appeared, the relevant authorities took immediate action and the auction was called off.

"Whenever this auction happens again, it will be open to all. The housing department does not discriminate against anyone," he said.

In other instances, the community complains the local authorities have, over the years, used a perceived danger to law and order as an excuse to stop them from holding open-air rallies, conferences, or even sports events, in a city where 95 percent of the population belongs to their sect. Meanwhile, their

critics have been allowed to hold what they said were “anti-Ahmadiyya” rallies in their city.

They provided VOA with copies of several legal notices dating as far back as 1994, ordering planned sports events to be cancelled due to what the notices claimed was a “danger to peace.”

No comment

Various officials of the Punjab government did not respond to VOA’s repeated requests for a comment. Political leaders from the ruling PML-N party, including some who are usually happy to defend their government on other issues, excused themselves once they found out the questions were about the Ahmadiyya community.

Human rights activists contacted for this story were not surprised. Political leaders, they said, either agreed with the discrimination, or feared speaking up.

According to activist Tahira Abdullah, certain Pakistani groups that were closely affiliated with the Saudi-style, ultraconservative version of Islam “killed without compunction.”

“Thus, most politicians and political parties are too scared and afraid of a violent reaction if they voice any sympathy or solidarity with the plight of the Pakistani Ahmadiyyas,” she said. “Only a few human rights defenders and a handful of journalists are willing to speak on the record now.”

Supporting the persecuted community was also perceived to be politically damaging.

Imran Khan, the leader of Pakistan Tehreek e Insaaf, one of Pakistan's main opposition parties, who had made various statements earlier in his career in favor of Ahmadiyyas and against "any laws that discriminate among human beings" made a reversal before the parliamentary elections in 2013 and declared that he considered Ahmadiyyas non-Muslims and that his party would not repeal laws declaring them so.

Members of the community faced a dilemma. On one hand, they wanted to raise awareness about the persecution they faced. On the other hand, they were so fearful of a violent backlash that they wanted to keep a low profile.

Meanwhile, Nayeema was worried about her old husband, incarcerated in a cell in the blistering summer heat. He had lost weight in jail and developed health issues. She has appealed his conviction, with little hope of winning.

<http://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-religious-minority-suffers-discrimination-for-fighting-extremism/3496946.html>