

introduced, including the 'blasphemy laws' that have persecuted a number of people belonging to religious minorities in Pakistan.

<https://nayadaur.tv/2020/01/multan-bar-association-bars-non-muslim-lawyers-from-contesting-bar-elections/>



## **PAKISTAN'S BELEAGUERED AHMADIS DECRY 'DEPLORABLE' ATTEMPT TO ISOLATE THEM**

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By Frud Bezhan

Daud Khattak



In May 2018, a mob led by hard-line Muslim clerics destroyed a 100-year-old mosque belonging to the Ahmadi community in the eastern city of Sialkot, just one of many acts of sectarian violence inflicted on Ahmadis in Pakistan in recent years.

To be considered Muslim, members of Pakistan's minority Ahmadi sect must deny the beliefs of their religion.



They must swear that the Prophet Muhammad is the final prophet, and denounce the Ahmadi sect's 19th century founder as a false prophet and his followers as non-Muslim.

The Ahmadis, or Ahmadiyya, consider themselves Muslim, but that is a view rejected by mainstream Islamic sects.

And since they refuse to declare themselves non-Muslims, the Ahmadis have been stuck in legal limbo, leaving them without fundamental human rights such as access to education and the right to vote.

Numbering almost 5 million, the community has been persecuted for decades, banned from publicly practicing their faith and the target of rising sectarian violence.

Authorities in the predominantly Muslim country of 208 million have done little to stem the attacks, with the government still refusing to grant the community equal status.

### **'Paranoia, Intolerance, And Bigotry'**

In what Ahmadis say is the latest attempt to segregate its members, the Islamabad branch of Pakistan's Bar Association on January 15 made it mandatory for its 5,500 members to declare their religious affiliation. If they identify themselves as Muslim, members must sign an affidavit by January 31 declaring that they are not Ahmadis.

To be listed as a Muslim, the affidavit said the signatory must believe that Muhammad was "the last of the prophets"; that the founder of the Ahmadi sect was an "apostate, liar, and hypocrite"; and must not have ever referred to him/herself as "an Ahmadi."

The Islamabad Bar Association (IBA) said members who failed to comply would have their membership suspended and be publicly named.

The move has been condemned on social media and criticized by bar members and rights activists, who have alleged that it is an attempt to suspend Ahmadi lawyers from the association.

Amir Mahmood, a spokesman for the Ahmadi community, told RFE/RL that the IBA's "deplorable" decision risked further pushing the sect towards "isolation."

"This shows the level of religious extremism in society and how religious differences are getting deeper," Mahmood said. "It is a deliberate attempt to isolate the Ahmadis in Pakistan."

Mustafa Nawaz Khokhar, a senator and member of the bar, said the move had "buried" the South Asian country's vision for a secular state "in heaps of paranoia, intolerance, and bigotry."

"I am deeply saddened to be put under the spotlight to prove my faith," said Khokhar, who added that he would refuse to submit the declaration.



Khokhar said that "some in the fraternity" were contemplating challenging the move in the Supreme Court.

IBA President Malik Zafar Khokhar said the purpose of the declarations was to simply "identify" the Ahmadi members of the association.

### **'Rights Are Being Violated'**

"Ahmadis are being discriminated against and their basic human rights are being violated in every sphere of life," Mahmood said, citing freedom of religion, right of assembly, and voting rights.

Under Pakistani law, the Ahmadis cannot refer to themselves as Muslims or engage in any Muslim practices, including using Islamic greetings, calling their places of worship mosques, or participating in the hajj, or holy pilgrimage. Ahmadis risk imprisonment for up to three years and a fine if they break those laws.

Ahmadis are allowed to vote only for parliamentary seats reserved for non-Muslims and, since they refuse to declare themselves non-Muslims, most do not vote.



Ahmadi community members carry the coffin of a victim of an attack by gunmen wearing suicide vests on two Ahmadi mosques, during a funeral ceremony in Rabwah in May 2010

The world's roughly 12 million Ahmadis are followers of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the man who founded the movement in British India in 1889 and who Ahmadis believe was a messiah and prophet. For the mainstream Islamic sects, that contradicts a cornerstone of their belief that Muhammad was the final prophet.

Those beliefs have seen the Ahmadis come under pressure in a number of countries, including Saudi Arabia and Indonesia. In Pakistan, members of the community have



been systematically persecuted by both mainstream Muslim sects and the government.

In the 1970s, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto passed an amendment to the Pakistani Constitution declaring anyone who does not believe Muhammad was the last prophet as non-Muslim. Under the rule of military dictator Zia ul-Haq in the 1980s, the practice of the Ahmadi faith was declared a "blasphemous" criminal offense.

Ahmadis face a stark choice in Pakistan.

They can follow their faith and risk persecution and death or they can convert or leave the country. Thousands of Ahmadis from the subcontinent have left, with large communities in Britain, the United States, and Canada.

### **Growing Sectarian Violence**

Religious discrimination and violence have increased in Pakistan, a mainly Sunni Muslim country, with attacks against Shi'a, Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs in recent years.

Ahmadis have become the target of the rising sectarian violence, with their burial grounds, mosques, and homes coming under attack. The community says the authorities have done little to stem the assaults.

In May 2018, a mob consisting of several hundred people led by hard-line Muslim clerics destroyed a 100-year-old mosque belonging to the Ahmadi community in the eastern city of Sialkot.

In August that year, a mob carried out a similar attack on an Ahmadi mosque in the eastern city of Faisalabad. Nearly 30 were wounded, and the mosque was largely destroyed.

In September 2018, Prime Minister Imran Khan revoked the appointment of Atif Mian, an Ahmadi and a Princeton-educated economist, to a key advisory role following protests by a hard-line Islamist party and opposition from within Khan's own party.

It is not only Ahmadis, but also those seen sympathizing with them, who have faced threats and violence.

Pakistan's justice minister was forced to resign in 2017 after followers of a radical cleric accused him of blasphemy for changes to the electoral law that were seen as a concession to Ahmadis. Protesters forced the virtual lockdown of Islamabad for weeks.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistan-beleaguered-ahmadis-decry-deplorable-attempt-to-isolate-them/30394936.html>

