

PAKISTAN RELIGIONS & RELIGIOUS LIFE

A wide analytical report on faith, religious communities, institutions, heritage and social dynamics — 2026

Executive Assessment

Religion is a central dimension of Pakistan's constitutional identity, social organization, public culture and historical development. Islam is the state religion, while the Constitution also provides fundamental protections for citizens to profess, practise and propagate their religion and requires the State to safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of minorities. The country's religious landscape is therefore best understood through two complementary realities: a very large Muslim majority and a diverse set of minority and smaller religious traditions that contribute to Pakistan's cultural and historical fabric.

The 2023 digital census recorded about 231.69 million Muslims (96.35%) among the population covered by the religion question. It also recorded approximately 5.22 million Hindus (2.17%), 3.30 million Christians (1.37%), 162,684 Ahmadis (0.07%), 15,998 Sikhs, 2,348 Parsis/Zoroastrians and other smaller categories. The census does not provide a Sunni-Shia breakdown, so estimates of the internal Muslim composition should be treated as estimates rather than census counts.

Core analytical conclusion: Pakistan's religious future will depend not only on demographic trends but also on the quality of interfaith relations, equal citizenship, educational institutions, protection of religious heritage, responsible religious leadership and the ability of public institutions to manage sectarian and communal tensions through law and dialogue.

Key themes

- Islam as the dominant religious tradition and a major source of national identity.
- Sunni, Shia and other Muslim traditions, including Sufi, Ismaili and Bohra communities.
- Hindu, Christian, Sikh, Parsi/Zoroastrian and other communities, including the Kalash tradition.
- Constitutional rights, minority protection, religious education and institutional governance.
- Religious heritage, pilgrimage, architecture, festivals and cultural tourism.
- Risks and opportunities for interfaith harmony, social cohesion and inclusive development.

1. Religious Demography of Pakistan

Pakistan's 2023 census provides the most important official baseline for understanding the country's religious composition. The Pakistan Bureau of Statistics publishes national and provincial tables by religion, sex and rural/urban residence. The figures below reflect the census categories and should not be interpreted as a complete measure of the lived complexity of religious identity.

Religious category	2023 census population	Approx. share	Analytical note
Muslim	231,686,709	96.35%	Dominant religious population; census does not distinguish Sunni and Shia.
Hindu Jati	5,217,216	2.17%	Strongest concentration in Sindh, especially rural and southern districts.
Christian	3,300,788	1.37%	Significant communities in Punjab and major urban centres.
Qadiani/Ahmadi	162,684	0.07%	Recorded as a separate census category.
Scheduled Castes	~1.3 million	~0.55%	A distinct census category that overlaps with the religiously diverse Hindu social landscape.
Sikh	15,998	0.01%	Small resident population with major historical and pilgrimage significance.
Parsi/Zoroastrian	2,348	<0.01%	Small historic community, concentrated mainly in urban Pakistan.
Others	72,346	0.03%	Includes a range of smaller communities and traditions recorded under the census framework.

Geographic pattern. Religion is also geographically differentiated. Sindh contains the country's largest Hindu population and important Hindu heritage sites; Punjab contains large Christian communities and major Christian institutions; Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and northern areas contain distinctive Muslim traditions as well as important Sikh, Buddhist and Kalash heritage; Islamabad has a more nationally diverse urban religious profile.

Important data limitation. The 2023 census does not publish a Sunni–Shia division in the religion table. Therefore, internal Muslim shares should be presented using qualified estimates rather than as official census percentages.

2. Islam: The Dominant Religious Tradition

Islam shapes Pakistan's constitutional terminology, public holidays, religious education, family and social practices, charitable traditions, architecture, literature and many aspects of everyday life. Pakistan's official name is the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and Article 2 of the Constitution establishes Islam as the state religion.

Sunni Islam

Sunni Islam constitutes the majority of Pakistan's Muslim population. Pakistan contains multiple Sunni schools and religious movements, including Deobandi, Bareilvi and Ahl-e-Hadith traditions. These traditions share core Islamic beliefs while differing in jurisprudence, devotional practices, religious institutions and approaches to Sufi traditions.

Shia Islam

Shia Muslims form a substantial part of Pakistan's Muslim population, although the national census does not separately enumerate Sunni and Shia citizens. Shia communities include Twelver Shia populations as well as Ismaili and other traditions. Important Shia populations are found in urban centres, Gilgit-Baltistan, Kurram and other parts of the country.

Sufism and devotional culture

Sufi traditions have played a major historical role in the religious and cultural formation of South Asia. Shrines associated with figures such as Data Ganj Bakhsh, Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, Bahauddin Zakariya and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai are important religious and cultural landmarks. Qawwali, devotional poetry, shrine architecture and urs festivals connect religious life with literature, music, crafts and tourism.

Religious institutions

- Mosques serve as centres of worship, community gathering, charity, education and social support.
- Madrassas provide religious education alongside a diverse formal school and university system.
- Islamic seminaries and scholarly networks influence religious discourse and public debate.
- Waqf and charitable traditions support mosques, shrines, schools and social welfare activities.

3. Religious Minorities and Smaller Traditions

Pakistan's minority communities are numerically smaller but historically and culturally significant. Their presence can be seen in places of worship, historic neighbourhoods, cemeteries, schools, hospitals, charitable organizations, festivals, crafts, food traditions and heritage sites.

Hinduism

Hindu communities are particularly concentrated in Sindh, where Hindu temples, pilgrimage locations and festivals form an important part of the province's cultural landscape. The 2023 census recorded more than 5.2 million people in the Hindu Jati category, with Sindh accounting for the overwhelming majority of the national total. Important sites include Hinglaj Mata in Balochistan and numerous temples in Sindh.

Christianity

Christian communities include Roman Catholic, Protestant and other traditions. Major Christian populations are found in Punjab and large cities. Christian institutions have a long history in education, healthcare, social services and community development. Churches and historic schools and hospitals form part of Pakistan's built heritage.

Sikhism

Although Pakistan's resident Sikh population is small, Sikh heritage is exceptionally important because many major sites associated with Sikh history are located in Pakistan. Nankana Sahib, Kartarpur and other gurdwaras attract pilgrims from Pakistan and abroad and create opportunities for religious tourism and people-to-people exchange.

Parsi/Zoroastrian communities

The Parsi community is small but historically influential, particularly in Karachi. Parsis have contributed to commerce, philanthropy, architecture, education and civic life. Their institutions and heritage are part of the broader multicultural history of urban Pakistan.

Kalash and other indigenous traditions

The Kalash communities of Chitral preserve a distinctive indigenous religious and cultural tradition combining beliefs, seasonal festivals, rituals, music, dress and oral heritage. Their small population and unique cultural identity make safeguarding their heritage especially important.

4. Constitutional and Legal Framework

Pakistan's constitutional framework combines an Islamic state identity with explicit provisions concerning religious freedom and minority protection. This creates a legal framework in which religion has a formal constitutional role while individual and community religious rights are also recognized.

Core constitutional principles

- Article 2: Islam is the State religion of Pakistan.
- Article 20: subject to law, public order and morality, citizens have the right to profess, practise and propagate their religion; religious denominations and sects may establish, maintain and manage religious institutions.
- Article 21: protects citizens from being compelled to pay a special tax for propagation or maintenance of a religion other than their own.
- Article 22: provides safeguards concerning religious instruction and ceremonies in educational institutions.
- Article 25: establishes equality of citizens before law.
- Article 36: directs the State to safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of minorities, including due representation in federal and provincial services.

The constitutional design therefore contains both an Islamic constitutional identity and formal protections for religious practice and minority interests. The practical quality of religious freedom depends on implementation, institutions, policing, courts, education and the wider social environment.

Religious freedom and social challenges

International religious-freedom reporting has identified serious concerns involving sectarian violence, attacks on religious minorities, discrimination and misuse or contested application of religious laws. These issues should be analyzed separately from the country's constitutional guarantees: a constitutional right does not automatically mean that the right is experienced equally in every locality or circumstance.

For policy analysis, the central challenge is therefore implementation: strengthening rule of law, preventing mob violence, protecting places of worship, ensuring due process, improving minority access to public services and promoting responsible interfaith dialogue.

5. Religion, Society and Education

Religious belief in Pakistan intersects with family life, education, community organization, charity, politics, literature and the media. The relationship is not uniform: urban and rural communities, different provinces, sects, generations and socioeconomic groups can experience religion in different ways.

Religious education

Pakistan has a dual religious-education landscape: religious instruction within mainstream education and a large network of madrassas and seminaries. Religious education can contribute to moral formation, literacy in religious texts and community leadership, but quality, curriculum, accreditation and links with wider employment pathways are important policy questions.

Interfaith education

An inclusive education strategy should teach students about Pakistan's own religious diversity as part of national history and citizenship. Comparative knowledge of Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, the Kalash tradition and other communities can reduce stereotypes and support social cohesion when taught accurately and respectfully.

Religion and social welfare

Zakat, sadaqah, waqf, church charities, Hindu community organizations, Sikh gurdwara institutions and other forms of religious philanthropy contribute to social welfare. These networks can complement public services in areas such as food distribution, healthcare, education, emergency assistance and support for vulnerable families.

Religion and public life

- Religious leaders can support peacebuilding, disaster response, social welfare and community mediation.
- Faith-based institutions can strengthen local social capital and volunteer networks.
- Public institutions must maintain equal protection under law regardless of religious affiliation.
- Responsible media and digital communication are important for preventing misinformation and communal escalation.

6. Religious Heritage, Pilgrimage and Cultural Economy

Religion is also a major component of Pakistan's heritage economy. Mosques, shrines, temples, churches, gurdwaras, cemeteries, historic religious schools and archaeological sites form a dense cultural landscape across the country.

Islamic heritage

Pakistan contains major Mughal, pre-Mughal and regional Islamic monuments. Lahore's Badshahi Mosque and Wazir Khan Mosque, Multan's shrine architecture, Sindh's Sufi complexes and numerous historic mosques demonstrate the interaction of religion, architecture, calligraphy, craft and urban development.

Hindu and Sikh pilgrimage

Pilgrimage has substantial potential as a form of cultural diplomacy. Hindu pilgrimage sites in Sindh and Balochistan and Sikh sites such as Nankana Sahib and Kartarpur connect Pakistan with international religious communities. Well-managed pilgrimage corridors can generate local employment while improving conservation and cross-border understanding.

Religious tourism opportunities

- Develop professionally managed pilgrimage routes and visitor information systems.
- Improve conservation of temples, gurdwaras, churches, shrines and historic mosques.
- Train local guides in history, religious etiquette, languages and heritage interpretation.
- Link religious tourism with local crafts, hospitality, transport and community enterprises.
- Use digital archives, mapping and virtual interpretation to widen access to heritage.

The strongest approach is not to commercialize sacred places indiscriminately, but to balance worship, conservation, community ownership, visitor management and economic opportunity.

7. Key Risks and Structural Challenges

Pakistan's religious landscape has substantial social capital, but it also faces risks that can weaken cohesion and economic development if not addressed through law, education and institutional capacity.

1. Sectarian polarization

Differences among Muslim sects and movements can become politicized. Sectarian violence damages communities, public confidence and investment while diverting attention from development priorities.

2. Minority insecurity and discrimination

Minority communities may face social exclusion, unequal access to opportunities, threats to places of worship or pressure surrounding religious identity. Effective protection requires prevention, policing, judicial accountability and community-level engagement.

3. Mob violence and misinformation

Rapid circulation of unverified allegations through social media can transform local disputes into wider communal crises. Crisis communication, due process and responsible digital literacy are therefore increasingly important.

4. Heritage deterioration

Historic religious buildings can suffer from neglect, encroachment, pollution, uncontrolled development and climate-related damage. Conservation policy should integrate religious communities, heritage authorities, municipalities and professional conservation expertise.

5. Education gaps

When students receive limited knowledge of other communities, stereotypes can persist. Curriculum quality, teacher training and critical thinking are therefore part of a long-term religious-harmony strategy.

8. Strategic Opportunities and Recommendations – 2026–2035

Pakistan can treat religious diversity not only as a social issue but also as a resource for education, heritage conservation, tourism, diplomacy, social welfare and national cohesion.

Priority 1 – Strengthen equal citizenship

- Ensure that constitutional protections are translated into effective local protection and access to public services.
- Improve investigation and prosecution of attacks against people and places of worship.
- Strengthen institutional channels for minority complaints and community dialogue.

Priority 2 – Build an interfaith education strategy

- Teach accurate, age-appropriate knowledge of Pakistan's religious history and communities.
- Expand teacher training in interfaith literacy, conflict prevention and constitutional citizenship.
- Encourage universities to support research on religion, society, peacebuilding and heritage.

Priority 3 – Develop religious heritage tourism responsibly

- Create national and provincial religious heritage circuits.
- Invest in conservation, accessibility, sanitation, safety and visitor information.
- Ensure local communities share in tourism employment and enterprise opportunities.

Priority 4 – Protect intangible religious culture

- Document oral traditions, devotional music, festivals, manuscripts, crafts and ritual knowledge.
- Support community-led safeguarding rather than treating living traditions only as tourism products.

Priority 5 – Use religion for social development

- Build partnerships between public agencies and credible faith-based welfare organizations.
- Use mosques, churches, temples, gurdwaras and community organizations as partners in literacy, health and disaster preparedness where appropriate.

Priority 6 – Strengthen digital responsibility

- Develop rapid-response mechanisms for religious misinformation and incitement.
- Promote digital literacy and responsible public communication.

9. Conclusion

Religion is one of the defining dimensions of Pakistan's national and social identity. The country is overwhelmingly Muslim, but its religious landscape also contains Hindu, Christian, Sikh, Parsi/Zoroastrian, Ahmadi and other communities, as well as distinctive indigenous traditions such as the Kalash. These communities are part of Pakistan's history, cultural heritage and contemporary society.

The strategic objective for the coming decade should not be to reduce religious identity to a single demographic statistic. A stronger approach is to combine constitutional citizenship, religious freedom within the legal framework, public order, minority protection, quality education, heritage conservation and interfaith dialogue.

Pakistan has an opportunity to convert its religious and cultural diversity into a source of social resilience and international engagement. Religious heritage can support responsible tourism; faith-based welfare can complement social policy; universities can deepen research and dialogue; and religious leaders can play constructive roles in peacebuilding and community development.

Overall assessment: Pakistan's religious future will be shaped by the interaction of demography, law, education, economic opportunity, institutional capacity and social trust. Protecting the dignity and lawful rights of all citizens is not only a religious-freedom objective; it is also a foundation for long-term national stability and development.

Selected sources and data note

Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 7th Population & Housing Census 2023, Table 9: Population by sex, religion and rural/urban; Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, especially Articles 2, 20–22, 25 and 36; Pakistan Ministry of Human Rights, Constitution and Fundamental Rights overview; U.S. Department of State, International Religious Freedom reporting for Pakistan. Religious demographic figures in this report follow the 2023 census categories; where the census does not provide a breakdown, the report does not present an estimated figure as an official census result.