Faith, Freedom, and Foreign Policy in the Next Administration: The Case of Pakistan
Lisa Curtis

Abstract: The rise in persecution of religious minorities and incidents of Sunni–Shia sectarian violence in recent years reflects the expanding influence of Islamist extremist ideologies in Pakistan. The murder five years ago of two senior Pakistani officials for attempting to roll back anti-blasphemy legislation in response to a prominent case highlights the extreme nature of these ideologies. Only a comprehensive approach that prioritizes combating religious persecution and shutting down all Islamist militant groups operating in Pakistani territory will reverse these trends and put Pakistan on the path to long-term stability and prosperity. There are promising signs of a new and growing firmness on the part of the Pakistani government, suggesting that Islamabad is attempting to walk back from the abyss. With the aid of a new U.S. Administration, more can and should be done to implement a comprehensive security strategy that stabilizes Pakistani society and reverses Islamist extremist trends in the country.

As in several countries where al-Qaeda and ISIS operate and where Islamist ideologies are proliferating, religious persecution and religious intolerance are on the rise in Pakistan. The next U.S. Administration cannot afford to relegate religious freedom issues to the bottom of the priority list. In the case of Pakistan, as in many other countries, protection of religious freedom is important not only as a human rights issue, but also as a strategic and security issue, since it must be part of a broader effort to counter the message of Islamist extremism.

Pakistan was originally established in 1947 as a homeland for Muslims, but the country’s founding father, Muhammed Ali Jinnah,
supported the idea of Islam serving as a unifying force and envisioned the country functioning as a multiethnic, multi-religious democracy.

However, soon after the creation of Pakistan and Jinnah’s untimely death one year after partition, debate about the role of religion in the country’s constitutional and legal systems was increasingly influenced by the idea that Islamic principles should inform the conduct of the state. Moreover, the strategic environment in South Asia over the past 30 years and the Pakistani response to regional challenges have also influenced Islamist trends in society and heightened religious-inspired violence. Failure of both civilian and military leaders to uphold the rule of law against religious extremists also is to blame.

But it was the period of rule by military dictator General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq in the 1980s that did the most damage to the state of religious freedom in Pakistan. As part of his campaign to further Islamize Pakistani society and governing institutions, Zia strengthened blasphemy legislation by making blasphemy a capital offense, incorporated anti-Ahmadi provisions into the Pakistani penal code, expanded the madrassa network to support the Afghanistan jihad against the Soviets, and incorporated militant interpretations of Islam into the Pakistani public school curriculum.

The independent U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended in its most recent annual report that the State Department designate Pakistan as a “country of particular concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act. The commission has made this recommendation each year since 2002.

Religious Persecution of Christians and Ahmadi Muslims

Christians in Pakistan increasingly face discrimination, persecution, and violent attacks. The Easter Day terrorist attack at a park in Lahore was directed at the Christian community, even though mostly Muslims died in the attack. There were 72 killed in that horrific attack, and nearly half were young children. This was the third major attack against Christians in Pakistan in recent years. In March 2015, two churches were bombed, and in September 2013, a suicide bombing at a church in Peshawar killed nearly 80.

The most high-profile case of religious persecution against Christians is that of Aasia Bibi, a mother of five who was charged with committing blasphemy and sentenced to death for sharing a water bowl with a Muslim. In October 2014, her death sentence was upheld by the Lahore High Court.

The blasphemy legislation was introduced during British colonial rule but at that time was applicable to all religions and rarely used. However, General Zia ul-Haq tightened the legislation as a way to
Islamize the country’s institutions. Today, there are more people on death row or serving life sentences for committing blasphemy in Pakistan than in any other country in the world.

Under the blasphemy laws, blasphemous acts include making derogatory remarks about the Muslim Prophet Muhammad and defiling the Koran. But blasphemy allegations are often fabricated and used to intimidate religious minorities or settle personal vendettas. Moreover, blasphemy charges do not require proof of intent or evidence, and there are no penalties for false allegations.

In early 2011, Pakistan’s Governor of the Punjab Salman Taseer and Minority Affairs Minister Shahbaz Bhatti were assassinated by religious extremists because of their efforts to defend Asia Bibi and roll back the controversial blasphemy laws. Back-to-back assassinations of two senior Pakistani officials demonstrate the extent to which religious intolerance and support for extremist ideologies is rising in Pakistan.

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Especially troubling was the broad-based support for the murderer of Salman Taseer. The day after Taseer’s assassination, several hundred Pakistani clerics signed a statement condoning the murder and warning other Pakistanis against grieving for the governor.

Ahmadi Muslims also have long suffered religious persecution in Pakistan. Ahmadis do not believe in the finality of the prophet Muhammad. They believe Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who lived toward the end of the 19th century, was an Islamic prophet. Six years after Pakistan’s independence, Islamists started a mass movement to declare the Ahmadi sect as non-Muslim and called for the removal of Pakistani Foreign Minister Chaudhry Zafrulla Khan, an Ahmadi follower.

Sunni–Shia Sectarian Violence

Let me say a few words about Sunni–Shia sectarian violence. Violence against the Shia community in Pakistan has reached alarming proportions in recent years. Most of the recent attacks against Pakistani Shia have been carried out by the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LJ), a Sunni militant organization that seeks to declare Shia as non-Muslims. Over the past year, the Pakistan government has started cracking down on LJ. In July 2015, one week after his arrest, LJ founder and supreme leader Malik Ishaq and over a dozen of his followers were killed in a police encounter.

The Pakistani authorities have blamed the LJ for last Tuesday’s attack on the police academy that left over 61 Pakistani cadets dead. ISIS also claimed responsibility for the attack, showing a photo of the three alleged attackers on its news service, Amaq. It is possible that ISIS is working with local elements of LJ to attack the Pakistani state. LJ and ISIS share a virulent anti-Shia ideology.

Glimmers of Light

Amid all of the bad news, there are a few glimmers of light. Over the past two years, Pakistan has been carrying out a crackdown in the tribal border areas against terrorist groups that attack the Pakistani state. As a result, terrorist attacks were down nearly 50 percent in 2015 from 2014 levels.

Another notable positive development was the government’s follow-through earlier this year with the execution of Mumtaz Qadri, the assassin of Salman Taseer. Qadri had tried to appeal his murder conviction, but the Supreme Court upheld his death penalty on the grounds that objections to the blasphemy law did not constitute blasphemy and that Qadri had no authority to kill the governor. The Supreme Court said that if it were to accept the arguments of Qadri’s defense team, “then a door shall become open for religious vigilantism which may deal a mortal blow to the rule of law in this country where divergent religious interpretations abound and tolerance stands depleted to an alarming level.”

Despite street protests in all of Pakistan’s major cities against the execution of Qadri, the government resisted intervention against the Supreme Court’s decision, and the death sentence was carried...
out on February 29. This was a bold and positive step by the Nawaz Sharif government.

The Supreme Court also agreed in 2015 to review the case of Aasia Bibi. Unfortunately, the court has not yet done so, and she remains in prison seven years after her arrest and faces threats from vigilantes who could decide to take the law into their own hands.

Other tentative, positive steps include the Supreme Court’s June 2014 judgment directing the federal government to establish a task force to develop a strategy for promoting religious tolerance and a special police force to protect religious minorities. In response, the government created a National Commission for Minorities under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, but there are still concerns that the commission has little access to Pakistan’s top leadership.

What the U.S. Should Do

Pakistan is a major recipient of economic and military assistance, receiving over $30 billion in aid over the past decade. Relations have become strained in recent months, particularly over Pakistan’s failure to crack down on militant groups that attack Afghanistan and India, and the U.S. has cut some military aid to Pakistan.

Washington must continue to support the overall development of civil society and democratic institutions. Increased civil society engagement between Americans and Pakistanis would help to elevate the voices of moderation and democracy in Pakistan and facilitate freer discourse on issues of religious freedom and pluralism.

Washington must also continue to monitor individual cases of violations of religious freedom and speak up publicly to defend those facing religious persecution. In this vein, Washington must sustain its public advocacy for the release of Aasia Bibi. While the Pakistani Supreme Court has taken a step in the right direction with its decision to review Bibi’s appeal, the U.S. must sustain pressure for her immediate release from jail.

What may be the most important step in tamping down rising religious intolerance is Pakistan’s pursuit of friendlier ties with India. Sustaining dialogue with India and cracking down on extremist groups that press an anti-India narrative would help to stabilize Pakistani society and undercut support for extremist ideologies.

Conclusion

Rolling back the tide of extremism in Pakistan will be an enormous task and could take a generation, but there are some recent hopeful signs that the Pakistani government under Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is committed to making this happen. To accomplish this enormous task, Islamabad must take a comprehensive approach to shutting down all Islamist militant groups that operate from Pakistani territory, not just those that attack the Pakistani state. Turning a blind eye to some terrorist groups ends up providing an environment that, overall, is conducive for all terrorist groups to operate and allows the ideology that drives them to flourish.
I hope I have made it clear that promoting religious freedom in Pakistan is not only important as a human rights issue, but also important as a strategic and security issue.

—Lisa Curtis is a Senior Research Fellow in the Asian Studies Center, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation. These remarks were made during a panel discussion sponsored by the Institute for Global Engagement and hosted by Pepperdine University’s Washington, DC, Campus on November 1, 2016.