

BLASPHEMY, POWER, AND RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE IN PAKISTAN (2005–2011): A GRAMSCIAN ANALYSIS OF STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

Hammad Ahmad¹ Nawira Khawar², Saba Batool³, Saljuk Zafar⁴

^{1,2,3,4}, Bachelor of “Public Administration”,

Department of Government & Public Policy, School of Social Sciences and Humanities,
National University of Sciences & Technology (NUST), Islamabad, Pakistan.

Corresponding Author: Email: hafiz.m.hammadahmad@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates the recent surge in religious intolerance in Pakistan, focusing specifically on blasphemy-related violence from 2005 to 2011. Drawing on five in-depth interviews with academics, activists, and civil society experts, it uses thematic analysis to identify key drivers behind the phenomenon. The findings point to a confluence of factors, including colonial-era legal legacies, socioeconomic inequality, politicisation of religion, and the strategic use of blasphemy laws by extremist groups and state actors alike. Accusations of blasphemy are often weaponized to settle personal disputes or suppress dissent, and the resulting violence is normalized by media narratives and hegemonic educational discourse. Guided by historical materialism and Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, the study shows how structural conditions (laws, class dynamics, and state policy) have produced a dominant religious ideology that justifies intolerance. Elites manipulate this ideology to maintain control, redirect grievances, and avoid accountability. The research concludes with policy suggestions including legal reform, stronger protection against false accusations, educational curriculum changes, and a political shift away from appeasing extremist actors. Although constrained by a small sample size and the topic's sensitivity, the study contributes critical insight into the systemic roots of religious violence in Pakistan.

Keywords: Religious Intolerance, blasphemy-related violence, colonial-era legal legacies, socioeconomic inequality, politicisation of religion.

Introduction

Religious Intolerance

Pakistan has seen a significant rise in religious intolerance in recent times (Khan et al., 2023). Religious intolerance has taken many physical shapes. There is an increase in discrimination against sectarian and religious minorities (*Ahmadi and Christian Socio-Political Responses to Pakistan's Blasphemy Laws*, n.d.). Pakistan has also seen a rise in far-right political parties and their institutional support). One major manifestation of religious intolerance is the rise in blasphemy-related incidents.

Blasphemy-Related Incidents

Any incident that involves the use of blasphemy as a justification for violence, mob incitement, mob justice, extrajudicial murder, legal cases, etc is considered a blasphemy-related incident.

Blasphemy-Related Incidents as a Case Study for the Rise in Religious Intolerance:

Blasphemy-related incidents are an important indicator of the rise in religious intolerance. These incidents have seen a significant rise since the inception of the Pakistani state. The rise of blasphemy accusations in Pakistan can be divided into three periods, before 1986, 1986 to 2010, 2011-2024. Before 1986, despite several religious and anti-Ahmadi riots, incidents of blasphemy-related violence were not reported more than 4 times. During the 1986 to 2010 period, the graph shows a rise in the accusations of blasphemy, with a total of 114 cases. However, after 2011, the number of people accused of blasphemy rose exponentially (Dawood, 2022).

On September 26, 2024, The New York Times published an article, titled: “*First It Was Lynch Mobs. Now Police Kill Pakistanis Accused of Blasphemy.*” The article was written in the

context of the extra-judicial murder of Dr Shahnawaz in Umerkot, Sindh, who was accused of blasphemy (gustakhi e Rasool) and was killed in a fake encounter by the police. Pakistan has witnessed a sharp rise in the specific type of violence that emerges after someone is accused of blasphemy. By 2021, at least 89 people were murdered by mobs or individuals, without trial after they were accused of blasphemy (Akhtar, 2022). In 2024, multiple cases of mob lynching and extra-judicial killings of people accused of blasphemy have been reported (Brecorder, 2024; Rehman, 2024).

This study examines this support of blasphemy violence by the masses and by the institutions and tries to find out the factors that have led to a sharp rise in the incidents of violence motivated by religion in recent years. This demands a deeper examination of the root cause of this increased occurrence of violent incidents due to accusations of blasphemy and the increasing tolerance of intolerance by the state.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Colonialism was not merely an economic and territorial affliction; it permanently altered the political, social and cultural fabric of the states it victimized. The sudden collapse of colonial rule in the 20th century left behind fractured identities, weak state institutions and disrupted political frameworks, compelling many post-colonial states to seek coherence through radical and extremist ideologies. In this regard, Ziltener and Künzler (2013) note, “colonial interventions destroyed existing state structures and identities, resulting in long-term political instability and heightened likelihood of conflict and radicalization” (p. 291). Scholars like Fanon (1963) observe that violence is both a by-product and a response to the dehumanization experienced by the colonized states. In numerous countries, this took the form of religious extremism, ethnic cleansing, autocratic regimes and militant insurgencies- each propelled by the type of colonial trauma they inherited.

Pakistan presents a lucid case of post-colonial inheritance of extremism. The Muslim League’s demand for a separate homeland was not rooted in a realistic state plan but in an emotive mass mobilization based on religious otherization (1945-1947). Ishtiaq Ahmed, et al, (2022) directly ties this to contemporary mob violence in Pakistan, arguing that the culture of religious vigilantism “originated in Jinnah’s strategy of political mobilization based on fear, religion, and communal division” (p. 321). Ayesha Jalal (1985) says that the League’s political power lay in projecting a perpetual sense of insecurity rather than pragmatic politics. Modern phenomena such as blasphemy-lynchings, a rise of political factions like Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP) and legal tolerance of mob violence are extensions of this colonial-political grammar.

The factor that binds these diverse geographies is one of post-colonial trauma. It can be concluded that colonial trauma generates extremism when no institutional, democratic or inclusive remedy follows decolonization. The sudden collapse of a colonial structure creates a political abyss that is filled by radical movements. In the case of Pakistan, the nation’s descent into religiously sanctioned mob violence is not an anomaly but a manifestation of this global postcolonial condition.

The 1990s cemented Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization agenda, incorporating blasphemy laws into Pakistan's legal and social fabric. The decade's political manoeuvres, judicial judgments, legislative amendments, and administrative inaction, created an environment in which allegations were synonymous with guilt, and mob violence developed as a de facto enforcement tool. While large-scale lynchings like Mashal Khan's (2017) and the Sialkot brothers' (2010) took place later, their origins can be traced back to legal and societal developments in the 1990s (BBC News, 2025). By neglecting to modify these rules, Pakistan's democratic governments normalized a system in which religious extremism thrived and the state's monopoly on justice crumbled irreparably.

In 1990, Pakistan's Federal Shariat Court (FSC) announced a significant decision that altered the scope of Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), which criminalizes blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad. Section 295-C, adopted in 1986 by Zia-ul-Haq, provided for "death or imprisonment for life" as possible punishments. The FSC's 1990 decision abolished the alternative of life imprisonment, making the death penalty the only punishment for blasphemy convictions. This decision went against classical Islamic doctrine, which previously enabled non-Muslims guilty of blasphemy to avoid capital sentences if they renounced their crimes. The Nawaz Sharif government, which took office in 1990, declined to challenge the verdict, effectively supporting the FSC's view (Amnesty International, 1994).

Organizations such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Sipah-e-Sahaba exploited blasphemy language to recruit members, portraying violence against accused individuals as a religious duty. Their booklets and lectures spread the belief that executing blasphemers guaranteed martyrdom (Nafees, 2023). Religious parties, particularly the Jamaat-e-Islami, stepped up efforts to associate blasphemy reform with treason. In 2008, the Difa-e-Pakistan Council (a coalition of 40 Islamist groups) announced a statewide strike to demand tougher blasphemy laws. This highlighted the movement's ability to deploy violent street power, discouraging major parties such as the PPP and PML-N from promoting changes (Nafees, 2023).

Over time, Pakistan's institutions, from police stations to courts, have been stretched to respond to the blasphemy cases amid intense public pressure. Legislative attempts to soften the laws or add safeguards have faced staunch resistance. For example, a 2010 bill by parliamentarian Sherry Rehman to require senior officers to investigate blasphemy cases (to curb frivolous accusations) never passed, as political parties backed down under pressure from religious groups. Instead of reform, legal changes have sometimes further tightened the regime; in January 2023, Parliament increased penalties for certain blasphemy-related offences (insults to the Prophet's companions and family) from 3-year imprisonment to 10 years, a move that alarmed human rights observers about escalating misuse. The historical trend, therefore, has been an expansion and entrenchment of blasphemy laws, which in turn has put Pakistan's institutions in the difficult position of enforcing harsh laws that carry the weight of religious zeal.

Research Design and Methodology

Research Questions

This study aims to address the following gaps in the literature.

- a. What socioeconomic and political factors explain the rise of blasphemy-related incidents from 2005 to 2011?
- b. How does the Gramscian hegemonic structure of Pakistan use Blasphemy in favour of the elite?
- c. What are the policy recommendations for de-escalation of blasphemy violence?

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative interpretive design to explore the rise in blasphemy incidents (2005–2011). Given the controversial nature of blasphemy laws and the lack of access to official sources, semi-structured interviews with knowledgeable stakeholders were chosen. This approach allows for open-ended, reflexive discussions where participants can elaborate on personal observations and insights. In keeping with interpretive paradigms, the research focuses on participants' subjective meanings, enabling an understanding of blasphemy discourse within their social and cultural settings. The goal was not statistical generalization but rich, contextualized insight into how blasphemy violence is perceived and justified. The study uses purposive sampling to select five informants who have deep knowledge or experience of blasphemy politics: two prominent academics, a civil society researcher, a student activist, and an artist-activist. These individuals were chosen because they represent

diverse perspectives (academic, civil society, youth, cultural activism) on the issue and were willing to speak frankly when state officials would not. Purposive (targeted) sampling is a standard qualitative strategy to ensure diverse viewpoints and access to specialized knowledge. By design, all participants had demonstrated engagement with issues of religion, human rights, or public protest, so they could provide informed commentary on blasphemy cases.

Five in-depth interviews were conducted in person. Each session lasted approximately 20–40 minutes and followed a semi-structured protocol with open-ended questions. The flexible format allowed participants to discuss socio-economic factors, political influences, and personal experiences related to blasphemy cases. Interviewees were encouraged to speak freely; they even chose venues where they felt most comfortable to ensure candid dialogue. With consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Throughout the process, the researcher explained the study’s purpose, following best practices for sensitive research.

As an exploratory qualitative study, this research has inherent limitations. The small, non-random sample (five interviews) means findings cannot be statistically generalized across Pakistan. Rather, the intent is to uncover deep insights and theorize about underlying dynamics. The reliance on civil society voices means government or security perspectives are largely absent. Finally, recall bias or reluctance to disclose sensitive opinions may have influenced responses. These limitations are acknowledged, but the thematic richness of the interviews (aided by triangulation and rigorous analysis) provides a credible foundation for understanding the complex socio-political factors at play.

Thematic Analysis

Historical Context:

Interviewees stressed the importance of Pakistan’s historical trajectory and legal framework in explaining the recent surge in blasphemy-related intolerance. A respondent noted that instances of violence over “blasphemy” cannot be understood solely as a contemporary phenomenon confined to Pakistan; similar extreme reactions have occurred elsewhere (e.g. the murders in Europe following blasphemous caricatures). He observed that these patterns are “very unique to Islam in our present era” – unlike other religions, in recent decades insults to Islam often spark mob violence. Several interviewees traced key turning points in Pakistan’s legal history. Another respondent confirmed that each wave of violence was preceded by some changes in legality. A respondent pointed out that the 1990s amendment to Section 295-C of the Penal Code (mandating death as the only penalty) removed any leniency for blasphemy so that even false accusations automatically demanded the harshest sanction.

As she explained, once life imprisonment was struck from 295-C, “the only punishment that was not death was omitted. So, naturally, any political uncertainty after that could give rise to blasphemy-incited violence”. Similarly, references to the 1986 military regime under Zia-ul-Haq recurred: Respondents agreed that the Islamization drive and law reforms of the Zia era deeply altered Pakistan’s social relations. In sum, interviewees agreed that successive changes in Pakistan’s legal-ideological “base” (e.g. colonial-era blasphemy laws, Zia’s Islamization, the 295-C amendments) created fertile ground for a new wave of blasphemy cases. As one participant put it, the rise of blasphemy incidents since 2010 is rooted in these long-term transformations: earlier periods allowed more “latitude,” whereas the modern legal framework invites instant militant reaction to any perceived insult.

Re-emasculatation of Religious parties in the late 2000s

A respondent noted that the 2011 wave of violence came against the particular backdrop of a series of legal reforms that pushed religious parties to back foot. Hudood ordinance was reformed without much consultation from the religious stakeholders, and efforts were being made for a reform in the Blasphemy laws of Pakistan. This resulted in a renewed anger in the

mosque and vows were made to protect the blasphemy laws. Similarly, another respondent talked about the Lal Masjid operation, “Musharraf won the battle but lost the war.” It was another tipping point in the country’s history and made the religious sector more hostile than ever.

Socioeconomic and Class Dynamics

Another prominent theme was the role of socioeconomic factors and class relations in fuelling intolerance. Several informants argued that class grievances are often refracted through a religious lens. A respondent, for example, explained that different social strata have been mobilized by religious politics in distinct ways: the rural poor are “used by the religious parties to create a sort of mobilization around blasphemy politics,” while the urban bourgeoisie provides patronage and protection for that ideology. In other words, class antagonisms are expressed as religious crusades. He further noted that middle-class frustrations – such as immigration anxieties or moral panic over Westernization – have found outlets in conservative Islamist narratives. One participant likened Pakistan’s middle-class angst to fears of immigrants or sexual minorities in the West, except that in Pakistan such anxieties are projected onto “religious puritanism”.

Economic dislocation and inequality also surfaced as concerns. Interviewees observed that economic stagnation and unemployment make disaffected youth susceptible to extremist messaging. As a result, many ordinary people see blasphemous accusations as a quick way to assert power or settle disputes. Another respondent emphasized this point: he recounted that accusing an opponent of blasphemy has become “the easiest tool” for personal revenge, whether in domestic or professional settings. Even intra-family quarrels or university promotions can turn violent if one party levels a blasphemy charge. This pattern suggests that underlying material grievances (e.g. poverty, powerlessness, class resentment) are being channelled into religious militancy.

In sum, the informants highlighted a dialectical interaction: material class tensions (rural-urban divides, immigrant insecurity, generational conflict) provide discontent, while religious rhetoric offers a ready-made ideology to interpret and exploit those tensions. In effect, socioeconomic struggles become articulated through religious identity. This blending of “class grievances” and zealotry appeared across interviews as a critical driver of the intolerance surge.

Colonial Trauma

While the lower class and lumpenproletariat are mobilized by the religious leaders for blasphemy, under the patronage of the elite, to which religious politics is an alternative that maintains the status quo, the educated middle class is also drawn towards these ideas. This was attributed by the interviewees to imperial, colonial trauma. The civil society researcher who responded to us, pointed out that the colonial trauma gives the organizing power to blasphemy politics, as any perceived attack on the honour of the Holy Prophet, is felt like an attack similar to imperial attacks that took agency from the people. It revises the trauma of being ruled by others. Another interviewee agreed that the word blasphemy gains its power from the insecure feelings arising because of centuries of imperial humiliation on the global stage.

Ideological and Cultural Hegemony

A third theme concerns how religion and state ideology have merged to create a hegemonic culture of intolerance. Interviewees portrayed blasphemy discourse not merely as isolated prejudice, but as part of a broader religious-ideological climate engineered by the ruling establishment. An interviewee who specializes in hegemonic studies explicitly characterized blasphemy violence as an outgrowth of the “politicization of religion” that has long been central to Pakistan’s power structure. He noted that Islam has been systematically mobilized as a state ideology – both to unite the populace and to suppress dissent. In his view, the same

entire sect of Ahmadi Muslims that was once considered peaceful has been “militarized” by this process. Blasphemy cases, therefore, are simply “one particular expression” of an ongoing strategy to weaponize religion.

This hegemonic dynamic was also evident in discussions of education and media. Several participants mentioned the role of state institutions and popular culture in normalizing extremist views. For example, one interviewee pointed out that Pakistani school textbooks and sermons effectively teach a narrow, hardline interpretation of Islam as common sense. In one telling exchange, An artist-activist who talked to us, observed that major media outlets and public platforms have repeatedly amplified anti-blasphemy messaging without challenge. Her comment, “I came to know about this [blasphemy issue] in university, through social media and friends”, underscores how cultural production (universities, news, the internet) diffuses the dominant narrative. Another respondent similarly argued that most Pakistanis tacitly accept the blasphemy narrative because dissent is so heavily stigmatized that even questioning state policy on religion can provoke violence.

The interviews imply that this hegemonic culture serves to manufacture consent for the status quo. Religious parties and state-aligned clerics set the public agenda, while mainstream political leaders avoid criticizing these narratives. For instance, analysts note that even when extremist supporters assaulted members of the ruling party (e.g. TLP activists attacking PML-N leaders over the Mumtaz Qadri case), party officials reflexively blamed their political rivals or the “establishment,” rather than the clerics who incited the attacks. This deflection reflects how the dominant ideology protects elite interests: by externalizing blame, the ruling class preserves its legitimacy.

Rise of Extremist Groups and Mobilization

Closely related is the theme of organized extremist movements exploiting blasphemy law for political ends. All interviewees noted the prominent role of parties like Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) and factions of Jamiat Ulema Islam (JUI). These groups, with state or military patronage, have made blasphemy allegations the centrepiece of their platform. Dr Hoodbhoy condemned TLP’s tactics, arguing that once blasphemy sentiment was turned into a mass movement, membership in the “blasphemy brigade” became lucrative. He advocated harsh measures against such groups (for example, taxing or outlawing them) if they refused to abide by normal politics.

Personal and Social Pretexts

A consistent sub-theme was that most blasphemy accusations are a social pretext for underlying conflicts. Academics and a student activist both described how blasphemy charges are routinely used in personal disputes. One vivid example involved a young wife who secretly recorded her husband allegedly making derogatory remarks about religion; the wife then circulated the audio, resulting in his arrest. More generally, as an interviewee put it, accusing someone of blasphemy has become “the easiest tool” to persecute adversaries. This logic applies in nearly every domain: jealous siblings, neighbours vying over land, or colleagues competing for a promotion can all invoke blasphemy to neutralize the other side.

Several interviewees noted that false blasphemy allegations in domestic or professional contexts are often intentionally fabricated, knowing that the accused will languish in jail or be killed before any verdict.

Media and Education (Ideological Socialization)

A related theme was the shaping of public opinion through media and schooling. Although not always labelled as a separate theme by interviewees, our coding found frequent references to how institutions communicate intolerance. For example, one interviewee remarked that Pakistani madrassas and mosque sermons frequently stir up narratives of religious persecution and “othering” of minorities. Television talk shows and newspapers also often sensationalize

blasphemy stories, painting any accused person as beyond the pale of society. Several informants worried that such media coverage reinforces the idea that “pagans and infidels” are the natural enemies of the state, making mob violence seem justified.

Educational institutions, meanwhile, implicitly endorse a narrow Islamist worldview. An academic explained that government-controlled curricula have systematically instilled an Islamist ethos in multiple generations, effectively training students to accept blasphemy laws without question. One activist noted that she first learned about the blasphemy law in university – not from legal texts, but through campus debates and social media echo chambers. In short, interviewees saw Pakistan’s educational and media apparatus largely complicit in maintaining the hegemonic narrative: dissenting perspectives on blasphemy are rarely given a platform, while extremist interpretations dominate the “common sense” imparted by schools and news outlets.

Gramsci’s Cultural Hegemony: Gramsci’s theory helps explain how ruling elites secure consent for this reactionary ideology. Our themes show that the Pakistani elite – the military, political parties, and the clergy – have together constructed a hegemonic narrative that equates state identity with a particular version of Islam. Through control of civil society institutions (schools, mosques, media), they cultivate what Gramsci would call the “common sense” of religious intolerance. For instance, Hoodbhoy’s and Salwa’s observations about textbooks and mosque sermons illustrate an ideological apparatus that teaches citizens to see the world through sectarian lenses. Gramsci also emphasized the role of intellectual and religious leadership in manufacturing consent. Interviewees described how party leaders and clerics (often interlocked) promulgate anti-blasphemy sentiment to unify their base. When people internalize the message that “questioning Islam is worse than any crime,” they police each other, essentially becoming unwitting enforcers of the hegemonic order. This matches Gramsci’s notion that hegemony operates not just by force, but through cultural and ideological persuasion. The widespread support (or at least passivity) for extrajudicial killings of the accused indicates a deeply hegemonic social condition. Even critics of the regime rarely challenge the framing of the blasphemy law, focusing instead on personal rivalries or technical reforms – thus leaving the broad ideological consensus intact. Moreover, the way the elite have handled political fallout reflects hegemonic practice. For example, rather than directly confront blasphemy mobs, mainstream politicians often placate them or blame scapegoats. This strategy of misdirection serves to preserve elite unity and prevent cracks in the hegemony. By constantly shifting the discourse – from substantive issues (like law reform) to personal or partisan debates – the ruling bloc ensures that the hegemonic narrative (the sanctity of blasphemy law) remains unchallenged.

In short, our themes illustrate a two-level dynamic: material interests shape the conditions of possibility, and hegemonic culture insulates those conditions from critique. The durability of religious intolerance in Pakistan thus arises from a historically grounded, elite-driven synthesis of economic power and cultural ideology. Our respondents’ insights provide concrete examples of this synthesis at work, validating the theoretical expectation that material and cultural forces co-produce phenomena like blasphemy violence.

Discussion

The research questions can be answered from the synthesis of the data acquired from the interviews.

What socioeconomic and political factors explain the rise of blasphemy-related incidents from 2005 to 2011?

The surge in blasphemy violence, which peaked in 2011, has roots in the re-emergence of religiopolitical power in the late 2000s. The Charlie Hebdo Cartoons and the pushback against it made the ground fertile for a surge. After reforms in the Hudood Ordinance, efforts to reform

295-C, and the Lal Masjid operation, the religious parties organized around the protection of blasphemy laws and gained significant political clout. Before Salman Taseer's murder, the statements from different religious leaders acknowledged the vulnerabilities in the law and its differences with the fiqh. However, when the governor got media coverage after talking about reforms, a very strict narrative was created by religious leaders about the punishment of blasphemy. This resulted in the murder of Salman Taseer. His killer, Mumtaz Qadri was hailed as a hero and his shrine was built. The factors identified by the participants, that gave the organizing potential to Blasphemy politics, were class anxiety and economic instability, colonial trauma and inferiority feelings in the Pakistani people; coupled with the weaponization of religion by the state, the state's patronage of extremist religious parties, the historical development of blasphemy law and otherization of minorities. The state's suppression of non-religious identities and making being a Pakistani synonymous with being a Muslim, created a culture of puritanism where the "other" is impure and must be killed. Further research is required for quantification of these factors.

How does the Gramscian hegemonic structure of Pakistan use Blasphemy in favour of the elite? All five interviewees provided consistent evidence that blasphemy laws in Pakistan are not only a matter of religious principle but also a strategic tool used by the ruling elite to consolidate and perpetuate power. Across different perspectives, a central theme emerged: the state and religious institutions work in tandem to embed certain ideological beliefs within the population that align with their political and class interests. Participants argued that the idea of blasphemy, and the sanctity surrounding it, is actively constructed and reinforced through state-aligned religious discourse. Rather than emerging organically from community sentiment, the elevation of blasphemy to a national concern was described as a deliberate political act. One interviewee noted that religious outrage is often "mobilized from the top down," where political parties, clerics, and power centres frame perceived insults to religion as existential threats. This framing creates an atmosphere in which any dissenting voice, particularly from minorities, liberal and leftist sectors, can be labelled anti-Islamic and thus eliminated from the public sphere. The interviews revealed that the elite do not uniformly believe in the narratives they promote. Instead, they instrumentalize religious emotion to achieve specific ends: gaining electoral support, distracting the public from governance failures, and suppressing dissent. Several participants described how the same political actors who privately dismiss extremist ideas publicly endorse them when it is politically expedient. They attend rallies, avoid condemning mob violence, and backtrack on progressive statements when faced with clerical backlash, not because they lack alternatives, but because supporting the dominant religious sentiment yields short-term political rewards and protects them from public or clerical retaliation.

Additionally, the participants observed that political leaders rarely challenge blasphemy-related violence directly, even when it targets state officials or their party members. Instead, they redirect blame, toward opposition parties, vague notions of foreign interference, or "misuse" of religion, while carefully avoiding confrontation with the clerics or parties that foment the violence. This calculated silence, as the interviewees described, is a form of passive endorsement. By refusing to break ranks with the dominant religious narrative, the political class ensures the continuation of a status quo that benefits them by maintaining their legitimacy in the eyes of a religiously charged electorate.

Interviewees also reflected on the psychological dimension of this hegemony. Through repeated exposure in media, schooling, and public discourse, citizens are socialized into believing that the blasphemy law is a divine imperative rather than a human-made legal construct. As one interviewee explained, this indoctrination has made it nearly impossible for ordinary people to question the law without being seen as enemies of the faith. In effect, the

population is not only ruled by the law but also made to desire and defend it, fulfilling the core condition of hegemony: the internalization of elite-defined ideology by the masses.

What emerges from the interview data is that the ruling elite in Pakistan has not merely tolerated religious extremism, it has curated it. Through silence, symbolic gestures, and the amplification of religious outrage, the elite has sustained a hegemonic order in which the very idea of blasphemy serves as a weapon for political control. This has enabled them to mobilize support, silence dissent, and divert class-based grievances into the safer terrain of moral panic, maintaining both their power and their image as defenders of the faith.

Policy Recommendations

Legal Reforms

Slow and steady reforms in 295-C:

Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code must undergo phased and structured reform.

The filing of an FIR under this section must require prior approval from a senior government official to prevent frivolous and malicious accusations.

A pre-FIR dispute resolution mechanism, aligned with Hanafi jurisprudence, must be established to allow for denial, retraction, or apology by the accused before formal legal action is initiated.

The law must ultimately be repealed through a gradual legislative process that minimizes backlash and ensures public order during the transition.

Political Reforms

Ban on extremist religious organizations:

The Government of Pakistan must immediately initiate the process for a complete ban on extremist religious organizations under Anti-Terrorism Act 1997, such as Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), Jamiat-e-Tulaba, and all similar outfits, and initiate legal proceedings against their leadership for inciting organised violence and endangering the lives of citizens of Pakistan. Their involvement in orchestrating mob violence, such as the Jaranwala incident, necessitates decisive state action to uphold constitutional order and public safety.

End of Preferential Treatment of Political Parties and Military Intervention:

The state must end all forms of preferential treatment toward religious political parties. Political resources, media space, and institutional support must be allocated equitably, without privileging religious identity over other forms of political expression. The protection of pluralism requires active disengagement from sectarian favouritism and the enforcement of a level political playing field.

There must be an effective disengagement of the military from civil institutions and politics.

Social Reforms and Production of organic intellectuals, in pursuit of counter hegemony:

End of Ban on Student Unions:

The Government must lift the existing ban on student unions across academic institutions in Pakistan. Democratic student representation must be reinstated through clear legal frameworks, enabling young people to participate in political processes, engage in policy discourse, and organize collective action within constitutional bounds. This is necessary for the counter hegemonic process to begin

Opening up of Spaces to decrease frustration:

The state must invest in and expand public spaces that facilitate intellectual debate, accessible cultural expression, and affordable entertainment. These include but are not limited to open forums, libraries, community theatres, and public parks, and spaces for academic cultural engagement of the people, e.g The Black Hole. The provision of such spaces must be prioritized in urban planning and governance to counter social alienation and foster inclusive

civic engagement.

Revision of Educational Content

A nationwide overhaul of the educational curriculum is imperative. All public and private syllabi must be revised to eliminate exclusionary narratives and incorporate themes of religious coexistence, critical reasoning, and cultural plurality. Curriculum reform must be accompanied by robust teacher training initiatives and the development of non-discriminatory pedagogical materials, enforced through statutory oversight.

Conclusion

This research is related to blasphemy that investigates the recent surge in religious intolerance in Pakistan, focusing specifically on blasphemy-related violence from 2005 to 2011.

Drawing on five in-depth interviews with academics, activists, and civil society experts, it uses thematic analysis to identify key drivers behind the phenomenon. The findings point to a confluence of factors, including colonial-era legal legacies, socioeconomic inequality, politicisation of religion, and the strategic use of blasphemy laws by extremist groups and state actors alike. Accusations of blasphemy are often weaponized to settle personal disputes or suppress dissent, and the resulting violence is normalized by media narratives and hegemonic educational discourse. Guided by historical materialism and Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, the study shows how structural conditions (laws, class dynamics, and state policy) have produced a dominant religious ideology that justifies intolerance. Elites manipulate this ideology to maintain control, redirect grievances, and avoid accountability. The research concludes with policy suggestions including legal reform, stronger protection against false accusations, educational curriculum changes, and a political shift away from appeasing extremist actors. Although constrained by a small sample size and the topic's sensitivity, the study contributes critical insight into the systemic roots of religious violence in Pakistan.

Bibliography

- Ahmed, I., Ahmed, Z. S., Brasted, H., & Akbarzadeh, S. (Eds.). (2022). *Religion, extremism and violence in South Asia*. Springer Nature.
- Akhtar, A. S. (2022). *The struggle for hegemony in Pakistan: Fear, desire and revolutionary horizons*. Pluto Press.
- Amnesty International. (1994). PAKISTAN Use and abuse of the blasphemy laws, <https://www.amnesty.org/ar/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/asa330081994en.pdf>
- BBC News, (2010, August 23). Pakistan investigates brutal mob killing of brothers. Accessed from BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11062184> dated 11
- Brecorder. (2024, September 30). Inexcusable and unforgiveable. *Brecorder*. <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40324643>
- Dawood, A. (2022, January 26). 89 citizens killed over blasphemy allegations since 1947: Report by CRSS. *Dawn News*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1677890> December 2025.
- Fanon, F. (1963). *The wretched of the earth*. Grove Press.
- Jalal, A. (1985). *The sole spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the demand for Pakistan*. Cambridge University Press.
- Khan, T., Österman, K., & Björkqvist, K. (2023). Severity and reasons behind religious intolerance in Pakistan: Perceptions of Sunnis, Shias, Ahmadis, and Christians. *Deleted Journal*, 2(1), 73–87. <https://doi.org/10.2478/hptr-2023-0008>
- Nafees, M. (2023). Faith and fury: The rise of blasphemy-driven violence in Pakistan. *Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS)*, 1947-1970.

- Zia Ur Rehman. (2024). Policing blasphemy: A dangerous duty. *Herald* (January 2024 issue).
- Ziltener, P., & Künzler, D. (2013). Impacts of colonialism: A research survey. *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 19(2), 290-311.