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Constitutional Promises and Practical Realities: An Analysis of the Protection of Minority Rights in Pakistan (2018 - 2024).

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ABSTRACT

The Constitution of Pakistan provides a comprehensive framework for the protection and promotion of minority rights, ensuring equality, religious freedom, and socio-political participation. However, the practical realities often reveal a stark contrast between constitutional guarantees and ground-level implementation. This research critically examines the protection of minority rights in Pakistan from 2018 to 2024, focusing on the intersection of legal frameworks, state policies, and societal attitudes. It explores whether constitutional promises translate into meaningful safeguards for religious minorities in political representation, education, employment, and social justice. Special attention is given to the role of institutions such as the judiciary, parliament, and civil society in upholding or undermining these rights. The study also highlights challenges faced by minorities, including discrimination, underrepresentation, and vulnerability under controversial legal provisions. By comparing constitutional commitments with contemporary realities, this research aims to assess the effectiveness of state mechanisms and propose actionable reforms. Ultimately, it seeks to contribute to the discourse on inclusivity, equality, and democratic governance in Pakistan, while offering policy recommendations for bridging the gap between constitutional ideals and practical realities.

Keywords: Minority Rights, Pakistan Constitution, Equality, Discrimination, Political Representation, Judiciary, Human Rights, Religious Freedom, 2018–2024

Introduction

The protection of minority rights remains a cornerstone of democratic governance and social harmony in modern nation-states. In Pakistan, the Constitution of 1973 enshrines fundamental rights such as equality before the law, religious freedom, and non-discrimination for all citizens irrespective of their faith. Despite these constitutional guarantees, minorities in Pakistan often encounter socio-political exclusion and systemic barriers that hinder their full participation in national life. This tension between constitutional ideals and practical realities has increasingly drawn scholarly and policy attention in recent years. From 2018 to 2024, Pakistan's political landscape has been marked by heightened debates on governance, rule of law, and human rights. Within this context, the position of minorities has remained a critical concern, especially in light of issues related to religious intolerance, legal ambiguities, and uneven policy implementation. While the state has made commitments at both domestic and international levels to protect vulnerable communities, the gap between promises and realities persists. This has created a space for critical inquiry into the structural and institutional dynamics that affect minority rights (Malik, 2002).

Furthermore, civil society organizations, human rights defenders, and international watchdogs have consistently highlighted incidents of discrimination, violence, and underrepresentation of minorities in Pakistan. These developments underscore the urgent need to examine the effectiveness of constitutional provisions in addressing the lived experiences of minorities. By focusing on the period from 2018 to 2024, this study aims to assess how constitutional guarantees have translated into practice, with the broader goal of identifying pathways toward inclusivity and equality in Pakistan's democratic framework (Mahmood, 2010).

Literature Review of the Study

The foundation of minority rights is deeply embedded in international human rights discourse, which emphasizes universality, equality, and protection against discrimination. Foundational documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) set the global benchmarks for safeguarding religious and ethnic minorities. Scholars argue that the universality principle ensures every individual's right to freedom of belief and equal treatment, irrespective of social or religious identity. Within this framework, the human rights approach serves as a critical theoretical tool for evaluating how national constitutions, including Pakistan's, measure up to international standards. The global discourse also highlights that violations of minority rights are not unique to developing nations but manifest across various contexts, though the intensity and impact vary with governance structures and political will (Claude & Weston, 2006).

The scholarship on Pakistan's constitutional framework reveals a tension between the ideals of equality and the realities of religious majoritarianism. The 1973 Constitution, while progressive in its formal guarantees, incorporates both protective provisions for minorities (Articles 20, 25, and 36) and discriminatory clauses, such as those linked to the definition of a Muslim under Article 260. Scholars note that this duality reflects Pakistan's struggle to balance its identity as both an Islamic republic and a democratic state. Existing literature further demonstrates that judicial

interpretations and legislative practices have often tilted toward privileging religious orthodoxy at the expense of minority rights. For instance, laws concerning blasphemy have been extensively critiqued for their misuse against vulnerable groups, undermining the constitutional promise of equality. This complex legal environment sets the backdrop for analyzing Pakistan's performance in the period 2018–2024, (Binder, 1961; Khan, 2017)

Empirical studies on Pakistan highlight the persistent challenges faced by minority communities despite constitutional guarantees. Research shows that Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Ahmadis encounter systematic discrimination in access to education, employment, political representation, and legal justice. Social practices such as forced conversions, hate speech, and mob violence further exacerbate their marginalization, often occurring with little state intervention. Analysts emphasize that political leaders frequently use religion as a mobilizing tool, leading to policies that sustain rather than dismantle exclusionary practices. Moreover, the persistence of feudal structures and weak governance institutions compounds these issues, leaving minority groups with limited avenues for redress. The literature therefore underscores a sharp gap between constitutional ideals and the everyday realities experienced by minorities in Pakistan, (Malik, 2002; Ahmed, 2013).

Recent studies focusing on the period post-2018 reveal both continuity and new dynamics in the treatment of minorities in Pakistan. Analysts point out that state institutions have attempted reforms, such as reserved seats for minorities in provincial and national assemblies, but these measures have largely been symbolic, with limited impact on structural inequalities. The rise of populist politics and growing political polarization during this period has further complicated the protection of minority rights, with minority issues often sidelined in mainstream political discourse. While considerable scholarship exists on the historical and constitutional aspects of minority rights, there remains a notable gap in systematic studies examining the period 2018–2024, particularly with reference to Pakistan's obligations under international human rights law. This study, therefore, seeks to fill that gap by critically analyzing the extent to which Pakistan has translated its constitutional promises into practical protections for minorities during this timeframe, (Rizvi, 2020).

Theoretical Underpinnings of the Study

Human Rights Theory asserts that every individual is entitled to basic rights and freedoms regardless of religion, ethnicity, or social background. In Pakistan, the 1973 Constitution guarantees equality before the law (Article 25), freedom of religion (Article 20), and safeguards for minorities (Article 36). This study applies Human Rights Theory to evaluate how far these promises have been realized between 2018 and 2024, particularly for minority groups such as Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs. It examines whether these communities enjoy genuine equality in political representation, education, and legal protection, while also addressing gaps created by discriminatory laws and practices such as blasphemy provisions. Human Rights Theory provides a framework to assess Pakistan's commitments against international standards like the UDHR (1948) and ICCPR (1966). Ultimately, this model highlights the gap between constitutional ideals and lived realities, exposing challenges in implementation and underscoring the need for reforms to ensure inclusivity and

equality.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach grounded in Human Rights Theory to examine the gap between constitutional guarantees and the lived realities of minorities in Pakistan (2018–2024). Data collection relies on document analysis of constitutional provisions, parliamentary debates, judicial rulings, government reports, and publications from NGOs and international bodies, supplemented by secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and credible news reports. Selected case studies of minority groups, including Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and others, provide contextual depth, while semi-structured interviews with legal experts and human rights activists may be included where feasible. Data analysis follows a thematic approach, identifying recurring patterns and contradictions in areas such as political representation, freedom of religion, education, and legal protections, and comparing Pakistan's practices with international human rights standards like the UDHR (1948) and ICCPR (1966) to highlight challenges and propose reforms for greater inclusivity. Structural and Institutional Challenges.

Historical and Constitutional Background

The historical roots of minority rights in Pakistan can be traced back to the vision of the country's founding leaders, particularly Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who emphasized religious freedom and equal citizenship in his speech of August 11, 1947. Despite this promise, the subsequent political trajectory reflected growing tensions between the ideals of inclusivity and the state's increasing Islamization. Early constitutional debates, particularly during the Objectives Resolution of 1949, laid the foundation for embedding Islamic provisions into the constitutional framework, which some critics argue marginalized minority communities by subordinating equal citizenship to religious identity. Over time, political developments such as General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies in the 1980s further entrenched discriminatory practices, leaving minority groups vulnerable to systemic inequalities (Binder, 1961; Ahmed, 2013).

The 1973 Constitution of Pakistan, however, formally guarantees protections for minorities under various articles, most notably Article 20 (freedom of religion), Article 25 (equality before law), and Article 36 (safeguards for minorities). These provisions reflect both domestic aspirations and international commitments to human rights principles. Yet, the implementation of these safeguards has remained inconsistent, particularly in the face of challenges such as blasphemy laws, political underrepresentation, and social exclusion. Scholars argue that while the constitutional framework embodies a commitment to equality, the practical realities often undermine these guarantees, creating a significant gap between promises and practice (Rizvi, 2003; Shaikh, 2009).

State Commitments and Policy Frameworks (2018–2024)

Between 2018 and 2024, Pakistan's state commitments toward minority rights continued to be framed within the constitutional provisions of the 1973 Constitution, particularly Articles 20, 25, and 36, which guarantee religious freedom, equality before law, and safeguards for minorities. Successive governments emphasized these

provisions in policy statements, and reserved seats in national and provincial assemblies remained a formal mechanism for political inclusion. However, scholars argue that these commitments have largely been rhetorical, with minimal substantive legal reforms to strengthen minority protections. For example, blasphemy laws, often criticized for misuse against minorities, were not revised during this period, despite international and domestic calls for reform. Thus, while Pakistan formally upholds constitutional guarantees, its legislative framework has shown limited progress in translating commitments into stronger protections for vulnerable groups, (Khan, 2017).

In terms of institutional policy frameworks, the government introduced initiatives such as the National Commission for Minorities, tasked with advising on minority issues and promoting interfaith harmony. Reports also suggest efforts at curricular reforms to include minority perspectives in textbooks, though implementation has been slow and uneven across provinces (Rehman, 2019). Some progress was made in symbolic measures, such as celebrating minority religious festivals officially and publicizing inclusivity in state rhetoric. Nevertheless, the lack of autonomy and enforcement power for minority commissions has limited their ability to influence policy outcomes meaningfully. Analysts highlight that while policy frameworks exist, they remain largely reactive rather than proactive, offering minimal protection in the face of rising religious intolerance and mob violence against minorities (ICG, 2022).

On the international stage, Pakistan has reiterated its commitments to human rights through participation in global forums such as the United Nations Human Rights Council and by reaffirming its obligations under treaties like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Official statements during the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process between 2018 and 2023 highlighted Pakistan's commitment to protect minorities and combat religious intolerance. However, critical reports by NGOs and human rights watchdogs noted that these commitments were often undermined by weak domestic enforcement and persistent structural barriers (Amnesty International, 2021). The disparity between Pakistan's international commitments and domestic realities underscores the challenges of aligning policy frameworks with actual protections. Scholars contend that unless there is stronger political will and institutional reform, Pakistan's commitments will remain more performative than transformative (Donnelly, 2013).

Social Discrimination and Everyday Marginalization

Despite constitutional guarantees, religious minorities in Pakistan such as Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and others continue to face systemic discrimination in everyday life. Social marginalization is particularly evident in education and employment, where minorities are often confined to low-paying, menial jobs such as sanitation work, reinforcing entrenched caste and class hierarchies. In education, minority students are subjected to discriminatory curricula that present Islam as the dominant national identity, marginalizing non-Muslim histories and contributions (Nayyar & Salim, 2003). Social exclusion is compounded by stigmatization, with derogatory terms and stereotypes reinforcing perceptions of inferiority. Scholars argue that these daily practices of discrimination perpetuate cycles of inequality, undermining the constitutional promise of equality before the law (Article 25). The reality thus reflects

structural inequalities that limit minorities' upward mobility and integration into mainstream society, (Malik, 2002).

Violence, Intolerance, and Blasphemy Laws

A central challenge for minorities in Pakistan is their vulnerability to religiously motivated violence, often triggered by accusations under the blasphemy laws. These laws, particularly Section 295 of the Pakistan Penal Code, have been criticized for misuse against vulnerable groups, leading to arbitrary arrests, mob lynching, and community displacement. High-profile cases, such as those involving Christian and Ahmadi individuals, have underscored how blasphemy allegations can become tools of personal vendettas or land disputes, rather than genuine religious grievances (Rehman, 2019). Beyond legal persecution, minorities frequently encounter mob violence and targeted attacks on places of worship, revealing the state's limited capacity or at times reluctance to intervene. Analysts note that the persistence of such violence not only undermines constitutional protections but also fosters a climate of fear and insecurity that restricts minorities' freedom of religion and expression, (Lau, 2006).

Political Representation and Exclusion

Although Pakistan's Constitution reserves seats for minorities in national and provincial legislatures, their political influence remains highly constrained. Reserved seats are filled through proportional representation by political parties, leaving minority representatives dependent on mainstream parties rather than their own constituencies. This system reduces minorities' capacity to advocate independently for their communities, relegating them to symbolic representation rather than genuine empowerment. Scholars argue that such tokenistic inclusion undermines substantive participation, as minority representatives often prioritize party agendas over community concerns (Rizvi, 2020). Furthermore, Ahmadis have been systematically disenfranchised since the 1974 constitutional amendment that declared them non-Muslims, forcing them to register separately and discouraging their political participation (Ahmed, 2013). Thus, while institutional mechanisms exist for inclusion, minorities' political marginalization persists, preventing them from influencing policymaking effectively, (Waseem, 2012).

Gendered Dimensions of Minority Rights

The practical realities of minority communities in Pakistan are further complicated by the intersection of religion and gender, with minority women facing dual layers of vulnerability. Forced conversions and marriages, particularly of Hindu and Christian girls, remain pressing concerns, with reports of abductions followed by coerced conversions to Islam (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan [HRCP], 2021). Minority women also face barriers in accessing justice due to patriarchal social norms and institutional bias within law enforcement agencies (ICG, 2022). The compounded marginalization of minority women reflects not only systemic gender inequality but also the state's inability to provide adequate legal protections despite constitutional safeguards. Scholars emphasize that addressing the plight of minority women requires an intersectional approach that considers both religious and gender-based

vulnerabilities (Shaheed, 2010). This highlights the urgent need for targeted reforms to address the specific challenges faced by minority women in Pakistan.

Pakistan's International Human Rights Obligations

Pakistan is a signatory to several key international human rights instruments that commit the state to protect and promote the rights of minorities. These include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, ratified in 2010), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, ratified in 2008). These frameworks obligate Pakistan to uphold freedom of religion, equality before law, and protection against discrimination. During the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) sessions between 2018 and 2023, Pakistan repeatedly reaffirmed its commitment to safeguard minority rights. However, critical observers note that while Pakistan has made formal commitments, the country has struggled to domesticate these obligations fully into its legal and institutional systems. The gap between ratification and enforcement reflects a broader challenge of aligning international standards with domestic political and social realities (Donnelly, 2013).

Domestic Implementation of International Standards

Although Pakistan has ratified international treaties, its domestic incorporation remains partial and inconsistent. For instance, the ICCPR guarantees religious freedom and protection from discrimination, yet Pakistan's blasphemy laws and the constitutional declaration of Ahmadis as non-Muslims directly contradict these commitments. Reports by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) show that minorities continue to face violations of their rights despite these international frameworks. Additionally, international watchdogs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have repeatedly highlighted cases of forced conversions, mob violence, and systemic exclusion of minorities from equitable access to education and employment. These findings underscore that Pakistan's compliance with international standards remains largely rhetorical, with insufficient institutional reform to bridge the gap between commitments and practice (Rehman, 2019; Amnesty International, 2021).

Comparative Regional Perspectives

A comparative perspective highlights that the treatment of minorities is a common challenge across South Asia, though varying in intensity and legal frameworks. In India, for instance, minorities such as Muslims and Christians face growing exclusion under Hindu nationalist policies, raising concerns similar to Pakistan's issues of majoritarianism. Bangladesh, while constitutionally secular, has struggled with violence against Hindus and Buddhists, often fueled by political mobilization and weak enforcement of minority protections. Nepal, by contrast, has made strides in strengthening constitutional secularism, though its minorities still face economic marginalization. These comparisons reveal that while Pakistan's challenges are acute, they are not unique; rather, they reflect broader regional trends where religion and politics intersect to limit minority rights. Pakistan's situation, however, is exacerbated by stronger legal constraints, such as the blasphemy laws, which intensify

discrimination (Hasan, 2019; Riaz, 2016).

Policy Frameworks and Government Initiatives (2018 - 2024)

Between 2018 and 2024, the Government of Pakistan introduced several policy frameworks aimed at protecting and promoting minority rights, though the implementation of these measures often fell short of expectations. The continuation of the 5% job quota for minorities in federal and provincial government services remained one of the most significant policies, intended to ensure representation of religious minorities in civil institutions. Similarly, the reserved seats in the National and Provincial Assemblies provided a platform for minority voices, though critics argue that these seats are often filled by political parties rather than directly elected representatives, thereby limiting authentic minority participation. Efforts were also made through the National Commission for Minorities (NCM), which, although reconstituted in 2020, was criticized for being advisory in nature without enforcement powers. The federal government also highlighted minority inclusion by inaugurating heritage and religious tourism initiatives such as the Kartarpur Corridor in 2019, which was a major step for the Sikh community. Despite these initiatives, gaps persisted in addressing forced conversions, hate speech, and unequal access to justice. While the policy framework symbolized a commitment to minority inclusion, its effectiveness was undermined by structural weaknesses, lack of monitoring, and the persistence of religious intolerance within broader society (Ahmed, 2021; Malik, 2022; Shaikh, 2023).

From 2018 to 2024, Pakistan also initiated several education and social inclusion reforms designed to reduce systemic marginalization of minority groups. Curriculum reforms were introduced to encourage a more inclusive portrayal of religious diversity, although many textbooks continued to reflect biases that reinforced majority narratives. Provincial governments, especially in Sindh and Punjab, undertook measures to protect minority places of worship, with the restoration of Hindu temples and Sikh gurdwaras seen as symbolic gestures of coexistence. Moreover, successive governments attempted to strengthen the National Action Plan (NAP) by incorporating sections on combating hate speech and extremism that targeted religious minorities, yet enforcement remained selective and inconsistent. Civil society organizations and minority parliamentarians frequently criticized these frameworks for their lack of accountability and insufficient allocation of resources to minority communities. In practice, the disconnect between constitutional commitments and policy execution was most evident in rural areas, where minorities faced systemic barriers in accessing education, healthcare, and legal redress. While policy initiatives during this period reflected progress in acknowledging minority rights, the lived realities of discrimination, coupled with political reluctance to challenge extremist narratives, significantly diluted their impact (Khan, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2021; Yousaf, 2024).

Practical Realities of Minority Communities in Pakistan

The practical realities faced by minority communities in Pakistan between 2018 and 2024 reveal a stark gap between constitutional guarantees and lived experiences. Socio-economic disparities remain one of the most pressing issues, as many Christians and Hindus are disproportionately employed in sanitation, menial labor, and other low-paying occupations due to structural discrimination and lack of

educational opportunities. Despite the introduction of quotas in civil services, minorities often struggle to benefit from them due to bureaucratic hurdles and limited awareness. Forced conversions, particularly of Hindu and Christian girls in Sindh, became a recurring issue that exposed the vulnerability of minority women to both legal and social exploitation. Ahmadis, in particular, faced systemic exclusion, as state policies reinforced their marginalization in both political and religious spheres. Legal protections such as the right to freedom of religion were frequently undermined by blasphemy accusations, which were often weaponized against minorities, leading to mob violence and long judicial battles. The Ghotki incident of 2019 and mob attacks in Punjab highlighted the precarious position of minorities in society. These challenges illustrate that minorities in Pakistan continue to encounter systemic barriers that not only limit their socio-economic mobility but also threaten their security and dignity on a daily basis (Ali, 2020; Saeed, 2021; Malik, 2022).

While policy frameworks attempted to create space for inclusion, the ground realities for minorities from 2018 to 2024 were shaped by persistent insecurity and discrimination in everyday life. Access to education for minority children remained highly uneven, with reports of biased curricula and discriminatory treatment in schools contributing to dropout rates among Christian and Hindu students. Health disparities were also stark, as minorities in remote areas like Tharparkar and southern Punjab had limited access to medical facilities, exacerbating poverty cycles. Religious spaces of minorities, though occasionally restored by the state, were still vulnerable to encroachment and violence, as seen in repeated attacks on Hindu temples and churches. Women belonging to minorities faced intersecting challenges of gender and religion, making them especially vulnerable to harassment, exploitation, and violence. At the same time, however, minority communities demonstrated resilience, with local initiatives promoting education, interfaith harmony, and social cohesion. The Kartarpur Corridor initiative in 2019 symbolized a rare success in promoting religious harmony, particularly for Sikhs, yet such symbolic gestures did not address deeper systemic inequalities. The persistence of discriminatory practices, coupled with weak enforcement of protective laws, underscores the gap between promises of equality and the harsh lived realities of Pakistan's minorities (International Crisis Group, 2021; Yousaf, 2023; Shaikh, 2024).

Challenges to Minority Rights Protection

The protection of minority rights in Pakistan between 2018 and 2024 faced significant challenges, primarily due to the rise of religious extremism and intolerance embedded within society. Despite constitutional guarantees, extremist groups continued to exercise influence in both political and social domains, often using religion to marginalize minorities and restrict their freedoms. The persistence of the blasphemy laws, which are widely criticized for being misused against vulnerable communities, further exacerbated the risks for minorities, creating a climate of fear and insecurity. Institutional weaknesses compounded these issues, as law enforcement agencies frequently failed to protect minorities from mob violence or to prosecute perpetrators effectively. Judicial delays and selective application of justice meant that minorities rarely received fair trials or timely redress for grievances. Political reluctance to reform discriminatory laws also reflected the state's fear of backlash from conservative religious groups. For example, incidents of mob attacks in Punjab and

Sindh highlighted the state's inability to ensure accountability and equal protection under the law. Consequently, these dynamics created a structural environment where constitutional rights existed largely in principle but were often rendered meaningless in practice (Siddiqui, 2020; Ahmed, 2021; Shaikh, 2023).

Another critical challenge to the protection of minority rights in Pakistan lies in the gap between policy frameworks and their actual implementation. While government initiatives such as minority job quotas, the reconstitution of the National Commission for Minorities, and the promotion of religious tourism projects signaled commitment, their effectiveness was severely limited by weak institutions and lack of political will. The Commission itself remained advisory without binding authority, while job quotas often went unfulfilled due to bureaucratic inefficiencies. Furthermore, policies failed to address the deep-rooted socio-cultural biases that continued to marginalize minorities in daily life, particularly in education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. International obligations under UN treaties were also inadequately met, as Pakistan's periodic reports often highlighted commitments rather than achievements. Civil society and advocacy groups consistently pointed out the disconnect between state rhetoric and the lived realities of minorities, urging for structural reforms. The persistence of systemic discrimination and violence underscored that the state's inability or unwillingness to enforce protective measures remained one of the most significant obstacles to minority rights. Thus, without stronger institutions, accountability mechanisms, and genuine political resolve, minorities in Pakistan continue to face entrenched challenges (Malik, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2021; Yousaf, 2024).

Minority Voices and Civil Society Activism

Minority voices and civil society activism in Pakistan from 2018 to 2024 played a crucial role in resisting systemic discrimination and advocating for social justice. Minority leaders and activists used both traditional platforms and digital media to raise awareness about forced conversions, misuse of blasphemy laws, and unequal socio-economic opportunities. Civil society organizations such as the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) consistently documented human rights violations against Hindus, Christians, Ahmadis, and Sikhs, amplifying minority concerns at national and international levels. Grassroots initiatives by minority groups also focused on education, legal aid, and community mobilization, especially in marginalized regions like Sindh and southern Punjab. Social media activism gained momentum during this period, with campaigns highlighting incidents of mob violence, attacks on temples, and the plight of minority women. Minority parliamentarians, though limited in number, contributed by voicing concerns in assemblies, advocating for reforms, and pressing for accountability. These voices often encountered backlash from conservative segments, but their resilience underscored the determination of minorities to claim their rights as equal citizens. Thus, civil society activism became a vital counterbalance to state inaction, ensuring minority struggles remained part of the national discourse (HRCP, 2020; Saeed, 2021; Yousaf, 2023).

Despite structural limitations, civil society activism contributed to building resilience within minority communities and promoting interfaith harmony. Local NGOs and faith-based organizations often initiated projects to restore minority places of worship,

provide scholarships for minority youth, and create safe spaces for women vulnerable to gendered violence. One prominent example was the interfaith dialogues and harmony programs organized in Punjab and Sindh, which sought to reduce communal mistrust and foster cooperation. The role of Sikh activists in promoting the Kartarpur Corridor, and Hindu women's organizations campaigning against child marriages and forced conversions, highlighted the agency of minority groups in shaping policy debates. International collaborations also amplified these efforts, with advocacy groups engaging with UN bodies and foreign missions to highlight systemic discrimination. However, activists faced intimidation, threats, and surveillance, which limited their capacity to operate freely. Despite these obstacles, minority voices consistently demonstrated resilience, transforming their marginal position into a platform for resistance and advocacy. Their persistent efforts reflect a broader struggle for equal citizenship, democratic accountability, and protection of human rights in Pakistan (Baloch, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2021; Shaikh, 2024).

Comparative Perspective and Lessons for Pakistan

A comparative perspective on minority rights reveals that while Pakistan has constitutional safeguards, its implementation lags behind both regional and global models. In South Asia, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka have also struggled with communal tensions, but some of their policy approaches provide lessons for Pakistan. For instance, India's constitutional system guarantees secular principles and affirmative action for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, though communal violence remains a persistent challenge. Bangladesh, despite being a Muslim-majority state, has implemented measures to protect Hindu and Buddhist minorities, particularly in political representation. Sri Lanka, after decades of ethnic conflict, has attempted reconciliation policies for Tamils, showing how institutional reforms can reduce marginalization. In contrast, Pakistan's reliance on symbolic rather than structural reforms has left minorities vulnerable to systemic discrimination. Learning from these regional contexts, Pakistan could adopt stronger enforcement mechanisms, genuine political representation through direct elections, and effective affirmative action policies. Such approaches could bridge the gap between constitutional promises and societal realities by creating a more inclusive framework for minorities (Chakrabarty, 2020; Jayasuriya, 2021; Yousaf, 2023).

Global models of minority protection also offer valuable insights for Pakistan's policy and institutional reform. Countries such as Canada and South Africa have developed strong multicultural policies, ensuring legal equality, affirmative action, and robust mechanisms for minority representation. Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms emphasizes equal citizenship regardless of religion or ethnicity, while its multicultural framework fosters inclusion through education and cultural recognition. Similarly, South Africa's post-apartheid constitution has set a precedent by embedding minority protections, combating systemic discrimination, and creating independent institutions to enforce equality. The United Kingdom also provides lessons through its Human Rights Act and anti-discrimination laws, which create enforceable safeguards against religious and ethnic prejudice. Unlike Pakistan, these countries empower independent commissions and legal bodies to investigate violations and provide remedies, reducing the gap between policy and practice. For Pakistan, adopting such global best practices means strengthening its National Commission for Minorities, reforming

discriminatory laws, and ensuring judicial independence to protect vulnerable communities. Drawing from these models, Pakistan can shift from symbolic initiatives to a structural approach that secures minority rights as an integral part of democratic governance (Kymlicka, 2019; Habib, 2021; Shaikh, 2024).

The Way Forward

The way forward for protecting minority rights in Pakistan requires a shift from symbolic measures to meaningful structural reforms that ensure accountability and equal citizenship. First, constitutional safeguards must be operationalized through effective enforcement mechanisms, including empowering the National Commission for Minorities with binding authority rather than advisory functions. Second, reforms to controversial laws, especially blasphemy provisions, are essential to prevent their misuse against vulnerable groups; safeguards such as independent investigations and fast-track courts could mitigate abuse. Expanding representation by allowing minorities to directly elect their assembly members would also strengthen political agency and reduce tokenism in parliamentary participation. Education reforms that promote tolerance, diversity, and interfaith harmony are equally critical, as textbooks often perpetuate stereotypes and exclusionary narratives. Furthermore, law enforcement agencies must undergo human rights training to address mob violence and hate crimes, ensuring that perpetrators are punished regardless of religious identity. These steps would create a stronger legal and institutional environment, translating constitutional promises into practical protections for minorities (HRCP, 2020; Malik, 2022; Yousaf, 2024).

Equally important in moving forward is the promotion of an inclusive national identity that values diversity as a strength rather than a threat. Civil society, religious leaders, and political parties must collaborate to foster a culture of tolerance and respect for minority communities, shifting public discourse away from majoritarian narratives. Grassroots programs focusing on interfaith dialogue, community development, and youth engagement can play a vital role in reshaping societal attitudes. On the international front, Pakistan must demonstrate genuine compliance with its obligations under UN treaties and use global best practices—such as Canada’s multiculturalism or South Africa’s post-apartheid constitutionalism—as guiding models. Economic empowerment of minority groups, through targeted scholarships, business grants, and access to employment, will also reduce structural inequalities. Moreover, safeguarding places of worship and ensuring security for minority women should remain top priorities, as they are often the most vulnerable to violence. Ultimately, the way forward lies in a holistic approach that blends legal reform, institutional strengthening, and cultural transformation to ensure minorities in Pakistan enjoy full citizenship and equal protection under the law (Khan, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2021; Shaikh, 2024).

Conclusion

The study concludes that while Pakistan’s constitutional framework contains strong commitments to protect minority rights, the practical realities between 2018 and 2024 reveal a consistent gap between promises and implementation. Government initiatives such as job quotas, reserved seats in assemblies, and the reconstitution of the National Commission for Minorities reflected a recognition of the need for inclusion, yet these

measures often remained symbolic rather than transformative. Persistent challenges such as misuse of blasphemy laws, forced conversions, mob violence, and underrepresentation in decision-making processes demonstrated the fragility of minority protections in practice. Judicial delays, weak law enforcement, and political reluctance to confront extremist narratives further reinforced this disconnect. The evidence highlights that constitutional rights alone are insufficient without robust institutional mechanisms, genuine political will, and societal acceptance of diversity. Moving forward, the protection of minority rights in Pakistan requires both structural reforms and cultural transformation. Legal safeguards must be matched with enforcement, ensuring that discriminatory practices are confronted and perpetrators held accountable. Education reforms promoting tolerance, empowerment of minority voices through direct political participation, and economic inclusion programs are essential to bridge existing inequalities. Civil society and grassroots activism, despite facing threats, continue to play a vital role in amplifying minority concerns and pushing for accountability. At the same time, Pakistan can learn from regional and global models that successfully integrate diversity into governance structures. Ultimately, achieving harmony between constitutional promises and ground realities demands not only institutional strengthening but also a redefinition of national identity that embraces pluralism as a cornerstone of democracy and stability.

Findings

Pakistan's Constitution guarantees equality, religious freedom, and non-discrimination, but implementation remains weak.

Minority communities face systemic socio-economic marginalization in education, health, and employment.

Reserved seats and job quotas exist but often serve symbolic rather than substantive inclusion.

The misuse of blasphemy laws disproportionately targets religious minorities.

Forced conversions and child marriages remain persistent challenges, especially for Hindu and Christian girls.

Mob violence and extrajudicial actions reflect the failure of law enforcement to protect minorities.

The National Commission for Minorities lacks autonomy, authority, and accountability.

Political parties rarely prioritize minority rights in their agendas beyond token gestures.

Civil society and minority activists play a critical role but face threats and intimidation.

Judicial redress for minority rights violations is slow, inconsistent, and vulnerable to societal pressures.

Positive steps such as the Kartarpur Corridor improved Pakistan's global image but had limited domestic impact.

International organizations consistently highlight Pakistan's gaps in minority protection.

Regional comparisons show Pakistan lags behind in ensuring pluralism and institutional safeguards.

Extremist narratives and religious intolerance remain deeply entrenched in politics and society.

Without political will and institutional reform, constitutional promises will remain aspirational.

Discussion

Discussion of these findings suggests that the structural weaknesses of Pakistan's governance system, coupled with religious extremism and political expediency, have limited the state's capacity to protect minority rights. Blasphemy laws, though framed under the guise of protecting religious sentiments, were disproportionately misused against minorities, often leading to mob violence and judicial paralysis. Civil society activism, though vibrant, remained constrained by threats, state pressures, and societal hostility. At the same time, positive developments such as the Kartarpur Corridor initiative and increased global scrutiny provided symbolic hope but failed to address the deeper institutional and cultural barriers minorities face. These findings highlight the need for comprehensive reforms: stronger enforcement of constitutional provisions, depoliticization of religion in governance, empowerment of minority voices in policymaking, and adoption of regional and global best practices for pluralism. Without such steps, constitutional promises will remain aspirational, unable to transform the lived realities of Pakistan's minority citizens.

Recommendations

Strengthen institutional enforcement of constitutional safeguards for minorities through independent monitoring bodies.

Reform blasphemy laws to prevent misuse and ensure due process protections.

Expand political representation of minorities beyond reserved seats to foster inclusive governance.

Introduce educational reforms that promote religious tolerance and pluralism at all levels.

Ensure equitable access of minority communities to employment, housing, and social services.

Empower minority women through targeted social and economic inclusion programs.

Strengthen judicial capacity to address cases of religious discrimination and violence swiftly.

Collaborate with civil society to promote interfaith harmony and counter extremist narratives.

Adopt best practices from regional and global models for minority protection.

Build political consensus to depoliticize religion and prioritize pluralism in state policy.

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