

Chapter 2 **Looking Back**

2017–18 in the Lives of Minorities in South Asia

The South Asia Collective

Introduction

Minorities in South Asia are a mix of religious, ethnic, linguistic and caste groups, with women being particularly vulnerable. Recent years have continued to be detrimental to minorities in the region. They have faced targeted attacks on individuals, groups and places of worship; and government suppression and prohibition of cultural practices. These include killings by armed Islamist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan and by vigilante groups and lynch mobs associated with Hindutva groups in India; the targeting of bloggers by Islamists in Bangladesh; and communal flare ups involving Buddhist extremists in Sri Lanka. South Asia continues to be a difficult place for its minorities. The Peoples Under Threat rankings, which list countries where communities face the greatest risk of genocide, mass killing, or systematic violent repression, include every single country in South Asia, with varying degrees of threat (Minority Rights Group International 2018). The only one missing is Bhutan, about which there is little knowledge.

This chapter, looking back over the events of 2017 and 2018 (up to the month of August), especially targeted violence against minorities by both state and non-state actors in the region, catalogues the human tragedy playing out in the region in an attempt to demonstrate the implications of the more long term and institutionalised discrimination and marginalisation of minorities in the socioeconomic realm – the focus of this year’s report. In the literature on minority rights violations, one can see strong links between the two – the long term marginalisation of minorities and physical attacks against them. The causality works both ways. Long term and institutionalised marginalisation paves the way for overt physical violence and the targeting of minorities’ cultural rights and practices, because society becomes

used to the discrimination, and impunity is already established, giving the perpetrators free rein. At the same time, violence towards minorities and the resultant polarisation of society reinforces discrimination, especially by state actors that then lend weight to communal considerations in the delivery of citizenship rights and the rule of law. A vicious circle sets in, which is exactly what seems to be happening in South Asia.

Below is a summary of developments during 2017 and 2018, covering the period since the last State of Minorities Report was published, presented by country (listed alphabetically). This account is limited to the information available. In Bhutan's case in particular, we have struggled to find any information on minorities there. For the rest, most of what is available is work by international networks on human and minority rights as well as by local civil society and minority groups and networks. Official data on the condition of minorities is severely limited.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh has been teeming with attacks on its minorities, including indigenous people; atheist and secular writers and activists; and members of the LGBTQI+ community. Members of the Ahmadi, Sufi and Baul communities have also been targeted. There have been inter-group clashes too with entire villages attacked and burnt. While the government has attempted to clamp down on these attacks, minorities still fear for their lives, security and property.

The Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council compiled 959 reports of violations of minority rights between January and October 2017, based on media reports. These included murder, attempted murder, death threats, assault, rape, kidnapping, and attacks on homes, businesses, and places of worship (United States Department of State 2017a). These followed some 907 incidents of political violence in Bangladesh in 2016, many against minority groups, which resulted in 177 deaths and 11,462 injuries. Reports on these were compiled by the Bangladesh legal aid and human rights organisation Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) (2016: 13). A bi-annual report by the Kapaeeng Foundation reported that in the first 6 months of 2018, there were attacks on at least 209 indigenous persons and 125 families. Victims included 12 children and 23 women.¹ This section aims to

1. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2018/07/02/report-209-indigenous-people-victimized-in-six-months>

provide a snapshot of events in the country affecting minorities from January 2016 to August 2018, especially attacks by non-state actors on individuals from minority communities.

On 2 January 2017, a Hindu named Narayan Chandra Das was killed in Naokhali over extortion (ASK 2018). On 8 May 2017, Mustafijur Rahman, an imam of the Ahmadiyya community, was brutally hacked to death in Mymensingh district.² On 24 May 2017 the Bangladesh Christian Association reported a Christian family being attacked by Muslim real estate investors and local government officials, who wanted to seize their land (United States Department of State 2017a).

On 2 June 2017 at least 224 houses, offices and shops were razed to the ground in an attack on indigenous people in Langadu in Rangamati. Tensions began with the brutal killing of the local leader of the Awami League's youth front, Juba League: Nurul Islam Nayan. Two indigenous Chakma persons were accused. During the funeral procession, a crowd of thousands gathered. Some were holding banners demanding the punishment of 'indigenous criminals'. As the procession moved, someone threw bricks at Chakma houses and shops. Soon, houses began to be torched. A 70-year-old Chakma woman died during the attacks. The survivors managed to escape while their homes and livelihoods, including granaries and cattle, were destroyed.³ As of August 2017, 46 people had been arrested for the arson.⁴

On 8 September 2017, the Buddhist community, under the banner of the Bangladesh United Buddhists' Forum, formed a human chain in Dhaka, calling upon the Myanmar government to stop ongoing atrocities against Rohingya Muslims. They also expressed concerns for their safety in the light of rumours circulating against them on social media, and a fear of reprisal from Bangladeshi Muslims.⁵ On 29 October 2017 six persons were detained for looting and vandalising a Hindu Durga temple in Manikganj district (United States Department of State 2017a).

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2. <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/bangladesh-imam-of-ahmadiyya-attacked-mosque-976174-2017-05-09>
 3. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2017/06/11/langadu-attack-manufactured-rage/>
 4. <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2017/08/06/rangamati-court-sends-16-to-jail-over-langadu-violence>
 5. <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/rohingya-refugee-crisis-stop-atrocities-bangladesh-buddhists-urge-myanmar-1459282>

According to ASK Bangladesh's annual observation on the human rights situation in Bangladesh, violence against Hindus in the country in 2017 included the attack, looting or destruction of 212 idols, 45 houses and 21 business organisations (ASK 2017: 14). On 10 November 2017, more than 30 Hindu homes were ransacked, looted and set on fire by a mob in Thakarpur village in Rangpur Sadar upazila of Rangpur. The mob that carried out the attack had emerged from a crowd of about 20,000 people from neighbouring villages, which had gathered based on a rumor that a Hindu had put up a Facebook post defaming Islam. In the police action that followed, one person was killed and at least 5 more severely injured. An angry mob later blocked a highway, protesting the police attack.⁶ Two Union Parishad members were also arrested for suspected involvement,⁷ and 53 further arrests were made.⁸ In January 2018 a government engineer confessed in court that he had incited people to attack Hindu homes, leading to the aforementioned Rangpur violence. In the two cases registered in connection to the attack, the police have referred to 159 named and 2000 unidentified perpetrators.⁹

On 20 January 2018, three pastors were assaulted at a gathering in Gopalganj, over disputed property.¹⁰ The National Coordination Committee for Different Religious and Indigenous Organisations – an umbrella group for ethnic and religious minorities – held a rally on 10 March protesting communal attacks and demanding safety and security.¹¹

On 30 March 2018, a large group of people attacked an Ahmadiyya mosque at Jamalpur's Madarganj Upazila. The attack took place after Friday prayers, and left over 20 worshippers injured.¹² On 12 June 2018, five Hindu houses were attacked in Nasirnagar, Brahmanbaria, leaving nine

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6. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2017/11/10/one-killed-angry-go-ber-serk-rangpur-hindu-village-facebook-status/>
 7. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/crime/2017/11/17/attack-rangpur-hindus-two-members-arrested>
 8. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2017/11/11/53-arrested-attack-hindu-houses/>
 9. <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/world/engineer-admits-to-inciting-people-to-attack-hindus-in-bangladesh/531043.html>
 10. <https://www.ucanews.com/news/thugs-beat-up-bangladeshi-pastors-over-disputed-pond/81314>
 11. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2018/03/10/minority-communities-protest-communal-attack-demand-safety>
 12. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2018/04/11/jamalpur-ahmadiyya-community-living-fear-mosque-attack/>

injured.¹³ On 22 July 2018, a Hindu religious procession, Ulto Rath Yatra, was attacked by a group of locals in Kotalipara Upazila, Gopalganj. Six devotees were injured.

State actors and minorities

On 5 April 2017, Romel Chakma, an indigenous college student and leader of Pahari Chhatra Porishad, Rangamati, was picked up by the army. It was alleged that the army tortured him and he eventually died of the injuries in hospital. Following his death, a day long blockade was called by indigenous students' political groups in Rangamati. The National Human Rights Commission set up a committee to investigate his death.^{14 15 16}

In April 2017, the High Court confirmed the death penalty for two found guilty of killing individuals for allegedly offending Islam. These were part of the nine killings from February 2013 to April 2016 claimed by banned group Ansar Al Islam (United States Department of State 2017a). In 2017, it was also reported that the Ministry of Education had made changes to Bengali language textbooks. Poems and stories from non-Muslim authors were removed, and Islamic content was added to nonreligious subject matter (United States Department of State 2017a).

Bhutan

When it comes to the status of its minorities, Bhutan is opaque to the world. Religious groups can register with the Commission for Religious Organisation to organise, raise funds, conduct outreach or import literature, among other activities. However, since not all groups are registered, very little is known about events affecting minorities. Of the 108,000 Lhotsampas who had fled Bhutan in the 1990s, most have been resettled by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) under a third country resettlement process, with the US resettling 100,000.¹⁷ The remaining

13. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2018/06/12/five-hindu-households-attacked-in-nasirnagar-9-injured>

14. <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2017/05/02/nhrc-investigating-hill-student-leader-romel-s-death>

15. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2017/04/21/romel-chakma-death-ppc-declares-blockade-rangamati/>

16. <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/police-probing-romels-death-1395517>

17. The country created situations where Lhotsampas, a Nepali-speaking minority, were forced out, in a bid to create a homogenous national identity. See: <https://thediomat.com/2016/09/bhutans-dark-secret-the-lhotshampa-expulsion/>

refugees are to be resettled by the end of 2018.¹⁸ These may be resettled in Nepal itself, though some, who refused third country resettlement, wish to go back to Bhutan. Bhutan itself maintains that it will take back only those who can prove to be Bhutanese.

According to Open Door's World Watch List 2018, Christians in Bhutan continue to face discrimination, with the NGO rating their persecution as 'very high'. Examples include a student who was not allowed to graduate from school due to her religion; a church building locked up and another demolished; a Christian man denied government identification; and Christian farmers who were excluded from the traditional communal harvesting process.¹⁹ It was reported that a make-shift church working in a private residence had to close after receiving threats and warnings from the government for not being registered. It was also reported that non-Buddhist civil servants were forced to resign if they did not participate in Buddhist rites and festivals (United States Department of State 2017b). Of the 96 registered religious groups in the country, only one is non-Buddhist, the Hindu Dharma Samudaya – an umbrella body representing the country's Hindu population.

India

Targeted violence against religious minorities is not new in India. Since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) took power in the centre in 2014, anti-minority violence has steadily risen, both in number of incidents and in geographical spread. Newer forms of violence are also emerging. According to figures released by the Government of India, there was a rise in the number of communal violence incidents in 2017 compared to previous years. 111 persons were killed and 2,384 injured in 822 communal incidents in 2017, compared to 86 persons killed and 2321 gravely injured in 703 incidents in 2016, and 97 persons killed and 2264 injured in 751 incidents in 2015.²⁰ The state that saw the highest number of incidents, claims the report, was Uttar Pradesh, with 44 deaths and 542 persons injured in 195 violence cases. Other states with a high incidence of violence in 2017 included Karnataka (9 killed and 229 injured); Rajasthan (12 killed and 175 injured); West Bengal

18. <http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2017-12-23/after-all-these-years.html>

19. Available at: <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/bhutan/>

20. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/nearly-300-killed-in-2-276-communal-violence-incidents-in-2015-17-govt-tells-rs/story-dQwLNGd1NtcvnKE5Ut1HhP.html>

(9 killed and 230 injured); and Gujarat (8 killed and 125 injured); as well as Bihar and Madhya Pradesh (*ibid*).

Muslims suffered the brunt of the violence in these ‘communal violence’ incidents, which are, in fact, targeted mass attacks by militant Hindutva groups themselves or networks established and nurtured by them. 2017 ushered in, in public discourse at least, the age of lynchings, mostly against Muslims in cow-related attacks, mostly carried out by so-called ‘Gau Rakshak Dals’ (cow protection militias), many working in coordination with state forces. IndiaSpend, an online data site, recorded 24 incidents of cow related violence in 2016, with 58 victims, including 8 deaths. Of these, Muslims accounted for 43%, Dalits for 34%, Hindus for 10%, Sikhs for 3%.²¹ In 2017 it recorded 37 incidents of cow-related violence, with 152 victims including 11 deaths. Of these, Muslims accounted for 61%.²² Cow related lynchings appeared to ease off towards the end of 2017, but they have seen a revival in 2018. A civil society study counted 40 deaths by lynching and vigilantism in February 2018, in 30 incidents spread over several states – notably Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand, as well as Rajasthan and West Bengal (Citizens Against Hate 2018a). Five persons have been reported lynched to death in quick succession since May 2018, all in cow related attacks, one each in in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, and three in Jharkhand.

Interfaith couples also faced harassment, with lynchings carried out against so-called ‘love Jihad’ – a purported Muslim conspiracy to lure Hindu women into marriage. Rumours on social media led to killings committed on suspicion of kidnapping and cow slaughter.

Other forms of targeted violence against Muslims have been reported from several states. In March 2018, in a string of targeted mass attacks against Muslims around Ram Navami festival, five persons were reported killed in West Bengal, and scores injured, besides largescale destruction of property and desecration of religious sites across several districts of Bihar, West Bengal and Telangana (Citizens Against Hate 2018b). Similar targeting of Muslims by organised Hindu groups has been reported in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. Small-scale incidence of provocations, threats and attacks by Hindu groups on Muslim communities and their religious sites and practices, as well as opportunistic violence against overtly Muslim peo-

21. <http://lynch.factchecker.in/>

22. <http://lynch.factchecker.in/>

ple, such as madrassa students and maulvis, is increasingly being reported from the states of Jharkhand, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, among others. State police also seem to be targeting Muslim youth in extrajudicial executions, with Muslims killed disproportionately in ‘fake encounter killings’ in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana (Citizens Against Hate 2018c). Both states are ruled by the BJP, with top political executives overtly espousing anti-Muslim stances.

Anti-minority violence is not limited to the targeting of Muslims, however. According to the Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI), a Christian human rights documentation and advocacy group, there were over 300 incidents of abuse targeting Christians in India in 2016, an increase from 177 incidents in 2015 (United States Department of State 2017c). The Religious Liberty Commission of the EFI documented at least 351 cases of violence against Christians and churches in 2017 (ibid). The Union of Catholic Asian News, Persecution Relief recorded 736 attacks on Christians in 2017 compared to 348 attacks in 2016 (ibid). This included four murders, 110 ‘physical violence/arrest’ cases, 70 cases of ‘threats and harassment’, 64 occasions when worship was forcibly stopped, and 49 cases of Christians being falsely accused and arrested. Most incidents were reported from southern Tamil Nadu, and from Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, of which the latter four states are ruled by the BJP, and in which the report noted, ‘the Sangh [Hindu nationalist] cadres have free hand, with the police and administration either looking the other way, or complicit’.²³ EFI described 2017 as ‘one of the most traumatic’ years for Indian Christians in a decade, comparing 351 verified incidents of hate crime against Christians in 2017 to 147 in 2014, 177 in 2015, and 134 in the first six months of 2016.²⁴

Police records as well as the claims of the perpetrators trace these instances of targeted violence and efforts at instigations to extremist Hindu groups, among them Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bajrang Dal, and Hindu Yuva Vahini, and their local variants, and notably senior members and foot soldiers of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (Citizens Against Hate 2018a and 2018b).

The period under report also saw restrictions on minority rights written into the law. In November 2017, Jharkhand became the 7th state to adopt

23. <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/02/2017-one-traumatic-years-indian-christians/>

24. Ibid.

what are euphemistically called Freedom of Religion Acts, provincial level legislations which prevent conversions, in effect restricting the freedom of conscience guaranteed by the Indian constitution.²⁵ While in select states – Arunachal Pradesh and Rajasthan – these laws apply specifically to religious minorities, in practice the laws everywhere restrict minorities' freedom to proselytise. Anti-conversion laws provide easy tools for anti-minority groups, such as VHP and RSS, to target Christians, especially on false charges of forcibly converting people. Recently, soon after taking power in the centre, the BJP was reported to have made an unsuccessful attempt at instigating a nation-wide anti-conversion law. The period also saw state cow protection laws being further beefed up, with punishments made more strict in some states. These laws have been known to create openings for Hindu extremist groups such as Bajrang Dal and VHP to target cattle traders and pastoralists, especially Muslims, resulting in the lynchings rife in the country today (Citizens Against Hate). Together, state anti-conversion and cow protection laws are the jurisprudential teeth of attempts to physically target minorities in India.

The highest court in the land, the Supreme Court of India, and its subsidiary high courts have in the period under report also passed some key orders affecting minorities. These deserve listing here. In August 2016 the Supreme Court declared the practice of unilateral triple talaq followed in the Muslim community as unconstitutional and unIslamic (United States Department of State 2017c). In the same month, the Supreme Court directed the Odisha state government to reinvestigate 315 pending cases from 2008's anti-Christian violence in Kandhamal, which saw some 90 killed and largescale destruction of property. By August 2018, of the 362 trials completed, only 78 had resulted in convictions.²⁶ On 16 September 2016, Mumbai High Court upheld yoga and sun salutation being compulsory in Mumbai schools, not granting interim stay to a petitioner arguing that non-Hindu children were being made to follow Hindu practices (United States Department of State 2017c).

25. The first of these laws were enacted in Odisha (1967), Madhya Pradesh (1968) and Chhattisgarh (1968), to be followed later in Arunachal Pradesh (1978), Gujarat (2003), Rajasthan (2006), and Himachal Pradesh (2006). Tamil Nadu, under a BJP coalition government, adopted the law briefly in 2002, but public opposition forced the government to withdraw in 2004.

26. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/10-years-after-kandhamal-riots-both-sides-say-they-await-justice-5322057/>

The Supreme Court in April 2018 set aside a High Court order from 2017 that had annulled the marriage of a Hindu girl to a Muslim man because the girl had converted to Islam. The Supreme Court held the right to choose one's partner and one's religion to be a fundamental right.²⁷ On 17 July 2018 the Supreme Court, in the light of cow vigilante cases, passed orders that included a slew of preventive, remedial and punitive measures to deal with mob violence and cow vigilantism, directing state authorities to provide relief to victims and take action against perpetrators as well as complicit state actors.²⁸ The Supreme Court is also supervising the process of updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in eastern Assam, to determine the nationality of residents. This exercise, which has involved processing the claims of some 32 million applicants, has already identified some 4 million as ineligible, causing fear and uncertainty in the minds of the excluded, even as an appeals process is underway.

Pakistan

Through 2017–18 Pakistan continued to battle extremism and violence against minorities. Legal provisions such as the country's blasphemy laws continue to be misused to target minorities. According to a recent report by the Centre for Social Justice, 74% of these blasphemy cases were reported from Punjab.²⁹ In 2017 at least 17 individuals were booked under the country's blasphemy laws, compared to 18 new cases in 2016 (United States Department of State 2017d). Through 2016–2018 over 140 Pakistani Shias have 'disappeared', according to community activists.³⁰ The country's national elections in July 2018 elected Imran Khan, leader of the Tehreek-e-Insaf party, as Prime Minister. Imran Khan has defended blasphemy laws. How minorities fare under his watch is yet to be seen.

A snapshot of events related to ethno-religious minorities from January 2017 to August 2018 is provided below. The trends include the following:

- Minorities were the target of violence by non-state groups and discriminatory practices by state law enforcement agencies. Ahmadis, Shias,

27. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/right-to-marry-supreme-court-hadiya-case-5131055/>

28. <https://www.firstpost.com/india/supreme-court-tells-parliament-to-draft-new-law-on-mob-lynching-condemns-mobocracy-highlights-from-judgment-4758471.html>

29. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1657005/1-74-blasphemy-cases-pakistan-originate-punjab-reveals-report/>

30. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44280552>

Hazaras and Christians suffered the brunt of this.

- Positive legislative changes such as the promulgation of the Hindu Marriage Act 2017 and the amendment to the Christian Divorce Act 1869 sought to protect minorities, especially women, from discrimination and abuse. Other attempts such as the Sindh Criminal Law (Protection of Minorities) Bill failed to pass.

Targeting of minorities by non-state actors

In January 2017 an anti-terrorism court acquitted all 106 accused of being involved in the Joseph Colony attack of March 2013, during which an armed mob torched around 150 houses in a Christian neighbourhood following allegations of blasphemy against a Christian man,³¹ who himself remains on death row following conviction in 2014 (United States Department of State 2017d). On 19 February 2017, a mob stormed into the Christian majority village of Baba Bandoon Saen, accusing one of its residents of committing blasphemy.³²

In April 2017 23-year-old journalism student Mashal Khan was killed by a vigilante mob over allegations of blasphemy.³³ An investigation team ordered by the Supreme Court found the blasphemy accusations to be fabricated (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2018). In February 2018 a Pakistani court sentenced one man to death and handed life terms to five others for the murder. 25 others were convicted of lesser offences in the case and 26 people were acquitted.³⁴

On 23 June 2017 at least 85 Shia Muslims died from twin bombings in the northwestern city of Parachinar. A Sunni armed group, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, claimed responsibility.³⁵ ³⁶ On 22 December 2017 assailants opened fire and killed two Shia Hazaras in Quetta. The victims were coal miners returning to the Mach coal field after a holiday.³⁷

31. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1310101/mob-violence-106-acquitted-joseph-colony-case/>

32. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/suspect-lahore-blasphemy-case-fighting-life-180303085358736.html>

33. <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-journalism-student-latest-victim-of-blasphemy-vigilantes/a-38433834>

34. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42970587>

35. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/twin-blasts-kill-dozens-parachinar-market-170623141126819.html>

36. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1341501>

37. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1378358>

At least four persons from one Christian family were killed in an attack in Quetta on 3 April 2018.³⁸ On 15 April at least two Christians were killed when leaving church after Sunday service in Essa Nagri in Quetta.³⁹ Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant claimed to have carried out two gun attacks and bombed a church, all in April 2018.⁴⁰ Such crimes against the community are driving Christians out of Quetta, according to reports.

April 2018 witnessed four targeted attacks on Hazaras. The month began with one killed and another injured when gunmen opened fire on their vehicle in Quetta's Kandahari Bazaar.⁴¹ A shopkeeper was killed in a drive-by shooting in Quetta on 18 April 2018.⁴² Two men from the community were killed and another injured in an attack in Quetta's western bypass area on 22 April 2018.⁴³ On 28 April 2018 unidentified assailants killed two Hazara shopkeepers in Quetta.⁴⁴ These killings led to protests by Hazara community members, led by the Hazara Democratic Party.⁴⁵

At least 20 were killed on 10 July 2018 in a suicide bombing at the Awami National Party's Peshawar campaign event. The Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack, which killed politician Haroon Bilour.⁴⁶ On 14 July 2018 a suicide bombing at an election campaign event in Mastung, Balochistan killed at least 149. Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack.⁴⁷⁴⁸ This was the second deadliest militant attack in the country since independence. In another attack claimed by Islamic State, a man blew himself up outside a polling station in Quetta, killing at least 31 people on 25

38. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/killed-attack-christians-pakistan-quetta-180402161157315.html>

39. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1401797>

40. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/04/21/christians-claim-forced-pakistani-city-isil-violence/>

41. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1398907>

42. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1402346>

43. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1403198/two-hazara-men-gunned-down-in-targeted-attack-in-quetta-police>

44. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/04/30/pakistans-hazara-community-under-attack>

45. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1404857/govt-talks-with-hazara-protesters-inconclusive>

46. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/suicide-bomber-kills-anp-candidate-supporters-election-rally-180710201101463.html>

47. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/14/world/asia/pakistan-suicide-bombing-election.html>

48. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44847295>

July 2018.⁴⁹ On 17 July an artist employed at the National College of Arts in Lahore was killed by his landlord over fake blasphemy charges.⁵⁰

Targeting of minorities by state actors

In January 2017 there was public outcry after five secular social media activists who had criticised the government went missing. Four returned weeks later, with one publicly saying he had been tortured by a state intelligence agency.⁵¹ The fifth activist, Samar Abbas, returned over a year later in March 2018.⁵² In May a Hindu man, Prakash Kumar, was arrested in Hub, Balochistan for alleged blasphemy. A crowd gathered outside the police station to lynch him and was stopped only by police intervention.⁵³ A Christian teenager was arrested in August 2017 in central Punjab province, again over allegations of blasphemy, for burning the Quran.⁵⁴ In September 2017 a court sentenced a man to death, arrested in July 2016 on allegations of sharing blasphemous material via messaging service WhatsApp.⁵⁵ Three Ahmadis were sentenced to death for blasphemy on 12 October 2017 in Sheikhpura, following their arrest in May 2014 for allegedly tearing down religious posters in Bhoiwal, southwest of Lahore. The accused claimed the posters carried anti-Ahmadi slogans. The fourth accused was shot and killed in police custody days after the incident took place.⁵⁶ On 16 May police brought 20 Christians to court in Karachi and charged them for possessing arms and being involved in criminal activities. The families of those arrested said that security forces picked up more than two dozen Christians without any charges from Gulshan-e-Iqbal and other parts of the city.⁵⁷ A 19-year-old Hindu boy was arrested in Tando Allah Yar's Mirwah Gorchani area for allegedly posting blasphemous content on social media on 31 July 2018.⁵⁸

49. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44924384>

50. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/08/misuse-of-blasphemy-law-again-on-the-rise-in-pakistan/>

51. <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistans-missing-activists-whats-behind-the-disturbing-phenomenon/a-41754825>

52. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1654420/1-missing-activist-samar-abbas-returns-home/>

53. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/hindus-balochs-condemn-arrest-of-hindu-man-in-pakistan-4643049/>

54. <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-christian-teen-detained-over-koran-burning/a-40166731>

55. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/16/pakistan-man-sentenced-to-death-for-ridiculing-prophet-muhammad-on-whatsapp>

56. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/ahmadis-sentenced-death-blasphemy-171012081709423.html>

57. <https://www.dw.com/en/police-arrest-dozens-of-christians-in-pakistan/a-43839440>

58. <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2018/08/01/19-year-old-hindu-boy-arrested-for-allegedly-posting-blasphemous-content-online/>

Attempts at legislative or institutional change concerning minorities

The period under report saw some legislative advances affecting the rights of minorities in Pakistan, but it also saw pushback by majoritarian groups. Early 2017 witnessed the passing of The Hindu Marriage Act 2017 – which at long last enables the registration of Hindu marriage, separation and re-marriage, with the minimum age of marriage set at 18 years for both boys and girls – in Punjab, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces.^{59 60} Sindh had already formulated its own Hindu Marriage Law. The new law provides for mechanisms for the registration of Hindu marriages, procedures for the dissolution of marriages and the grounds on which marriages can be dissolved. It also provides for judicial separation, where the marriage remains intact but parties are no longer under obligation to cohabit with each other. Moreover, the legitimacy of children born out of void and voidable Hindu marriages has also been protected.⁶¹

The Sindh Criminal Law (Protection of Minorities) Bill, passed by the Sindh Assembly in 2016, was returned by the Governor in January 2017 following a string of protests.⁶² The bill recommended that change of religion not be recognised until a person was 18 years of age and was seen as a move to protect religious minorities from forced conversions.⁶³ Many women's and human rights groups have been demanding changes, pointing to certain antiquated sections such as marriages solemnised after sunset being illegal and marriage solemnised between person(s) below the age of 18 being admissible under the Christian Marriage Act in force. Furthermore, the Divorce Act specifies six grounds for the dissolution of marriage by a husband, including conversion to another religion, adultery, bigamy and cruelty; whereas a wife may only initiate divorce proceedings if the husband has committed adultery coupled with cruelty.⁶⁴ The process seems to have stalled at present.

59. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1315482>

60. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/Pakistan-Senate-passes-landmark-Hindu-marriage-bill/article17324249.ece>

61. <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/pakistan-parliament-passes-landmark-hindu-marriage-bill-4563476/>

62. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1287146/sindh-governor-refuses-ratify-forced-conversion-bill/>

63. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/Sindh-Governor-returns-Minorities-Bill-against-forced-conversion/article17004387.ece>

64. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1242277/amendments-christian-marriage-laws/>

In February 2017 the National Assembly passed the Criminal Laws (Amendment) Act 2016. The punishment for the offence of ‘deliberately using words to hurt the religious feelings of any person’ has been enhanced from yearlong imprisonment and an unspecified fine to imprisonment extendable to three years and not less than one year, and/or a fine of Rs 500,000. One of the amendments outlines the duties of a police officer to prevent sectarianism and hate, as well as enhanced punishments for officers guilty of violating this duty. A new clause has been inserted into the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997 defining ‘lynching’ and suggesting punishments for it.⁶⁵

In October 2017 the national discourse against Ahmadis was in the lime-light due to amendments to the Election Reform Act of 2017 by a parliament committee. The wording of the oath on the candidates’ nomination form for Muslim candidates, affirming their belief in the finality of the prophethood of Muhammad, was changed from ‘I solemnly swear’ to ‘I declare’, and separate voter lists for Ahmadis were abolished. There were protests from multiple religious and extremist groups who saw this as an attempt to empower the Ahmadi community. The government relented, returning the oath to its original. The crisis escalated, with various Islamist groups launching protests, only ceasing once the government agreed to several demands, including firing the country’s Law Minister (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2018).

In January 2018 more than 1800 Pakistani clerics issued a fatwa against suicide bombings, declaring them to be ‘haram’ or un-Islamic.⁶⁶ The National Assembly on 24th May 2018 passed a constitutional amendment merging the Federally Administered Tribal Area with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a move that is considered to mainstream tribal areas.⁶⁷ But violence continued apace. On 14 March 2018 a suicide bombing outside a police checkpoint in Lahore caused at least nine deaths.⁶⁸ The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan claimed responsibility.⁶⁹

65. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1313249>

66. <https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistan-clerics-fatwa-suicide-bombings-unislamic/28978125.html>

67. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1409710/national-assembly-votes-on-kp-fata-merger-bill>

68. https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/world/the-full-speech-that-rm-of-bts-gave-at-the-united-nations/2018/09/24/f2dfc13a-c01d-11e8-9f4f-a1b7af255aa5_video.html?utm_term=.213a91711ab4

69. <https://www.cfr.org/interactives/global-conflict-tracker#!/conflict/islamist-militancy-in-pakistan>

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's minorities continue to face attacks and threats to life and livelihood. Even after the end of the civil war, ethnic minorities have continued to face discrimination and violence. Attacks against religious minorities have also remained unreduced. In 2017 alone the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka documented 97 attacks, and the Sri Lankan Muslim Council reported dozens of violent attacks on mosques and Muslim prayer rooms, especially during Ramzan.⁷⁰ These attacks were notably characterised by a lack of reportage, especially in local media. The police have also been reluctant to lodge complaints against the majority groups perpetrating the violence. Social media plays a significant role in perpetuating rumours and fake news has encouraged the violence. Major incidents in which minority groups were targeted between January 2017 and August 2018 are detailed below.

Violence against ethno-religious minorities

In February 2017 resettled Tamil women were continuously harassed by Sinhalese soldiers stationed at the irrigation building whenever the women went to the tank for water and bathing needs in Vadamunai, Batticaloa.⁷¹ On 17 September 2017 a Christian congregation was injured during an attack by a large Buddhist mob: stones were pelted at a church in an Eastern coastal town by a mob of approximately 150 members. Six members were injured during the onslaught, including two women. The perpetrators then locked the two injured women in the church, holding them hostage. The remaining four who were injured were taken to the hospital. Unable to reach the police on their emergency hotline, the pastor went to the police station and asked the Assistant Superintendent of police to rescue the two women trapped in the church.

On 26 September 2017 extremist Buddhist monks stormed a UNHCR safe house and attacked Rohingya refugees, following the alleged rape of a refugee girl by a policeman the previous month. Alleging that the refugees were Muslim terrorists who killed Buddhist monks in Myanmar, the violent monks urged their mob to smash the premises while the women refugees huddled with their children in fear.⁷² While this was an attack on Rohingya Muslims, it is characteristic of the increasing anti-Muslim violence in Sri Lanka.

70. <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/attacks-religious-minorities-continue-%E2%80%98unabated%E2%80%99-sri-lanka-says-us-state-department>

71. <https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=79&artid=38761>

72. http://www.colombopage.com/archive_17B/Sep26_1506438646CH.php

Since being resettled in 2015 in 60 different villages in Batticaloa, Tamil victims of war have been repeatedly harassed. Many of their homes and crops were destroyed by wild elephants but they are yet to receive the meager LKR 20,000 they were promised by government officials. Tamil Net reports: “Tamil families that are dependent on freshwater fishing are unable to withstand Sinhala intruders exploiting their catch. Farmers are robbed off their cattle by Sinhala colonisers.”⁷³

2018 has so far been a dire year for minorities. A Christian funeral service was disrupted by Buddhist villagers on 18 January 2018 in Vaharai, Batticaloa district (National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) 2018). The mob was against the burial of the deceased in the village cemetery and attacked the police when they arrived at the scene. On 26 February 2018, a Mosque and several Muslim-owned restaurants and vehicles were damaged in Ampara,⁷⁴ as violence broke out when a Muslim youth working at his family’s restaurant was forced to say he had put sterilisation pills in the food of a Sinhalese customer. He was video recorded saying this on a mobile phone and the video was circulated widely on social media.⁷⁵ The establishment was swarmed by a mob, who burned it to the ground. Following this several other Muslim-owned restaurants in the area were attacked, along with a mosque.⁷⁶ The police did not attempt to arrest the perpetrators, nor to stop the violence.^{77 78}

Immediately after the incident the World Health Organisation (WHO) issued a statement strongly condemning the violence and clarifying that sterilisation pills do not exist. This information was not circulated by the media, however, even though the attacks received wide and lengthy media attention both locally and internationally. The perpetrators who later surrendered to the police were granted bail when the court case was called. The matter that was said to be a sterilisation pill was examined by government analysts and found to be a cluster of flour. Almost a month later the doctors’

73. <https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=38116>

74. <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2018/03/04/news/govt-mulls-special-police-team-probe-ampara-unrest>.

75. <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/video-anti-muslim-assaults-lump-of-flour-has-snowballed-govt-balks-at-full-disclosure-on-situation/>

76. <http://www.ft.lk/news/Shops--mosque-damaged-in-Ampara/56-650304>

77. <http://www.ft.lk/news/PM-orders-another-inquiry-into-alleged-police-inaction-in-Ampara-incident/56-650570>

78. http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=181012

union released a statement stating that sterilisation pills do not exist. This did not receive much publicity either. The video of the Muslim youth continues to be circulated on social media, causing alarm and dismay among Sinhala Buddhists.⁷⁹

Violence against Muslims continued. On 4 March 2018, there were mass attacks on mosques, Muslim-owned businesses, and homes in the Kandy district by Sinhalese Buddhist mobs. They were encouraged by Buddhist monks both in the area and from afar – through social media. Both organised and spontaneous attacks on Muslims took place in the Kandy district when a Sinhalese man succumbed to his injuries after being assaulted by Muslim youths over a traffic dispute. The violence was wide spread, leaving four dead and several injured. Muslim-owned shops and homes, and mosques were burnt to the ground, leaving several homeless and with livelihoods lost. It was reported that the police and Special Task Force (STF) participated in the attacks and that the violence was only brought to an end when the army arrived. The president called for three days of curfew and an island-wide State of Emergency (SoE). The president also imposed an island-wide social media blackout and ordered internet restrictions on all networks for seven days to prevent hate and violence being spread on social media by extremist Sinhalese groups. This large-scale violence received much local and international media attention, including in-depth analytical reports. Facebook agreed to meet with government officials and relevant ministers to discuss how hate groups can be shut down on the network, however Facebook officials could not provide any solutions. While several hundred perpetrators were eventually arrested by the police, many were released days later. Muslims in the area continue to be harassed by their Sinhalese neighbours and monks in the area. Victims of the violence are yet to receive the compensation for damages that was promised to them by the government. The situation remains tense and volatile for the Muslims across the island.

Some 300 Tamil Iranaitivu villagers continued their year-long campaign to have their land – currently occupied by the military forces – returned to them. On 25 April 2018 they sailed to their land despite the military occupation, however the navy showed no signs that their land would be returned. The Tamils continued with their demand. By August 2018, according to

79. <http://www.ft.lk/columns/-Wanda-Pethi---Digakalliya--and-the-violence-in-Ampara/4-651431>

some reports, 100 community members had managed to permanently move back to the island and have begun to rebuild the town.⁸⁰

On 7 May 2018 it was reported that a Sri Lankan attendant on a North-bound train sexually harassed a Tamil woman and racially abused, and attempted to physically attack, male Tamil passengers who tried to intervene.⁸¹ On 11 July it was reported that a Tamil disappearances activist was attacked upon her return from attending the UN Human Rights Council session in Geneva. Thereafter she was harassed by Sri Lanka's Criminal Investigation Department, who visited her home questioning where she had gone and what she had spoken about there.⁸² A civil society attempt to question the impunity of perpetrators was made on 31 May 2016, when Eastern University staff protested against impunity for ethnic violence by Sinhalese students, following continued assaults and harassment of Tamil students and lecturers by Sinhalese students. This protest did not appear in the local media and the violence continued.

In July 2018, the Saleem Masroof Committee submitted its report on proposed amendments to upgrade Quazi Courts, which govern Muslim personal law in the country.⁸³ This once again brought attention to the demand for reforms to the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act, which, among other things, does not set a legal minimum age for marriage and allows polygamy. The government is taking the issue to be a 'Muslim issue' rather than one involving fundamental rights, especially of Muslim women, who continue to suffer under Quazi Courts.

Section 5 examines effective participation and Section 6 discusses identity and culture. The attempt is to build a baseline on precepts and practices of minority rights in India. Section 7 provides a snapshot of the on-going debates, which have somewhat accelerated in recent years, seeking to re-fashion majority-minority relations in the country; it also discusses secularism with implications for minority rights. The chapter concludes with a set of recommendations for action.

80. <http://www.ft.lk/columns/-Wanda-Pethi-Digakalliya--and-the-violence-in-Ampara/4-651431>

81. <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lankan-train-attendant-harasses-tamil-woman-and-racially-abuses-intervening-passengers>

82. <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/tamil-disappearances-activist-attacked-days-after-cid-harassment>

83. <http://www.dailymirror.lk/article/Muslim-Marriage-and-Divorce-Act-Reforms-154817.html>

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