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Research Report 7 - State persecution of religious minorities in Pakistan: Christians in distress

By Dr Siegfried O. Wolf

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Abstract

Religious minorities, including Christians, are facing severe discriminations in numerous Muslim-majority countries. Yet in no country are Christians so systematically - and institutionally - persecuted and victimised as in Pakistan. Here, the plight of the Christian community ‘fully illustrates the vagaries, miseries and dangers of life as a religious minority in Pakistan’ (Gregory 2012: 196). Besides the existence of anti-Christian sentiments among individuals and groups (especially Jihadists, Islamist pressure groups, and fanatic clerics), the main reason for the persistently deteriorating situation of the Christian community in Pakistan is that the state itself is one of the main drivers of suppression and persecution. Pakistani authorities at all levels, in alliance with radicalised Islamists, actively sponsor violations to human and fundamental (political) rights of Christians. As such, the persecution of Christians in Pakistan must be described as a domestic form of state-sponsored terrorism. The suppression of Christians is systemic and can be found all over Pakistan, from the centre to the provinces, in urban as well as in rural areas. This was highlighted by the South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF) in a Policy Brief published in 2018, which argued that ‘Pakistan plays a double game as a member of the ICCPR [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights] that also persecutes religious minorities. The oppression of minorities has become systemic in Pakistan’s top-down and bottom-up jihad nexus of state and non-state actors forming alliances that work together in targeting minorities’ (SADF 2018: 1). The current Government of Pakistan (GoP) seems to continue this trend, instead of protecting the country’s minorities in general, and Christians in particular. This not only constitutes a clear breach of numerous international covenants but also betrays the electoral promises by Prime Minister (PM) Imran Khan. This SADF Research Report stresses three important patterns of state support to the persecution

of Christians. First, that all types of governments, civilian and military, were involved in the persecution and discrimination of Christians. Second, that there is no difference among any of the major political parties regarding discrimination of Christians - all major political parties in Pakistan are engaged in this persecution. Third, it is argued that the Pakistani state is failing to protect its minorities and their rights not because of a lack in capacity but because of a lack in political will. Furthermore, it is argued that the withdrawal of the US/NATO combat troops from Afghanistan will further deteriorate the security and living conditions of Christians in Pakistan. Finally, this reports states that PM Khan's open endorsement of Jihadism and an authoritarian form of governance, namely following the "Chinese model", means even worse news for the Christian community.

Keywords

Religious Minorities, Christians, Persecution, State-Terrorism, Islamist Extremism, Jihadism, European Parliament, GSP+, Afghanistan, China

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Abbreviations

ACCORD	Austrian Centre for Country of Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation
AF-Pak	Afghanistan-Pakistan
AHRC	Asian Human Rights Commission

ANDSF	National Defence and Security Forces
AP	Associated Press
APPG	All-Party Parliamentary Group for Ahmadiyya Muslim Community
BTI	Bertelsmann Transformation Index
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
CPC	Country of Particular Concern
CSJ	Centre for Social Justice
CSW	Christian Solidarity Worldwide
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Australian Government
EC	European Commission
EEAS	European External Action Service
EP	European Parliament
FES	Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
FIA	Federal Investigations Agency
GoP	Government of Pakistan
GSP+	Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus
HRCP	Human Rights Commission of Pakistan
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
LeJ	Lashkar-i-Jhangvi
MEP/MEPs	Member/s of the European Parliament
MMA	Muttahida Majlis e Amal
MRG	Minority Rights Group International
MSP	Movement for Solidarity and Peace Pakistan
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OJ	Official Journal of the European Union
PBUH	Peace Be Upon Him
PCMR	People's Commission for Minorities' Rights
PIPS	Pak Institute for Peace Studies
PML-N	Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz
PPP	Pakistan People's Party
PTI	Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf
SADF	South Asia Democratic Forum

SEZs	Special Economic Zones
TLP	Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan/Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan
TTP	Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan
US	United States of America
USCIRF	United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

1. Introduction - The evolving threat scenario for Christians in Pakistan

Since the creation of Pakistan in 1947, religious minorities in the country have faced systematic marginalisation through various political, economic, social, and legal discriminations. Constitutional amendments during the last decades contributed to the ever-worsening situation of the country's religious minorities (Yousaf 2016, February 1). A growing number of reports document the acts of intolerance and violence based on religion or belief against individuals and entire communities (villages). Religious minorities, particularly the Christian community, have been increasingly targeted in the last few years, despite the promise by PM Khan that he would protect religious minorities and despite his reaffirmation that the GoP would treat the members of such communities as 'equal citizens'. For Christians, Khan's 'Naya Pakistan'¹ has so far failed to deliver any benefit on the ground. Pakistan is the country with the highest number of reported incidents of religious extremism and hatred against religious minorities in the world. The discrimination and persecution of Christians in Pakistan is multi-faceted and multi-dimensional, affecting all spheres of life, and the perpetrators include both state and non-state actors. This is leading not only to a massive exodus of Christians but also to a comprehensive - perhaps even an existence-threatening - 'decline of Christianity' in the country. The numbers speak for themselves: In 1998, the official estimate of the share of Christians in Pakistan was 1.59 percent.² According to the 2017 national census, the total population of Pakistan was around 208 million³ and the estimated proportion of Christians dropped to 1.27%. The CIA Factbook estimates that by July 2021 the overall population in the country will number 238,181,034. This means that over 3 million Christians are currently living in Pakistan, constituting one of the largest religious minority groups (Javaid & Jalal, 2019: 26, 27). The overall worsening conditions of religious minorities and the truncation of political rights,

¹ Understood as the vision of an Islamic Welfare State (PTI, 2018).

² Here it is also interesting to note that in 1947, when modern Pakistan was formed, non-Muslim communities made up 23 percent of the population, accounting for 27 million people.

³ The exact number given in the report is 207,684,626, including 2,642,048 Christians.

combined with the erosion of democratic norms and procedures in Pakistan, is obvious. For example, the Freedom House, an international, non-partisan NGO, points out in its *Freedom in the World 2021* report that Christians ‘are vulnerable to kidnapping and forced conversions’, and that they ‘remain at risk of blasphemy accusations that can arise from trivial disputes and escalate to criminal prosecution and mob violence’. One of the crucial indicators, this is one reason why the Freedom House categorizes Pakistan as only ‘Partly Free’. The latest Bertelsmann Transformations Index (BTI 2020) describes Pakistan regarding the status of its political transformation as a ‘hardline-autocracy’ with ‘very limited’ economic transformation and a ‘weak’ government index. The Minority Rights Group International (MRG) in its annual State of the World’s Minorities of 2016 downgraded Pakistan from number 10 (from 2007 to 2010) out of 150 of its lists of states violating minority rights to number 8 in 2016.

2. The multidimensional persecution of Christians in Pakistan

Besides a few individuals (and their families) able to achieve positions within the political-administrative system, the armed forces, or other areas of life such as business or law, the overwhelming majority of Christians in Pakistan belong to the rural and urban poor (Gregory 2015: 197). It goes without saying that the country’s Muslim establishment describes this tiny fraction of the Christian community able to enjoy comfortable living conditions as proof that the Pakistani state successfully integrates its religious minorities. Well-placed Christians serve the official rhetoric as an indicator of religious pluralism and as evidence for religious tolerance in the country (Gabriel 2007). But these praised success stories can’t whitewash the fact that even these privileged Christians ‘do not enjoy full human rights or fully equal citizenship’ (Gregory 2015: 197). Moreover, despite the fact that several prominent figures emerged from the Christian community,⁴ ‘Christians are rarely feature[d] in the mainstream media or public life’ (MSP 2014: 6) despite the fact that ‘Christians have made significant contributions to social sector development in Pakistan, evident in the building of educational institutions, hospitals and health facilities throughout the country’ (MRG 2014: 7). The realities on the ground for most Christians is much worse. The victimisation of Christians affects all spheres

⁴ For example, Cecil Chaudhry, first recipient of the Sitara-e-Jurat, the third highest military award of Pakistan, and Alvin Cornelius, former Chief Justice of Pakistan (MSP 2014: 6).

of both public and private life. The Christian community faces more or less the same threats as all other religious minorities. According to Gregory, ‘the commonalities in these experiences flow from the interplay of political, legal, and social factors which create a context of threat, intimidation, powerlessness and violence for many religious minorities’ (Gregory 2012: 197).

2. 1 Legal and constitutional discrimination: The Blasphemy laws

Despite the – theoretical – protection offered to minorities in Pakistan’s constitutional-legal framework, ‘these laws are often either misinterpreted or simply overlooked, and therefore have not helped to address the deplorable conditions religious minorities face’ (MRG 2014: 18). This is mainly due to the discriminatory nature inherent to Pakistan’s laws and constitutional mandates which lead to ‘worrying legal gaps for religious minorities in the country’ (MRG 2014: 18). For scholars, it is obvious that the constitutional and legal regulations, especially the Blasphemy laws which are ‘ill-defined and liable to much abuse’ (Gabriel 2007: 46), make religious minorities de facto unequal under the law (Gregory 2015). For example, testimony by members of a religious community are ‘being granted less weight than Muslim testimony’. Judicial practice further shows that the ‘penalties for convicted members of religious minorities are often more severe than the penalty for Muslims for an equivalent crime’ (Gregory 2015: 200). According to Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Christians are ‘disproportionately affected by the draconian laws against blasphemy’. Moreover, legal regulations such as the Blasphemy laws become an instrument of persecution of Christians in the country (Gabriel 2007: 46). This is extraordinarily worrying, since ‘allegations of blasphemy can be applied on the thinnest of grounds; even a rumour of blasphemy can lead to the complete destruction of a whole community’.

According to the Freedom House, the ‘constitutional guarantees of religious freedom have not provided effective safeguards against discriminatory legislation, social prejudice, and sectarian violence’. Blasphemy laws are exploited not only by religious vigilantes but by state authorities as well. According to MRG, ‘blasphemy accusations were often maliciously used to settle personal vendettas, criminal charges were filed based on abysmally low evidentiary thresholds, and blasphemy accusations all too often catalysed deadly vigilante action with impunity for perpetrators’ (Das 2020: 48). Here, Malik notes that blasphemy allegations are ‘frequently ... abused in order to settle local and personal grievances’. In some cases, allegations are completely false, and motivated by personal hostility, local business rivalry or the need to evict a person from a property (Malik 199:

141f). The BTI 2020 stresses the before-mentioned point by stating that ‘blasphemy laws are used as a pretext to persecute religious minorities, particularly Christians and Ahmadis’ (BTI 2020: 7). The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in its *Violating Rights* study published in December 2020⁵ states that 81 percent of state blasphemy law enforcement occurred in only 10 countries, and Pakistan is one of them. It is most informative that Pakistan not only belongs to the 10 countries accounting for over four-fifths (81%) of all reported cases of state criminal blasphemy enforcement but also that Pakistan holds first place on that list, accounting for more than twice the cases reported by the second ranked country (Iran). Pakistan is also subjected to human-rights due process violations. More concretely, in addition to state-sponsored violence against alleged blasphemers, observers identified ‘several criminal blasphemy law enforcement cases with reported state due process violations’. This includes no access to counsel and lawyer (of its own choice), illegal detentions, including detentions without charges or trial, and unfair trials. It is furthermore obvious that ‘false cases are made against Christians under discriminatory laws’ (Saeed 2002 quoted in Gregory 2015: 208) – this appears as the “intended norm” rather than a row of “unfortunate exceptions”. Even if the accused are acquitted they may get face execution by vigilantes such as radicalised and militant Islamist groups (Gabriel 2007: 7). Many of those facing charges due to (false) accusations of blasphemy are murdered while in custody. Moreover, accusations against an individual often spill out into one’s family and even whole community. According to the MRG 2014 report, ‘blasphemy laws have also helped to facilitate a culture of vigilantism, in which mobs target the accused or the religious community with whom they are connected before the accused is convicted’. Linda Walbridge states that blasphemy has ‘become the scourge of the Christian community’ (Walbridge 2003: 80).

2.2 Economic discrimination

Closely linked to social and cultural persecution (*see next section 2.3*) is economic discrimination faced in Pakistan. As constant victims of numerous types of persecution, ‘Christians also face problems in getting decent employment and, as a result, they often end up getting a job which is lower than their education status, something that further impedes their progress in life’ (Pio & Syed 2016: 192). The Christian community is experiencing a multitude of injustices leading to violations of numerous of their economic-

⁵ Focusing on a five-year period from 2014 to 2018, the USCIRF’s study ‘provides extensive data and examples demonstrating the many ways that, in the 84 countries that have blasphemy laws, enforcement of such laws undermines human rights, including freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression’.

related basic rights.

According to the BTI 2020, minority rights are not respected by the majority. Hence ‘the economic conditions of Christians ‘are below the national average’ (BTI 2020: 23). MRG states that is ‘has solid evidence’ of persistent economic and social discrimination ‘on the basis of religion and belief, which impacts heavily on the day to day lives of those affected’. Christians with fewer opportunities for education and consequently for employment have to make do with menial shops; a situation mirrored by the job market and exploited by employers. MRG highlights that ‘the repeated issuing of job adverts limiting certain low paid and low skilled jobs to religious minorities’ and that ‘discrimination prevents equality of opportunity in education, jobs, business and ultimately re-entrenches poverty for many’. For example, ‘sanitation workers, who were deemed essential workers, mostly belong to religious minorities including Christians’, ‘who make up about 75 per cent of the workers’ (MRG 2021: 37). The Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) provided similar information on this issue in December 2019: ‘Christians are severely inhibited in employment particularly by the government itself, which advertises for jobs in the sanitation sector which explicitly request non-Muslim applicants. A number of provincial advertisements specifically advertise for Christian or non-Muslim sanitation workers. Even those who manage to climb out of the persisting morass of prosecution and injustice face gross discrimination in finding decent jobs in government (public) or private sectors. In the low paid, menial jobs most Christian men do, they face humiliation, discrimination, intimidation, and abuse on a daily basis. In result, economic disparities remain a major reason for wilful conversions from Christianity to Islam. Another effect of economic discrimination is that the subsequent poverty is a significant roadblock to justice.’

2.3 Social, cultural, and religious discrimination

Persecution against Christians in Pakistan is conducted in a systematic manner – it does not only consist of episodic, sporadic activities undertaken by a limited number of persons and groups. Oppression must also be described as comprehensive since it targets all spheres of public and private life (social, economic and political). The perpetrators aim not only at the eradication of Christianity in the country but also at the destruction of societal and cultural lives, education, and economic conditions of Christians. Social and cultural factors point out ‘how prejudice and discrimination against certain religious communities, including some Muslims, has become ingrained within Pakistani society’ (MRG 2014: 19). The discrimination against Christians (and other minorities) seen as ‘inferior beings’ is adequately summarized by the following statements made in the MRG 2014 report:

‘Beyond discriminatory laws and constitutional injunctions, religious minorities in Pakistan encounter discrimination in a variety of public spaces on a daily basis, including school, work, local neighbourhoods and the media. Graffiti and banners on city walls, voices from the loudspeakers of mosques, popular television programmes, and even children’s textbooks carry messages that incite hatred towards minorities. Stereotypes of religious minorities also deeply impact their interactions with the Muslim majority: for example, because of negative associations Christians are often restricted from drinking water from the same source as Muslims’.

‘Increasingly, this discrimination has been accompanied by widespread violence that impacts in profound ways on the lives of marginalized religious groups’ (MRG 2014: 21).

Christians are ‘seen as inconvenient to Islamic rule rather than as full citizens offering enhancement of public life’ (Saeed 2002 quoted in Gregory 2015: 208). Besides the disadvantages in the constitutional and legal spheres, other discriminations affect the social, cultural and religious practices of Christians. Constitutional and legal issues [are] ‘linked to the negative attitudes of government, police, judiciary, and [the] local majority of Muslims towards Christians and other minority groups’ (Saeed 2002, quoted in Gregory 2015: 208). To many Muslims in Pakistan, Christians ‘are persona non grata, to be looked down upon and to be treated differently from themselves. At best they are to be assimilated by religious conversion and at worst expelled from the nation.’ (Gabriel 2007: 42).

The double challenge: Religion and class impacts on discrimination

The discrimination of Christians is not just a purely religious matter. Besides the negative impacts of the rapidly growing Islamisation in the country, the Pakistani mainstream considers ‘Christians as social outcasts on grounds of caste as many of them have historically been converts from low-caste Hindu tribes during the years of British rule’. In consequence, Christians face the double challenge of religious intolerance and a deep-rooted, caste-based discrimination. This finds its expression in a correlation between caste and profession. The Movement for Solidarity and Peace states that Christians in rural areas have a ‘disproportionately high representation in occupations such as sweepers, municipal workers, and domestic help’ (MSP 2014: 6). These ‘are identified as subsistence-level jobs and considered “polluting”’ (MSP 2014: 6) - leading to stigmatisation and exclusion. For example, the derogatory term ‘churha’ (sweepers) is widely used in Pakistan not only to describe Christians but also to ‘imply class distinction’. This urban phenomenon is reflected in rural areas, where 70 percent of Christians work as landless laborers for Muslim

landlords (MSP 2014: 6). It is reported that these Christian laborers are highly vulnerable to social discrimination and religious abuses as well as forced (usually due to a family debt) into bonded labour (which is considered as a modern form of slavery), for example in jobs related to brick kilns production⁶, carpet-weaving as well as crops including cotton and sugar cane industries. Here, one needs to point out that ‘Pakistan is considered one of the states where bondage and labour exploitation are most deeply entrenched’, affecting the lives of poor workers and their families, ‘many [of which] belong to already marginalized religious minority communities such as Christians’. Kamran Chaudhry points out that the presence of Christian workers in the brick kilns production is extraordinarily high. For example, some 60 percent of workers living and working in brick kilns of Punjab province are Christians. Gregory states that in some areas around 80% of brick kiln workers are Christians (Gregory 2015: 209). Christians trapped in bonded labour are ‘subjected to human trafficking and sale through debt transfers, physical abuse [including rape through landlords and police], and economic exploitation’ (MSP 2014: 6). It is also reported that Muslim employers are ‘maintaining private jails to discipline them’ [Christian workers]. Being illiterate and powerless, Christian labourers can’t do much to improve their working conditions (Gregory 2015: 209) or to escape from the ‘debt trap’. The inequalities in the law, and its inadequate practical application, ‘allow unscrupulous Muslims to drive religious minorities from their land, to seize their property and to take them into bonded labour and slavery’ (Gregory 2015: 200). It is reported that ‘land is being taken from Christians who are then driven into forced labour’ (Saeed 2002, quoted in Gregory 2015: 208).

Perennial disruption of religious practices and daily lives

While in theory there is little restriction on the freedom of Christians to practise their religion, this is not the case in practice (Gregory & Valentine 2009: 19). According to Presler, in Pakistan the Christian community faces discrimination and persecution on an ongoing basis (Presler 2015: 73). Pakistani Christians ‘face enormous challenges in practising their faith because of a range of factors, including lack of access to places of worship as well as the threat of violence’ (MRG 2014: 22). In fact, the freedom to profess and propagate (missionary work) Christianity is not only subject to restrictions but also to existential threats. The BTI 2020 comes to the conclusion that Christians (along with other

⁶ It is reported that around 80 percent of brick kiln workers in some areas are Christians working to pay off family debts. But the money they owe keeps persistently ‘increasing, spiralling out of reach, thus keeping them and future generations in debt’.

religious minorities) ‘often cannot profess or propagate their religion’ (BTI 2020: 23). As a consequence of living in an environment of long-standing and severe oppression, ‘the religious isolation of the majority of Pakistani Christians intensifies over time’ (Presler 2015: 75). It does not come by surprise that ‘persecution adversely affects church attendance and numerical membership’ (Presler 2015: 75).⁷ Moreover, facing stiff persecution and terror, Christians in huge numbers are leaving (or attempting to leave) the country (Pressler 2015: 76).

Other disruptions of religious practices for Christians include denial of access⁸ to churches and attacks against churches as well as other places of worship and religious practices such as cemeteries, chapels, and construction of housing for priests and for catechists. There are numerous reports of Churches desecrated⁹ (Saeed 2002 quoted in Gregory 2015: 208) or damaged, or destroyed – burned down usually as a result of mob violence or a terrorist bombing. The maintenance or (re)construction of churches are often blocked by severe bureaucratic and local authority delays, several forms of corruption and opposition. In some documented cases¹⁰ authorities and business commandeer Christian buildings and land, according to Gregory not an ‘unusual’ phenomenon in Pakistan (Gregory 2015: 208). There are also cases of restrictions on burials. The MRG assess the restrictions as part of a broader picture in which customs and traditions that deviate from those of the Muslim majority in Pakistan are being systematically repressed (MRG 2014: 22).

Education-based discrimination

Christians suffer from disadvantages in Pakistan’s educational system of Pakistan. Here, a major problem is access to education. The GoP, together with provincial administrations, conducted several measures against religious institutions ran and/or owned by religious minorities. The most noteworthy, unlawful move so far, was undertaken in the context of the nationalisation and subsequent privatisation of schools and colleges in the country. In 1972, under the use of Martial Law Orders, the GoP nationalised and took over numerous educational institutions under private management, especially those run by Christians (and by the Ahmadiyya). Such educational centres were well-known for their high educational

⁷ For example as a consequence of the September 13, 2013, All Saints’ Church bombing in Peshawar, the attendance of Sunday congregation dropped in average from 300 to 400 down to 80 to 100 people.

⁸ Reman outlines that numerous places of worship have been taken over by the GoP ‘under the pretext that the owners have migrated to India while only the managers may have gone away’(Rehman 2003: 16) and since then remain locked up and inaccessible to Christians (Gregory 2015: 208).

⁹ For example, on 9 May 2020, a Christian church in Pakistan’s Punjab province was desecrated in a land grab crime.

¹⁰ For example, on 10 January 2012, a site in Lahore’s Garhi Shahu district was commandeered and buildings on the land including churches, schools, houses, and elderly homes were bulldozed.

standards and served as safeguards allowing Christians and other religious minorities to compete with Muslim students in key public and private sectors (MSP 2014: 9). Christian schools and colleges are very popular among many moderate Muslims and other religious communities as well since the ‘education they impart is said to be of a better standard than many state-run schools’ (Gabriel 2007: 33). Robert Butler and Ikram Chagathai highlight that the work done in Christian colleges and schools is very much appreciated by both students and parents (Butler & Chagathai, 1994: 329). However, conservative Muslims in Pakistan quickly feared that Christian educational institutions would expose their children to Westernisation and lead to the erosion of Islamic beliefs and culture in the country (Butler & Chagathai 1994: 329). Muslim fanatics associated Christian educational institutions with hotbeds of alien ideologies and accused Pakistani Christians and their institutions to have a ‘hidden agenda’ defined by ‘anti-Islamic designs to destroy the purity of Islam’ (Gabriel 2007: 33). In 1996, the GoP offered to return these institutions under certain terms and conditions. Though several institutions were de-nationalized and returned to Christians, the nationalization had lasting consequences. In some cases the authorities refused to transfer management back to Christian (and Ahmadiyya) communities, transferring it to third parties instead (Wolf 2019, May 10: 26). Some cases of ‘nationalized’ Christian properties and institutions remained unaddressed (MRG 2014: 7).

Additionally, educational centres ‘that once catered to Christians now only do so marginally, and quotas for Christians remain unfilled’. Moreover, the inclusion of Islamic-centric syllabi ‘further marginalized Christian communities from access to education in public schools’ (MSP 2014: 6). The fact that the latter were implemented mostly at the expense of a more inclusive, broader educational focus reduced the educational standards available for most Christians. Moreover, it confronted Christian students with additional discrimination. For example, ‘through teaching methods and materials, schools in Pakistan have long propagated exclusionary views concerning the historical decades and contemporary place of religious minorities in society, while also restricting minorities from learning about their religious and cultural heritage’ (MRG 2016: pp. 139-140). Another instrument used to reduce the number of educational facilities run by religious minorities is to hamper opportunities for opening new schools and colleges (Wolf 2019, May 10: 26). A method used to indirectly hamper access to education for religious minorities was the introduction of a compulsory declaration of religious affiliation. The ‘constitution prohibits discriminatory admission based on religious affiliation to any governmental educational institution’ (USDOS 2018, May 29: 8). The US Department of State also notes that,

according to Pakistan’s regulations, the only factors affecting admission to government schools are students’ grades and home provinces (USDOS 2018, May 29: 8). However, applicants for public as well as private educational institutions are forced to declare their religious affiliation on application forms.¹¹ It is also reported that even when Christians are able to enrol (or not be expelled) they are confronted with various other challenges intended to make them leave.¹² The CSW mentions in a May 2020 report that ‘religious minority students endure physical and psychological abuses from teachers and classmates, including beatings and bullying’. The report adds that ‘non-Muslims are often reluctant to opt to study ethics because this identifies them as a religious minority and increases discrimination’. The fact that the ‘curricula and official textbooks are insensitive to Pakistan’s religious diversity and promote intolerance between majority and minority faiths’ is an additional indicator for the extraordinarily ‘biased educational system’ in Pakistan. The Agenzia Fides reports that Pakistani textbooks used in schools include hateful narratives; ‘they inculcate hatred and contempt in the minds of children, defining Hindus and Christians as infidels’ and ‘also teach that Christians are “agents of the Western world”’.

Besides educational discrimination and the violation of numerous rights, persecution against Christians in the educational sector has dramatic consequences for Pakistan – including the introduction of a hate-based educational system and consequent overall decline of the quality of education in the country. The growing religious intolerance has severe impacts on the educational sector as it sows the seed of extremism and violence in the mind of youngsters and students. Student wings of Islamist parties are gaining influence in universities and colleges. These forces are not only engaged in spreading hate and formulating threats (both minor and grave) but also in conducting violent activities against religious minorities. Besides the severe harassment and maltreatment of Christians (staff and students), there are also reports regarding organised sectarian campaigns (speeches, distribution of pamphlets) calling for violence against the community. The perpetrators of such campaigns act unhindered and with impunity. The fact that local authorities show no interest in protecting Christians further encourages education-based anti-Christian agitation.

¹¹ Applicants who identify themselves as Muslims must declare in writing that they believe the Prophet Muhammad is the final prophet. Non-Muslims are required to have the head/representative of their local religious communities verify their religious affiliation (USDOS, 2018, May 29, p. 8).

¹² For example, refusal of accommodation in attached hostels/dormitories or denying access to other facilities related to educational institutions.

Social boycott

In order to realise a comprehensive persecution affecting all spheres of life, fanatic Islamist groups, clerics, and local officials aim at the enforcement of an economic as well as social boycott on Christian agents. Especially targeted are those Christians who had to face false charges of blasphemy but were acquitted or who raise their voice in defence of the rights of religious minorities. The aim of the social boycott is to maintain a climate of fear and prevent victims ‘to countenance the stigma and oppression following blasphemy accusations’ (Gabriel 2007: 46). Today, social boycotts become a common tool to increase pressure on Christians in their daily lives. It is translated in a multitude of measures, for instance the cutting off or shortening of the supply of essential goods such as water or energy, or various forms of public harassment and intimidation (including reputational attacks). These cases are linked to hate propaganda by both individuals and groups in numerous urban and rural areas all over the country, a phenomenon not contemplated – much less addressed – in official regulations at the national level. The growing number of such incidents is worrying and must be identified as an indicator of increasing Islamist radicalisation, intolerance and violence across Pakistan’s society. Another form of social boycott is the stigmatising of Christians not only as ‘infidels’ but also as ‘enemies of the state’. Such statements are usually formulated in the form of derogatory remarks and terms. Religious extremist elements in Pakistani state and society uses social boycott not only to silence (pro-)Christians voices but also to force them to leave the country. According to observers even local authorities are involved in harassing Christians by ‘openly asking them to leave Pakistan, which they characterised as a homeland exclusively for Muslims’ (Gabriel 2007: 46). In this context, especially the use of social media platforms to distribute hate speeches and discriminatory remarks became a preferred tool for the persecution of Christians.

Housing and ‘ghettoization’

The issue of housing is another challenge for those Christians who are poor and powerless, as well as socially discriminated. Christians face severe difficulties to buy or rent a house or apartment. This works as a catalyst for another unfortunate, discriminating phenomenon regarding housing and living of the Christian community in Pakistan: ‘ghettoization’. Political analyst Muhammad Amir Rana points out that ‘a sense of insecurity encourages non-Muslims to live in ghettos’, understood as the clustering together in poor urban slums. From a historical perspective, this insecurity among religious minorities, particularly Christians, originated from the perceived need ‘to develop a sense of reciprocal solidarity

and to reinforce their Christian identity in a Muslim environment, staying united’. However, over time ‘the need for security and protection which Christian families in Pakistan felt’ was the main driving force tying minority communities together. People facing extreme and violent forms of faith-based discrimination are so that a ‘sense of insecurity encourages them to live in ghettos’. Rana further stresses that this ‘ghettoization’ may provide Christians in the country ‘a sense of community and some comfort of social interface but such solutions only trigger more insecurity’. According to Rana, ‘ghettoization of religious minorities’ enhances the ‘mistrust among different socio-religious communities’ and subsequently leads to more religious intolerance and communal tensions which manifest themselves in mob violence. This is also reflected by Gabriel’s assessment observing that so far, ‘assaults on individual Christians or Christian homes are rare. Christian villages are an interesting phenomenon in Pakistan and point to some kind of ghettoization of Christians’ (Gabriel 2007: 46). As such, the “voluntary” ghettoization worked to the advantage of Christians from a security point of view. However, today the phenomenon of Christians ghettos is exploited by radicalised Islamist clerics and groups to produce further anti-Christian sentiments – and makes these communities easier to target. Islamist fanatics are incited to conduct raids and mob violence against whole communities and villages. In the past such attacks focused mainly on churches and other Christian institutions (understood as physical infrastructures including logistic for missionary and humanitarian work; Gabriel 2007: 46). However, more recently it is increasingly human life itself, meaning individuals and their communities, that is becoming the direct target of anti-Christian agitations. Several other problems affect the “ghettoized Christian life in Pakistan”. The phenomenon of ‘Christians’ ghettoized living’ (Riaz & Khan 2015: 346) occurs usually in form of ‘irregular settlements in and around the urban centres’. Rapid urbanisation, population growth, and urban expansion has made Christian ghettos ‘lucrative for the land mafia’. In complicity with local authorities and the radicalised clergy, criminal elements are triggering communal tensions so as to pressurise the Christians and other non-Muslims and grab their land. The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) report, states that authorities declare irregular Christian settlements as ‘a haven for terrorists and extremists’. After being declared illegal, city administrations clean up the respective areas with ‘no compensation or rehousing plans for the residents’ (AHRC 2014: 75).

Moreover, “self-imposed” restrictions due to threats and fears narrows down the already limited access to education and the (theoretical) option to secure any high level jobs. Consequences include not only increasing poverty but also ‘a subservient mindset’ which

‘has settled into the consciousness of many Pakistani Christians’. It is also argued (Riaz & Khan 2015: 346) that the trend by Christians to restrict their activities to their ghettos is a factor which keeps them out from mainstream politics. This of course contributes to their lack of political representation and minimises the chances to find opportunities to improve their overall living conditions.

2.4 Political discrimination

Religious minorities such as Christians ‘have long faced challenges to “belong” in Pakistani society and fully participate in the political life of country’ (MRG 2014: 3). A Christian community leader quoted in the 2015 MRG report stated that ‘religious minorities are not fully engaged in the political process’ and as a result they are ‘withdrawn and do not feel part of the system’ (MRG 2014: 14). A major reason for this is that Christians feel underrepresented in the country’s political institutions (MSP 2014: 6). Besides several elements of religious discriminations inherent to the Pakistani constitution - for example Articles 41(2) and 91(3) which strictly bar non-Muslims from holding the two most influential positions of government, namely that of the Prime Minister and the Head of State - constitutional law provides for reserved seats for specific religious communities in the National Assembly and provincial legislatures.¹³ Not considering the highest political posts of the country, religious minorities are not, however, altogether restricted from holding governmental positions. Nevertheless, despite these provisions, the political involvement by religious minorities in the country remains very limited. Political representation remains a contentious issue for the Christian community in particular. The MSP explains that ‘Christian community leaders contend that the nature of patronage politics – based on contributions and funding to political parties — have prevented truly representative candidates from rising to positions of prominence’ (MSP 2014: 7). One of the main grievances by the Christian community (and other minorities) is ‘that political parties elected by the general electorate choose the minority individuals who hold these seats; they are not elected directly by the minority constituencies they represent’ (USDOS, 10 June 2020: 10). Subsequently, ‘these representatives have a limited connection to the communities they are supposed to represent, meaning minorities are still left without adequate means to address their concerns.’ In fact, these minority “representatives” show rather greater allegiance to their political party than to their respective minority. In result,

¹³ The 342-member National Assembly contains 10 seats reserved to non-Muslims. The 104-member Senate has four seats reserved to non-Muslims, one from each province. In the provincial assemblies, there are three such reserved seats in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; eight in Punjab; nine in Sindh; and three in Balochistan.

politicians holding reserved seats are often more interested in maintaining the status quo than advocating for real change. This creates a severe disenchantment with politics among Christians. Additionally, political parties rarely offer minorities the opportunity to run in general seats for the national and provincial assemblies, and when they do or when minorities run as independent candidates, they often meet with other forms of resistance (MRG 2014: 14). For example, candidates and their potential electorate are often cautioned not to vote for non-Muslim candidates. The fact that the Christian settlements are scattered over the whole country and through numerous places in both urban and rural areas makes it additionally difficult to bridge their political representation gap. In sum, the lack of political representation of the Christian community is a severe enabling factor for the persecution of Christians.

Discriminatory contestation: The phenomenon of religious-political outbidding

The tremendous numbers of voices, from all sectors and levels of society, which support perpetrators of violence against Christians, including murders, is worrisome. Gregory refers to an ad hoc opinion poll conducted by JagoNews stating that in some areas up to 65% of the interviewees supported the assassination of Salmaan Taseer (Gregory 2012: 196). This anti-Christian environment was not only enabled by the fear supporters of Christians understandably have of Islamist violence (Gergory 2012: 195); it is also a consequence of a religious-political outbidding. ‘Religious-political outbidding’¹⁴ is understood here as the process through which politicians compete for the support of a particular religious group and which often leads to ever greater demands by this group at the expense of other citizen interests. In the Pakistani context, the term refers to a strategy used by politicians so as to gain political capital and legitimacy by portraying themselves as guardians of the beliefs held by the majority – Sunni Muslims. A most favoured strategy consists in describing (or at least promoting the image of) Christian as an ‘alien, hostile element’ – hostile towards Islam, the Islamic world, and as such towards the Pakistani state and society as a whole. These politicians who use religious-political outbidding aim to foment a kind of xenophobia: *Christianophobia* (Shrott 2013). By equating Christians with the United States and West - meaning countries in which Christianity is the dominant religion - political entrepreneurs try to capitalise on the animosity which emerged out of the ‘war on terror’, conflicts in the Middle East, the drone strikes in Pakistani territory, among other issues. The cultivation of *Christianophobia* aims to foment hostility towards

¹⁴ The term ‘religious-political outbidding’ as used by the author is derived from the concept of ‘ethnic outbidding’ as defined by Donald L. Horowitz (1985: 410-416).

Christians as enemies of Islamic countries and subsequently to the production of fear among the majority religious group regarding threats to their beliefs and to Pakistan's national identity. As such, politicians appeal to the majority's perceived interests regarding the protection of their religious and national identities (since Pakistan is an Islamic Republic) – and proceed through the rationale that in order to protect both, Islam needs to be kept 'pure' from Christian influence. In order to portray themselves as capable of 'protecting Islam', they promote exclusive and repressive policies against the Christian community. It appears that Pakistan's politicians expect that through the exploitation of anti-Christian sentiments a "rally around the flag" effect among Sunni Muslims is to follow which will bolster their own power and delegitimise political opponents. Pakistan's politicians are thus entering a demagogic, vicious cycle. When one politician gets traction by demonising Christians and other religious minorities, others follow suit — and even try to top the first comers' actions.

3. Types of discrimination and persecution

In a report commissioned by the by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Status Determination and Protection Information Section, Shaun R. Gregory and Simon R. Valentine state that Christians are 'subject to serious physical abuse, intimidation and threat at the hands both of some of the majority Muslim communities and of elements of the state and local authorities' (Gregory & Valentine, 2009: 16). The methods of discrimination against and persecution of Christians are most varied and wide-ranging. They include murders (from target killings - often either through burning or shooting - to large scale massacres, extra-judicial killings), suicide bombings, sexual abuses and rapes, kidnapping, "kill and dump" incidents, allegations of blasphemy, criminal land grabbing (especially in rural areas), nationalization and other forms of confiscation of property (especially in the health care and educational sectors), vandalizing and torching of homes and businesses, forced conversion and marriage of women and girls, enforced disappearances, unlawful arrests, "protective custody, torture in and outside custody, blackmailing, forced displacements, insults and reputational attacks, and both offline and online hate speeches. In recent years, 'online platforms ultimately seem to play a key role in reinforcing stereotypes and spreading myths about religious minorities in Pakistan' (MRG 2014: 24). In this context, Edwina Pio and Jawad Syed stress that 'there is an active dissemination of negative stereotypes of minorities, and religious clerics tend to foment fundamentalist thinking and action, often resulting in mob violence against minorities' (Pio & Syed 2016: 188). Furthermore, the two scholars state that 'these acts of violence, hate speech and

discrimination are indicators of issues in many layers of society, and they pertain to human rights and governance’ (Pio & Syed 2016: 188). Selected examples are outlined below.

State sponsorship of anti-Christian groups and activities

According to the USCIRF, researchers found out that Pakistan is among the four countries with ‘incidents in which state officials allegedly committed acts of violence, including torture or cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment or punishment, against accused blasphemers’. The USCIRF also states that in addition to torture, state officials in Pakistan have ‘reportedly subjected accused individuals to cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment while in custody’. Pressler points out ‘that with no legal or constitutional basis for its position, the government resorted to sending ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence] agents to threaten and attack church representatives and their supporters, both Muslim and Christian’ (Presler 2015: 76). As indicated above, the GoP adopted a minority policy which can be described as a persistent and linear process from indifference towards oppression. More concretely, the initial notion by founding father Jinnah to accommodate the various religious minorities through a pluralistic approach was gradually transformed - first into a strategy of exclusion and later into what can only be assessed as comprehensive, open, state-supported persecution. Besides the use of legal-constitutional instruments, Pakistan’s authorities not only gave into Islamist pressure but in fact actively supported Islamist forces. This includes financial support (e.g., in the form of public/government grants offered to charity organisations functioning as societal front organisations of militant Islamist groups or in the form of direct payments to clerics preaching hate and violence against religious minorities), political and judicial protection of perpetrators (granting impunity), and political mainstreaming of radical Islamist groups (allowing the formation of radical Islamist political parties). This not only gives Islamists more political leverage but also helps further entrench anti-Christian sentiments into the political-administrative system of Pakistan. As such, one must point out that this state-sponsorship of anti-Christian groups and activities is systemic in nature and constitutes what can only be called a general policy by the GoP.

State policy of appeasement of Islamists

Afraid of the clerics’ capacities to mobilise religious fanatic mobs and their tremendous ‘street power’ - and to avoid this ‘street pressure’ -, the GoP chose to appease the country’s Islamists (including clergy/madrassas, religious organizations, religious-political parties, and banned religious groups). In order to do so, authorities are enforcing repressive

measures against the Christian community. It is crucial to mention that this appeasement approach or principle evolved during the last decades from being rather sporadic and reactive into becoming an established, systematic, proactive strategy. This means that today the GoP appeases Islamists by persecuting Christians even in the absence of any concrete pressure from religious fanatics. Naturally, this appeasement strategy not only panders to Islamist extremists but also encourages their harassment and violence against Christians. According to observers, the constraining impact of this appeasement response is one of the major reasons for the GoP's poor performance in curbing religious persecution and protecting minorities (PIPS/FES 2020: 60). Islamists aim not only to pressure Islamabad to maintain the persecution of Christians but also to influence the formulation of political agendas and the concrete, final decision-making processes regarding religious/ideological issues. The extent to which the GoP allows itself to be blackmailed by Islamist forces is so extremely high that one can no longer speak of a "soft corner" by authorities. Instead one must describe the current state of affairs as a 'capitulation' by the GoP and its administration before the "Islamist camp" – a capitulation reflected in a loss of sovereignty and decision-making power by authorities in numerous domestic areas, foremost in affairs related to religious minorities.

Mob violence or threats of mob violence against Christians

By assessing the situation of Christians in Pakistan, analysts found incidents 'in which mob activity, threats, and/or violence around blasphemy allegations coincided with state enforcement of blasphemy laws'. Moreover researchers also identified in Pakistan cases 'when mob activity, mob violence, and/or threats of violence occurred around rumours or allegations of blasphemy, without state enforcement of the criminal blasphemy law'. Pakistan is one of four countries accounting 'for nearly 80% of all reported incidents of mob activity, mob violence, and/or threats of violence, with or without state blasphemy or other law enforcement'.

Forced conversions and marriages

The intensified persecution of Christians in Pakistan today is well known and recorded (Presler, 2015: 72). There are numerous reports regarding the different ways Christians are forced to convert to Islam, from threatening letters 'to convert to Islam or die', to acts of direct physical violence. Less well-known are forced conversions to Islam affecting from individual women kidnapped for marriage to whole communities (Presler, 2015: 72). One of the reasons that such incidents are not much known outside the country is because

complaints are ignored by law enforcing agencies (foremost by the police). Here, it is also crucial to highlight that even when Christians are able to make it to the court, they still lack a fair access to and a chance for justice. Instead, ‘girls and women are pressured into testifying that their marriage was voluntary, often under the threat of recrimination towards their families or possible accusations of apostasy if they deviate from the prescribed testimony’.

According to the *Forced Marriage and Inheritance Deprivation* report by the Islamabad-based Aurat Foundation and a paper by the Movement for Solidarity and Peace Pakistan (MSP) in Pakistan, between 100-700 Christian girls are forced into marriage and conversion to Islam every year (MSP 2014: 4; Zaman 2014: 16). The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) stated in its 2017 and 2018 annual reports that 1,000 cases of forced conversions of Christian and Hindu girls and women take place every year (HRCP 2018: 174; 2017: 90). Referring to data compiled by the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), a Dawn article writes that 44.4 per cent of the girls and women who were allegedly victims of forced conversions belonged to the Christian community’ (Dawn, 29 November 2020). After their conversions, they were forced to marry Muslim men. Many Christian and Hindu girls were underage and raped before forced to marry a Muslim man (usually the persecutor of the sexual abuse). The GoP has done little in the past to stop such forced marriages, a point highlighted by Usman Ahmad who states that ‘with no national or provincial laws preventing forced conversion, this trend shows little sign of abating’. Ignorance by authorities helps prepare the ground for more abuses, probably even more traumatic ones. The MSP refers to the case of Tania Rubbecca and states that ‘forced marriage and forced conversion are often found to be smokescreens for much more pervasive and serious crimes. These include human trafficking, sexual exploitation, forced prostitution, child abuse, and obstruction of justice. Even where these crimes are not present, the abduction and forced marriage of Christian women is accompanied by sexual abuse and domestic violence bordering on torture.’ (MSP 2014: 24).

The ‘Chinese brides’ issue

In this context, it is insightful to shed some light on the issue of the so called ‘Chinese brides’. The HRCP reported an increase in sex trafficking of Pakistani girls to China (HRCP 2020: 54). Aided by Chinese and Pakistani intermediaries traffickers had reportedly been targeting impoverished, mostly Christian, families. After the traffickers paid (rather bribed) parents to allow their daughters and sisters -some clearly underage - to marry Chinese men (HRCP 2020: 54), these were moved under dubious conditions to

China. Once in the People’s Republic, such women and girls ‘are often neglected and starved, abused, sold into prostitution or the illegal organ trade.’ (HRCP 2020: 54). According to BBC, a senior official from Pakistan’s Federal Investigations Agency (FIA) in Faisalabad, Jameel Ahmed Mayo, told the broadcaster ‘that women deemed not "good enough" for the sex trade were at risk of organ harvesting’. Investigations by a member of the People’s Commission for Minorities’ Rights (PCMR) into the incidents of ‘Chinese brides’ found that 1,000 to 1,200 Pakistani women had ‘married’ Chinese men (HRCP 2020: 228). Around 700 of these women were Christians, and most these marriages were conducted by ‘fake’ priests (HRCP 2020: 228). Most these Pakistani women and girls are married against their will, while often the Chinese men involved make ‘false pretences’ - especially they pretend a conversion to Christianity enabling them to marry a Christian women. The fact that the FIA was obviously put under ‘immense pressure’ to curtail its investigation on this issue and that the Chinese involved in these human trafficking incidents ‘were either acquitted or bailed and allowed to leave the country’ suggests that the GoP became involved. It is obvious that the government does not want law enforcing agencies to adequately investigate these cases and bring the perpetrators to justice. FIA agents not following the official directive are apparently ‘transferred’. Pakistani and Chinese officials reject all accusations of forced marriages, human trafficking, forced prostitution and organ trade as ‘fabricated facts’, ‘rumo[u]rs’, and even as lies (as the Chinese envoy in Islamabad did). These occurrences clearly indicate the complicity of the GoP. Statements that the ‘media was pushed into curbing reports on trafficking’ and subsequently ‘the news began to dry up’ (HRCP 2020: 55) supports the impression that the state is more interested in avoiding issues with China than in protecting its citizens, especially those belonging to religious minorities. The major rationale behind Islamabad’s downplaying of the ‘Chinese bribe’ issue is clear: ‘Cash-strapped Pakistan’ depends on Chinese aid, trade and military assistance. The Pakistani establishment fears damaging its relations with Beijing and risking tremendously lucrative investments and emerging economic ties under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor/CPEC (Wolf, 2019) as well as the manifold diplomatic, political and financial support (and “incentives” for collaboration) the Chinese government grants the Pakistani leadership. The human trafficking of Christian women and girls is becoming more aggressively since the brokers, especially those Chinese¹⁵, know that they enjoy impunity. This is best summarized by a Pakistani official,

¹⁵ According to the Washington Post - which refers to an AP’s investigation - ‘a court in Faisalabad acquitted 31 Chinese citizens charged with human trafficking’. Furthermore, the US media outlet stresses that cases against Chinese human traffickers and the Pakistani collaborators are falling apart because ‘Pakistani media curbed its coverage’ and ‘while several women originally set to testify suddenly refused “because they were either threatened or bribed into silence’.

commenting on the issue of ‘Chinese brides’ and speaking on anonymity, stating: ‘The authorities won’t follow through, everyone is being pressured to not investigate. Trafficking is increasing now’.

Impunity by perpetrators of atrocities against Christians

In Pakistan rule of law is patchy. Legal cases and law enforcement (policing) are often advanced through direct negotiations with senior tribesmen, community leaders, and clerics. Corruption of local authorities and discrimination against Christians at the local level is extraordinarily high – and we find a culture of rampant impunity (Shrott 2013). According to Roger Ballard, ‘charges are rarely, if ever, brought against the instigators of the outrages: the Police regularly allege that they have been unable to identify the attackers’ (Ballard 2012: 13). Put simply, the police often remain inactive. For example, after a mob attack against a Christian colony of the Chak 5 village in Punjab province (after a Muslim landlord, passing by a Catholic church, accused youngsters of throwing dust on him), the victimised Christians filled a first information report. However, it is reported that the ‘police have not conducted a single raid’ since then. Another reason for the pervasive impunity is that not only Christians but also their supporters in general and people engaged for the protection of their rights and improvement of their overall situation are being attacked or ‘quickly find themselves subject to death threats’ (Gregory 2012: 196). State officials, lawyers and human and political rights activists ‘can be wary of getting involved, as discussing the problem of blasphemy can lead to an accusation’ or even harsher forms of harassment by Muslim fanatics. For example, ‘a judge of the Lahore High Court overturned a magistrate’s finding of blasphemy, the judge was assassinated’ (Ballard 2012: 13). Shobha Das, former director of MRG, emphasizes that especially after the killing of defenders of minority rights and advocates of respective legal reforms, the atmosphere of fear is ‘palpable and it appeared to have given rise to a culture of silence about human rights violations, particularly in relation to blasphemy laws’ (Das 2020: 48).

4. Perpetrators of discrimination and persecution

The above-outlined persecution of Christians must be described as a domestic form of state-sponsored terrorism. The Pakistani state conducts terrorist actions both directly via its representatives (e.g., law enforcing agencies) and indirectly through the legal framework in place, which discriminates against minorities and grants impunity to perpetrators. The Pakistani state also conducts indirect state-sponsored terrorism through the active sponsorship to and judicial support of perpetrators of activities against religious minorities.

Each religious minority in their individual ways is subject to persecution and violence within Pakistan at the hands of state authorities, local clerics (Mullahs) and segments of radicalised Muslim communities, general segments of the society, political parties, Jihadists and other extremist and Islamist groups (Gregory 2012: 196).

State authorities

Besides the involvement by both national and provincial governments, lawmakers as well as the judiciary, there are numerous other state actors involved in the persecution against Christians. Not only all branches but also all layers of government are involved. There are numerous cases in which perpetrators of anti-Christian activities act either on the behalf of the state or with the state's approval, either tacitly or explicitly. Several state employees (usually security sector agents and the judiciary) are involved in the persecution against the Christian community - often acting in an unofficial capacity (personnel off-duty or on leave) but with tacit approval by respective authorities. These anti-Christian activities in general and by state officials in particular are not restricted to the establishment of a political and societal environment in which rights violations are not only legal but also increasingly socially accepted. In this context, Shaun Gregory rightly points out that 'the murders of Salmaan Taseer and Shahbaz Bhatti in 2011 shocked Pakistan and the international community, but equally shocking was the widespread support in Pakistan for their killings and their killers' (Gregory 2012: 195).

Gregory suggests that 'Pakistan itself may be moving in an increasingly conservative Islamist direction' (Gregory 2012: 195). Pakistan's state officials are actively and directly engaged in concrete violative measures such as various kinds of physical violence - including harassments, indiscriminate arrests, torture, even murders undertaken by Pakistan security forces (foremost police forces and members of the ISI¹⁶). Saeed states that police are involved in torturing Christians (Saeed 2002 quoted in Gregory 2015: 208). Members of local administrations are involved in the desecration and demolition of churches and other sites belonging to various Christian communities. Authorities do not act as mere 'apathic bystanders' of such events - nor do state agencies such as the police limit themselves to 'occasional complicity'. Observers such as the MRG come to the

¹⁶ For example, Titus Presler, principal-in-exile of the Edwardes College in Peshawar, stated that he was mistreated by agents of the ISI in February 2014 in Peshawar: 'In beating me, accusing me, tearing up my visa, and threatening me with death, the ISI agents had treated me as trash. They heaped blame and shame on me' (Presler 2015: 74). Presler describes this abuse (of himself as a representative of the Christian community) by ISI agents as a persecution of his psyche (and subsequently also of the psyche of other Christians) by 'sharing not only their abuse but also a particular internal response to such abuse' (Presler 2015: 74). In other words, the ISI tries to destabilise the mental stability of Pressler by making him internalize 'the blame and shame'.

assessment that the situation of Christians and other minorities are made worse ‘by the actions of some law enforcement agents, such as the police, who are reportedly engaged in activities that undermine the security of religious minorities’ (MRG 2014: 18). It is argued here that Pakistani authorities are persistent and systematic stakeholders in activities directed against Christians.

Local clerics (Mullahs)

Beside state agents, local clerics or Mullahs constitute another main driver of persecution against Christians in Pakistan. They function as a crucial connector between the different dimensions of the persecution against Christians - namely between different branches of government and between the GoP and societal forces, particularly those most radicalised. As ‘status-quo agents’ (Wolf 2019, May 10: 34), they do everything in order to avoid legal and constitutional reforms intended to improve political rights or the socio-economic situation of Christians. Mullahs are less directly involved in physically violent activities and instead find themselves massively engaged in the production of hate speeches directed at Christians - including verbal agitations calling for their death. Here, it is interesting to refer to a report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Ahmadiyya Muslim Community (APPG) stating that the ‘vigilante culture in Pakistan is deeply entrenched, with clerics giving mobs the religious legitimisation needed to carry out acts of violence against minority religious communities’ (APPG 2020: 51). Mullahs also persistently pressure authorities to continue the persecution against Christians and are not afraid to issue threats if the situation of the Christian community seems anyhow alleviated. In order to keep Islamabad in line with the Mullahs’ hate campaign, they employ tactics such as blackmailing, threatening, protest campaigns, and activities intended to undermine law and order as well as create negative impacts on the country’s economy (usually through blockades cutting off major urban regions and connectivity links). Besides the ability to mobilise the religious fanatic mob, a key instrument is the (mis)use of ‘blasphemy laws’. Last but not least, the ‘Mullah-Military alliance’ (Akhbar, Amirali, & Raza, 2006) ensures that the army does not intervene in potential conflicts between clerics and government. When all these strategies and methods fail their goal - namely the avoiding of reforms of minority regulations and the improvement of their living conditions - Islamist fanatics use violence. One of the most well-known cases was the assassination of Shahbaz Bhatti, a prominent Christian human rights activist. Bhatti was appointed in 2009 as federal minister for minority affairs; in parallel his ministerial post was upgraded to cabinet level. However,

the new minister faced stiff resistance by Islamists and was murdered as a result of his attempts to modify blasphemy laws (Pio & Syed 2016: 189).

Extremist and Islamist groups (Jihadists and Pakistani Taliban)

Numerous religious extremist groups, aiming at the establishment of an Islamist Sunni state, have conducted anti-Christian activities ever since Pakistan came into existence. These groups are free to spread their message and organise rallies wherein they call for the strict application of blasphemy laws and thus for action against Christians and other religious minorities. In fact, as outlined in a report by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Australian Government (DFAT), several of these groups such as the Lashkar-i-Jhangvi (LeJ) even aim at the elimination of religious minorities (DFAT 2019: 37). Christians challenging discriminatory legislation and the exclusion of non-Muslims as equal citizens 'have encouraged hardline militant groups to target Christian communities' (MSP 2014: 7). By demonstrating their 'street power', Islamists aim not only to create fear among Christian and other minority communities but also to blackmail Islamabad not to undertake any reform of the existing, discriminatory legal framework. By publicly pushing an anti-minority agenda and triggering violence, Islamists try to pressure the GoP 'to implement their radicalised agendas in the society to create supremacy and influence over the socio-political set up of the country' (Jamil, 2018, July 13). Besides the GoP, religious fanatics put special pressure on local authorities. For example, it is reported that police officers 'have allegedly been pressured on occasion by religious groups to register blasphemy charges' (MRG 2014: 17).

Numerous groups with a militant anti-religious minority agenda have conducted attacks against Christians. However, the increasing number of incidents involving the Pakistani Taliban (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan/TTP) is of particular concern. It seems that the TTP experienced a revival. More concretely, the TTP was able to overcome internal feuds and regain some of its logistic and military capabilities after it was pushed out of Pakistan into Afghanistan through some major military operations by the Pakistani armed forces.

Politicians and Political parties

As already indicated above, politicians and their political parties are some of the main drivers of the persecution against Christians in Pakistan. Political parties based on Islamist ideology have gained ground in recent times (Gabriel 2007: 101), especially those pushing sentiments against religious minorities. However, it is important to point out that not only Islamist political parties (e.g., Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan/TLP, Muttahida Majlis e

Amal/MMA) but also the country's mainstream political parties (such as the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf/PTI, Pakistan People's Party/PPP, and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz/PML-N) are involved in these activities.

5. The Afghan factor - Christians in the focus of Jihadists

Jihadists consider the members of Pakistan's Christian minority 'as natural supporters of the United States – so much so that they are frequently subjected to vicious hounding on the grounds that they are traitors to the national cause' (Ballard 2012: 12). Gregory and Valentine confirm this observation by stating 'as antipathy grows in Pakistan towards the West as a result of US-led foreign policy and in particular of US and NATO action in the Afghan theatre, Christians are perceived as proxies for the West' (Gregory & Valentine 2009: 14). As a result, Christians have recently found themselves as the targets of even more violent attacks - particularly after the militarily enforced fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Gabriel points out that the 'war on terror seems to have worsened the hostility of Muslim fundamentalists against Christians' (Gabriel 2007: 48). The MRG states that Christian minorities have taken the brunt of hostility toward the US-led invasion of Afghanistan because they are 'seen as connected to the West due to their faith' (MRG 2014: 7; Gregory & Valentine 2009: 14).

Of course, there is a fear that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan puts Christians in the entire AF-Pak area at (additional) risk. Concretely, Islamists in Pakistan could feel even more encouraged to persecute Christians after the proclaimed victory by the Afghan Taliban over US/NATO troops in Afghanistan. This will be most likely supported by the GoP which will continue, perhaps further increase, its military and political support for the Afghan Taliban and its appeasement policy towards Islamists supporting the Taliban cause in Afghanistan. For obvious reasons, Islamabad is not only interested in maintaining and extending its influence in its western neighbourhood but also in avoiding any provocation by radicalised Islamists who could turn against the Pakistani state. A continued oppression of religious minorities, especially Christians, could be identified as a tool to keep at bay religious fanatics and maintain the comradery between state institutions and Jihadist elements in Pakistan and beyond.

Moreover, Christians could be used as scapegoats for the outbreak of another civil war. The increasing likelihood of a new Taliban regime in Kabul contributes to the grim perspective of Christians in the region. A "replay" of Taliban campaigns against religious minorities could create spill-over effects into Pakistan, with severe consequences for the Christian community. Last but not least, even "moderate Muslims", which were supportive

of the US/NATO engagement in Afghanistan, could turn against the West and thus against Christians in the region out of frustration over the withdrawal of US/NATO troops, the ongoing US (and other states) policy of appeasement towards the Taliban, and the pathetic state in which the government of Afghanistan in general and the Afghanistan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) in particular are left behind by the international community.

6. Reactions by the international community

Despite decades of engagement by both domestic and international human rights and other civil-society organisations, journalists, and the activism by some Pakistani legislators to amend blasphemy laws and protect the rights to freedom of religion and expression for all, it appears that the GoP prefers to continue - even further entrench - the discriminatory patterns of Pakistan's realpolitik. It is clear for observers that the country's authorities are 'reluctant to bring laws in line with international law' and that 'the list of victims who fall prey to blasphemy allegations keeps growing'. Considering the scale and intensity of the persecution of Christians and other minorities, it does not come by surprise that for 2021 the USCIRF, based on religious freedom conditions in 2020, recommends that the State Department designates¹⁷ Pakistan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC).

The European Parliament takes a stand and calls for action

Due to the ill-treatment of Christians and other religious minorities by both the Pakistani state and non-state actors, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are considering economic sanctions against the South Asian country. There are calls for a removal of the GSP+ (Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus) status for Pakistan. The European Parliament (EP) has worried for years about the deteriorating situation of Christians in Pakistan, especially the country's highly controversial blasphemy laws which are a constant topic of concern. Among others, previous EP resolutions on Pakistan include the EP resolution of 20 May 2010 on religious freedom in Pakistan, the EP resolution of 10 October 2013 on recent cases of violence and persecution against Christians, the EP resolution of 17 April 2014 on Pakistan: recent cases of persecution, the EU resolution of 27 November 2014 on Pakistan: blasphemy laws, and the EP resolution of 15 June 2017 on Pakistan, notably the situation of human rights defenders and the death penalty. On

¹⁷ Pakistan belongs to the five CPC-designated countries for which waivers on taking any action based on those designations are in place. The process of redesignation aims to create 'appropriate policy changes to demonstrate meaningful consequences and encourage positive change'.

April 29, 2021, the EP passed its latest resolution on blasphemy laws in Pakistan, in particular the cases of Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel (2021/2647 [RSP]). According to the German Member of Parliament (MEP) Reinhard Bütikofer, the resolution was initiated mainly regarding Ms Shagufta Kausar and Mr Shafqat Emmanuel, a Christian couple, who have been on death row in Pakistan for blasphemy charges since 2014.¹⁸ However, the resolution also noted a sharp rise in targeted killings, blasphemy cases, forced conversions, and hate speech against religious minorities. MEPs supporting the resolution are also alerted by the ‘rising number of online and offline attacks on journalists and civil society organisations’. This “alarming increase” in accusations of blasphemy online and offline in Pakistan over the past year’ (with the highest number of accusations since 1987 taking place in 2020).

Obviously, most MEPs question Pakistan’s political will to carry out comprehensive reforms of Blasphemy laws as discussed in the EU-Pakistan Strategic dialogues and other diplomatic exchanges¹⁹ as well as international convenient Islamabad agreed upon. As such, the EP ‘regrets the alarming uptick in blasphemy accusations across Pakistan; stresses that Pakistan’s blasphemy laws are incompatible with international human rights laws and conventions and therefore calls on the [GoP] to urgently repeal them’. The call by MEPs for economic sanctions is a logical consequence of these observations. Concretely, under the current resolution passed by the EP, the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS) have been instructed evaluate Pakistan’s eligibility for the GSP+ status in the backdrop of recent events and determine sufficient grounds to initiate procedures for the temporary withdrawal of this status and its attached benefits.²⁰ Such a step could have adverse effects for the Pakistani economy in general and the CPEC in particular. The removal of the GSP+ status would result not only in tremendous losses for several economic sectors or branches (like the textile industry), but also in severe reputational damages which might restrain European companies and entrepreneurs to invest in the new Special Economic Zones (SEZs) currently being set up (second phase of the CPEC).

¹⁸ These charges against the couple emanated from an alleged sending of text messages disrespectful of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) from a phone number registered to Kausar to the person accusing the couple of blasphemy.

¹⁹ For instance the EU-Pakistan Joint Commission (and its sub-group meetings), the EU-Pakistan Staff Talks forum and the EU-Pakistan Strategic Engagement Plan Forum, among others.

²⁰ The EP also ‘takes note of the latest Commission’s GSP+ assessment of Pakistan covering the period 2018-2019, especially on the country’s compliance with the GPS+ condition to implement core international conventions; calls on the Commission however to reassess the Pakistan’s valid eligibility for the GSP+ programme given the deteriorating situation of human rights, and to swiftly submit a report to the European Parliament with a convincing explanation for its decision; urges the European Ombudsman to open an investigation on the correct application of EU rules in the promotion of the GSP+ benefits for Pakistan.’

That Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari raises the question in a twitter tweet ‘whether the GSP Plus is getting muddled in Islamophobia’ underlines that Islamabad will most likely continue to ignore European concerns regarding the persecution of Christians and will fail to take the international demands for reforming the blasphemy laws seriously. This appears even clearer considering statements by Pakistan’s Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry further discrediting the discussed EP resolution by describing it as ‘dictation (from the West)’. Interestingly, Chaudhry immediately interpreted said EP resolution as a ‘dictation’ to take action against the banned Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan/TLP (which was not explicitly mentioned in the EP document). The comments by the two ministers Mazari and Chaudhry indicate that the Pakistani leadership will not abandon its appeasement and protection policy towards Jihadist and religious extremists or its increasing assertive - to some degree even hostile - attitude towards Europe, not to mention the promotion of anti-Western sentiments within and beyond its borders. In this context, it is interesting to note that the resolution also expresses its ‘deep concern’ regarding another extraordinarily sensitive and critical issue: the prevailing sentiments within radicalised sections of Pakistan’s society against a member state of the European Union, France, as well as the fact that the GoP is taking a threatening stance.²¹ This must be seen as another proof of the correlation between state-sponsorship of jihadism (including other forms of Islamist extremism) in Pakistan and the persecution of Christians in the country. It also constitutes an indicator for the deep involvement by the state in the persecution of Christians, which must be described as state terror against religious minorities.

7. Conclusion

The situation of the Christian community in Pakistan, which mirrors that of other religious minorities, stands in stark contrast to the public rhetoric by Pakistan’s political leadership and to the international agreements the country agreed on. Christians are one of the most persecuted communities in Pakistan due to several factors.

The persecution of Christians (and other religious minorities) in Pakistan is the direct consequence of state policies of Islamisation, state-sponsorship of Jihadism, cross-border terrorism, marginalisation of secular democratic forces, and the co-option and patronage of radicalised religious parties by successive military as well as civilian governments. PM

²¹ In this context, the resolution from April 29, 2021, points at the ‘repeated and deceptive attacks against the French authorities by radical Pakistani groups and recent statements by the [GoP] on the grounds of blasphemy have escalated since the response of the French authorities to the terrorist attack against a French school teacher for defending freedom of expression, prompting the French authorities to recommend on 15 April 2021 that their nationals temporarily leave Pakistan; whereas on 20 April 2021, a ruling party member tabled a resolution in the National Assembly of Pakistan demanding a debate on the expulsion of the French ambassador’.

Khan, far from empowering liberal, democratic voices, prefers to enjoy support by the military and intelligence services. In order to bridge an increasing gap of political legitimacy and remain in power, Khan and his administration rely on the support by the army headquarter and the ISI in co-opting Islamists (the “religious right”) and undermining legitimate political opposition forces. The main reasons for the rapidly deteriorating situation faced by Christians include not only the overall political and religious radicalisation of state and society but also the steadily increasing persecution against Christians through both state and non-state actors. The current leadership further entrenches traditional patterns in Pakistani politics of fostering an atmosphere of religious intolerance in which Jihadism can grow. Despite the massive electoral promises and successive statements (after taking office) by PM Khan regarding the improvement of conditions for the Christian community, the situation is only worsening. The fact that the PM is apparently not only completely backtracking from his promise of ‘justice for all’ but also actively discriminating against Christians both confirms and reinforces bigotry in the country at large. Unlike many former governments which applied a kind of reactive discrimination intended only to appease Islamists, PM Khan’s administration obviously switched to a ‘pro-active discrimination’ stance. The worsening situation of the Christian community is in the words of Shaun Gregory ‘a barometer of a deeper malaise in Pakistani society in which a diminishing number of defenders of a democratic plural Islamically tolerant vision of Pakistan are being cowed and silenced by violence, threat, and by Islamic conservatism’ (Gregory 2015: 209). The state’s capitulation before Islamist forces and the subsequent persecution of Christians leads to gross injustices and violates all basic norms of good governance, rule of law and the principle of even-handed attitudes towards all sections of society. In consequence, the persecution against Christians makes the establishment of democracy, respect for human rights and freedom of religion impossible. The increasing persecution of the Christian community is a clear indicator for the rapid erosion of state and society in Pakistan. The frequency and viciousness of religious intolerance and the complicity by political institutions as well as the establishment further stresses the need to draw attention by the international community to the plight of Christians in Pakistan – an attention to be followed by immediate reactions. The EP made a crucial move with its latest resolution calling for a (re-)assessment of Pakistan’s eligibility for being a beneficiary of the GSP+. It needs to be seen whether other European institutions, foremost the EC and the EEAS, will follow up the alert. However, European and other international political decision-makers should keep in mind that neither the granting of economic and trade incentives nor large-scale condition-based development aid

or other types of financial assistance so far convinced the Pakistani leadership to bring out adequate reforms. Much the opposite, the GoP and its administration at all state levels and branches of governance conducted numerous measures leading to a severe truncation of human and political rights in general and a worsening of the situation of religious minorities in particular. The tremendously increasing formal influence of the military in the country is worrying, as are the growing authoritarian tendency and open appreciation of Jihadism by PM Khan's style of governance. Khan's parliamentary eulogy of Osama bin Laden once again stresses state-sponsorship of Jihadism in Pakistan. Additionally, the PM's appreciation of China's one-party system as 'offering a better model for societies compared with electoral democracy' is symptomatic for the erosion of any remaining democratic norms and values. In other words, Khan publicly praised a political system which is 'exclusively controlled' by one party and where 'are no direct elections for major positions or the country's parliament'. PM Khan offers 'his country's support for the Chinese government regarding its policies in Muslim-majority Xinjiang province', which means he embraces 'the mass detention and efforts at forced assimilation of Uyghurs, which the U.S. State Department has described as "genocide."' The GoP's open support for Chinese state terror against its own people contributes to the frightening perspectives faced by Christians and their supporters in Pakistan. One must ask what this portends for the future of religious minorities, human and political rights, and democracy in Pakistan when the international community continues to let systematic strangling of people over faith take place.

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