

Pakistani court requires citizens to identify religious affiliation

by [Naila Inayat](#) in the [April 25, 2018](#) issue

A high court in majority-Muslim Pakistan recently ruled that citizens must declare their religious affiliation before joining the civil service, military, or judiciary. All birth certificates, identity cards, passports, and voting lists must also indicate the person's faith.

The judgment, a victory for hard-line clerics pressuring the state to single out minorities, adds that all Muslim candidates for national or provincial assemblies must swear that Islam's Prophet Muhammad was the last of God's prophets.

This move has spread fear among Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and other religious minorities already under pressure in the South Asian nation. Ahmadis, who believe another Muslim prophet came after Muhammad, feel especially targeted.

"Already it is difficult for us as minorities to retain our government jobs," said Ejaz Mall, 34, a Christian civil servant in Lahore. "With this court judgment, we can forget whatever normalcy we had in our lives."

In its March 9 ruling, the Islamabad High Court argued that citizens should be easily identifiable by their faith and that applicants for public offices should declare their beliefs before being considered for employment. Justice Shaukat Aziz Siddiqui, in a remark many see as aimed at Ahmadis, said it was "alarming that one of the minorities was often mistaken for being Muslims" because their names and general attire were like those of Muslims.

The court's ruling outraged human rights activists, who fear it will lead to more persecution. The independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan called on the government to counter it immediately.

"It is essential that the government acts in aid of its minority citizens by appealing this ruling," said Mehdi Hasan, chair of the commission. "Forums for justice such as the Islamabad court should play their due role in safeguarding the fundamental rights of the most vulnerable sections of society."

The ruling is the latest in a long series of attempts by officials to distinguish between religious groups in Pakistan. A 1974 constitutional amendment declared the Ahmadis to be non-Muslims, and a 1984 ordinance barred them from practicing Islam in public.

Although Ahmadi Muslims, also known as Ahmadiyya, believe in the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad, many mainstream Muslims consider them to be heretics because they also believe their 19th-century founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, was a latter-day prophet.

In 1992, lawmakers proposed indicating religion on official identity cards, but they dropped the idea when Christians protested.

Christians, the second-largest religious minority in Pakistan, constitute less than 2 percent of the country's 208 million population, followed by Hindus, Ahmadis, and others.

[Militants killed four Catholics in southwestern Pakistan on Easter Monday, Vatican News reported. Many people were injured in another attack at a church in the eastern part of the country on April 3.]

Non-Muslims have faced discriminatory laws, violence, and prejudice for decades in Pakistan. Earlier this year, the U.S. State Department placed Pakistan on its Special Watch List for severe violations of the religious freedom of minorities. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom noted in its 2017 annual report that "the Pakistani government continued to perpetrate and tolerate systematic, ongoing and egregious religious freedom violations" in the previous year. "Religiously discriminatory constitutional provisions and legislation, such as the country's blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws, continue to result in prosecutions and imprisonments."

Nasir Saeed, director of the Centre for Legal Aid, Assistance, and Settlement, a Lahore-based group that advocates for religious minorities in Pakistan, said the government should promote harmony rather than further division.

"Minorities, who are living under threat and are already fleeing the country, need to be assured of security, protection, and equality," he said.

The campaign against Ahmadis has gained momentum in the run-up to Pakistan's general election, slated for July. A new ultraconservative religious party shut down Islamabad for three weeks late last year with protests against a new election law that seemed to ease some restrictions on Ahmadis.

Last December, lawmaker Muhammad Safdar Awan called for a ban on Ahmadis from joining the armed forces. Safdar is the son-in-law of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

"These people are a threat to this country, its constitution and ideology," Safdar said at the time. "A person who doesn't believe in the jihad in the path of Allah, that person cannot be a part of our pious army."

Ruby Tabbasum, a 32-year-old Ahmadi mother who lives in Rabwah, a majority-Ahmadi city, knows this discrimination firsthand.

"In 2016, my husband, Qamar ul Zia, was stabbed to death outside our house in broad daylight," Tabbasum said. "His crime: he was an Ahmadi."

Zia was hounded for years for supposed offenses like posting his father's name, Muhammad Ali, on his house gate or displaying the Arabic expression *mashallah* ("God has willed it") on the window of his mobile phone shop.

He was assaulted a few times, and then a group armed with knives killed him as he was bringing his children back from school.

"I fear for my children," Tabbasum said. "They know what happened to their father. They also know that they are not accepted in this society."

Other minorities say they now feel as if they have an even-larger target on their backs than they did before.

"If my religion is mentioned on the identity card, that makes me even more vulnerable as a minority," said Asher Daniel, 19, a university student in Lahore who is a Christian. "Now even getting a parking or red-light ticket for me will become dangerous. . . . Why should my religion be [the] business of the state?" —Religion News Service