



POLICY BRIEF

PUNJAB INTERFAITH HARMONY POLICY

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POLICY BRIEF

PUNJAB

INTERFAITH

HARMONY POLICY

01 BACKGROUND

Pakistan witnessed an upsurge of sectarian violence in the 1980s and 1990s, terrorist attacks on every religion and segment of society, including armed forces from 2001 till now, and increased hatred and polarization amongst followers of different sects and religions¹. Religion and sect were used as a weapon against individuals and communities that led to violence against them². The state adopted successive policies to curb extremism which were not very effective for various reasons. For example, several militant and extremist groups were banned, but they remained active with a new name. In the wake of the December 2014 Army Public School Peshawar Attack, the state implemented a National Action Plan that helped it control the situation³. The government needs to make continued efforts to improve the ongoing countering extremism work in the country.

In 2010, the passing of the 18th amendment brought a historic devolution taking the majority of the social and community development departments to the provincial level⁴. However, this devolution process takes more than expected time, and in April 2019, the federal government devolved the interfaith harmony from the Federal Ministry of Religious Affairs component to the provinces. The Punjab government attached this to the already established ministry of Human Rights and Minority Affairs. The extended mandate of the ministry has now included developing policies and adopting actions at promoting peace and tolerance amongst different religious groups and sects. This emerged as an opportunity to work with various stakeholders to form a well thought and comprehensive policy to chalk out strategies to improve interfaith harmony and promote peaceful coexistence in the society.

02 POLICY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Ministry of Human Rights, Minority Affairs, and Interfaith Harmony, the Government of Punjab, supporting a local civil society organization, Youth Development Foundation, drafted a provincial Interfaith Harmony Policy by engaging a wide range of critical stakeholders. This policy was conceived, formulated, and reviewed systematically through a series of consultations, compilation, and reviews. A total of 20 consultations were held at government offices and local hotels, participated by more than 750 individuals and organizations representing leaders of all faiths and Muslim sects, provincial legislatures, youth, women, journalists, business people, civil society, and lawyers⁵. In addition, through its official circles, the Punjab Ministry of Human Rights, Minority Affairs, and Interfaith Harmony also held internal consultations and reviews by the attached provincial departments. This policy is the first of its kind due to it being formulated by people belonging to diverse religions and sects, thus making it inclusive of minorities and the majority population.

03 RECOMMENDATIONS⁶

BUILDING LOCAL RESILIENCE:

The Government shall restructure District Peace Committees and introduce Union Council Peace Committees to resolve minor disputes that cannot reach the district committees. The district administrations shall be easily accessible to these committees. Inclusion and participation of youth and women should be ensured in Peace Committees at district, tehsil, and union council levels.

COUNTERING HATE SPEECH AND TEXTS

Hate speech is still practised at thousands of spots in the province. Loud-speaker Act shall be implemented in letter and spirit to stop hate speech and exploitation of religious sentiments. All educational institutions shall purge themselves of intolerant and extremist elements and material like literature that promotes intolerance. Punjab Government shall include representatives from non-Muslim communities in Muttahida Ulema Board, meant for reviewing textbooks.

UNIFORMED FRIDAY SERMONS

The government shall prepare uniformed sermons for Friday prayers. Every speech shall carry the message of peace, tolerance, harmony, and acceptance in the light of religious teachings.

INCLUSION OF SUCH TOPICS IN THE CURRICULUM

A chapter on Interfaith and social harmony in the light of the teachings of various religions shall be included in the Curriculum of social sciences. Subjects of Peace Education, Ethics, and Human Rights shall be introduced in Curriculum and compulsory for all at school and college levels.

OFFICIAL CELEBRATIONS

National days should be celebrated with representatives of all religions, who should jointly hoist the flag of Pakistan on such occasions. Cultural festivals like Jashan-e-Baharan, Besakhi, Lohri, Basant (without kites), etc., shall be celebrated at the government level because they are not linked to any religion.

STOPPING FORCED CONVERSIONS

Punjab Government shall proclaim the law against forced conversions on a priority basis by adopting the already tabled bill to give Hindu, Christian, and Sikh communities a sense of security.

ENFORCING MEDIA LAWS

Punjab Government shall consult PEMRA, APNS, owners of media houses, unions of journalists, and press clubs for robust implementation of media laws, ethics of journalism as this strategy will help the state improve the quality of journalism and spread a message of peace.

04 SUCSESSES

WIDER RECOGNITION

None, another province in the country, grabbed this opportunity to formulate a comprehensive policy document after the devolution. This was also acknowledged by the Commission of Supreme Court on Religious Minorities and instructed provinces to follow Punjab's footsteps during a meeting with the ministry in Lahore.

INCLUSIVITY:

This is the first policy developed after comprehensive consultations with critical stakeholders, including people of various faiths, government officials, political representatives of parliamentary parties, journalists, women, youth, business people, lawyers, academia, and civil society organizations.

GOVERNMENT OWNERSHIP

Ministry of Human Rights, Minority Affairs, and Interfaith Harmony jointly worked with a local civil society organization to initiate the development and review process. Besides the broader consultations that the government officials participated in, the ministry also held various discussion sessions with the seventeen attached government departments. This is encouraging that wider government ownership is created through the inclusive process⁷.

PARLIAMENTARIAN SUPPORT

The draft was shared and discussed with the Parliamentary Working Group members on CVE and the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights, Minority Affairs, and Interfaith Harmony. All the members representing various parliamentary parties extended their fullest support for its approval and implementation at all levels⁸.

POLICY APPROVAL

The Law Department has vetted the policy, which is necessary for every law or procedure to be reviewed before final submission to the Punjab cabinet. Ministry is now gearing up to prepare a final document to approve the Punjab cabinet for a final nod⁹.

05 CHALLENGES

• There is also a lack of coordination between civil society organizations and ministry on the conception and implementation of interfaith harmony promotion interventions. This results in weak reporting by the ministry on consolidation of provincial interventions and aligns those with the ministry priorities and international commitments, including Sustainable Development Goals¹⁰.

Coordination amongst ministry and other government departments is a challenge as the promotion of interfaith harmony is a cross-cutting theme that the departments need attention and work. Bringing this to the forefront is challenging, but the current federal and provincial government policies and actions provide enabling environment to work closely on these issues collaboratively.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The ministry should formulate a resourcing plan with donors, local civil society organizations, and the Punjab government's resources. Besides this, the ministry should also closely collaborate with the attached departments to devise the resourcing strategies for promoting interfaith harmony policy .

Since this is a policy document that provides guidance on various issues identified and discussed with wider stakeholders and proposes solutions to counter those challenges, the provincial government attached departments including Women Development, Youth, Auqaf, Primary & Secondary Education, Information, Social Welfare, and Home. There is a need to develop sector strategies in consultation with these key government departments that spell out actions to be taken by key stakeholders in their sphere .

A ministerial steering committee comprised of the attached department should be formulated to oversee the policy implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting by various key stakeholders. Ministry of Human Rights, Minority Affairs, and Interfaith Harmony should hold its secretariat and convene its quarterly meetings regular-

Ministry should also establish a coordination group with the donors and civil society organizations on the Punjab Local Government Department that holds its regular meetings to align development needs with the available resourcing .

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Know Youth Development Foundation

Youth Development Foundation (YDF) is a not-for-profit and non-governmental youth-led organization that has been 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. 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 7 years. Due to its contribution for 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. 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. YDF works with multi-stakeholders including District, Provincial and Federal governments on the promotion of youth-oriented policies and strategies that celebrate cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversity. Most recently, YDF is 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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