

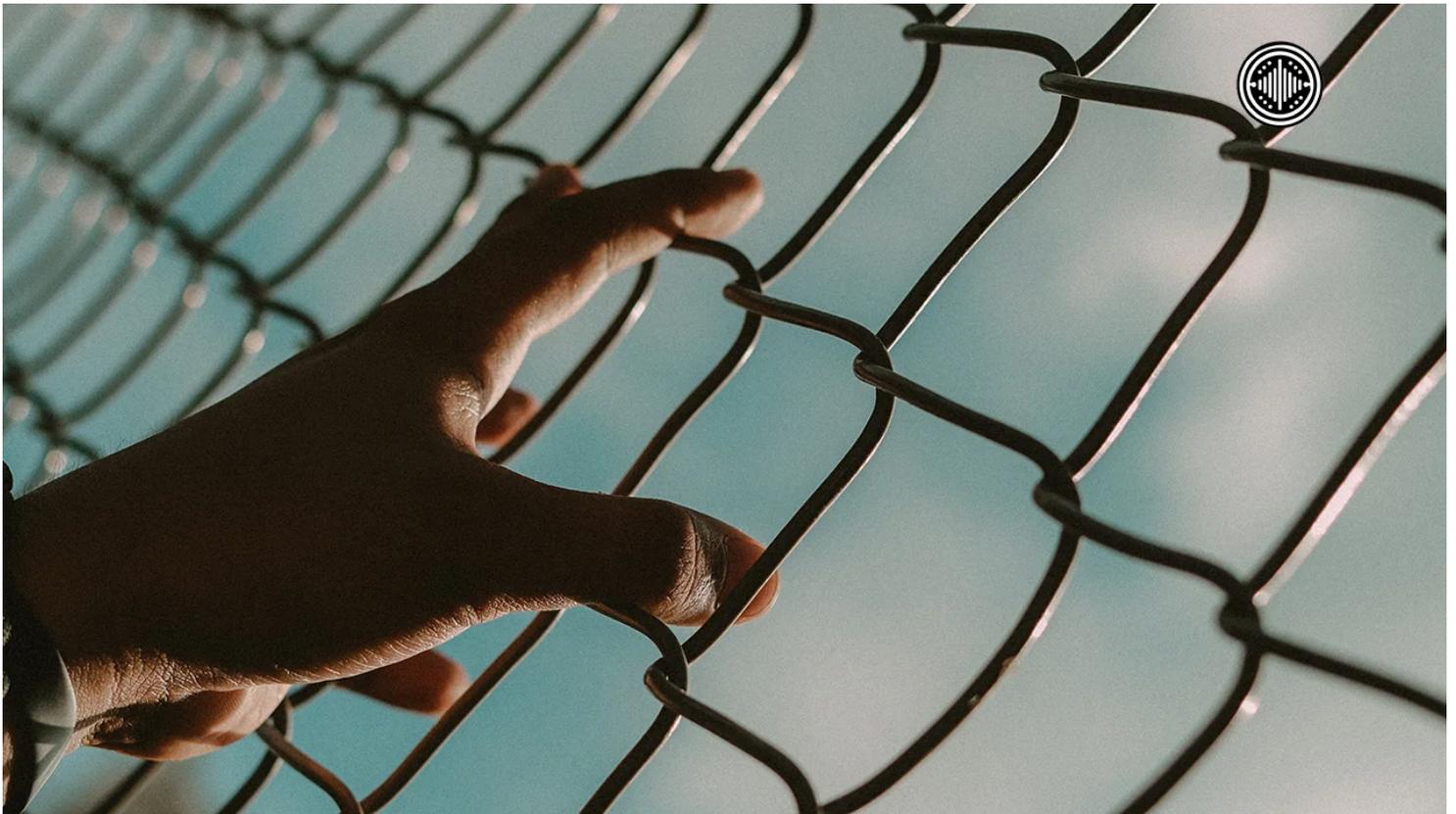
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Concerns Mount Over Religious Persecution and Legal Overreach in Pakistan

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– Categories: Crime



A recent incident in Gujranwala, a city in Pakistan's Punjab province, has once again spotlighted the persistent religious persecution faced by minority groups, particularly members of the Ahmadiyya community. On July 6, a man from this community was arrested for allegedly “posing as a Muslim” while distributing free food during the Islamic month of Muharram.

The case, filed under Section 298(C) of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), a law that criminalizes Ahmadis for referring to themselves as Muslims, has sparked widespread

concern among human rights advocates and legal experts.

According to the First Information Report (FIR), filed by a resident of Hafizabad Road, the accused was distributing food and drinks, a common charitable act during religious commemorations. However, his identity as an Ahmadi was cited as grounds for arrest. Judicial Magistrate Sidra Gul Nawaz denied the accused bail, citing recovered items, including a large pot of chicken biryani, as supposed evidence. The court warned that such acts could inflame religious sensitivities and disrupt public order.

The Ahmadiyya community has long endured state-sanctioned discrimination in Pakistan. Declared non-Muslim by a constitutional amendment in 1974, Ahmadis are legally barred from identifying as Muslims or practicing Islamic rituals in public. Section 298(C), enacted in 1984, has been widely criticized by international observers as a legal tool for persecution. Critics argue that its vague language and broad application make it vulnerable to abuse, especially in a climate that often supports extremist narratives.

The case has drawn condemnation from political figures, including Senator Sherry Rehman of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), who voiced hope that the FIR would be annulled. However, the government's current stance, shaped by a growing alignment with Islamist factions, offers little hope for reform. Just last month, the Lahore High Court Bar Association (LHCBA) sent a letter to the Punjab Inspector General of Police calling for Ahmadis to be barred from observing Islamic rituals during Eidul al-Zha. The letter demanded legal action against those "violating the law" by using Islamic symbols, further illustrating institutional hostility toward religious minorities.

Human rights organizations have also raised alarms. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), in its recent report *Under Siege: Freedom of Religion or Belief in 2023–24*, documented increasing violence and legal repression. As of October 2023, at least 750 individuals were imprisoned on blasphemy charges, with a significant number being Ahmadis. The report also cited rising incidents of mob violence, desecration of minority graves, and forced conversions, especially targeting Hindu and Christian women.

The HRCP warned of a troubling trend: disinformation spread on social media often triggers blasphemy accusations. More concerning is that many of these cases are now initiated by law enforcement rather than fringe mobs, suggesting that the state is either complicit in or incapable of safeguarding religious freedom.

This growing climate of intolerance undermines Pakistan's international image, particularly as its leadership seeks foreign investment and strategic partnerships. Yet under the current administration, frequently criticized for weak legitimacy and its failure to uphold constitutional rights, there appears to be little political will for meaningful reform.

In the meantime, the Ahmadiyya community and other religious minorities continue to live under the weight of outdated, discriminatory laws and a legal system that too often favors appeasement of hardline elements over justice and equality. Without urgent reform, Pakistan risks not only greater social unrest but deepening isolation from the global community.