



# Attacks on religious minorities' sites of worship in Gujranwala and Wazirabad

An HRCP fact-finding report (January 2023)

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## Introduction

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has observed a worrying upsurge in the persecution of members of the Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya in Punjab during 2022. This has included the desecration of Ahmadi graves, the destruction of minarets at Ahmadi sites of worship, first information reports (FIRs) filed against community members for carrying out ritual animal sacrifice on Eid, the forcible removal of Quranic verses from houses belonging to members of the community, and even wanton faith-based murders. Punjab—and especially Gujranwala and its surrounding locales—appears to account for the bulk of reported attacks. More alarming is the allegation that such acts have been carried out at the behest of police and civil administration officials.

On 12 December 2022, the district administration removed the minarets atop an Ahmadiyya *bait-ul-zikr* [place of worship] in Gujranwala's Baghbanpura area, after receiving complaints from local religious outfits.<sup>1</sup> Most recently, on 11 January 2023, in a similar incident in neighbouring Wazirabad, police officials destroyed the minarets of a *bait-ul-zikr*.<sup>2</sup> Earlier, in July 2022, a few days before Eid-ul-Azha, police officials—accompanied by two local residents—desecrated 53 graves of members of the Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya in Talwandi Khajoorwali—the fourth such incident in the city in that year alone (see Appendix 1).<sup>3</sup> (Subsequent to the mission, another instance of the desecration of graves was reported in Talwandi Khajoorwali on 12 February 2023).

In light of these incidents and complaints registered by the local Ahmadiyya community with HRCP, the organization felt it necessary to conduct a fact-finding mission to ascertain the circumstances. The mission comprised HRCP Punjab vice-chair Raja Ashraf, journalist Fatima Razzaq, HRCP staff member Zarnaab Adil Janjua and HRCP members Tahir Bashir and Rubina Ghazal, and was carried out in Gujranwala and Wazirabad on 31 January 2023.

## Mission's terms of reference

The mission's terms of reference were to:

- Investigate the prevalent persecution of members of the Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya in Gujranwala and Wazirabad and surrounding villages and assess the degree to which their fundamental rights are being violated, with a special focus on (a) demolition of Ahmadiyya places of worship, (b) desecration of Ahmadiyya graves in the area, (c) harassment of members of the Ahmadiyya community, or FIRs registered against them, for carrying out religious rites such as ritual animal sacrifice on Eid-ul-Azha, and (d) physical attacks on members of the Jamaat.
- Assess the civil administration's response to the persecution and ascertain the degree to which officials themselves might be responsible for this maltreatment.

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<sup>1</sup> W. A. Butt. (2022, December 12). Minaret of Ahmadi place of worship removed in Gujranwala. *Dawn*. Retrieved 2 February 2023, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1725918/minaret-of-ahmadi-place-of-worship-removed-in-gujranwala>

<sup>2</sup> M. Shehzad. (2023, January 11). Police accused of 'desecration' of Ahmadi worship place. *The Express Tribune*. Retrieved 2 February 2023, from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2395315/police-accused-of-desecration-of-ahmadi-worship-place-in-wazirabad>

<sup>3</sup> Police allegedly desecrate 53 Ahmadi graves in Gujranwala days before Eid. (2022, July 8). *The Friday Times – Naya Daur*. Retrieved 2 February 2023, from <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/2022/07/08/police-allegedly-desecrate-53-ahmadi-graves-in-gujranwala-days-before-eid/>



- Assess the sociopolitical reasons that have led to growing animus towards members of the Jamaat.
- Understand if any legal recourse has been taken by the community itself.

### Fact-finding exercise

#### *Meeting with Assistant Commissioner (City), Gujranwala*

After reaching Gujranwala on 31 January at 9:30 AM, the team proceeded to the deputy commissioner's office on Sialkot Road where the first meeting was held with the city assistant commissioner. He provided the mission with a one-page brief, outlining the civil administration's position on the demolition of minarets in the Baghbanpura area. He explained that local Bareilvi and Deobandi religious leaders and members of the political party Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) had objected to the use of minarets on the bait-ul-zikr about a year ago. The AC told the mission that these parties had insisted that minarets were a distinguishing feature of mosques and that Ahmadis were 'constitutionally' forbidden from constructing them [HRCP notes that there is no such constitutional restriction]. He went on to explain that the matter was taken up with the District Intelligence Committee and Aman Committees.<sup>4</sup> He said that the latter has representation from different sects and religions, including members of the Ahmadiyya community. In order to appease the complainants, the district administration and both committees decided to cover the minarets with an approximately four-foot-wide steel sheet in October 2022.

He said that, towards the end of November 2022, the local TLP leadership once again threatened to initiate violent protests and destroy property belonging to members of the Jamaat if the minarets were not destroyed immediately. The AC explained that the decision to remove the minarets was taken only to prevent a serious deterioration of law and order; the local administration decided to demolish the minarets in early December. He said that, in the days leading up to the decision, the TLP would bring mobs to the district administration offices to pressure officials and admitted that, in earlier cases involving the Ahmadiyya community, certain officers had been negligent.

He claimed that the local Ahmadiyya community had been apprised of this decision and acquiesced to the destruction of the minarets. In light of this apparent agreement, he bemoaned the fact that a video of the demolition had been uploaded on social media and was being used to 'ignite religious sentiment'.

In conclusion, he added that, in his experience, Gujranwala had been remarkably peaceful, with considerable sectarian harmony, but the rise of extremist religious groups in recent years had aggravated anti-Ahmadiyya persecution.

#### *Meeting with Additional Deputy Commissioner Gujranwala (General)*

The mission then proceeded to the office of the additional deputy commissioner (ADC) where the assistant commissioner (Saddar) was also present. The ADC began by stating that he was ashamed of what he had been compelled to do, but with the threat of potentially fatal violence looming over their heads, the local administration had been left little choice. In his opinion, the decision to demolish the minarets prevented members of the Jamaat from being left to the mob's mercy. He asserted that the rise of the TLP was a result of the government's vulnerability to mob rule, with the government serving as a functionary of political parties rather than of the state. Responding to a question about the decision-making process, he said that Ordinance XX of 1984 and constitutional provisions provided the complainants with legal grounds for their demands. He said that, in neighbouring districts with similar cases, the civil administration had decided to demolish such minarets, setting a precedent for doing so. He revealed that the Baghbanpura bait-ul-zikr and the one in Wazirabad had existed for almost a century with no objections raised, but the TLP had weaponised this subject for sociopolitical clout. He reiterated that the local Ahmadiyya community had agreed to the

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<sup>4</sup> District Aman [Peace] Committees have historically been constituted in some districts in Punjab under the purview of community policing. They are composed of representatives from different sects and religious minorities to deliberate on certain security issues as deemed appropriate by the district administration and regional/city policy offices.



demolition and that the decision had been taken to avoid a wave of organised agitation against the community.

#### *Meeting with the SSP Investigation Gujranwala*

From the deputy commissioner's office, the team proceeded to the Central Police Office to meet the senior superintendent of police (SSP). He said that he was not involved with cases dealing with the Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya and had little knowledge of the situation. A police staff member present added that the earlier brief the team had received from the AC represented the official stance of all civil administration officials and the matter merited little further discussion. The SSP explained that he was not aware of the specifics of the situation, but he was certain that all parties must have been brought on board and any decision taken would have been to preserve law and order. He outlined the composition of the District Intelligence Committee and explained that it included representatives from all major intelligence and security agencies [HRCP notes that, under the Punjab Vigilance Committees Act 2016, such committees should include the CPO/RPO, district coordinator, Intelligence Bureau representative, Special Branch representative and local provincial assembly member.<sup>5</sup>]

#### *Meeting with the local Ahmadiyya community and visit to Baghbanpura bait-ul-zikr*

The team met five members of the Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya outside the deputy commissioner's office and were led to the bait-ul-zikr in Baghbanpura where minarets had been demolished in December 2022 (see Appendix 2). On reaching the site, the team met the *amir* [leader] of the Jamaat for Gujranwala and other members of the community and were shown the razed minarets up close. One of the members explained that the bait-ul-zikr had existed since 1911 and not one objection had been raised since then. He said that, prior to the TLP's political rise at a national level, members of the Ahmadiyya community had coexisted peacefully with other groups in the neighbourhood.

Responding to a question about the district administration's assertion that the Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya had been on board with the demolition, a lawyer from the community disagreed. He told the mission that, on three separate occasions, the police and the district administration had told the community that they should remove the minarets themselves, which they had refused to do. Subsequently a team of plainclothes policemen came to the site with a crane at 1:55 AM on 11 January 2023 and destroyed the minarets.

#### *Visit to Bait-ul-Afiyat*

The team then reached a local community and learning centre for the Jamaat, the Bait-ul-Afiyat, where it was given a comprehensive presentation examining the reasons for the anti-Ahmadiyya laws passed in 1974 and 1984 and arguments for why these were unconstitutional; the team was also provided a list of instances of persecution that had taken place over the years. A local community leader explained that the aforementioned laws violated Articles 20 and 22 of the Constitution. He said that, with their very existence criminalised, participating in public life was next to impossible but practising their faith in private had now also become unthinkable. He cited a judgement penned by Justice Syed Mansoor Ali Shah in 2022, under which there is no bar on Ahmadis from professing and practising their religion privately; despite this, they were not free to do so in their own homes.<sup>6</sup>

He gave the team a detailed list of instances of abuse that the Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya had had to endure. Apart from the events mentioned above, this included the desecration of graves in Talwandi Moosa Khan near Gujranwala for having Quranic verses inscribed on the tombstones, the forcible removal of Quranic verses from a bait-ul-zikr and houses in Gajju Chak, Rahwali and Garmula Virkan, and the registration of FIRs against Ahmadis in Kot Mirza Jan and Qiampur Virkan for carrying out ritual animal sacrifice. He also shared photos of anti-Ahmadiyya literature, including pamphlets and posters that had been distributed in the city

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<sup>5</sup> Government of the Punjab. (2016). *The Punjab Vigilance Committees Act, 2016 (Act XXVIII of 2016)*. Retrieved 13 February 2023, from <http://punjablaws.gov.pk/laws/2646.html>

<sup>6</sup> Supreme Court judgement for Criminal Petition 916-L/2021.



recently. A detailed document shared with the team also contained photos of each of these instances and copies of relevant court orders and FIRs.<sup>7</sup>

When questioned about the legal recourse adopted by the community, the lawyer responded that six Ahmadi family members in Gujranwala had been killed in an arson attack in 2014. In the resulting investigation, the names of the main accused were removed from the FIR after the local authorities were pressured by Bareilvi religious leaders. Elaborating on their scarce legal options and strategy, the lawyer commented that going to the courts was futile because, regardless of the decision, airing their grievances in public would lead to stronger, more organised opposition to the Jamaat. The team was also told that, in hearings for cases registered against members of the Jamaat, TLP members were wont to crowd the courtroom at the Gujranwala Sessions Court, chanting anti-Ahmadiyya slogans, openly threatening judges and their lawyers and trying to prevent them from being heard or approaching the bench.

The Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya member explained to the mission that the civil administration registers complaints against the community readily, fearing violent retaliation by the TLP. On the District Aman Committee, a Jamaat member commented that the Jamaat had no representation there since other members were outspoken in their opposition to the Jamaat and one of its members had publicly declared its members *wajib-ul-qatl* [condemned to death]. With protests out of the question, the team was told that the police would incessantly pressure members of the Jamaat to avoid agitating on social media and attempt to coerce them into recording statements explicitly agreeing with the plan to demolish minarets at their sites of worship.

#### *Visit to Rahwali*

En route to Wazirabad, the mission stopped to meet an Ahmadi man who had been booked in an FIR in 2022 for sacrificing a goat in the vicinity of his home in Rahwali. He said that a TLP member from three villages away had registered the complaint after seeing him bring the animals home. The man, currently out on bail, explained that, immediately after the complaint was registered, the police took his other two goats away and even tried to include his six children in the FIR. With charges yet to be framed, he said that he had lived peacefully in the neighbourhood for the past four decades.

#### *Visit to Bait-ul-Zikr in Moti Bazaar, Wazirabad*

The team visited the bait-ul-zikr in Wazirabad where its minarets had been destroyed a few weeks ago and were taken to the roof to see the destruction up close. A local member of the Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya explained how the local station house officer (SHO) had repeatedly asked for the Jamaat itself to demolish the minarets, but they would not budge. He then explained that TLP members had managed 'to secure a court order calling for the demolition' which they used to strongarm local police. A few weeks later, on 11 January 2023, he claimed that plainclothes policemen had climbed up to the bait-ul-zikr's roof and destroyed the minarets; the incident had been recorded by security cameras. He explained that a local TLP leader had become increasingly influential in recent years. He also showed the team some posters that had been put up congratulating the TLP leader on having the minarets removed. The TLP leader in question had managed to register FIRs against local Ahmadis, which the Jamaat had been unable to have quashed in court because the judge had seemingly succumbed to pressure by a large mob of TLP members.

The Jamaat member commented that he and other members of the community were constantly followed and harassed; he could not even take his children to school in peace. He said they survived only through the benevolence of Jamaat members that had migrated abroad. Several members expressed serious reservations about former chief minister Pervez Elahi's anti-Ahmadiyya rhetoric and the inclusion of an 'anti-Ahmadiyya' clause in marriage certificates in Punjab. He said that the community feared they would next be denied area to bury their dead: a graveyard built on ancestral land owned by the community had already been seized from them and similar events were taking place in surrounding areas. Other members explained how NADRA created obstacles when they tried to obtain computerised national identity cards (CNICs).

In an ideal world, said the amir of the Jamaat, anti-Ahmadiyya laws should be repealed. He said that the Jamaat's representatives had met privately with many influential politicians, policymakers, intelligentsia and

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<sup>7</sup> Lodged under Section 289-C of the Pakistan Penal Code.



bureaucrats, all of whom were sympathetic to their cause but none of whom were willing to take a stand for them, lest their safety be compromised. He reiterated the futility of going to the courts, saying it was something that their senior leaders had forbidden. In the immediate term, he remarked that action against the extremist religious group orchestrating a campaign against them (the TLP) was necessary to quell the relentless persecution they faced.

## Conclusion

This fact-finding exercise makes it clear that the persecution of members of the Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya has escalated in recent months. Having taken stock of the situation and spoken to most of the parties concerned, HRCP's mission concludes that such incidents—the desecration of Ahmadi graves, the destruction of their sites of worship and FIRs lodged for carrying out ritual animal sacrifice on Eid—have been happening consistently in Gujranwala and surrounding districts. These constitute grave violations of the fundamental rights of Ahmadiyya citizens.

One of the mission's terms of reference was to assess the civil administration's response to the persecution. In their interviews with the mission, the civil administration admitted to having been directly involved in such acts. They claimed to have done so in view of the looming threat of mob violence, but the way the civil administration has handled the matter has only fostered growing hostility towards the Ahmadiyya community. This has increased the vulnerability of Ahmadi residents in the area.

The mission was told by the district administration that the Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya was part of the District Aman Committee but the Jamaat has denied this claim. Regrettably, despite all attempts to obtain the District Aman Committee's views on the issue, none of its members were available for comment.

What worries the mission is the district administration's view that some legal and constitutional provisions provide room for persecution of this kind. While the mission understands that the local bureaucracy, police and judiciary were successfully intimidated by a religious group, their response displays a pitiful inability to manage law and order while respecting the fundamental rights of the Ahmadiyya community.

These incidents and ensuing actions directly contravene the Supreme Court judgment handed down by Chief Justice Tasadduq Hussain Jilani in 2014, which called for a specially trained, professional police force to protect religious minorities' sites of worship. Moreover, the destruction of minarets is also a violation of Article 20(b) of the Constitution, under which every religious denomination or sect has the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions. A 2022 Supreme Court judgement by Justice Syed Mansoor Ali Shah also states clearly that there is no bar on Ahmadis professing and practising their faith in private or that doing so is repugnant to the spirit of the Constitution.

## Recommendations

The mission would like to make the following recommendations for the short, medium and long terms.

1. The government must ensure that the civil administration provides ample security to Ahmadi graveyards, places of worship and community centres, in accordance with the constitutional freedoms to which they are entitled.
2. The government must enhance the police's capacity to deal with the threat of mob violence in such situations through proper infrastructure and training. Under no circumstances should a mob be allowed to take the law into its own hands. This would also prevent the police from registering frivolous FIRs with no legal grounds.
3. The government must ensure that the civil administration—including the police—is well-versed in laws and constitutional safeguards for religious minorities, and that both adopt a progressive, rights-centric outlook in carrying out their duties. This should be part of their training.
4. The government must take concrete measures to implement the 2014 Supreme Court judgement, which envisages a specially trained police force to protect religious minorities' sites of worship and places of religious significance.



5. Local law enforcement must take the requisite legal action against members of groups involved in harassing members of the Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya.
6. Local police should ensure that members of the Jamaat are able to profess and practise their faith freely in private, as outlined in the Supreme Court judgement for Criminal Petition 916-L/2021.
7. The police should ensure that members of the Jamaat are able to participate in court proceedings unhindered and ensure their safety on the premises of the court.
8. District government officials should include members of the Jamaat in the District Aman Committee.
9. The federal government should ensure that the Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya is represented on the National Commission for Minorities.
10. NADRA should ensure that members of the Jamaat can easily apply for and receive CNICs.



## **Appendix 1: Timeline of recent instances of persecution of members of the Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya**

8 July 2022, Gujranwala: Police allegedly desecrated 53 Ahmadi graves days before Eid.

13 July 2022, Safdarabad: Police arrested members of the Jamaat and filed FIRs against them for sacrificing animals on Eid-ul-Azha.

13 July 2022, Toba Tek Singh: Cases filed against five Ahmadis for sacrificing animals on Eid.

1 August 2022, Khushab: PML-Q leader Malik Ilyas Awan wrote to the deputy commissioner of Khushab requesting him to withdraw the security detail provided to Ahmadi residents of the region and also called for them to be forcibly evicted.

12 August 2022, Chenabnagar: A 60-year-old Ahmadi man was stabbed to death after being forced to raise slogans in praise of former TLP chief Khadim Hussain Rizvi.

24 August 2022, Faisalabad: Unidentified miscreants desecrated 16 Ahmadiyya graves.

23 September 2022, Attock: A local school expelled three students allegedly on the grounds that they were Ahmadi.

12 December 2022, Gujranwala: The minarets of an Ahmadi bait-ul-zikr in Baghbanpura (Gujranwala) were removed.

11 January 2023, Wazirabad: Police destroyed the minarets of an Ahmadi bait-ul-zikr in Moti Bazar in Wazirabad.

3 February 2023, Karachi: Miscreants from the TLP destroyed the minarets of an Ahmadi bait-ul-zikr in Saddar (Gujranwala).

## Appendix 2: Photographs of demolished minarets in Gujranwala and Wazirabad

The images in this appendix were taken by members of the fact-finding mission.



*Demolished minarets at an Ahmadiyya site of worship in Baghbanpura, Gujranwala*





*Demolished minarets at an Ahmadiyya site of worship in Moti Bazaar, Wazirabad*



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