

OHCHR Report on Disinformation

Ahmadiyya Muslim Lawyers Association USA Submission

Ms. Irene Khan, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression:

Preliminary Statement

This report highlights a toxic feedback loop of disinformation in which false information is used to underpin laws and regulations persecuting a religious community, in turn creating a fertile environment for extremists to amplify the spread of lies that endanger life and liberty. The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community is among the most vulnerable and persecuted religious minorities in the world. In particular, Pakistan's treatment of its Ahmadi Muslim citizens stands in direct contravention to its International Human Rights obligations.¹ Ahmadi Muslims, along with other religious minorities, are routinely the subject of false allegations. These include fabricated blasphemy charges, unfounded assertions that Ahmadi Muslims are agents of foreign powers and that, notwithstanding its entirely peaceful teachings and practices, the Community represents a danger to Pakistan.

The country's government, rather than taking action to counter the systematic campaign of disinformation against Ahmadi Muslims, has leveraged the falsehoods to legally excommunicate Ahmadis from the fold of Islam (by constitutional amendment in 1974), proscribe wholesale community members' practice of their chosen faith (by passing Ordinance XX in 1984), and to continuously fashion new and ever more pernicious tools of persecution against Ahmadi Muslims.² For example, in 2018 Justice Shaukat Aziz of the Islamabad High Court, called for the targeting and persecution of Ahmadis to be much more extensive, so that Ahmadis could no longer "hide" as Muslims anywhere, especially in public services.³ These judicial opinions are yet another form of disinformation, spreading lies and hatred against the vulnerable community ultimately begetting greater persecution. In Pakistan, neither the laws nor the authorities offer any hope of respite, instead they are ratcheting up the persecution.

The ban on the Community's publications is a case in point. Even though the founder of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad unequivocally condemned all forms of religious violence and specifically enjoined that violent jihad was forbidden for Muslims going forward, Ahmad's books have been banned across Pakistan under anti-terrorism legislation.

¹ OHCHR | *Pakistan must repeal discriminatory measures leading to persecution of Ahmadis, say UN experts*. (2018, July 25). OHCHR.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23401&LangID=E>

² See generally, All Party Parliamentary Group. (2020, July). *Suffocation of the Faithful: The persecution of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan and the rise of international extremism*. APPG.

<https://appg-ahmadiyyamuslim.org.uk/report/#REPORT>

³ Sayeed, S. (2018, March 9). *In blow to minorities, Pakistani court orders citizens to declare religion*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-pakistan-religion-law-idUKKCN1GL28P>

Ahmadi Muslims are now routinely arrested and charged solely because they are caught possessing copies of books written by their community's founder. For example, In May of 2020, Rohan Ahmad, an Ahmadiyya Missionary, was arrested on the accusation that he possessed Ahmadiyya literature. He was charged under 298-C and 295-B, PPC & 11 of Electronic Crimes Act. Along with him, several other senior officials working at the Ahmadiyya Headquarters in Rabwah were named in the FIR. The Missionary, Rohan Ahmad, remains in jail in Lahore.⁴

In recent months, both the Pakistani government and extremist elements have attempted to extend the reach of their persecution of Ahmadi Muslims through disinformation beyond Pakistan's borders. In mid-December 2020, trolls in Pakistan launched a coordinated hate and disinformation campaign against the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community which has resulted in the uptake of hate crimes and murders of members of the already vulnerable minority group. On the heels of the troll campaign, the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority began issuing notices to overseas individuals and entities--including Google, Wikipedia, and Ahmadi Muslims in the United States and other countries--demanding the takedown of websites and apps affiliated with the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. The Pakistani justice system, far from pushing back against this disinformation-driven persecution, instead demanded that authorities take swift action against overseas actors who are engaging in purportedly "blasphemous" activities.⁵

1. Troll Farm Led Hate and Disinformation Campaign Against the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community

In December 2020, a massive and sophisticated hate campaign was organized by trolls in Pakistan aimed to exploit U.S. technology companies to further expand Pakistan's persecution of a vulnerable religious community. Between December 14-15, 2020, trolls in Pakistan infiltrated YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok and coordinated the upload of over 1,000 videos instructing viewers about how to alter Google's search results related to the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community.

Numerous reports have chronicled the rapid rise of troll disinformation campaigns in Pakistan that have targeted journalists, dissidents and progressive movements. Last August, minority rights leaders cited a significant rise in online sectarian attacks and hate speech in Pakistan. The Associated Press reported that in a single day, nearly 200,000 hate-filled tweets appeared

⁴ *Muslims in Pakistan: Religious persecution and merciless torture of Ahmadiyya* | IIRF. (2020, October 8). International Institute for Religious Freedom. <https://www.iirf.eu/news/other-news/muslims-in-pakistan-religious-persecution-and-merciless-torture-of-ahmadiyya/>

⁵ *PTA chairman summoned: LHC CJ voices concern over blasphemous material on internet*. (2020, December 22). The News International. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/762566-pta-chairman-summoned-lhc-cj-voices-concern-over-blasphemous-material-on-internet>

directed at Ahmadi Muslims.⁶ Although there is no agreed universal definition of disinformation, it is commonly understood to be false information that is created and spread, deliberately or otherwise, to harm people, institutions and interests. Here, the disinformation campaign was intended to increase hatred against a vulnerable religious minority & undermine human rights. To that end, the disinformation campaign has been successful and has led to the targeted killings of several Ahmadi Muslims.

Recommendations

We request that the Special Rapporteur shed light on these events and highlight the plight of this vulnerable community.

Last September, Facebook announced it had shut down extensive troll activity in Pakistan, but other social media companies have not yet followed suit. In fact, instead of going after the trolls, Google has elected to comply with patently discriminatory legal notices from Pakistan Telecommunication Authority to censor all Ahmadi digital content.

We further request that the Special Rapporteur call on Google and Twitter to investigate this mass disinformation campaign perpetrated on their platforms.

2. Censorship of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community's digital content and targeting of US citizens

On December 25, 2020, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (“PTA”) issued takedown notices to Google and Wikipedia to remove content associated with the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community.⁷ More specifically, the PTA, citing the controversial Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content Rules 2020 (“Unlawful Online Content Rules”), required Wikipedia to remove articles portraying the head of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, His holiness Mirza Masroor Ahmad, as a Muslim. The PTA also required Google to remove a Google play app published by the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, which provides Arabic and English translations of the Qur’an. Unfortunately, Google has succumbed to this pressure and has removed all apps owned by the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community from its Google play app.⁸ This is a clear overreach from the PTA and yet another means to censor the minority community. Members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community can not access digital content in clear violation

⁶ Gannon, K. (2020, August 27). *Trolls flood social media in Pakistan amid virus lockdown*. AP NEWS. <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-ap-top-news-religion-music-middle-east-1daafaf0f6775813361081d3cb1f8257>

⁷ Hussain, J. (2020, December 25). *PTA issues notices to Google, Wikipedia for 'disseminating sacrilegious content'* DAWN.COM. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1597761>

⁸ Rajagopalan, M. (2021, February 7). *Pakistan Forced Down Apps Made By A Persecuted Religious Minority*. BuzzFeed News. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/meghara/pakistan-forced-down-ahmadiyya-apps>

of their right to freedom of opinion and expression.⁹

Further, on December 24, 2020 the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority's ("PTA") sent a legal notice to Amjad Mahmood Khan and Harris Zafar, two U.S. citizens who are alleged to operate the website.¹⁰ The Notice required the two Americans to remove all content from the www.trueislam.com website within a mere 24 hours of receipt of the Notice as is violated Pakistan's draconian blasphemy laws. The PTA also threatened penalties under Pakistan's Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 and the Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content Rule 2020, which include harsh criminal sanctions and fines of up to 500 million rupees (\$3.1M USD) if www.trueislam.com does not comply.

Pakistan's targeting of this digital content and US Citizens is in clear violation of Article 18, 19, and 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Pakistan has acceded. Furthermore, these blasphemy and censorship laws have been roundly condemned by human rights experts and nations around the world including the UN Human Rights Council.

Recommendations

We request that the Special Rapporteur shed light on these events and highlight the plight of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. Pakistan's blasphemy laws, further strengthened by additional legislation such as Pakistan's Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 and the Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content Rule 2020, are in direct contravention to its International Human Rights obligations. Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan account for almost 40% of all arrests under Pakistan's anti-blasphemy laws. Over 4,000 Ahmadi Muslims have faced criminal charges for simply practicing their Islamic faith.

We further request that the Special Rapporteur call on international tech companies, including Google, Apple and Twitter, to stop the censorship of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community's digital content thereby contributing to the persecution of a vulnerable minority group.

**This report has been submitted by the Ahmadiyya Muslim Lawyers Association, USA.
Please direct any comments or inquiries to amjad.khan@ahmadiyya.us**

⁹ *Pakistan: Persecution of Ahmadis must end as authorities attempt shutdown of US website.* (2021, February 3). Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/02/pakistan-persecution-of-ahmadis-must-end-as-authorities-attempt-shutdown-of-us-website/>

¹⁰ Quinn, J. (2021, February 2). *Pakistan's Disturbing Digital Threat to Americans.* National Review. <https://www.nationalreview.com/2021/02/pakistans-disturbing-digital-threat-to-americans/>