



**COUNTERING HATE SPEECH:  
A CASE OF  
PUNJAB MUTTAHIDA  
ULEMA BOARD  
POLICY BRIEF**



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# POLICY BRIEF

## COUNTERING HATE SPEECH:

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## PUNJAB MUTTAHIDA ULEMA BOARD

### 1. BACKGROUND

Hate speech, in its varied manifestations, including hate and biased literature, has impacted society's social and economic fabric. The hate literature emanates from a diverse range of publications of numerous newspapers, religious magazines, and publications focusing on the sectarian divide create a divided society. Within Punjab, the Southern region, including Multan and Bahawalpur (including Azm-e-Pakistan operational areas), has remained a stronghold of sectarianism where the circulation of religious magazines is managed by the religious organizations within its closed social circles. Besides this form of hate speech, local civil society has identified hate content against religious minorities in the public and private sector textbooks<sup>12</sup>. In the digital world, hate speech on social media platforms is also a challenge for various government agencies. Most recently, the federal government banned the publication of proscribed group activities on mainstream media. Still, they used alternate digital media to reach out to their workers and sympathizers<sup>3</sup>.

After the deadly attack on Army Public School in 2014, the federal government developed a National Action Plan to counter terrorism and extremism with the wider support of civil and military leadership. Action point # 05 focused on "Strict action against the literature, newspapers and magazines promoting hatred, extremism, sectarianism and intolerance"<sup>4</sup>. Both the federal and provincial governments have also passed legislation to curb hate speech in the country. Pakistan Penal Code Section 153-A states that "Promoting or inciting, or attempting to promote or incite, on the grounds of religion, race, place of birth, the residence" is a criminal offence.

## 2. PUNJAB MUTTAHIDA ULEMA BOARD

## 3. SUCSESSES

In 2015, the Punjab government enacted Sound Systems Act to regulate and control loudspeakers in the province<sup>5</sup>. In 2016, the Punjab government passed an act on the constitution of vigilance committees that will allow the constitution of committees at the District, Sub-Divisional and Union Council level with a mandate to check unregulated charity, wall chalking, curb hate speech, distribution of objectionable material, and information about tenets<sup>6</sup>.

In 2016, the federal government passed the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (PECA) that prescribed that whoever prepares and disseminate information through any information system or device that advances or is likely to advance interfaith, sectarian or racial hatred shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to seven years or with fine or with both. In 2020, the Punjab government passed an amendment in the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board Act 2015 that now bound the textboard to seek review and approval of religion-related content. Thus, textbooks or part of it with contents to Islam in books such as Islamic studies, Pakistan studies, Urdu literature, and any other will not be published unless the Punjab Muttahida Ulema Board approves the content<sup>7</sup>.

Federal and provincial governments counter hate speech through various agencies, departments and platforms, including Federal Investigation Authority, Punjab Home Department, District Peace Committees, and Muttahida Ulema Board (MUB). Out of these platforms, MUB is a representative body of major schools of thought, i.e., Deobandi, Shia, Brelvi, and Ahl-e-Ahdees, headed by a senior cleric who oversees the management of the board. The current federal minister of Religious Harmony and Middle East Affairs is also the Chairperson of MUB. The board is mandated to review the religious books and magazines and recommends banning objectionable material to Home Department. In 2020, through Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board Act 2020, the provincial government also made it compulsory for Textbook Board to seek approval of religious content in all textbooks by MUB<sup>8</sup>. It also has its District representatives that work closely with the district administration, including Deputy Commissioner and Police Offices.

Banning Hate-Based Material: The mandate of MUB is to identify hate and biased content from various forms of publications, including religious and textbooks. By this date, MUB has successfully banned hundreds of books that include objectionable material determined unanimously by the board members. Such efforts to

#### 4. CHALLENGES

remove hate and biased material help identify miscreants in the religious fraternity and restrict their extremist ideology deepening further in society.

Expanding Mandate: The work of MUB is appreciated at the highest levels, including the Chief Minister office; under the current leadership, the board has fully supported the provincial government efforts in identifying and banning hate material. The Punjab government recently recognized their landmark efforts. It passed legislation "Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board Act 2020" by expanding the MUB mandate to review the Islamic content in the textbooks of public and private sectors before it gets to the publications.

Resolving Blasphemy Cases: MUB represents all major schools of thought and carries those considered adequate within their domain and influence. In 2020, MUB supported Punjab police in investigating a false allegation of blasphemy by a group of four sanitary workers who threw pamphlets carrying the name of Prophet Muhammad PBUH in Lahore. After deliberations, MUB found that these sanitary workers were illiterate and could not read and write. The case was resolved, and four individuals were acquitted of the false charges<sup>9</sup>.

- As per the directions of the Govt of Punjab, MUB is a representative body of major schools of thought; some religious circles demand equal representation of all sects in the board<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, it has provided proportional representation to various denominations, while some equal demand representation within the board. Due to this fact, MUB could not receive more significant support from all religious circles.
- Currently, there is no women member of MUB; however, the draft Punjab Interfaith Policy took up this issue at policy forums during the consultation process in 2020. Board is a body that works under an executive order issued by the Government of Punjab. However, the Punjab government passed recent legislation on Curriculum and Textbook Board by expanding the role of MUB to review all textbooks of public and private sectors and provide legitimacy to its work in the province. But still, more work is needed to enhance transparency around its mandate and work.
- Punjab government does not provide specific technical and operational support to the board and its members that restrict their ability to deliver services in an efficient and effective manner. This lack of support often delays the hate literature review in the referred books and its associated decisions.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

- MUB is a structure having its representatives, including religious leaders at the district level. Still, their engagement with other stakeholders, including Multan Interfaith Forum and District Peace Committees, is very weak. These forums promote interfaith harmony; tracking hate and objectionable material in the literature can support MUB's work at district and provincial levels.
- The Punjab government should provide technical and logistical support to MUB's work on countering hate speech. MUB should be provided by a team of local researchers who can do desk research for the members, which can speed up the review and decision process. This will help identify more hate and biased content in the Islamic books and textbooks of public and private schools.
- The decisions of the MUB should gain more visibility and acknowledgement as its publication is only happening through Punjab Home Department. More information on board functioning, including critical decisions, should be made public in a brief report on quarterly basis to garner support from relevant stakeholders.
- More vital coordination between district structures, including Multan Interfaith Forum, Bahawalpur Support Groups, District Peace Committees, District Women Forum, and MUB, should foster partnerships and exchange knowledge on countering hate speech strategies. Connections at the district level will also help refer to hate and biased material, specifically those regions that produce religious literature.
- Members of MUB should be provided orientation on the other CVE laws including the recently passed Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board Act 2020
- MUB should include women members as it is essential to include women's voice in all processes and decision-making. Further, the women members of MUB can also play a crucial role in increasing MUB's outreach to women community members and women members of various district-level structures etc.

## 6. REFERENCES

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## 7. Know Youth Development Foundation

Youth Development Foundation (YDF) is a not-for-profit and non-governmental youth-led organization working on interfaith harmony, social inclusion, local government, preventing and countering violent extremism (CVE) since 2010. YDF brings together youth from diverse cultural, religious and geographical backgrounds to prevent and counter growing trends of extremism through innovative ideas that lead to demonstrable solutions. As a result, YDF has been able to bring positive cultural changes in three Pakistani provinces by directly engaging more than 12,000 young people in the last seven years. Due to its contribution to positive social change in Pakistan, YDF had the opportunity to present youth contributions in conflict mitigation at UN Minority Forum 2013, Geneva, UNAOC Global Forum 2016, Baku, and NEXUS 2016, New York. In addition, YDF has had the privilege to work with USAID, European Union (EU), UKAID, USIP, UN agencies, World Faith, and the Swiss Mission Office and Government of Punjab and Sindh. Furthermore, YDF works with multi-stakeholders, including District, Provincial and Federal governments, to promote youth-oriented policies and strategies that celebrate cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversity. Most recently, YDF has been working with the Ministry of Human Rights, Minority Affairs, and Interfaith Harmony on drafting a tolerance strategy for Punjab province and dedicated media campaign to counter discrimination, hate speech and stigmatization during COVID19.



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