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Religion, Politics, and the Marginalization of Minorities[1]

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Abstract

This essay examines how religious interpretations, political power, and institutions interact to marginalize religious minorities. It argues that these interpretations can authorize unequal rights and acquire institutional force through constitutions, political movements, and administrative practices. Drawing on existing research, official statistics, and human rights reports, the essay develops an integrative framework of four processes: religious identity and national belonging, authoritative religious interpretations, discrimination in routine administration, and selective protection and political incentives. Pakistan serves as the main case, illustrating the coexistence of constitutional protections, religious qualifications for high office, discriminatory employment practices, and unequal security, with particular attention to the intersection of religion and social class. These processes are not confined to one country, one religious tradition, or religiously defined states, and religious exclusion can also occur under formally secular arrangements. The essay proposes reliable protection, accountable recruitment, meaningful participation, and cooperation on equal terms as complementary institutional responses. Religious pluralism can support these changes, but equal citizenship ultimately requires enforceable rights despite theological disagreement.

Keywords: *discrimination, equal citizenship, inclusion, political power, religious minorities, Pakistan*

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Introduction

Religious minorities in many countries hold formal citizenship yet encounter unequal treatment in law, employment, and protection. Constitutions may promise equality while other provisions, political movements, or routine administrative decisions attach consequences to religious identity. These gaps lie behind a question often asked in public debate: is it religion or politics that marginalizes minorities?

This essay reframes that question. It asks how religious interpretations, political power, and institutional practices interact to turn differences of religious identity into unequal rights and opportunities. Its aim is to identify the processes through which this happens and the points at which institutions can interrupt them.

I argue that religion can be an active source of minority marginalization. Religious interpretations can define legitimate authority, distinguish insiders from outsiders, and justify unequal rights. When incorporated into constitutions, political movements, and administrative practices, these distinctions can acquire coercive force. Political interests also shape which interpretations become authoritative. Religion and politics therefore need to be examined as interacting sources of power. Religious traditions contain resources for resisting exclusion, but those resources do not absolve religious doctrines, leaders, or institutions from scrutiny.

Brubaker (2012) shows that religion can help constitute nationalism rather than merely exert an external influence on it. This insight matters wherever the ideal citizen is imagined as a member of a particular faith. Worship, theology, and government remain distinct, but their connections have to be examined, not ruled out by definition.

Recent work gives the question renewed urgency. Mostofa et al. (2024) examine the relationship between religious nationalism and authoritarian politics in South Asia. Allie (2025) argues that India's 2024 election left Muslims facing both explicit political exclusion and strategic silence about their concerns. The problem extends beyond South Asia. Fox and Zellman (2025) report increases in governmental and societal discrimination against religious minorities in Western democracies between 1990 and 2023. Such findings challenge the assumption that constitutional labels or democratic elections alone tell us whether a religious community enjoys equal standing.

For the purposes of this essay, Pakistan serves as the main case. One example shows why. A government recruitment advertisement can reserve sanitation work for non-Muslims even though the Constitution prohibits religious discrimination in public service appointments, a practice documented by the National Commission for Human Rights in its report Unequal Citizens (NCHR, 2022). Here religious identity becomes a condition of employment through an ordinary administrative decision, supported by assumptions about the work appropriate to particular communities. Pakistan’s constitutional protections, religious qualifications for high office, and documented inequalities in employment allow the argument to be developed in concrete terms. Comparisons with India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Myanmar, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, France, and China identify related problems in different legal and political settings. They are illustrations rather than a matched comparative study, and the harms involved differ markedly in character and severity.

The essay draws selectively on peer-reviewed research, official statistics, legal texts, and human rights investigations. It offers a conceptual synthesis rather than a systematic review or a test of a new causal model. Its contribution is to connect research on religious and national boundaries with evidence about ordinary institutional decisions. I organize that connection around four processes: religious identity and national belonging, authoritative religious interpretations, discrimination in routine administration, and selective protection and political incentives. They provide a way of asking where exclusion arises and who has the authority to change it.

Minority status and equal citizenship

Religious minority status depends on the community and jurisdiction being considered. A group may be numerically small at national level, locally concentrated, or disadvantaged within a wider religious tradition. Here, the term includes both communities outside the majority religion and sectarian groups whose beliefs or assigned identity expose them to exclusion. Shia Muslim professionals in Pakistan, for example, may face sectarian hostility within a country whose population is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim (Syed & Ali, 2021).

Marginalization also needs a more precise meaning than social discomfort or theological disagreement. It includes legal restrictions on eligibility and rights, barriers to employment and advancement, stigmatization in everyday life, and exclusion from political decisions or effective protection. These disadvantages may accumulate. Poor access to education narrows occupational choices; concentration in low-paid work can reinforce stereotypes; limited influence can make those conditions harder to contest.

Equal citizenship is the standard I use to assess these arrangements. Citizens should have equal standing before public institutions regardless of faith. This leaves room for strong theological disagreement. A person can believe that a particular religion is true without claiming that its adherents deserve superior civic rights. The problem arises when a religious distinction determines whose testimony is trusted, who may hold office, or who receives protection. Those are questions about the exercise of power over other people.

Citizenship is not the whole basis of rights. Stateless persons and noncitizens also possess rights to religious freedom, personal security, and equal protection. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights addresses these protections in Articles 2, 9, 18, and 26. The Human Rights Committee's General Comment No. 15 explains that Covenant rights generally apply irrespective of nationality or statelessness, subject to provisions that expressly distinguish citizens from noncitizens (Human Rights Committee, 1986, paras. 1–2, 7). This distinction becomes essential when exclusion involves denial of nationality itself.

Tolerance can help sustain coexistence, but it is an insecure foundation if it means that a dominant community permits others to live and work on terms it controls. Rights must remain available when goodwill disappears. A minority employee should be able to challenge an unfair recruitment decision without first finding a sympathetic patron. A threatened community should be able to obtain protection despite opposition from influential local actors. Equal citizenship requires institutions through which those claims can be made and enforced.

Four processes through which exclusion takes hold

Wimmer's (2008) work on ethnic boundaries directs attention to institutions, power, and networks rather than treating group differences as self-explanatory. Religious and ethnic boundaries are not interchangeable, although they often overlap. The useful question is who defines membership and what follows from the definition. A label becomes an institutional barrier when it determines access to authority, resources, or recognition. The four processes below distinguish different ways this can happen, and they often operate together.

Religious identity and national belonging

The first process links the dominant religion to the image of the authentic national citizen. People outside that religion may retain formal citizenship while being treated as less representative of the nation. Repeated demands to demonstrate loyalty can follow. This connection may be expressed in political rhetoric, but constitutional and citizenship rules can also give it a durable form.

For example, Sri Lanka's Constitution gives Buddhism the foremost place while assuring the rights of other religions under specified provisions (Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 1978/2023, art. 9). Malaysia's Constitution protects the special position of Malays and natives of Sabah and Sarawak; its definition of Malay includes profession of Islam, alongside other conditions (Federal Constitution of Malaysia, 1957, arts. 153, 160(2)). The protected categories are not all defined by Islam. The point is that religion forms part of one constitutionally consequential ethnic classification.

India's Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 makes members of six named religious communities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, who entered India on or before 31 December 2014, eligible for a special route subject to statutory conditions. Muslims are excluded from that route. Ordinary citizenship provisions remain, but people classified as illegal migrants face barriers under those provisions (Citizenship Act, 1955, ss. 5–6). Jaffrelot (2021) places the amendment within a wider shift towards Hindu nationalism and ethnic democracy.

Myanmar illustrates the intersection of religious identity, ethnicity, and citizenship denial. The UN fact-finding mission traced Rohingya statelessness to a discriminatory nationality framework organized around recognized national races and its implementation (Human Rights Council, 2018, paras. 488–497). The Rohingya are predominantly Muslim, but the legal exclusion cannot be explained as a simple religious qualification. Ancestry, official ethnic recognition, and the administration of citizenship are central to it.

Authoritative religious interpretations

Religious traditions contain competing accounts of obligation, community, and legitimate authority. The second process concerns the influence particular interpretations acquire through organizations and recognized leaders. An exclusionary belief can shape interpersonal conduct without state support. Its effects become more extensive when schools, religious bodies, political movements, or public institutions teach it as authoritative or attach sanctions to disagreement.

Hunsberger and Jackson (2005) show that the relationship between religion and prejudice depends on how religion is understood and lived; diversity among believers does not make exclusionary

interpretations harmless. In Pakistan, Syed (2016) traces how militant groups, supported by a wider network of religio-political parties, clerics, and seminaries, turned particular interpretations into justifications for violence against Sunni Barelvis and Sufis, Shias, Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus, and other communities. Pio and Syed (2016) examine the persecution of Christians in the same setting. Exclusionary authority works by naming outsiders, attaching religious sanction to hostility, and raising the cost of dissent for co-religionists as well as for minorities.

There is no need to resolve a theological dispute before examining its institutional consequences. A believer may regard a militant interpretation as a distortion of faith. The researcher must still ask how that interpretation persuades followers, obtains resources, or influences officials. Sincere religious commitment and the pursuit of political advantage can coexist. An account that assumes religious language is always a cynical disguise can miss motivations that matter to the people acting on it.

Discrimination in routine administration

Exclusion often survives through ordinary decisions rather than public campaigns. Recruitment criteria can associate a community with a particular occupation. Informal networks can restrict access to vacancies. A manager may interpret majority practices as evidence of commitment or organizational fit. A discriminatory outcome need not establish personal animosity on the part of every official involved: people can administer an unequal rule conscientiously. The task is to examine the rule and its consequences as well as attitudes.

Adida et al. (2010) provide evidence from a correspondence experiment in the French labour market. In the hiring situations they tested, a fictitious applicant signalled as Muslim was about 40% as likely to receive a callback as a comparable Christian applicant of Senegalese origin. The design helped separate the religious signal from shared origin. Within the occupations tested, the study shows that legal prohibitions do not keep discrimination out of routine selection decisions.

Once repeated, these decisions can give a social hierarchy an appearance of inevitability. If members of a community are commonly found in low-paid work, employers may regard that distribution as evidence of suitability rather than ask how it was produced. Families then make educational and employment decisions within an already restricted range of opportunities.

Selective protection and political incentives

Protection may be withheld because officials fear retaliation, because they have little political incentive to act, or because they support the exclusionary demands themselves. These explanations should not be conflated. Khan's (2022) account of blasphemy politics in Pakistan examines competing claims to enforce religious and moral order. It helps explain the setting in which defending an accused person can become politically dangerous.

Wilkinson (2004) offers a different explanation for variation in state responses to Hindu–Muslim riots in India. His argument connects protection to electoral competition and the value of minority support, including to governing coalitions. Protection is therefore partly a matter of incentives confronting those who direct the police, not simply police capacity. Weak electoral incentives can discourage action without direct intimidation. Conversely, political leaders who depend on minority support may have reasons to intervene.

The processes can reinforce one another without forming a necessary sequence. Public narratives can authorize an exclusionary interpretation; administrative decisions can give it effect; selective enforcement can make resistance costly. Syed and Ali's (2021) pyramid-of-hate perspective similarly connects bias, discrimination, and violence within and beyond workplaces. Movement from prejudice to violence is neither automatic nor inevitable.

The framework and its limits

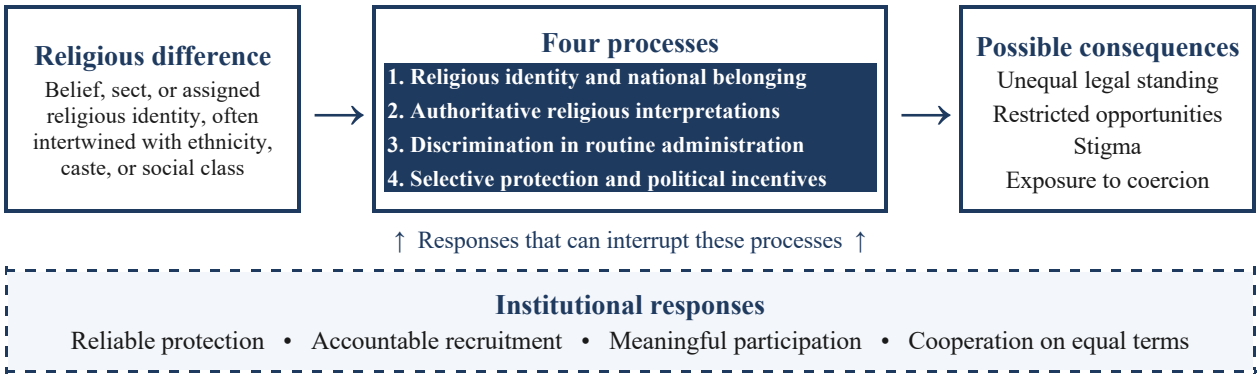
Figure 1 summarizes the relationship proposed here. Religious difference is a basis on which people may be classified; it does not determine how they will be treated. The consequences depend on the power attached to the classification and on the institutions through which it operates. Outcomes can feed back into beliefs about the community, making a historically produced disadvantage appear natural. Table 1 links the four processes to the evidence discussed and to possible responses.

The framework is an organizing argument, not a validated explanation of all the cases included. Some studies establish discrimination without identifying the beliefs of those responsible. Others examine political mobilization or legal hierarchy rather than employment outcomes. A national restriction on religious office, a hiring disadvantage, and violence under occupation require different explanations even where identity matters in each. Similar vocabulary must not substitute for evidence about the causal connection.

Several qualifications follow. Social class, caste, ethnicity, gender, and geography can shape exposure to exclusion and the ability to resist it. State capacity, war, economic dependence, and the availability of courts also matter. The four processes help locate religious identity within those conditions; they do not displace them. The proposed responses are likewise overlapping rather than paired remedies. Cooperation may improve relationships without changing eligibility for office, while a fair recruitment procedure cannot compensate for an absence of physical security.

Figure 1

How religious difference becomes minority marginalization: four processes, their consequences, and institutional responses



Note. The four processes may overlap and reinforce one another. Outcomes can also feed back into beliefs about a community.

Table 1

The four processes of minority marginalization

Process	Evidence discussed	Possible responses
1. Religious identity and national belonging	Religious office qualifications in Pakistan; comparative constitutional and citizenship provisions.	Equal eligibility; review of status rules; effective political participation.
2. Authoritative religious interpretations	Militant interpretations and organizations discussed by Syed (2016).	Pluralist religious leadership; institutional rules rejecting discrimination; protection for dissent.
3. Discrimination in routine administration	Sanitation recruitment in Pakistan; the French hiring experiment; caste-based occupations in India.	Fair selection and advancement; safe working conditions; review of occupational confinement.
4. Selective protection and political incentives	Blasphemy-related coercion in Pakistan; electoral incentives for riot prevention in India.	Accountability for neglect; public backing for protective action; access to independent remedies.

What the research can establish

Research on religion and prejudice supports a conditional argument. Hall et al. (2010), in a meta-analysis of US studies, associated strong religious in-group identification and orientations tied to conformity with racial prejudice. Although the studies concern race and religion in the United States, they challenge the assumption that religious identification necessarily extends humanitarian concern to outsiders.

Experimental research addresses a narrower question. Snell et al. (2024) synthesized 44 studies with 11,330 participants and reported a small overall effect of religious priming on prejudice, $r = .06$. The effect concerns the short-term activation of group distinctions, not lifelong belief or the design of institutions.

At national level, Grim and Finke (2007) examined religious regulation and persecution in 143 countries. Their findings gave stronger support to an explanation based on regulation than to a broad clash-of-civilizations account. Fox (2020), studying government-based discrimination against 771 minorities in 183 countries, likewise directs attention to variation across political and religious settings. Both point towards institutions and regulation, although restrictions, hostility, and wider political conflict can feed one another.

Constitutional provisions require equally careful interpretation. Fox (2023) found that most types of religion clauses, including declarations of an official religion, separation, and religious freedom, did not significantly predict levels of government-based religious discrimination in his analysis. Constitutions still matter. A religious qualification for an office directly determines legal eligibility for that office, even when a broad constitutional label predicts little about a country's overall discrimination score. Legal design, implementation, and enforcement must therefore be studied separately.

Pew Research Center's study of conditions in 2023 distinguishes government restrictions from social hostilities involving religion. It identified 58 countries with high or very high government restrictions and 55 with high or very high social hostilities, placing Pakistan among those with very high social hostilities (Majumdar & Jacobs, 2026). These indices summarize country conditions rather than

directly measuring individual attitudes, and they help place particular cases in a wider distribution of state restrictions and societal coercion.

Pakistan and the terms of citizenship

The 2023 census recorded Muslims as 96.35% of the population for which detailed demographic characteristics were available. The relevant population was 240,458,089, distinct from the larger total that included restricted-area headcounts without equivalent characteristics. The remaining religious categories together accounted for approximately 8.77 million people. Christians represented 1.37%, Hindu Jati 1.61%, and Scheduled Castes 0.56% (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics [PBS], 2025, Table 4.13). These are administrative categories, not a complete description of people's identities.

The separate listing of Scheduled Castes under religion is particularly important: caste and religion are different dimensions of identity. Scheduled Caste communities in Pakistan generally follow the Hindu faith. Hindu Jati and Scheduled Castes together account for about 2.17% of the enumerated population. Ahmadis are also separately classified by the state as non-Muslims despite their self-identification as Muslims. Such classifications affect the categories through which citizens become visible to public institutions.

The Constitution contains substantial protections. Article 20 addresses the profession, practice, and propagation of religion, subject to law, public order, and morality. Articles 25 and 27 address equality and discrimination in public service appointments. Article 36 concerns minority interests and representation in public services, but belongs to the Principles of Policy rather than the enforceable Fundamental Rights. Article 30 limits challenges based solely on noncompliance with those principles. The legal force of these provisions therefore differs, even though each is relevant to public responsibility (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973/2025).

The same Constitution makes religion a qualification for the presidency and prime ministership through Articles 41(2) and 91(3). This is an exclusion in the rule itself, not merely a failure to implement a general promise of equality. Non-Muslims can hold other elected offices, but not the two highest on the same terms as Muslim citizens. The provision also communicates a public hierarchy of eligibility whose significance exceeds the number of people likely to seek those positions.

Religious qualifications for office exist elsewhere: under the Act of Settlement 1700, enacted in 1701, the British monarch must be in communion with the Church of England. A hereditary constitutional monarch and an elected head of government exercise very different kinds of authority, and Pakistan’s rules must be judged on their own terms.

Pakistan's combination of protections and restrictions requires more than a general appeal for better implementation. Some changes involve enforcing rights already recognized. Others require debate about eligibility rules themselves. A university can correct its recruitment procedures through organizational decisions; a constitutional qualification requires action at a different level of authority. Keeping these responsibilities distinct makes reform more realistic and prevents public commitments to equality from becoming a substitute for examining the governing rules.

Employment, caste, and occupational confinement

The NCHR's 2022 report is especially instructive because its figures need to be read with their original dates and denominators. Drawing on the Annual Statistical Bulletin of Federal Government Employees for 2017–18, it reported that non-Muslims accounted for 2.8% of federal employees. Figure 2 placed 80.3% of minority federal employees in BPS 1–4. These are historical federal-workforce figures, not a 2022 survey of all minority workers or a count of appointments filled under the minority quota (NCHR, 2022, p. 9, Figure 2). The workforce share cannot by itself establish the percentage of reserved vacancies left unfilled.

The report also reproduced advertisements limiting sanitation recruitment to non-Muslims. Such wording shows an institutional decision to associate religious identity with a narrow occupational role. Sanitation is essential work; the wrong lies in constrained choice, discriminatory assignment, poor treatment, and avoidable danger. Removing the stigma should improve the conditions of people who remain in the occupation as well as expand the choices of those who wish to leave it.

Amnesty International's (2025) investigation documents the intersection of religion, social class and caste in Pakistan's sanitation sector. It describes compounded discrimination and inadequate labour protections. As a qualitative investigation, it gives evidence of experiences and practices rather than a nationally representative prevalence estimate. It strengthens the case for investigating how recruitment, inherited status, working conditions, and economic dependence combine. A policy that considers religious identity alone may miss important differences within a community.

A comparison with India helps clarify that point. Human Rights Watch (2014) documented the persistence of caste-based manual scavenging despite statutory prohibition. Its evidence included pressure on Dalit communities and the role of local authorities in reproducing occupational assignment. The comparison is useful because it makes visible an overlapping source of inequality that a religion-only explanation would miss.

Pakistan's federal quota policy offers one possible route to broader opportunity. The Establishment Division's 26 May 2009 memorandum, reproduced in the NCHR report's Annexure A, reserves 5% for non-Muslims in specified federal direct recruitment, including the civil services, in addition to open-merit participation and within the applicable provincial allocation. Its scope should not be confused with every provincial arrangement, promotion, or private-sector job. Assessing implementation requires the number of relevant vacancies, their allocation, and recruitment outcomes, not just the share of minorities in the existing workforce (NCHR, 2022, Annexure A).

Unfilled posts require diagnosis. Barriers may arise before an application is made, through unequal schooling, limited information, or the cost of competing for a post. They may also arise in selection, documentation requirements, or officials' decisions. These explanations should be tested at the appropriate stage. Quota implementation should be assessed across occupational grades and subsequent opportunities for advancement.

Coercion and the withdrawal of protection

A religious accusation can make an ordinary dispute dangerous when the accused cannot count on a fair process. Human Rights Watch (2025) investigated the use of Pakistan's blasphemy laws for

blackmail, property seizure, and commercial advantage. The report shows how economic motives can work through religiously charged allegations, though not that every allegation has a material origin. Pio and Syed (2016) show how blasphemy provisions in particular leave Christians exposed to persecution in their homes and places of worship. Together, these accounts require attention to both the credibility religious accusations can acquire and the institutions that should protect those accused.

Khan (2022) argues that blasphemy politics involves struggles over moral authority and sovereignty. Participants may understand punishment as a religious obligation. That conviction can make it harder for political leaders or officials to defend due process, while organized pressure can raise the personal cost of intervention. The interaction is more complex than either religion acting alone or politicians simply manipulating an otherwise harmless sentiment. Religious commitments, organizational power, and the state's response have to be examined together.

In India, Human Rights Watch (2019) documented vigilante violence associated with cow protection and failures of police response. Victims included Muslims, Dalits, and Adivasis. The religious idiom and legal setting differ from Pakistan's blasphemy disputes. What the cases share is that accusations can expose particular groups to private coercion and that official responses can reduce or compound the danger.

The effects can extend into workplaces. Syed and Ali's (2021) interviews with 76 Shia Muslim professionals and employees in Pakistan documented experiences ranging from stereotyping to harassment and overt hostility. This supports taking sectarian discrimination seriously within organizations, rather than locating it only in street violence. It also suggests why formal complaints may provide an incomplete account. Employees may withhold information when disclosure appears unsafe.

Religious identity, national domination, and occupation

Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory require separate treatment because citizenship, nationality, religion, and occupation overlap there without becoming the same thing. Jewish identity includes dimensions of peoplehood and national belonging as well as religious affiliation. Palestinians include Muslims and Christians, and differences in religious observance cannot explain the national conflict.

Israel's 2018 Nation-State Basic Law reserves national self-determination in the state to the Jewish people and treats Jewish settlement as a national value (Basic Law: Israel – The Nation-State of the Jewish People, 2018, arts. 1(c), 7). The provisions concern national status rather than personal belief, but they show how a national identity with a religious dimension can acquire constitutional privilege. Palestinians living under occupation stand in a different legal position from Palestinian citizens of Israel.

In its July 2024 advisory opinion, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) found systemic discrimination in Israel's restrictions on Palestinians in the occupied territory, based on grounds including race, religion, or ethnic origin. It also found that legislation and measures maintaining separation breached Article 3 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICJ, 2024b, paras. 223, 229). Article 3 addresses racial segregation and apartheid;

the Court did not specify which of those descriptions, or both, characterized the breach. Human Rights Watch (2021) concluded that Israeli authorities were committing the crimes of apartheid and persecution, while Amnesty International (2022) characterized the system it examined as apartheid. The Israeli government rejects both characterizations.

The distinction between findings and legal proceedings is equally important for Gaza. In January 2024, the ICJ recognized the plausibility of certain rights claimed under the Genocide Convention and ordered provisional measures; it did not decide the merits of the allegation that genocide had occurred (ICJ, 2024a, para. 54). In September 2025, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel (2025) concluded that Israel had committed genocide against Palestinians in Gaza. Israel rejects the finding. The ICJ proceedings remained pending as of this revision; its May 2026 order directed a further round of written pleadings (ICJ, 2026).

These findings establish grave harms and a clear need for accountability. The case shows, in extreme form, how religious and national classifications can sustain unequal standing and leave a population without effective protection. Protection against violence belongs to Palestinians irrespective of how their national or religious identity is classified.

Religious pluralism and the claims made for secularism

Religious claims should be judged partly by the institutions and practices they authorize. Describing exclusion as a distortion of faith does not answer questions about the authority, support, and consequences of those who promote it. The questions that matter are which interpretations gain power, whose rights they restrict, and how religious institutions respond.

Religious resources for inclusion deserve more than ceremonial acknowledgment. Leaders can challenge accounts that make other people inferior, defend due process when an accusation is popular, and reject collective punishment. They can also support institutions whose protections do not depend on theological agreement. Minority citizens should not have to persuade the majority that their faith is correct, or obtain a favourable religious ruling, before receiving equal treatment. Theological conviction and civic equality can coexist, but that coexistence requires a willingness to restrain power over others.

Secularism needs the same scrutiny of institutions and outcomes. Bowen (2007) explains how French debates over republican identity and public schooling produced the 2004 restriction on conspicuous religious signs. Although the rule applied across religions, Muslim schoolgirls wearing headscarves were central to the dispute. Its formally general wording does not settle the fairness of its burdens. The French model of laïcité should not, however, be conflated with China's state regulation of religion or with the conduct of an authoritarian security apparatus.

The 2022 Xinjiang assessment by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) concluded that the extent of arbitrary and discriminatory detention of Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim groups, in the wider context of restrictions on fundamental rights, may constitute crimes against humanity (OHCHR, 2022, para. 148). Severe religious repression, in other words, does not require a state religion.

Institutional responsibilities and reform

Reform should begin with the authority capable of changing the problem. A discriminatory recruitment condition can be removed through administrative action. A constitutional restriction on public office requires legal change at another level. Threats to a community require protection and investigation, not merely a seminar on tolerance. The four processes help distinguish these responsibilities. The responses below (reliable protection, accountable recruitment, meaningful participation, and cooperation on equal terms) often address several processes together.

Reliable protection requires public backing for officials who defend unpopular people and credible consequences for officials who permit coercion. Police and administrative leaders need authority, resources, and clear expectations to prevent collective punishment and protect threatened individuals. Where protection depends on political incentives, oversight and access to courts must make neglect costly even when the affected community has little electoral influence. Religious and political leaders can strengthen that protection by defending due process publicly before a crisis makes it personally dangerous to do so.

Accountable recruitment requires examination of actual decisions. Public agencies and employers should review the route from vacancy advertising to appointment and advancement. Relevant questions include who hears about a vacancy, which requirements are necessary, how shortlisting is justified, and whether selected employees receive access to development. Religious identity should be collected only for a defensible purpose and with suitable safeguards. Data that expose a vulnerable employee can do harm even when the stated purpose is inclusion.

Kalev et al. (2006), studying 708 US private-sector establishments, found stronger improvements in managerial diversity associated with arrangements assigning organizational responsibility than with initiatives focused mainly on training. Although the study concerns race and gender in the United States, it supports giving someone the authority and responsibility to examine outcomes. An institution that announces inclusion without allocating responsibility has left a significant part of the work undone.

Meaningful participation also requires attention to whose views count. Shore et al. (2011) describe inclusion in terms of belongingness and recognition of uniqueness. For religious minorities, this suggests being able to contribute without hiding one's identity or being treated only as its representative. Managers can review leave arrangements, harassment procedures, promotion decisions, and access to influential networks. Employees should have opportunities to shape relevant policies without being obliged to act as spokespeople for an entire community. The comparative literature on religious diversity at work reinforces the need to consider national context and intersecting identities (Syed et al., 2018).

Cooperation on equal terms can help, provided its conditions do not reproduce the hierarchy being challenged. Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis of 515 studies found that intergroup contact generally reduced prejudice, with stronger effects under supportive conditions. Varshney's (2002) comparative research on Indian cities linked cross-community civic associations with the containment of communal violence. Though they concern different outcomes, both give reasons to support sustained cooperation through institutions, rather than rely exclusively on occasional

interfaith events. Shared work, fair standing within the activity, and support from those in authority are practical starting points.

Progress must finally be judged from several sources. A rise in complaints may indicate worsening conduct or greater confidence in reporting; a fall may indicate improvement or fear. Recruitment figures need to be considered alongside grades, retention, promotion, and employees' accounts of treatment. Confidential interviews, independent complaint review, and evidence of actual remedies can reveal problems that a public statement or aggregate number conceals. In the end, the question is whether people can depend on the institution when their identity becomes a source of vulnerability.

Conclusion

Religious difference becomes a basis of marginalization through decisions about belonging, authority, opportunity, and protection. Religion can contribute directly by furnishing interpretations that justify unequal standing. Political projects and institutions can amplify those interpretations, incorporate them into law, or reproduce their effects through ordinary decisions. Religion is therefore neither an innocent bystander nor the sole culprit. Religious ideas can help produce unequal citizenship. The doctrines that justify exclusion require critical scrutiny, and the leaders and institutions that enforce it must be held accountable.

Pakistan's constitutional provisions, historical employment data, and documented experiences of coercion show why reform must address both legal design and institutional practice. The comparative cases reveal different ways identity can acquire public consequences and different limits on available remedies. A fair recruitment procedure, a constitutional entitlement, and protection from collective violence each matter, but success in one cannot be taken as evidence of success in the others.

Religious pluralism can make an important contribution by challenging exclusionary authority. Equal citizenship and universal human rights provide the institutional standard by which that contribution, and the conduct of secular authorities, should be judged. People should be able to claim protection, pursue occupations, and participate in decisions without having to belong to the majority faith. The practical test is whether those claims remain dependable when public sentiment turns against them.

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Note on AI assistance. The argument, analytical framework, and interpretations in this paper are the author's. Generative AI tools were used to assist with language editing.

Appendix: Indicative discussion questions

1. The panel that prompted this paper asked whether religion or politics marginalizes minorities. How do religious interpretations, political interests, and institutional practices interact to marginalize minorities, and which of the four processes is most evident in a country or organization you know?

2. Pakistan's Constitution both protects minorities and reserves its highest offices for Muslims. How would you distinguish failures of implementation from problems in the design of rules?

3. France and China are formally secular, yet both have imposed serious burdens on religious minorities. Is secularism a sufficient safeguard for equal citizenship? Why or why not?

4. Sanitation work in Pakistan and manual scavenging in India show religion and caste or class reinforcing one another. How can recruitment policies, including reserved quotas, widen occupational choice while improving conditions for workers in stigmatized occupations?

5. Fewer complaints can signal either improvement or fear. As a leader, which indicators would you track to judge whether minority employees are better off, and how would you gather evidence without exposing them to risk?