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STATE POLICIES AND THE MARGINALIZATION OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES A CASE STUDY OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST CHRISTIANS IN PAKISTAN DURING THE BHUTTO AND ZIA-UL-HAQ ERAS

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Abstract

This article examines how state policies under Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971–1977) and General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988) structured and intensified the marginalization of Pakistan's Christian minority. Using a qualitative policy-legal analysis of constitutional provisions, criminal-law amendments, education and election reforms, and curriculum policy—triangulated with human-rights reports and secondary scholarship—the study traces mechanisms that converted majoritarian ideology into everyday exclusion. Under Bhutto, the 1972 nationalization of church-run schools and colleges eroded the Christian community's educational capital and institutional autonomy, with denationalization proceeding only partially decades later (Centre for Social Justice [CSJ], 2020). Under Zia, Islamization transformed legal and political opportunity structures: the Hudood Ordinances re-ordered evidentiary standards and criminalized conduct in ways that disproportionately exposed minority—and especially Christian—women to vulnerability (Lau, 2007); blasphemy provisions were expanded (PPC §§295-B in 1982; 295-C in 1986), catalyzing case growth and chilling expression (Amnesty International, 1994; International Commission of Jurists, 2015); and the 1985 separate-electorate system segmented Christians from mainstream electoral competition, diluting voice and bargaining power until its reversal in 2002 (Ahmad, 2023). School curricula over this period further entrenched symbolic exclusion by narrowing depictions of non-Muslim citizens (Nayyar & Salim, 2003). The analysis shows path-dependent continuity across regimes: economic dispossession (via nationalization), legal precarity (via criminal-law changes), political disenfranchisement (via separate electorates), and cultural othering (via curricula) formed an interlocking policy ecology of marginalization. The article concludes with a reform agenda centered on procedural safeguards in speech-related offences, curricular pluralism, restitution/partnership models for faith-run institutions, and minority-inclusive electoral design, offering historically grounded benchmarks for rights-compliant policy in contemporary Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

Religious minorities have occupied an uneasy place in Pakistan's constitutional imagination and policy practice. While the state's founding discourse promised equal citizenship irrespective of faith, institutional developments—especially during the 1970s and 1980s—produced rules and routines that constrained minority participation and security in everyday life. This article examines how state policies under Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971–1977) and General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988) structured the marginalization of Christians, one of Pakistan's largest non-Muslim communities. Rather than treating "marginalization" as a purely sociological outcome, the analysis traces the policy mechanisms—constitutional choices, criminal-law amendments, education and election reforms, and curricular directives—through which majoritarian commitments were translated into administrative practice and legal exposure (Lau, 2007; Nayyar & Salim, 2003).

The 1970s marked a pivotal constitutional and institutional reset. The 1973 Constitution declared Islam the state religion (Art. 2) and, through subsequent constitutional politics, elevated the Objectives Resolution to justiciable status in 1985 (Art. 2A), reshaping the normative hierarchy within which minority rights claims would be adjudicated (Government of Pakistan, 1973/1985). These moves coexisted with fundamental-rights guarantees, producing a constitutional duality: minorities were formally protected as citizens while the state simultaneously committed itself to an Islamic identity that could—and often did—inform legislation, judicial reasoning, and administrative discretion (International Commission of Jurists [ICJ], 2015). This tension became more consequential across the Bhutto and Zia eras as policy domains central to Christian associational life—education, political representation, and speech-related criminal law—were successively reworked.

Under Bhutto, the most consequential policy for Christian institutions was the 1972 nationalization of privately managed schools and colleges. Church-run education networks, long-standing anchors of social mobility for many Christian families, were absorbed into state control. Although motivated by egalitarian and state-building rationales, nationalization diminished the community's organizational autonomy and eroded accumulated educational capital; partial denationalization decades later did not fully restore lost capacity or trust (Centre for Social Justice [CSJ], 2020). The period also witnessed constitutional and legislative developments that, while not directed at Christians per se, entrenched a politics of religious delimitation (notably the 1974 measures concerning Ahmadis), signaling a state willingness to legislate religious boundaries—a precedent with chilling downstream effects for all minorities navigating public space and rights claims (ICJ, 2015).

Zia's military regime intensified the religio-legal turn. The Islamization program introduced the Hudood Ordinances (1979) and associated evidentiary and procedural shifts that re-ordered legal risk for women and minorities, including Christians (Lau, 2007). In parallel, amendments to the Pakistan Penal Code expanded blasphemy-related offences—§295-B (1982) and §295-C (1986)—lowering thresholds for accusation and raising the stakes of speech, with documented growth in case filings and patterns of misuse for personal or communal vendettas (Amnesty International, 1994; ICJ, 2015). The legal environment thereby created a "high-surveillance, low-due-process" zone around interfaith relations, where Christians faced outsized vulnerability to accusation and protracted litigation regardless of ultimate conviction outcomes (ICJ, 2015).

Electoral engineering further segmented minority voice. In 1985, the regime reintroduced separate electorates for non-Muslims, relocating Christians to distinct rolls and reserved seats rather than allowing participation in general constituencies. While framed as guaranteed representation, the design diluted bargaining power, limited constituency linkages with Muslim majorities, and incentivized patronage over programmatic politics; reversal did not occur until 2002 (Ahmad, 2023). These institutional choices narrowed policy feedback channels through which Christian communities might contest

discriminatory practices or influence mainstream parties' platforms.

Cultural policy operated alongside law and elections. Curriculum and textbook directives from the 1970s through early 2000s encouraged increasingly narrow depictions of citizenship, national identity, and the role of non-Muslim Pakistanis. Studies have documented how social studies and language texts often portrayed minorities as external to the core national narrative or framed them primarily through a tolerance discourse rather than equal belonging, entrenching symbolic othering within formative school experiences (Nayyar & Salim, 2003). For Christian students and teachers, this symbolic regime combined with legal and electoral changes to produce an interlocking "policy ecology" of marginalization across school, court, and ballot box.

This article proceeds from three research questions. First, which specific state policies under Bhutto and Zia most directly affected the rights, security, and political efficacy of Christians? Second, through what mechanisms did these policies translate into everyday exclusion—administrative, legal, and cultural? Third, what lessons emerge for rights-compliant reform today? Methodologically, the study uses qualitative policy-legal analysis: close reading of constitutional provisions and statutory instruments; assessment of criminal-law amendments and their enforcement patterns; review of education and electoral policies; and triangulation with human-rights reporting and scholarly literature (Amnesty International, 1994; CSJ, 2020; ICJ, 2015; Lau, 2007; Nayyar & Salim, 2003). The unit of analysis is the Christian minority as a community embedded in institutions (schools, churches, NGOs) and legal regimes (criminal procedure, elections), with attention to gendered effects and regional variation where evidence permits.

Three contributions are offered. Substantively, the article shows that marginalization was not a single policy's by-product but the cumulative effect of intersecting domains—education, criminal law, elections, and curricula—whose feedback loops amplified vulnerability over time. Analytically, it reframes the Bhutto and Zia eras not as discrete ruptures but as a sequence in which nationalization under Bhutto weakened community institutions that might otherwise have buffered the harsher legal-political environment Zia later built. Normatively, it distills a reform agenda attentive to both immediate safeguards (e.g., procedural protections in speech-related offences) and structural redesign (e.g., inclusive electoral rules; pluralist curriculum standards; durable partnerships for faith-run schools) (Ahmad, 2023; CSJ, 2020; ICJ, 2015; Nayyar & Salim, 2003).

Two limitations should be noted. First, the analysis relies largely on documentary sources and secondary studies; under-reporting and survivorship bias in case data, especially for blasphemy accusations and local administrative practices, caution against simple inference from reported counts (ICJ, 2015). Second, a focus on Christians enables conceptual clarity but cannot capture the full heterogeneity of minority experiences across groups and regions; parallels and divergences with other communities (e.g., Hindus, Ahmadis, Sikhs) are flagged only where they illuminate mechanisms rather than to generalize claims.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section 1 reconstructs the Bhutto-era policy environment with emphasis on education, governance and constitutional politics. Section 2 analyzes Zia's Islamization, focusing on criminal-law amendments, evidentiary standards, and separate electorates. Section 3 examines curricular change as a vector of symbolic exclusion. Section 4 synthesizes mechanisms across domains to model the policy ecology of marginalization. Section 5 sets out a reform agenda grounded in historical lessons and contemporary constitutional constraints.

Review of Literature

Scholarship on Pakistan's treatment of religious minorities generally converges on the 1970s–1980s as a decisive period in which constitutional commitments, criminal law, education policy, and electoral engineering combined to narrow the civic space for non-Muslims—Christians in

particular. This review synthesizes five strands: (1) legal-institutional analyses of Islamization; (2) studies of criminal-law change (Hudood and blasphemy provisions); (3) work on electoral design and political representation; (4) research on education governance and curriculum; and (5) community-focused and cross-sector assessments of Christian marginalization. It also identifies gaps this article addresses—especially the need to connect discrete policy domains into a single causal account of marginalization across the Bhutto (1971–1977) and Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988) eras.

Legal-institutional accounts of Islamization and constitutional politics

Foundational legal histories emphasize how Islam's constitutional status, interpreted through judicial and bureaucratic practice, reshaped Pakistan's law after the 1970s. Mehdi's monograph details the trajectories through which "Islamization" altered constitutional and criminal law, with special attention to the late-1970s turn under Zia (Mehdi, 1994/2013). Lau's work complements this by tracing the judiciary's role in integrating Islamic principles into the legal system, showing how doctrinal shifts reverberated through criminal and procedural law (Lau, 2006). Together, these studies frame the Bhutto-to-Zia sequence as a move from institutional experimentation to system-wide entrenchment, providing the backdrop against which minority rights became increasingly contingent on majoritarian readings of Islam and state identity.

Criminal-law change: Hudood Ordinances and evidentiary regimes

On criminal law, the Hudood Ordinances (1979) are central. Lau's detailed review in the *Washington & Lee Law Review* documents how the Zina Ordinance reordered sexual-offence classifications and evidentiary thresholds, producing documented harms for women and heightening legal exposure for minorities who often lacked political protection or access to quality defense (Lau, 2007). Subsequent legal commentary situates the Hudood framework within a broader, path-dependent Islamization that constrained later reform attempts (Mehdi, 1994/2013; Lau, 2006).

Blasphemy provisions: design, implementation, and misuse

The literature consistently links the expansion of "offences relating to religion" in the Pakistan Penal Code to the Zia years—especially §295-B (1982) and §295-C (1986). Early human-rights monitoring flagged patterns of accusation and detention that disproportionately implicated non-Muslims, including Christians (Amnesty International, 1994). Legal scholarship by Siddique and Hayat (2008) provides an exhaustive doctrinal and empirical critique, identifying "design defects" (strict liability tendencies, vague mens rea, and punitive ceilings) that incentivize accusations and chill expression. Implementation studies then show how trial-level practice compounds these defects: the ICJ (2015) documents systemic fair-trial violations and the social pressure surrounding proceedings. Comparative and advocacy reports broaden the canvas, indicating that Pakistan's framework functions as a form of legalized discrimination against minorities (Freedom House, 2010). Later case-based analyses (e.g., post-1988) are often used heuristically to illustrate the dynamics set in motion in the 1980s.

Electoral engineering and the separate-electorate system

Political-science and legal syntheses converge on the 1985 reintroduction of separate electorates for non-Muslims as a crucial mechanism of political marginalization. Authoritative summaries (Law Library of Congress) trace the shift from joint electorates in 1970/1977 to separate rolls under Zia, noting the consequences for voice, coalition-building, and constituency service; reversal came only in 2002 (Ahmad, 2023). HRCP's field-based assessment of electoral participation shows how—even after the reintroduction of joint electorates—structural and party-system incentives continued to dampen minority bargaining power (HRCP, 2013). Broader work on Pakistan's party politics (e.g., Waseem) situates these institutional choices

within a longer pattern of executive-led rule-changes with enduring feedback effects on representation.

Education governance: nationalization and Christian institutions

A smaller, policy-history literature examines the 1972 nationalization of private schools and colleges under Bhutto—a reform that disproportionately affected church-run institutions long central to Christian social mobility. Civil-society research by the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) synthesizes archival material and interviews to argue that nationalization eroded Christian institutional capital and autonomy, with partial, uneven denationalization decades later (CSJ, 2020). Academic overviews similarly describe lasting sector-wide effects on school governance, performance, and community relations (Mehboob, 2014). This strand underscores how a reform framed in egalitarian terms could unintentionally (or secondarily) marginalize a minority through loss of organizational control and voice in education policy.

Curriculum and symbolic exclusion

Textbook studies—most prominently *The Subtle Subversion* (SDPI)—document how curricular content from the 1970s onward promoted a monolithic Islamic national identity, with non-Muslim Pakistanis portrayed as peripheral or "tolerated" rather than equal citizens (Nayyar & Salim, 2003). Subsequent indices and sector reports (e.g., Center for Law & Justice) note persistent implementation gaps despite later policy pledges to accommodate Ethics in lieu of compulsory Islamic Studies for non-Muslim students, indicating the durability of symbolic exclusion in classroom practice.

Community-focused scholarship on Christians in Pakistan

Interdisciplinary work connects this policy changes to Christians lived experience. Historical and sociological studies highlight "double discrimination," where religious minority status intersects with occupational and caste hierarchies, amplifying vulnerability in workplaces and local bureaucracies (Fuchs, 2020). City-level case studies (e.g., Lahore) trace how administrative practices, neighborhood segregation, and school access mediate national policy effects at the local level (Chawla, 2019). Policy-advocacy syntheses and governmental country notes gather incident data (attacks on churches, patterns of accusation) and qualitative testimony to map trends in risk and protection over time.

Theoretical lenses: policy feedback and path dependence

Beyond Pakistan-specific literature, comparative political science offers tools for explaining persistence across regime change. Pierson's accounts of policy feedback and path dependence suggest that once institutions allocate resources and redefine interpretive frames, they generate constituencies and routines that resist reversal—even when formal rules change (Pierson, 1993, 2000). Applied here, these frameworks help explain how Bhutto-era nationalization (weakening Christian institutions) interacted with Zia-era criminal-law and electoral changes to produce a self-reinforcing "policy ecology" of marginalization—where diminished organizational capacity reduced political leverage precisely as legal risk increased.

Gaps and implications

Three gaps emerge. First, domain-siloed analyses (criminal law, elections, education, curriculum) seldom model cross-domain interactions; this article addresses that by tracing interlocking mechanisms across the Bhutto and Zia periods. Second, while legal critiques of the blasphemy framework are abundant, fewer studies link those laws' *introduction* under Zia to contemporaneous changes in representation and schooling that shaped Christian communities' ability to seek redress. Third, micro-level, Christian-specific evidence from the 1970s–1980s remains limited relative to post-1988 case material; this study triangulates legal texts with institutional histories (e.g., nationalization) and human-rights reporting to bridge that temporal gap. (Amnesty

International, 1994; ICJ, 2015; CSJ, 2020; Nayyar & Salim, 2003).

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, single-case historical–institutional design focused on Pakistan during the Bhutto (1971–1977) and Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988) eras, with the Christian community as the focal unit of analysis. The objective is explanatory rather than merely descriptive: to identify which state policies mattered, how they interacted across domains (criminal law, elections, education, curricula), and through what mechanisms they produced marginalization. The design combines doctrinal legal analysis, process tracing, and documentary content analysis to connect formal rules with administrative practice and lived effects.

Primary sources include constitutional and statutory texts and their official histories: the Constitution of 1973 and subsequent amendments (including the incorporation of the Objectives Resolution as Article 2A), Gazette of Pakistan notifications and ordinances (e.g., the 1972 measures nationalizing private educational institutions; the 1979 Hudood Ordinances), Pakistan Penal Code amendments expanding offences relating to religion (§295-B, §295-C), the 1985 electoral orders reintroducing separate electorates, rules of criminal procedure and evidence where implicated, judgments of the Federal Shariat Court, the Shariat Appellate Bench, and the Supreme Court, as well as contemporaneous parliamentary debates and standing-committee reports. Education and curriculum materials are treated as primary where issued by the state: National Education Policies (1972 and 1979), textbook-board syllabi, teachers' guides, and directives concerning Ethics/Islamiat options for non-Muslim students. Election Commission records, delimitation orders, and notifications concerning reserved seats and voter rolls are also treated as primary. Where available, contemporaneous press reports (e.g., *Dawn*; *Jang*) are used as primary eyewitness documentation for specific episodes, cross-checked against official records.

Secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed scholarship on Islamization and Pakistani public law; monographs and articles on the Hudood regime, blasphemy provisions, and constitutional politics; political-science work on electoral design and party competition; education-policy studies on curriculum and textbook content; and rights reports and syntheses produced by civil-society organizations (e.g., Amnesty International, International Commission of Jurists, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Centre for Social Justice). These materials provide theory, context, and prior findings against which primary-document interpretations are triangulated.

Document selection follows purposive sampling anchored to the period 1971–1988 with bounded spillovers where a measure's effects or implementation straddle the boundary (e.g., partial denationalization decades later, or post-1988 litigation rooted in 1980s laws). Inclusion criteria are (a) legal or administrative instruments directly affecting criminal liability, political representation, education governance, or curriculum; (b) state documents that articulate intent or interpretive guidance; and (c) contemporaneous accounts that credibly evidence implementation. For case episodes (e.g., school nationalization, introduction of §295-B/§295-C, separate electorates), theoretical sampling is used to capture "high-salience" instances with multiple, independent sources.

Analysis proceeds in three steps. First, a chronological event ledger is compiled, coding each item by domain (criminal law, elections, education, curriculum), instrument type (constitution/ordinance/rule/judgment/notification), and intended beneficiaries or targets. Second, within-case process tracing links instruments to observable implications for Christians through diagnostic evidence (e.g., shifts in prosecutorial practice, changes in school governance, alterations to voter-roll construction), seeking "hoop" and "smoking-gun" tests where feasible. Third, cross-domain synthesis applies a policy-feedback/path-dependence lens to identify reinforcing mechanisms—legal exposure, political voice,

organizational capacity, and symbolic status—and to model how Bhutto-era institutional changes conditioned the impact of Zia-era Islamization.

To enhance credibility and dependability, the study uses triangulation across source types (legal texts, administrative records, press, scholarly analyses), maintains an auditable chain-of-evidence (source matrix and coding memos), and practices reflexive memoing on interpretive choices. Because this research involves documents only and no human subjects, formal ethics review is not required; nonetheless, quotations from sensitive materials avoid naming private individuals unnecessarily, and community-level effects are discussed without exposing vulnerable people. Limitations include archival gaps, under-reporting of blasphemy accusations at local levels, potential bias in advocacy reports, and the difficulty of attributing community-level outcomes to single instruments. The aim is analytic generalization—explicating mechanisms that account for observed patterns—rather than statistical inference, with transferability supported through thick description of context and policy design.

Research Gap

Existing work is rich but siloed: legal critiques of Hudood and blasphemy laws, studies of curricula, and accounts of electoral engineering rarely integrate into a single causal narrative linking Bhutto- and Zia-era choices to Christian marginalization (Lau, 2007; Siddique & Hayat, 2008; Nayyar & Salim, 2003). The temporal connection between Bhutto's 1972 school nationalization—weakening Christian institutional capacity—and the 1980s Islamization and separate electorates remains undertheorized (Centre for Social Justice, 2020; Ahmad, 2023). Mechanisms are often asserted rather than process-traced with diagnostic evidence, and minority-specific, gender-sensitive analyses are scarce (International Commission of Jurists, 2015). Subnational implementation—textbook boards, voter-roll construction, police/prosecutorial practice—also lacks curated documentary baselines. Finally, comparative theories of policy feedback and path dependence are seldom applied to Pakistan's minority governance, leaving persistence and reinforcement under-explained (Pierson, 2000).

Historical–Constitutional Baseline (Pre-1971)

Pakistan's founding discourse blended a promise of equal citizenship with a normative emphasis on Islam as the moral horizon of the new state. The Objectives Resolution (1949) famously pledged that "adequate provision shall be made for the minorities to freely profess and practice their religions," while simultaneously vesting sovereignty in the Almighty and situating democratic authority within "limits prescribed by Him." This duality—rights universalism alongside a confessional state identity—reappeared across constitutional experiments of the 1950s and 1960s and seeded an enduring ambiguity: minorities were protected as citizens but were also governed through institutions willing to encode theological boundaries in public law (Mehdi, 1994/2013). For Christians—long embedded in education, health, and urban labor—this meant their organizational footprint was tolerated and at times celebrated, yet always subject to the possibility of rule changes that could reclassify institutional autonomy as a dispensable policy variable. The baseline matters because it clarifies what changed in the 1970s–1980s: not a sudden repudiation of rights talk, but a decisive recalibration of constitutional priorities, legal risk, and administrative routines that cumulatively narrowed the space for minorities to operate as equal partners in national life (International Commission of Jurists [ICJ], 2015; Nayyar & Salim, 2003).

Bhutto Era (1971–1977): Institutional Reconfiguration

The Bhutto years were transformed across constitutional and policy arenas. The 1973 Constitution affirmed fundamental rights, created a robust catalogue of liberties, and included safeguards for religious practice; yet it also declared Islam the state religion (Article 2), laying down a normative compass that future legislatures and courts could read in majoritarian terms. Equally consequential was the subsequent

elevation of the Objectives Resolution into substantive constitutional text (Article 2A), a move finalized under Zia but grounded in the 1970s' effort to reconcile democratic rule with a confessional state identity (Government of Pakistan, 1973/1985). The coexistence of rights guarantees, and a privileging of Islamic identity set the terrain for law, administration, and pedagogy. In minority governance, two signals stood out. First, the 1974 Second Amendment, which declared Ahmadis non-Muslim, revealed a willingness to legislate theological boundaries—an action not directed at Christians but one that normalized state arbitration of religious identity. Second, a broader state-building agenda sought to bring key social sectors, especially education—under tighter public control, with downstream effects for communities whose institutional capital lay in private schools and colleges (ICJ, 2015; Mehdi, 1994/2013).

The 1972 nationalization of privately managed education was the most immediate shock to Christian associational life. Church-run schools and colleges, many ranked among the country's most reputable, were absorbed into government management. Proponents framed the step as egalitarian—aimed at leveling access and curbing elite capture—while critics warned of bureaucratization, resource dilution, and the erosion of pluralist models that had delivered high-quality outcomes. For Christian communities, nationalization translated into a loss of institutional autonomy, donor confidence, and the ability to anchor community mobility through faith-run pedagogy and values; decades-later denationalization was partial and uneven, and the relational trust between state and church actors proved harder to rebuild than property titles (Centre for Social Justice [CSJ], 2020; Mehboob, 2014). Even where school premises remained operational, the governance shift reconfigured incentives: principals became civil servants answerable upward rather than community stewards accountable laterally; hiring and curricular decisions moved to distant bureaucracies; and parent-teacher linkages that had served as informal representation channels weakened.

Nationalization also carried political feedback. By transferring a dense network of Christian-led institutions into the state apparatus, Bhutto-era policy effectively reduced the organizational capacity that had given the community bargaining leverage with local administrators and elected representatives. This mattered because the later 1980s legal-political environment—more punitive on speech and more segmented in representation—arrived precisely when Christians' institutional "voice" was thinnest. In that sense, the 1970s constitute a critical juncture not because they introduced direct anti-Christian laws, but because they softened the buffers—schools, associations, and alumni networks—that convert formal rights into practical power (CSJ, 2020; Pierson, 2000).

Zia-ul-Haq Era (1977–1988): Islamization and Political Engineering

The Zia regime intensified the religio-legal turn and re-engineered the political system. Islamization, both as legislative program and administrative ethos, reshaped criminal law, evidence, and procedure, while electoral redesign altered the calculus of representation. The Hudood Ordinances (1979) reclassified sexual and property offences, introduced Qur'anic evidentiary categories, and adjusted punishments and standards in ways that reverberated through policing and prosecution. Though framed as the Islamization of criminal justice, the composite effect was to reorder legal risk for those with the least political insulation—women and minorities. For Christian women, the combination of social stigma, limited access to high-quality legal defense, and intersectional vulnerability (religion, class, occupation) meant the Hudood regime could transform private crises into extended entanglements with the criminal process (Lau, 2007). Even where convictions were rare or later overturned, the ordeal—pre-trial detention, reputational damage, financial exhaustion—operated as punishment by process.

In parallel, the penal code's "offences relating to religion" expanded. Section 295-B (1982) criminalized desecration of the Qur'an with severe penalties, and Section 295-C (1986)

introduced capital punishment (later mandatory through judicial interpretation) for derogatory remarks about the Prophet. Legal scholars have critiqued these provisions as design-defective: vague men's rea standards, low accusation thresholds, and penalties that create strong incentives for accusation while making bail and fair trial harder to secure (Siddique & Hayat, 2008). Human-rights monitoring from the 1990s onward documented case growth and patterns of misuse, including the instrumentalization of blasphemy accusations to settle personal scores or displace minority communities from coveted properties; these reports underscored how social pressure around trial venues and police reluctance to cross-examine complainants intensified the peril regardless of eventual acquittal (Amnesty International, 1994; ICJ, 2015). The legal structure thus created a "chilling perimeter" around interfaith discourse: Christians as a small, visible minority learned to minimize exposure in public speech, publishing, and even neighborhood disputes lest routine frictions be escalated through penal instruments.

Electoral engineering further segmented minority voice. In 1985, the regime reintroduced separate electorates for non-Muslims, allocating reserved seats to Christians and other minorities elected by voters placed on separate rolls rather than participating in general constituencies. This is sometimes defended as guaranteed representation; yet political-science analysis shows that separate electorates fragment coalition-building and strip minorities of district-level bargaining power: mainstream candidates now have little electoral incentive to court minority voters, while minority legislators elected on segregated rolls, depend more on executive patronage than on geographically rooted constituencies. The result is representation without leverage—a presence in the legislature that secures symbolic inclusion but weakens policy influence. Separate electorates persisted beyond Zia, with reversal only in 2002, which illustrates how institutional choices outlast regimes once party strategies and administrative routines adjust around them (Ahmad, 2023; Human Rights Commission of Pakistan [HRCP], 2013).

Curriculum policy has moved in tandem. Textbook boards and education ministries institutionalized content that foregrounded a monolithic Islamic national identity, framed citizenship through religious idiom, and often treated non-Muslim Pakistanis as peripheral objects of "tolerance" rather than equal co-owners of the political project. Studies in the early 2000s, reviewing curricular materials from the previous decades, documented recurring patterns: conflation of Muslim identity with national loyalty; historical narratives that underplay non-Muslim contributions; and pedagogical cues that flatten the diversity of Pakistani society (Nayyar & Salim, 2003). For Christian students and teachers, the school became both a space of belonging and a subtle site of symbolic othering; even where administrative accommodations existed (e.g., Ethics in lieu of compulsory Islamic Studies), implementation lagged, textbooks lagged further, and classroom practice lagged most of all. The combined effect of criminal, electoral, and curricular change was thus to heighten legal exposure, dilute political leverage, and inscribe second-class belonging in the routines of schooling.

Cross-Domain Mechanisms: A Policy Ecology of Marginalization

A central claim of this article is that marginalization did not flow from a single discriminatory statute but from the intersection of multiple domains whose feedback loops reinforced one another. Reduced organizational capacity following school nationalization diminished the Christian community's ability to mobilize alumni networks, engage bureaucrats, and negotiate with political parties. Precisely as that capacity declined, criminal-law changes increased the cost of public presence: speaking, publishing, or engaging in contentious local politics carried higher legal risk. Meanwhile, separate electorates further narrowed channels of collective action by lowering mainstream parties' electoral incentives to respond to minority

concerns and by encouraging patronage-mediated, executive-dependent advocacy. Curriculum reforms then normalized a symbolic narrative in which non-Muslims were "tolerated" but not central, subtly dampening the solidarities that might otherwise transform individual victimization into cross-community mobilization (Nayyar & Salim, 2003; Pierson, 2000).

These domains did not merely coexist; they interacted. Consider a stylized chain: a Christian-run school loses autonomy (1972), reducing opportunities to cultivate community leaders with ties to ministers and senior bureaucrats; Zia-era Islamization then raises criminal exposure through Hudood and blasphemy provisions, increasing the probability that a routine dispute—over land, labor, or neighborhood friction—acquires a penal dimension; separate electorates remove district-level electoral incentives for mainstream politicians to intervene early; and curriculum cues reduce empathy among peers and teachers, making it harder to build coalitions that would push back against misuse. The outcome is not just vulnerability to discrete abuses but a durable "policy ecology" in which everyday risk is structurally higher and recourse structurally weaker (Amnesty International, 1994; ICJ, 2015; Lau, 2007).

Subnational and Social Heterogeneity

The policy ecology varied across provinces and social strata. Punjab—home to the largest Christian population—concentrated both the benefits of Christian institutional presence (schools, hospitals) and the costs of legal-political shifts (dense policing, intense party competition). Urban centers like Lahore and Faisalabad offered more media attention and civil-society support, sometimes enabling swift mobilization in the face of accusations or neighborhood targeting; yet urban property values also raised the stakes of communal disputes, and political entrepreneurs could instrumentalize religion to mobilize supporters in crowded constituencies. Sindh displayed different dynamics: a smaller Christian population, a distinct party system, and localized administrative cultures shaped the trajectories of case incidence and protection. Rural settings introduced yet other layers: social hierarchy, landowner influence, and thinner legal aid capacity often magnified the risks of accusation and the costs of legal defense (Chawla, 2019; HRCP, 2013).

Heterogeneity was also occupational and gendered. A significant share of Christians in urban Punjab occupied sanitation and low-wage service roles linked to municipal authorities and private contractors. Employment precarity—few formal contracts, dependence on supervisors—made it harder to contest discrimination or coordinate collective action in response to legal targeting. Christian women faced compounded constraints: social stigma around sexual misconduct claims rendered Hudood-era allegations especially devastating, and economic dependence limited exit options during extended litigation (Lau, 2007). Intersectionality thus shaped exposure and resilience: the same legal rule produced different lived outcomes depending on class, caste, occupation, and gender (Fuchs, 2020).

Community Responses and Mediating Actors

Christians did not respond as passive subjects. Church networks, parish-based associations, and civil-society organizations built legal-aid pipelines, publicized cases to national and international audiences, and negotiated accommodations with local officials. Some dioceses invested in human-rights desks or partnered with NGOs to document incidents and train community paralegals. Lawyers' collectives and bar associations occasionally played protective roles, providing pro bono defense or facilitating bail; at other times, professional bodies reflected the same winds that buffeted politics, and social pressure constrained advocacy (HRCP, 2013). Media strategies evolved: while sensationalist coverage could inflame tensions, sustained relationships with reporters sometimes enabled corrective narratives and mobilized urban publics during crises. Educational institutions, even nationalized ones—remained important: committed principals and teachers cultivated cultures of respect, created extracurricular platforms for interfaith dialogue, and mentored

students into civic participation. These micro-counter movements did not erase structural disadvantages, but they often mitigated harm in concrete cases, bought time for appeals, and kept the question of equal citizenship in public view (Amnesty International, 1994; CSJ, 2020).

Church-state engagement also had policy dividends. In some districts, diocesan leaders negotiated partial returns or management contracts for formerly nationalized schools; in others, they secured curricular accommodations for ethics and mobilized alumni to advocate for textbook revisions. International connections—missionary networks, ecumenical bodies, and human-rights organizations—supplied documentation, small grants for legal defense, and transnational attention that made abusive local officials think twice. The presence of these mediating actors underscores a key analytic point: even in adverse legal environments, governance outcomes are not predetermined; relational capacity can widen or narrow the space of the possible.

International and Comparative Reference Points (Within Period Constraints)

The 1970s and 1980s coincided with the consolidation of post-war human-rights norms and increased monitoring by non-governmental organizations. Reports by Amnesty International, ICJ, and later Freedom House placed Pakistan's blasphemy and Hudood frameworks within a comparative catalogue of speech-related and gendered rights restrictions (Amnesty International, 1994; ICJ, 2015). This attention did not merely shame; it also structured domestic debate. Lawyers and legislators referenced international arguments when advocating procedural safeguards; editorial boards invoked "global standards" to seek reform; and minority advocates learned to translate local grievances into rights language legible to donors and diplomats. At the same time, the geopolitics of the Cold War, regional conflict, and refugee flows meant international leverage was uneven. External attention waxed and waned with strategic priorities, and reform-minded officials within Pakistan operated under constraints that comparative checklists could not map. The comparative horizon thus provided frames and allies, but it rarely supplied the sustained pressure needed to unwind deeply embedded institutional choices.

Legacies and Spillovers Beyond 1988

Many Zia-era legal and political instruments outlived the regime. Separate electorates were reversed only in 2002; Hudood remained imperfectly reformed for decades; and blasphemy provisions not only persisted but acquired a jurisprudential afterlife through court interpretations that tightened enforcement pathways. Meanwhile, Bhutto-era nationalization left a long tail: piecemeal denationalization and management hand-backs restored ownership in some cases but not the relational trust, governance capacity, or alumni ecosystems that had once multiplied community voice (CSJ, 2020). Curricular revision has likewise proved slow and contested: even where policy allows Ethics for non-Muslim students, textbook production cycles, teacher training, and exam design often lag behind, reproducing symbolic exclusions that policy documents on paper disavow (Nayyar & Salim, 2003). These legacies matter for contemporary reform because they reveal how early choices reorganize political incentives and administrative capacities, making later course corrections costly and incomplete (Pierson, 2000).

Synthesis: Theory-Driven Explanation

Bringing the strands together, the causal story is one of path dependence and policy feedback. Bhutto-era nationalization weakened Christian institutional capital—buildings and budgets, but also relationships and reputations that had converted social work into political leverage. Zia-era Islamization then raised the stakes of public presence—criminalizing broader domains of speech and tightening evidentiary regimes—while separate electorates severed the district-level incentives that might have prompted mainstream politicians to defend minority constituents early. Curriculum policy reinforced a narrative in which non-Muslims were ancillary to the nation's

core identity, dampening the propensity of peers and officials to perceive minority threats as threats to the polity itself. Through feedback, each domain made the others stickier: diminished organizational capacity lowered the probability of successful legal mobilization; legal risk made political coalition-building costlier; and segmented representation reduced the payoff to parties for investing in minority protection. Over time, the system settled into a low-equilibrium of minority rights in which shocks—accusations, local conflicts, rumor—convert readily into crises (Amnesty International, 1994; ICJ, 2015; Lau, 2007; Pierson, 2000).Process tracing within this framework clarifies mechanisms. In education, takeovers and bureaucratic replacements reduced lateral accountability to communities, altering how quickly school-level disputes escalated beyond principals' control. In criminal justice, police and prosecutors learned to navigate Hudood and blasphemy rules defensively, sometimes preferring arrest and charge to discretionary de-escalation. In elections, party organizers optimized for majoritarian payoffs, investing energy where votes were concentrated and leaving minority outreach to symbolic gestures. In pedagogy, classroom narratives socialize students into a national story with narrow boundaries, making interfaith solidarity less automatic. None of these mechanisms presuppose malice; they reflect rational responses to institutional incentives. But their cumulative effect is discriminatory in practice, particularly for a small, visible, and occupationally clustered minority like Pakistan's Christians.

Policy Implications

A historically grounded reform agenda should be incremental but systemic, addressing each domain while recognizing their interactions. In criminal law, the priority is procedural: tighten men's rea and evidentiary thresholds for speech-related offences; codify safeguards against bad-faith complaints (e.g., penalties for proven false accusations); strengthen bail norms; and institutionalize witness protection to reduce mob pressure around trials (ICJ, 2015; Siddique & Hayat, 2008). Training for police and prosecutors should stress early de-escalation in speech cases and clarify that preventive detention is not a default substitute for investigation. Judicial practice can be guided through appellate benchmarks that foreground proportionality and fair-trial guarantees.

In representation, durable inclusion requires mainstreaming, not segregation. Joint electorates should be complemented by party-internal reforms: candidate selection rules that reserve a share of winnable general seats for minority nominees; constituency outreach metrics that reward local chapters for demonstrable interfaith engagement; and formal complaint pathways within parties for minority members to trigger leadership attention. Reserved seats can remain as a floor of presence, but their function should be redesigned to avoid executive dependency—e.g., allocating them proportionally to party vote shares while requiring parties to nominate from transparent minority caucus lists (Ahmad, 2023; HRCP, 2013).

Education policy can rebuild Christian organizational capacity without reproducing pre-1972 inequalities. "Partnership schools" or management contracts with faith-run organizations—anchored in performance-based funding and audited learning outcomes—can reconnect communities to institutions that double as civic representation nodes. Curriculum reform should move beyond token Ethics options to curricular pluralism: textbooks that narrate the contributions of non-Muslim Pakistanis to the independence movement, armed forces, arts, sciences, and social services; teacher training that equips educators to handle interfaith content confidently; and exam design that tests civic competencies rather than doctrinal recall (Nayyar & Salim, 2003). These steps operate not only as symbols but as investments in the social infrastructure that renders rights real.

Administrative practice is the frontier where law meets life. Provincial home departments and police chiefs can issue standing orders on handling blasphemy complaints (triage protocols, senior-officer sign-off before arrests, rapid transfer to secure venues), while prosecutors general can adopt screening standards that privilege evidence

quality over accuser volume. District education officers can be mandated to track Ethics implementation for non-Muslim students and report publicly on compliance. Election administrators can work with civil registries to minimize errors in minority voter rolls and facilitate rapid redress. None of these measures require constitutional surgery; they require leadership signals, bureaucratic clarity, and modest resource allocations.

Finally, the reform narrative should be framed as fidelity to Pakistan's own constitutional commitments, not as capitulation to external pressure. The constitutional text protects minority worship and equality before law; the 1973 settlement aimed at democratic inclusion; and the Objectives Resolution itself promises freedoms for all. A policy agenda that reduces speech-related abuses, mainstreams minority representation, and restores pluralist education is thus not a foreign graft but a domestic restoration project—one that strengthens the state's legitimacy by aligning everyday governance with the best of its founding promises (Government of Pakistan, 1973/1985).

Conclusion

This article set out to explain how state policies during the Bhutto (1971–1977) and Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988) eras structured the marginalization of Pakistan's Christian minority. The evidence shows that exclusion did not arise from a single law or moment but from an interlocking "policy ecology" that unfolded in sequence and then reinforced itself over time. Bhutto-era nationalization weakened Christian institutional capacity—especially the church-run schools that had long served as ladders of mobility and platforms for community voice—while constitutional politics normalized state arbitration of religious boundaries. Zia's Islamization then reconfigured criminal law, electoral rules, and curricula in ways that raised legal exposure, diluted political leverage, and narrowed symbolic belonging. Together, these choices transformed a formal promise of equal citizenship into a constrained reality in everyday life (Lau, 2007; Nayyar & Salim, 2003; International Commission of Jurists [ICJ], 2015).

Revisiting the study's questions clarifies the causal chain. First, which policies mattered most? Four domains stand out: education governance (the 1972 nationalization and partial, uneven denationalization), criminal law (Hudood and the expansion of "offences relating to religion," notably §§295-B/C), electoral design (the 1985 separate-electorate regime), and curriculum directives that centered a monolithic national identity. Second, how did these policies operate? Nationalization eroded organizational autonomy and bargaining power precisely where Christian institutions were strongest; Hudood and blasphemy provisions lowered accusation thresholds and increased the costs of public presence; separate electorates segmented representation and encouraged patronage dependence; and textbooks and classroom practices cemented second-class belonging. Third, what lessons emerge? Policies interact: changes that shrink community capacity today increase vulnerability to legal and political shocks tomorrow, while symbolic exclusions in schooling shape the social reception of rights claims across generations (Siddique & Hayat, 2008; CSJ, 2020; Ahmad, 2023).

The analysis also highlights heterogeneity. Provincial administrative cultures, urban–rural divides, occupational clustering, and gender intersected to produce varied pathways of risk and resilience. In urban Punjab—home to the largest Christian population—the same density that enabled mobilization also intensified contestation over property and policing. Women faced distinct harms under the Hudood framework, where reputational and procedural burdens turned allegations into prolonged ordeals, even absent conviction (Lau, 2007). These differences caution against one-size-fits-all remedies and underscore the need for subnational diagnostics alongside national reform.

Methodologically and theoretically, the article contributes by integrating siloed literatures into a single, sequenced account and by applying policy-feedback and path-dependence lenses. Once

nationalization transferred governance from community stewards to distant bureaucracies, it altered who could break the state; once separate electorates severed constituency linkages, parties rationally reallocated attention; once speech-related offences multiplied, frontline officials learned to manage risk through precautionary arrest rather than investigation. These adaptations made the original policy choices sticky, explaining why later reversals—such as the 2002 end of separate electorates or partial school returns—delivered incomplete relief. In Pierson's terms, increasing returns locked in a low equilibrium for minority rights, where each domain's incentives stabilized the others (Pierson, 2000).

At the same time, the study acknowledged limits: reliance on documentary sources in a context of under-reporting; the difficulty of attributing community-level outcomes to singular instruments; and the challenge of recovering subnational implementation records from the 1970s–1980s. These constraints counsel interpretive modesty. Yet triangulation across legal texts, administrative notifications, rights reporting, and education-sector analyses lends confidence to the central claim: the marginalization of Christians was structured and cumulative, not incidental (ICJ, 2015; CSJ, 2020; Nayyar & Salim, 2003).

The policy implications follow the logic of the diagnosis. In criminal law, reforms should tighten men's rea and evidentiary thresholds for speech-related offences, codify penalties for demonstrably false complaints, strengthen bail, and insulate trials from mob pressure through venue, witness-protection, and prosecutorial screening protocols (ICJ, 2015; Siddique & Hayat, 2008). In representation, inclusion requires mainstreaming: joint electorates paired with party-internal rules that place minority candidates on winnable general seats and reward constituency outreach to non-Muslim voters (Ahmad, 2023). In education, partnership models can re-empower faith-run institutions while anchoring them to audited learning outcomes, and curriculum reform should move beyond token "Ethics" alternatives toward pluralist narratives that recognize non-Muslim contributions to Pakistan's history and public life (Nayyar & Salim, 2003; CSJ, 2020). Finally, administrative practice is pivotal: clear policing and prosecutorial SOPs for blasphemy complaints, district-level monitoring of ethics provision and textbook compliance, and meticulous voter-roll management can reduce harm immediately while broader legal reforms proceed.

Ultimately, the reform case is not external but constitutional. Pakistan's own basic law promises equality before the law and freedom to profess and practice religion. Restoring those promises for Christians is therefore a project of constitutional fidelity, not foreign imitation. The historical record suggests that progress is possible when legal design, electoral incentives, schooling, and administrative routines are aligned toward inclusion. The task, then, is to convert that lesson into a practical agenda—incremental yet coordinated—capable of unwinding path-dependent harms and rebuilding the institutional, political, and symbolic foundations of equal citizenship (Government of Pakistan, 1973/1985; ICJ, 2015).

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