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VOICELESS IN THE BALLOT BOX: THE STRUGGLE OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES FOR POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN PAKISTAN

Fatima Abid[*1], Dr. Asia Saif Alvi[2]

[*1]*MPhil Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Sargodha, Pakistan*
[2]*Chairperson, Department of Political Science, Associate Professor, University of Sargodha, Pakistan*

[*1]fatimaabid0573@gmail.com, [2]asia.saif@uos.edu.pk

Corresponding Author: *
Fatima Abid
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ABSTRACT

Pakistan's religious minorities, comprising Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, Sikhs, and other communities, have historically occupied a marginal position within the country's democratic framework despite formal constitutional guarantees of equal citizenship. This article examines the political participation of religious minorities in Pakistan through a comprehensive analytical lens that encompasses the constitutional and legal framework governing minority rights, the historical evolution of minority political status from independence to the present, the structural and systemic barriers that constrain meaningful participation, and the specific experience of the Hindu community as an illustrative case study. The analysis demonstrates that the problem of minority political exclusion in Pakistan is not reducible to electoral mechanics but is rooted in a deeper architecture of discriminatory legislation, religious nationalism, economic marginalization, and institutional indifference that formal electoral reforms have thus far proven insufficient to dismantle. The article concludes with a set of evidence-based recommendations spanning constitutional reform, blasphemy law revision, redesign of the reserved seat system, and broader social and educational interventions necessary for achieving genuine democratic inclusion.

Keywords: *Political Participation, Religious Minorities, Pakistan, Democratic Exclusion, Reserved Seats, Blasphemy Laws*

Introduction

Since the very beginning, Pakistan's position in the discussions about democracy, pluralism, and the rights of religious minorities in the broadest sense has been very complex. It was made as a homeland for the Muslims of the whole subcontinent. However, right from the first moment, there was a big non-Muslim population in the new country leading to the formation of a Pakistani identity not only for Muslims but also for Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, and other religious groups. These non-Muslim citizens would acquire their futures, rights, and the sense of belonging to the new state not through their religion but through the constitutional and legislative decisions of their government in the future. At the beginning the promise seemed, at least on paper, to be one of real inclusion. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, in his address to the Constituent Assembly on August 11, 1947 spoke with great clarity about what he expected for the non-Muslims of Pakistan. He said that religion would not be considered in the affairs of the state, that every citizen would have the freedom to worship without hindrance, and that all Pakistanis would be equal in the eyes of the law. This speech was given a great significance because what actually happened over the next seven decades were in fact completely opposite to the vision expressed then(Basedau et al., 2023).

Participation of religious minorities in Pakistan's political affairs is not merely a question that touches only the mechanics of elections or the

number of seats in parliament allocated to different communities. It is a question that runs so deep as to touch the very foundations of the definition of a Pakistani citizen and the determination of who truly belongs to the political community of the nation. According to the most basic and widely accepted formulations of democratic theory, the legitimacy of any government is supposed to depend on the meaningful consent and participation of all the people it governs. No set of citizens ought to be systematically excluded from the decision-making processes by which laws are made, public resources are distributed, and the course of national life is determined. If we analyze the situation of minority religious groups in Pakistan by this yardstick, it will be found to be one of the longest-standing and least analyzed failures of democratic governance in the contemporary Muslim world. These communities make up only around three to five percent of the total population, which is equivalent to several million human beings with legitimate political rights, but they have been largely kept outside the main political process throughout the country's history. Their exclusion has not been something that just happened. It was the result of a combination of factors – constitutional arrangements that segregated them as a different category of citizens, discriminatory legislations that limited their civil and religious liberties, hostile social attitudes that made political involvement dangerous for them, and institutional neglect that left their complaints without effective answering.

To know the contemporary situation of religious minorities in Pakistani politics, it is important to understand how their political rights evolved over time through different historical phases. Right after independence, a joint electorate system that was shared by minorities with Muslims was in operation. Although the situation was far from equal and tensions between communities were high due to partition, the principle of civic equality in electoral participation was at least preserved in a formal sense. Non-Muslim candidates would stand for elections; non-Muslim voters would cast their votes in the same system as everyone else, and a few minority representatives would even be in the assemblies of the provinces and the country. This set-up was flawed and very fragile, but it allowed for the possibility of gradual integration and increased political clout over time. The military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq, however, cut this possibility abruptly when his Islamization program of the 1980s not only changed Pakistani law, society, and political culture but his effect is still being felt today. One of the reforms that most deteriorated minority political rights was his introduction of separate electorates in 1985. Non-Muslim voters were taken off the general electoral rolls and put on separate lists so they ended up voting only for candidates of their own religious communities. These contestants were in different electoral contests for a limited number of reserved seats. This change was far from being a mere mechanical modification to the electoral system. Rather, it was a symbolic and practical declaration that non-Muslims were not fully members of the Pakistani political community, that their votes should not determine the lawmakers who would govern them, and that their political existence was to be confined to a carefully delimited, disempowered environment far from the mainstream of national life. Minority leaders at the time clearly understood the nature of the change and protested strongly, yet the military government, which was hardly interested in their political inclusion, did not heed their objections(Bhatti, 2023).

Multiparty elections were held in 2002. The President Pervez Musharraf abolished the system of separate electorates and as part of a broader package of political reforms he reinstated joint electorates. Minority communities and civil society organizations welcomed the restoration as a step in the right direction and it was indeed one of the most notable reversals of exclusionary policies in Pakistan's legislative history. That said the reintegration of minorities into the mainstream electoral system has not resulted in their meaningful political empowerment. The reserved seat system introduced to replace separate electorates itself not without serious flaws. In case of minority candidates who are given seats through party lists instead of being directly elected, lack of independent mandate and constituency relations which are essential for making politicians truly accountable to their people. Party leaderships, rather than voters, appoint them which means that their survival in

political life depends more on the goodwill of party bosses than on the satisfaction of the minority constituents. This analogy of created dependency makes it very difficult for reserved seat holders to strongly assert minority interests if the interests are contrary to those of the party hierarchies from whom their positions have been given(Fuchs & Fuchs, 2020).

Looking at Pakistan through the regional comparison helps in understanding not only its unique features but also those that it shares with other experiences of minority exclusion. In India, religious minorities such as Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs are under a joint electorate system that does not segregate voters formally, and while they face social and political discrimination, they have held top political offices such as national leaders and senior cabinet ministers, and have been part of federal coalitions. Bangladeshi Hindus are the minority which participate in general elections without formal exclusion even though they face social discrimination and political vulnerability from time to time. In Sri Lanka political participation of all citizens has been maintained within a constitutional framework that does not segregate the electorate on religious lines despite the terrible history of ethnic conflicts between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Pakistan's separate electorates were, by regional standards, an extremely rare and a particularly backward move away from the norms of inclusive democratic citizenship that have existed elsewhere in South Asia even if only at a minimal level. The effects of this move still determine minority political life in Pakistan even after the formal system has been ended.

This article attempts to analyze the political engagement of religious minorities in Pakistan through an ordered system of analysis that begins with the legal and constitutional bases of minority rights, covers the historical evolution of minority political status, and extends to the actual structural impediments that are causing the present limitation of participation. It then goes on to examine the unique situations of the major minority groups one by one before ending with a series of realistically achievable proposals for change. The thesis that is maintained throughout is that the question of the political inclusion of minorities is absolutely intertwined with the issue of the democratic consolidation of Pakistan. A democracy which excludes millions of its citizens from real political participation on the ground of religion is not simply a flawed democracy which needs to be gradually improved. It is a democracy which has failed to fulfill its most fundamental promise, and the price of this failure disproportionately affects the most vulnerable segments of Pakistani society(Hussain, DAWN).

Constitutional and Legal Framework

The least favored legal status of the religious minorities in Pakistan has been primarily governed and transformed through a number of constitutional documents, legislative enactments, and judicial interpretations that have gradually formed a very incoherent framework.

On one hand, the history of Pakistan's constitution includes several provisions that uphold the principle of equal citizenship and forbid discrimination on the basis of religion. However, an entirely different, and increasingly dominant, set of laws treats Islam not just as the religion of the majority of the population but the very basis of the identity of the state, public law, and the life of the citizens in such a manner that a hierarchy of citizenship is inevitably created with non-Muslims holding a structurally subordinate position. To unravel such a dilemma and identify its perpetuity over different constitutional periods is a prerequisite to a profound study of minority political participation in Pakistan.

Almost a decade after independence when Pakistan was engulfed in constitutional debates, it was Pakistan's first constitution, enacted in 1956, that transformed Pakistan into an Islamic Republic and pronounced Islam the state religion. It was a momentous and far-reaching decision. The Objectives Resolution of 1949, standing as a precursor to the constitution and included as its preamble, had given a decisive ideological inclination by stating that only Allah is the sovereign of the universe and that the people of Pakistan simply exercise their authority as a sacred trust, following the limits set by Him. The Resolution also promised that minorities would be allowed to practice and develop their religious and cultural life, but it was only a part of the larger framework that previously had established the state on a

confessional rather than a secular basis. The contradiction between the universal promise of equal citizenship and the particular logic of an Islamic state was therefore inherent in the Pakistani constitutional thought from its inception, and it has never been, to date, resolved satisfactorily(Mahmood, 2016).

Ayub Khan's military regime constitution, the Constitution of 1962, preserved the declaration of Pakistan as an Islamic Republic while attempting at the same time to update certain aspects of the political system. It upheld the fundamental rights provisions that forbade discrimination of citizens on the basis of race, religion, caste, sex, or place of birth and ensured freedom of religion and the right to manage religious institutions. These provisions gave minorities a formal basis to demand equal treatment before the law. Nonetheless, as Pakistani constitutional law experts have pointed out time and again, the guarantees enshrined in the 1962 Constitution and later ones have been consistently compromised by a lack of proper enforcement mechanisms, the judiciary's vulnerability to political pressure, and the passing of ordinary laws that go against the spirit and sometimes even the letter of constitutional safeguards. Legal rights which are only on paper and cannot be implemented in reality are of little help to politically vulnerable groups.

The Constitution of 1973, which after a series of amendments is still the operating framework of Pakistan, is the main document through which the current legal status of religious minorities can be understood. Drafted under the democratic government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and ratified with a wide parliamentary consensus, the 1973 Constitution incorporates a number of clauses that are relevant to minority rights and political participation. Article 20 recognizes the right of every citizen to publicly support and spread their religion. This article however is also subject to "law, public order and morality." Article 21 clearly prohibits forcing a citizen to be taxed for a religion to which he/she doesn't belong. Article 22 forbids an educational institution to give religious instructions to students of other religions than the school's one and also safeguards the student from being forced into religious ceremonies of a faith not his/her own. Article 26 bans discrimination in the use of public places on grounds of race, religion, caste, or sex. Whereas, Article 27 forbids discriminating against someone because of their race, religion, caste, or place of birth in government service(Pande, 2005).

In the eyes of religious minorities, probing the Constitution of 1973 closely reveals that it also contains clauses that destruct the consistency and equality regime of equal citizenship. Article 2 unequivocally names Islam as the official religion of Pakistan. Article 31 charges the government with the responsibility of allowing the Muslims to lead their lives according to the way of Islam. Article 41 and 91 lay out the requirement that the President and the Prime Minister respectively be Muslims.

Under Bhutto, the amendment was passed in 1974 that declared the Ahmadiyya as non-Muslims for all purposes in the Constitution and law. This was the most striking move after the long struggle of orthodox religious groups who saw the Ahmadis' doctrines as an aberration of Islam and it effectively marked the termination of the civil and political rights of the Ahmadi community. By a constitutional provision, the Pakistani state excluded the Ahmadis at the same time from the Muslim category thus creating a community that was neither admitted to the status and protection of the mainstream minority group nor was it fit and accepted as a Muslim minority.

In 1984, Zia-ul-Haq promulgated the Anti-Ahmadi Ordinance which went even further by criminalizing Ahmadis for calling themselves Muslims, using Islamic terminology, or practicing their faith in a manner which could be construed as their posing as Muslims. The criminalization of identity and religious practice with such legislation has never been witnessed in Pakistan which is why it placed the Ahmadi community outside the normal citizenship protection in such a way that it is still impacting their political participation.

Sections 295-A to 298-C of the Pakistan Penal Code that primarily contain the provisions of Pakistan's blasphemy laws might be considered as potentially the most destructive set of ordinary legislations in the context of minority rights and political participation. Section 295-B carrying the sanction of life imprisonment punishes the desecration of the Quran, and Section 295-C awards death penal or life imprisonment as an

alternative for the blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad. These enactments which were considerably enhanced during the Zia regime are predominantly used to harass and victimize the religious minorities. Although on paper the laws are not biased making no difference whether the person is a Muslim or non-Muslim, the reality of their use is quite the opposite(Qasmi, 2015).

The blasphemy laws have consequences for minority political participation beyond the possibility of punishing them legally in case of accusation. They make the whole minority population scared and hesitant to come out, participate in politics, protest publicly, and speak on politically sensitive issues. Just as a community leader of minority who publicly raises their voice against being discriminated, unequal treatment, or misuse of religious laws can be liable to the charge of blasphemy which in the existing judicial and social environment in Pakistan, can lead to consequences which are far worse than where the law is simply applied.

The legal framework for minority political participation has shifted significantly over the history of Pakistan as will be discussed more thoroughly in the following section, but the present arrangement is worth mentioning in its constitutional and legislative aspects. The Elections Act of 2017 which brought together and replaced some past electoral laws sets up a system reserving seats in the parliament and provincial assemblies for non-Muslims. Thus, under the system, a total of ten seats in the National Assembly are reserved for non-Muslim members which are distributed among political parties in proportion to their share of general seats. There are also similar reserved seat provisions at the provincial level. It is to be noted here that non-Muslim members occupying the reserved seats come from party lists which are given before the election, so they are not elected directly by minority voters. Hence, they are accountable to party hierarchies rather than minority constituents whom they are supposed to represent.

Historical Background

The history of religious minority political participation in Pakistan is marked by gradual reduction. What initially was a somewhat imperfect but officially inclusive setup in the early years of the nation gradually eliminated itself over the course of decades, the main factors being the imposition of military dictatorship, rising religious nationalism, manipulation of the constitution, and the chronic weakness of democratic institutions. It is not only a matter of political chronology, as such, that one may be interested in tracing this history but even more importantly in understanding the ways in which past exclusions and accommodations continue to structure the present, without which reference to their origins is impossible.

Throughout the 1950s, minority participation in Pakistani politics was realized through a joint electorate system under which non-Muslim voters and Muslim voters cast their votes in the same general constituencies. Non-Muslim aspirants could stand for general seats and non-Muslim voters could support candidates of any religion. Besides this general participation, there were provisions for reserved seats that would guarantee a minimum level of non-Muslim representation in the legislature. This dual arrangement, combining general participation with reserved representation, reflected a recognition that minorities needed some structural protection to ensure their voices were heard, while also preserving the formal principle that all citizens participated in the same political community. In practice, the joint electorate system of this period produced modest but genuine minority representation. Several non-Muslim candidates won seats in the Constituent Assembly and later in provincial assemblies, and minority communities, particularly the more educated and urbanized Christian and Parsi populations, began to develop a degree of political organization and engagement with the nascent structures of Pakistani democratic life(Sarkar,N, 2024).

The return to civilian government under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto following the 1970 elections, which were the first genuinely competitive direct elections in Pakistan's history, brought both promise and severe disappointment for religious minorities. The 1970 elections saw significant minority participation, with non-Muslim candidates contesting seats across multiple parties and minority voters participating actively in what was widely regarded as the most democratic election Pakistan had yet conducted. Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party drew support

from minority communities in Sindh and Punjab who saw in its populist platform a potential vehicle for social and economic advancement. However, Bhutto's tenure also produced what many scholars and minority rights advocates regard as the single most damaging constitutional act against minority rights in Pakistani history: the 1974 constitutional amendment that declared the Ahmadiyya community to be non-Muslims. This amendment was the product of intense pressure from religious parties and orthodox clerical groups, and Bhutto's willingness to accede to their demands in order to shore up his political position revealed the extent to which minority rights were vulnerable to majoritarian political bargaining even under ostensibly civilian and progressive governments. The Ahmadi community, which had contributed significantly to Pakistani intellectual, professional, and public life since independence, found itself constitutionally redefined as a religious minority against its own self-understanding, with consequences for its political and civil status that would become fully apparent only in the decade that followed.

It was under General Zia-ul-Haq, who seized power in 1977 and governed Pakistan until his death in 1988, that the condition of religious minorities underwent its most dramatic and lasting deterioration. Zia's program of Islamization was the most comprehensive attempt in Pakistani history to restructure the legal, educational, economic, and political life of the country in accordance with a particular interpretation of Islamic law and doctrine. For religious minorities, this program produced a cascade of harmful consequences. The blasphemy laws were significantly strengthened during the Zia period, with the additions to the Pakistan Penal Code that made blasphemy against the Prophet a capital offense giving these provisions the lethal character they retain today. The Hudood Ordinances, introduced in 1979, imposed criminal penalties derived from classical Islamic jurisprudence in ways that disadvantaged non-Muslim citizens in the judicial system. The education system was reformed to give much greater prominence to Islamic religious instruction, with textbooks introduced during this period that contained material disparaging of non-Muslim religions and communities, material whose effects on majority attitudes toward minorities are traceable to this day through successive generations of Pakistani school children(Ispahani, 2017).

The 1988 elections, the first held after Zia's death, were significant for minority communities because they returned civilian rule and brought the PPP to power under Benazir Bhutto, a leader who had cultivated relationships with minority communities and whose party's constitutional commitments included a stated preference for joint electorates. However, the separate electorate system remained in place, and minority political participation continued to be channeled through the restricted mechanism of reserved seats filled by candidates from the separate minority rolls. The decade of the 1990s saw continued advocacy by minority political organizations for the restoration of joint electorates, set against a background of deteriorating social conditions for minority communities, with several high-profile incidents of anti-Christian violence, attacks on Hindu temples in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition in India in 1992, and growing use of blasphemy accusations against minority individuals.

When General Pervez Musharraf came to power through a coup in 1999, few minority leaders initially expected significant improvement in their political situation. Military governments had been responsible for some of the most damaging policies against minorities in Pakistan's history, and there was no particular reason to anticipate that this one would be different. However, Musharraf's government, partly in response to international pressure following the September 2001 attacks in the United States and the increased scrutiny of Muslim-majority states' treatment of their own citizens, undertook a number of reforms affecting minority rights. The most significant was the abolition of separate electorates in 2002 and the restoration of a joint electorate system in which all citizens, regardless of religion, would vote on the same electoral rolls. The Legal Framework Order of 2002 also increased the number of reserved seats for non-Muslims in the National Assembly. These changes were welcomed by minority communities as a

genuine, if partial, improvement. For the first time in nearly two decades, a Christian voter in Lahore could once again cast a ballot in the general constituency election alongside her Muslim neighbors, supporting whichever candidate or party she judged most likely to serve her interests and those of her community.

The period from 2002 to the present has been characterized by the formal restoration of joint electoral participation alongside the persistence of deep structural barriers to meaningful minority political influence. The general elections of 2008, which returned civilian rule after Musharraf's decade in power, saw minority communities participating actively and with considerable enthusiasm, motivated by the hope that the restoration of democracy would bring improvements in their legal and social conditions. The PPP government that came to power under Asif Ali Zardari included several minority members in senior positions, and the government made some gestures toward minority rights, including the designation of August 11, Jinnah's speech day, as National Minorities Day. However, the period also witnessed some of the most violent attacks on minority communities in Pakistan's post-independence history. The 2009 attack on the Christian community of Gojra in Punjab, in which at least eight Christians were killed and dozens of homes burned following a blasphemy accusation, illustrated the gap between formal political inclusion and substantive security and equality for minority citizens(Shifa, 15:57:42+05:00).

The elections of 2013 and 2018 continued this pattern of formal participation accompanied by persistent substantive exclusion. Minority candidates stood in general constituencies in both elections, and a small number achieved remarkable results. In 2018, Dr. Ramesh Kumar Vankwani, a Hindu politician from Sindh affiliated with the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, became one of the very few minority candidates to win a general seat through direct election in Pakistan's history. His victory was celebrated by minority communities as evidence that direct electoral success was not entirely impossible, but it remained exceptional rather than representative of a broader trend. The vast majority of minority representation in the National Assembly and provincial assemblies continued to flow through the reserved seat mechanism, with all the limitations of accountability and political influence that system entails. The historical trajectory described in this section thus leads to a present in which formal inclusion coexists with structural exclusion, where the ballot box is technically open to minority citizens but the political system surrounding it is shaped by decades of discrimination, legal disadvantage, and institutionalized marginalization whose consequences cannot be wished away by formal reform alone.

Barriers to Political Participation

The reintroduction of joint electorates in 2002 eliminated one of the most blatant discriminatory formal methods through which religious minorities were excluded from the mainstream political life of Pakistan. However, it didn't tear down the underlying layers of exclusion that have been built over the years through discriminatory laws, social hostility, and neglect by institutions. The factors limiting the political participation of minorities in a meaningful way in Pakistan today, continue to be present on various fronts at the same time; from the highest governmental offices being constitutionally reserved only for Muslims, to regular laws that criminalize religious expression of the minorities, and to social and economic conditions that make political activism very risky and costly for individuals and communities with limited resources and protection from institutions. To fully understand these barriers, it is necessary to go beyond just looking at the election-related issues and consider the entire political, legal, and social environment that minority citizens have to deal with in their relationship with the Pakistani state. The system of reserved seats, which is the main formal mechanism of minority representation in the legislative assemblies of Pakistan, is in fact the most basic structural hurdle for effective minority political participation. It calls for a very critical thorough review especially because it is the one that is usually seen as a fix to the issue of minority exclusion while in fact it is itself a form of exclusion. According to the current system as per the Elections Act of 2017, there are ten reserved seats for non-Muslim members of the National Assembly with similar

arrangements at the provincial level as well. Minority voters do not directly elect these seats which instead are distributed among parties in proportion to the seats they have won generally, and the individuals who will take these seats are chosen from the party lists that were submitted prior to the election. Such an arrangement has a number of serious consequences that negatively affect the political agency of minorities. To begin with, this arrangement places minority representatives in a situation where they are answerable to the leadership of the parties and not to the minority voters, because their political life depends on their ability to maintain the good will of the party hierarchy rather than satisfying the voters they theoretically represent. It would be easy for the party to remove from the list a minority member who publicly advocates minority rights and in doing so embarrasses or inconveniences the party leadership. He or she will have no political base left to challenge the party independently. Secondly, this system with reserved seats sets a fixed limit on minority representation irrespective of the actual size or distribution of the minority populations and, as a result, political parties are not encouraged to fight for minority votes by offering them substantive policy commitments. Thirdly, and most importantly, this system keeps minorities in a conceptual framework denoting them as a separate class of citizens whose participation requires special accommodation instead of as complete members of the political community whose votes and voices are expected to determine the mainstream political process(Salim & Saeed, 2021).

When we say 'barriers to minority political participation', the first category that comes to mind is perhaps electoral mechanics related to voter intimidation and election-related violence. Minority voters in Pakistan not uncommonly report that they are discouraged from going to the polls through a combination of explicit threats, social pressure from dominant community members, and the general atmosphere of insecurity that surrounds election day in many parts of the country. Based on a number of reports in 2013 general elections, few minority voters were reportedly prevented from reaching polling stations in parts of Punjab and Sindh, and this problem's overall scale remains difficult to quantify. Yet, minority political participation deterrent effect of this issue is widely acknowledged by electoral observers and minority community organizations.

The third and very problematic one refer to how the blasphemy laws serve as a barrier to minority political participation, particularly through their social consequences. It is important to realize that this particular issue works not mainly through direct electoral interference but the fear and self-censorship which these laws and the surrounding atmosphere induce within minority communities. As was highlighted before, Pakistan's blasphemy legislation has disproportionately been used by the courts against the religious minorities, and a person accused of blasphemy can face repercussions that go much beyond the formal legal outcomes. Mob violence is often triggered based on an accusation only, a person's livelihood and social relations are simply destroyed, and the entire families are forced to go in hiding or internally displaced.

Turning a blind eye to the neglected state protection of minority communities is another way that those communities are being barred from political participation. It functions at yet another level by communicating the message that minority groups cannot depend on state institutions for their security. Minority churches, temples, and homes have been attacked in many instances across Pakistan. These include the burning of Christian houses in Shanti Nagar in 1997 and the desecration of Hindu temples in Sindh on multiple occasions in the recent decades. In such cases, the state response has most of the time been slow, partial, and lacking in all respects. It is an open secret that perpetrators of anti-minority violence are hardly ever prosecuted with the seriousness their crimes deserve. Also, the compensation and rehabilitation provided to the affected communities are in most cases quite inadequate. The whole pattern of insufficient protection sends a message to minority communities that their safety and security do not really top the list of state concerns, and it serves as a deterrent to political activism that is predicated on a reasonable level of confidence that political activity will not expose individuals and communities to unpunished retaliation(Qasmi, 2015).

Educational underprivilege is structurally less visible but in many ways equally if not more potent a barrier to minority political participation. As is well known, access to quality education is a prerequisite for the type of political knowledge, civic literacy, and professional credentialing that effective political participation demands. Unfortunately, minority communities in Pakistan face major challenges in this area. The public school curriculum incorporates courses in Islamic studies that non-Muslim students are technically exempt from but are in many instances compelled to attend or at least sit through. Besides, there is a marked absence of alternative religious education for minorities at a level comparable to their Muslim peers. Non-Muslims also tend to be depicted negatively in textbooks which has been extensively documented by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute among others. These portrayals contribute to the ways majority populations think of minorities and this plays out in the socio-political landscape where minority participation occurs.

Case Study: The Hindu Community and Political Participation in Pakistan

Pakistan's Hindu community is a highly illustrative example of minority political participation in the country. Historically, Hindus formed a substantial and socially powerful part of the area that is now Pakistan, especially in Sindh where they were prominent in trade, finance, and intellectual professions. However, this community was severely diminished both in numbers and status due to the mass exodus of partition. Those Hindus who chose to stay in Pakistan after 1947 had their reasons such as a strong attachment to their ancestral homes, economic considerations, family circumstances, and many even considered themselves part of the plural South Asian homeland that Jinnah's August 11 speech seemed to offer. Their choice to remain and the subsequent political history is a key perspective from which the general situation of minority political participation in Pakistan can be understood(Salim & Saeed, 2021).

Today, Pakistan's Hindu population is believed to be between two to four million, though it is hard to get exact numbers due to census methods and social factors which might lead people to not reveal their true religious identity in official surveys. According to the 2017 census - which marked Pakistan's first thorough census since 1998 - Hindus were listed as 1.6% of the total population, a figure that the Hindu community organizations have always questioned as a significant undercount. However the community is almost entirely located in Sindh such as Karachi, Hyderabad, and Mirpurkhas districts along the Indian border with only small Hindu communities in cities outside of Sindh such as Karachi, Hyderabad, and Mirpurkhas.The location in Sindh strongly influences not only what kinds of opportunities Hindu political actors can access but also the various forms of their vulnerability that they experience.

The composition of Pakistan's Hindu community along its social lines is at the root of reasons that significantly determine political participation of different community segments. At the top, a small yet economically important Hindu business and professional class has historically been active in the commercial life of Sindh, mainly residing in the cities of Karachi and Hyderabad. This class, mostly made up of trading castes like Lohanas, Bhaibands, and Amils, has traditionally enjoyed better education, more economic means, and wider social networks than other Hindus, and it is from this group that most nationally prominent Hindu politicians have come. On the other hand, the vast majority of rural Hindus in Sindh belong to Scheduled Caste communities like Meghwars, Kolhis, Bheels, and Oadhs, who have traditionally been at the bottom of Sindh's social hierarchy, working in roles such as landless laborers and sharecroppers with a very high degree of economic dependence. The political involvement of these groups is restricted not only by obstacles faced by all religious minorities in Pakistan but also by the peculiarities of the feudal social system that remains prevalent in rural Sindh where mainly landowners have complete control over various aspects of the lives of the working population making free political participation almost impossible(Bhatti, 2023).

The bonded labor system of Sindh, locally called "haris" is an extremely exploitative practice that has hampered the political rights of Scheduled Caste Hindus in rural areas. Working under the bonded labor system, which is still present today

despite its formal prohibition by the Bonded Labour System Abolition Act of 1992, agricultural workers and their families become bonded to landlords through recurring debts that are inherited from one generation to another and are economically impossible to be freed from. Besides being financially dependent on the landlord, the bonded laborer's whole social life, such as access to water, shelter, protection from violence, and freedom of movement, is in the hands of the landlord. So it is hardly even a matter of choice for the laborer to cast their vote independently. In fact, bonded laborers in Sindh hardly ever vote except as their landlords dictate them. Besides, the landlords who control their votes are mostly Muslim feudal families whose political motivations have no connection to the needs of the Hindu minorities whose labor they exploit. Consequently, bonded labor among Scheduled Caste Hindus in Sindh remains a stark example of how economic marginalization goes hand in hand with political disenfranchisement which is a common feature of minorities in Pakistan on a larger scale.

The problem of abduction and forced conversion of Hindu females in Sindh has become one of the most well-known human rights violations linked with the Hindu minority in Pakistan and hence has serious impacts on their political participation. The pattern is very clear. Young Hindu females are kidnapped, converted forcibly to Islam and married off to Muslim men. Then the legal system is engaged to stop them from going back to their families since it is assumed that they are converted by choice and a Muslim woman has no rights in her Hindu family. Usually, the victims belong to the Scheduled Caste communities of rural Sindh where the social and economic plight of Hindu families makes it almost impossible for them to resist the abduction. The consequences on politics of this issue go far beyond the pain of the victim and their family. When Hindu women can be abducted and forcibly converted with little state intervention, a climate of fear grips the Hindu community and drives them away from political actions that require open and public visibility if they are to be effective. A family that is already concerned with the safety of its female members will be even more reluctant to get involved in political activities that might attract the predators' attention.

Under such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that only a few Hindu leaders have reached the heights of political life and are still representative of both the aspirations and constraints of minority politics in Pakistan. For example, Dr. Ramesh Kumar Vankwani's election to the National Assembly on a Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf general seat ticket in 2013 and again in 2018, made him one of the very few minority politicians in Pakistan's history to enjoy electoral success without three motions only through the reserved seat formula. Vankwani's political style is important for a number of reasons. He showed that a minority candidate with enough resources, organizational skills, and party support can win a general constituency election. This case challenged the assumption that minority candidates are unelectable outside majority-minority constituencies. Secondly, his success also reflected the peculiarities of Sindh's political environment where the PPP's long dominant and minority support-loving cultivation created a political atmosphere somewhat more tolerant of minority political participation than Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. But to a large extent, Vankwani's exception highlighted rather than challenged Hindu political marginalization. He was successful due to a unique mix of personal resources, party relations, and favorable constituency that most Hindu political aspirants lack and cannot imitate(Basedau et al., 2023).

Through its reserved seats system, the major avenue of legislators at the national and provincial levels, Hindu politicians have generally been drawn from the urban business and professional class rather than from the Scheduled Caste majority of the Hindu community, reflecting the class dynamics within the Hindu community itself. Consequently, the interests and concerns of Scheduled Caste Hindu communities, including bonded labor, forced conversions, land dispossession, and access to education and healthcare, have been underrepresented even within the limited space of reserved seat advocacy, since the reserved seat holders who nominally represent the entire Hindu community do not share the social background or daily experience of its most vulnerable members. Such class disparity among

minority representatives is an angle of political participation problem which is rarely brought up in policy discussions mainly focusing on the Muslim majority and minority divide.

On the issue of religious freedom, notably the care and protection of Hindu temples and other religious heritage sites, Hindu political representation often intersects with larger cultural rights issues and the responsibilities of the state. Pakistan has many old Hindu temples that have great architectural and religious heritage value but as the Hindus who lived in those areas have largely left at partition and over the years, these temples are either out of use, in a state of neglect or destruction. The legal status of these properties remains disputed with many such properties having been taken over by the Evacuee Trust Property Board which looks after the properties of those who migrated to India. Others have been encroached upon, converted or just left to decay. Political representatives of Hindus and their community organizations have consistently argued for the protection, restoration and handover of these properties to Hindus for their worship. Some headway has been made by such advocates, with constructing a new Hindu temple in Islamabad recently gaining much attention as a symbolic gesture of state accommodation.

Meanwhile, the Islamabad temple project itself was constantly delayed and faced staunch opposition from the religious groups, illustrating the political difficulty of even modest symbolic gestures toward Hindu religious rights in Pakistan's current political environment.

Therefore, the life of the Hindu community in Pakistan offers a complex and sobering story of minority political participation amidst conditions of profound structural disadvantage. On one hand, the community has produced skilled and committed political leaders who, within the confines of the system, have fought for the rights and interests of their community. It also secured legislative successes through persistent advocacy, most notably the Hindu Marriage Act. Politicians such as Vankwani, for example, have been able to show that minority candidates can engage in direct electoral competition if they have the right mix of resources and political standing. However, these successes are set against the backdrop of widespread economic deprivation, social frailty, inadequate state protection, and a political system that views Hindu political interests as secondary matters to be managed rather than as legitimate demands deserving of genuine engagement. The forced conversion problem continues unabated due to lack of effective state action. Bonded labor is still a reality in rural Sindh fields. Hindu religious heritage sites are neglected or under threat and the structural design of the reserved seat system means that Hindu political representation depends on the good will of party hierarchies rather than the democratic mandate of Hindu voters. So in this respect, the Hindu community case is a microcosm that highlights the larger point that just formal inclusion in the electoral process is necessary but not sufficient for minorities to achieve meaningful political participation in a democratic state(Mahmood, 2016).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Recent discussion has delineated the role of the local jinn Hacer in the new French literature and the picture that emerges is a piece of stuff. The the most representative piece is certainly the one from the moment Jinnah promised equal citizenship to everyone irrespective of their religion to the current situation in Pakistan where minority groups have been progressively legally marginalized, excluded from the institutions, and their political interests subordinated to those of the major religious groups

This article has argued that it is not only through electoral reforms that minority political participation in Pakistan can be improved. The minority communities are deprived not only by legal restrictions but also by social and economic factors. For instance, a bonded laborer who is a member of a minority community cannot freely participate in elections irrespective of the formal provisions of electoral law. Similarly, the non-Muslim leaders of the minorities who are always at the risk of being accused of blasphemy cannot even dare to come forward to defend their interests politically no matter how many reserved seats are provided for them in the constitution.

The most essential legal reform is to completely and honestly reconsider the constitutional provisions that discriminate against non-Muslim citizens in political matters. In particular, the

restrictions in Articles 41 and 91 of the 1973 Constitution which disallow non-Muslims from being the President and Prime Minister are a form of discrimination at the institutional level, and these provisions are not consistent with any genuine commitment to equal citizenship.

The present blasphemy laws and their abusive application have transformed these laws into tools of persecution rather than legitimate safeguards of religious feelings. Extensive documentation of their disproportionate use against religious minorities has been done.

The way the political system of Pakistan allocates reserved seats for the minority vote does little to facilitate meaningful democratic participation for these communities. Under the current scheme system, it is the party-list that initially fills reserved seats with their nominees rather than elected representatives, which keeps minority legislators reliant on party leaders rather than their constituents and hence less likely to robustly speak up in minority interest which may contradict party directions. It is the core right of every person to thought freely, to believe and carry on religious practices. In case of disagreement of such fundamental rights, there should be not religiously motivated persecution especially on the pretext of blasphemy which in fact also does not exist in the country. Governments from ground up and upward have to demonstrate political will and must deliver on this pledge. It will require them to recognize and allocate minority groups a share commensurate to their actual population and amend the seat distribution formula so that Scheduled Caste and lower-income minority groups are not systematically underrepresented within the minority quota as compared to more affluent and better-connected community members.

Political parties have a lot to answer for the state of minority political participation which has hardly come up in policy discussions on this issue. The PPP, the PML-N, and the PTI have all at one time or the other pledged minority rights and an inclusive polity which to date remain unmet in their government conduct and internal operations. The road to genuine minority political participation cannot be paved with mere symbolic gestures of inclusion but only through making actual institutional commitments that indeed count.

Enforcement of laws regarding bonded labor and forced conversions should be massively improved if minority political participation in rural Sindh and other areas is to be serious. Over the past three decades, the Bonded Labour System Abolition Act of 1992 has been largely ignored and as a result a system of labor exploitation which is one of direct causes of political impotence of the victims is allowed operating openly in the rural parts of Sindh.

The education system is on one hand, a major source of deeply entrenched barriers to minority political participation and, on the other hand, one of the best long-term levers for change. Removing negative portrayals of non-Muslim citizens form textbooks, a process that has been started and then forgotten several times over past 20 years, should be done with true motivation, and such initiatives must be protected from successful religious nationalist political pressures that have been reversing or diluting such initiatives until now. Genuine and high-quality religious education alternatives for non-Muslim students not only exist in most cases as mere exemptions on paper but have to be transformed from a matter of educational justice and constitutional obligation to an optional accommodation.

Civil society and media institutions as well as international partners have important roles to play in supporting minority political participation that complement but cannot substitute for the above state-level reforms. Pakistani civil society has produced a number of dedicated and effective organizations working for minority rights including Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, the Centre for Social Justice, and various community-based organizations representing specific minority communities.

International engagement on Pakistan's record of minority rights, primarily focused through bilateral diplomatic relations and multilateral human rights mechanisms, has from time to time led to tangible results as witnessed during the era of Musharraf's reforms. Pakistan's foreign partners, such as the United States, the European Union, and multilateral bodies like the United Nations Human Rights Council, must continue a consistent and principled engagement on minority rights matters making it very clear the link of Pakistan's international

relations and access to international economic and diplomatic support with its treatment of its minority citizens.

The way to real political participation of religious minorities in Pakistan is long and complex. It calls for consistent and continued political will transcending different governments and the many institutions of Pakistan. It entails the confrontation of powerful vested interests including religious extremists, feudal landlords and party establishments that benefit from the current system of minority exclusion and any reform of the Islam-state relationship is seen by them as a threat to their fundamental values. It also calls for a readiness to face up to the disconnect between the constitutional promises of Pakistan to equal citizenship and the actual minority political situation which has been highlighted in this article. None of this is simple and the history that has been analyzed very well testifies to the great difficulty of achieving real progress and even more so to its fragility once it comes. Joyfully, that very history bears witness to the possibility of progress, that the work of minority groups and their friends in civil society, media, and politics has led to real, though incomplete, benefits over the years. The introduction of joint electorates, the enactment of the Hindu Marriage Act, the court recognition of minority religious sites, and the infrequent but symbolically striking election of minority candidates to general seats reveal the political system, despite its structural biases, as not totally closed to minority pressure and reform. The point is not whether change can or cannot happen but whether Pakistan's political institutions, civil society, media, and ultimately majority population are willing to make the decision which is the very basis of democracy - that all citizens regardless of faith stand equally and fully in the political community of the nation.

A democracy that sidelines millions of its people from the political sphere on account of their religious identities is definitely not just a flawed democracy that needs a few improvements and beauty enhancements. It is one that has not even delivered on its very first promise, and the price of this unfulfillment is being paid daily by the Hindu farmers of rural Sindh, the Christian sanitation workers of Lahore, the Ahmadi professionals who cannot openly identify their faith, and the countless other Pakistani citizens whose full democratic participation remains a promise yet to be realized. The argument has been that no further deferral of this promise can be morally acceptable and politically sustainable for a state aspiring to democratic legitimacy and a dignified place in the international community.

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