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**Political Representation and Minority Rights in Pakistan: Challenges and Prospects for****Inclusive Governance****Dr. Asghar Raza Burfat**

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Sindh

[asghar.burfat@usindh.edu.pk](mailto:asghar.burfat@usindh.edu.pk)**Hansraj Oad**

Lecturer department of Political Science, University of Sindh

[hansrajhansoad@gmail.com](mailto:hansrajhansoad@gmail.com)**Abstract**

*This article explores the institutional practice and political economy of religious-minority representation in Pakistan, and the constitutional design of this representation. Based on Hanna Pitkin's dichotomy of formal, descriptive, and substantive representation, and on the literature on the politics-of-presence, it suggests that Pakistan has created a rich formal framework of minority protections such as Articles 20, 25 and 36 of the 1973 Constitution, reserved seats in the National Assembly, Senate and the provincial assemblies, a five per cent public service quota, and, most recently, a statutory National Commission for Minorities Rights, but this framework has brought limited substantive empowerment. Minority voters are not the ones who fill reserved seats; political parties rarely allow non-Muslim candidates to compete for general seats; Ahmadis are structurally disenfranchised; and the social environment generated by blasphemy prosecution and communal violence hinders political agency. The author draws a conclusion that the reserved seat elections need to be redesigned, minorities need to be more represented on the general seats, the strength of an independent rights commission needs to be increased, and religious qualification needs to be removed from high office.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan; Minority Rights; Political Representation; Reserved Seats; Inclusive Governance; Religious Minorities; Constitution Of 1973

**Introduction**

The representation of religious minorities in the political life of a state is not an incidental to the electoral administration. It offers a measure of the extent to which citizenship is a civic status or a privilege hierarchy. Pakistan was established in 1947 when there was a partition that caused displacement of millions and redefined the relationship of religious identity and political belonging. On 11 August 1947 Mohammad Ali Jinnah made a speech to a Constituent Assembly where he made it clear that citizens would have the freedom to enter their temples, mosques or other religious institutions, and religion would have “nothing to do with the business of the State”. This civic promise exists in parallel with the evolution of the Constitution later on, Islam being made the state religion, the Second Amendment 1974 stipulating that Ahmadis were not Muslims, the Islamization programme of the 1980s and the continued use of religious test for the office of the President and Prime Minister (Government of Pakistan, 1973/2023; Ahmed, 2018).

In modern-day Pakistan, the religious minorities are few in number but considerable in influence and significance for assertions of democratic inclusion politically and morally. The population census in 2023 shows that 96.35 per cent of the population was Muslim. The major faith groups in Pakistan are the 2.17 percent (5.22 million) of the country's population that identifies as Hindu,

1.37 percent (3.30 million) as Christian, and 0.07 percent (162,684) as Ahmadis, with smaller groups of Sikhs, Parsis, Bahá'ís, Buddhists, and Kalash (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2024; Dawn, 2024a). The distribution of these communities is not even. The Hindus are concentrated in Sindh where they constitute almost nine percent of the provincial population, Christians are the largest group in Punjab and Islamabad Capital Territory and the historic centre of the Ahmadis is in Punjab (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Demographic concentration fosters clusters of electoral power, albeit most noticeable in Tharparkar, but not leading to regular parliamentary representation on the general seats.

The text of the constitution is not void of any message. The Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of religion and the State ensures that minorities are also given due representation in the federal and provincial services (Government of Pakistan 1973/2023). The National Assembly, Senate and provincial assemblies are reserved for non-Muslims by Article 51, 59 and 106 of the constitution. The Elections Act, 2017, implements these reservations in a closed-list proportional allocation system which is based on general-seat tallies (Elections Act, 2017; International IDEA, 2023). In local government, there are also additional reserved seats at union, tehsil and district levels that are specified by the laws of the country. A five per cent reservation has been declared in public jobs for minorities (The Friday Times, 2026). The President assented to the National Commission for Minorities Rights Bill in December 2025 – a long-anticipated statutory body, as the Supreme Court ruled in 2014 in favour of the minorities' rights (International IDEA, 2025; Library of Congress, 2026).

Yet the gap between formal provision and lived political power remains wide. Reserved-seat legislators are nominated by party high commands rather than chosen by minority electorates, a design that PILDAT and other observers have criticised as converting a safeguard into an instrument of party patronage (Mehboob, 2024; Dawn, 2024b). No Christian candidate has ever won a National Assembly general seat since 1947, and only isolated Hindu victories most notably that of Mahesh Kumar Malani from Tharparkar in 2018 punctuate an otherwise closed general-seat market (UCA News, 2024). Ahmadis face a distinctive and more severe barrier: voter registration requires either a declaration of non-Muslim status or an oath denouncing the community's founder, with the result that most Ahmadis abstain from voting rather than compromise a core tenet of faith (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Khan, 2023). The 2024–2025 litigation over reserved-seat allocation after the February 2024 general election further illustrated how minority and women's reserved seats can become bargaining chips in elite partisan conflict rather than vehicles of group voice (Dawn, 2024c; The News, 2025).

This article does not simply examine political representation as the numbers game of seats. It distinguishes between formal authorization, descriptive resemblance, symbolic standing-for and substantive acting-for, following Pitkin (1967). It examines, like Phillips (1995) and Mansbridge (1999), whether the “politics of presence” of minority legislators creates advocacy, agenda-setting and protection or just a visible but limited presence. The analysis is structured as follows: a mapping of constitutional and institutional framework, an evaluation of the nature and level of minority participation, an examination of political and institutional issues and challenges and an examination of the prospects for inclusive governance. The argument is that Pakistan's minority-representation mechanism fails to empower minorities even in a formal sense, and bringing more symbolic institutions into the equation won't necessarily provide a good foundation for reform, but rather will require a more fundamental shift in the way representatives are selected, in the way parties deal with minority candidates, and in the overall legal climate of religious offence and political exclusion.

## Literature Review

The conceptual vocabulary to measure Pakistan's arrangements comes from the theoretical literature on political representation. Pitkin (1967) identified four types of representation: Formalistic representation (the rules of authorization and accountability); Descriptive representation (how a representative looks like the represented) (the meaning that presence conveys); and substantive representation (acting in the interest of the represented). Later theorists have maintained that the demand for descriptive presence is not a superficial one, but a democratic demand, for historically marginalized groups. The politics of presence' (Phillips 1995) posits that there are unique viewpoints and experiences that can only be learned from those who have been excluded, because those viewpoints and experiences are a result of shared exclusion. Mansbridge (1999) delineated context of mistrust, un-crystallized interests, and that of social meaning as contexts where descriptive representation is of particular value. Young (2000) and Williams (1998) further argued that oppressed groups need Voice, memory and the ability to challenge and re-imagine dominant narratives. However, not all descriptive representatives are "preferable" (Pitkin, 1967; Phillips, 1995; Mansbridge, 1999; Young, 2000; Williams, 1998; Dovi, 2007), for the design of the institutions must create the incentives for accountability to the group, not just the group's choice of whom to hold accountable.

A comparative study of reserved seats and electoral quotas reveals that institutional design has an impact on the nature of the quotas: agency or tokenism. Closed party-list reservations create legislators who are party loyal and have low engagement with the electorates they are supposed to represent. Open or mixed systems, where the reserved seat candidates are directly elected by all minority voters, lead to a clearer principal-agent relationship (Reynolds, 2006; Htun, 2004). What's relevant is the experience of South Asians. India's mixed electoral system, comprising reserved territorial constituencies for SC and ST, and first-past-the-post voting, results in a first-past-the-post representative system in which the candidates have to secure votes in specific geographic constituencies. In Nepal, after 2006, proportional lists and identity quotas were used in a combined fashion. The model adopted by Pakistan since 2002 is unique, featuring a dual electoral list for general seats alongside closed lists at national and/or provincial levels for non-Muslim seats allocated based on the parties' results in the general seats (International IDEA, 2023; Mehboob, 2024). This leaves descriptive presence as the only means of representation without a minority electoral base.

Scholarship on Pakistan has traced the historical oscillation between joint and separate electorates and the consequences of each. Separate electorates, reintroduced under General Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s, confined non-Muslims to voting only for reserved seats and isolated them from mainstream contestation. President Musharraf's 2002 restoration of the joint electorate returned minority voters to general constituencies, but retained party-list allocation for reserved seats and preserved a separate supplementary roll for Ahmadis (Rais, 2007; Saeed, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2023). Analysts of the reserved-seat system argue that it has "broken its promise": the number of National Assembly seats reserved for non-Muslims has remained ten for decades even as the House expanded, so the minority share of the chamber has declined in relative terms (The News, 2024a; Dawn, 2024b). PILDAT's 2024 issue paper documents the evolution of the system, compares it with other countries, and recommends reforms that would increase public participation in the selection of reserved-seat members (Mehboob, 2024).

A second strand of literature examines the legal and social environment that conditions political participation. The Second Constitutional Amendment of 1974 and Ordinance XX of 1984 constructed a special disability for Ahmadis, criminalizing religious self-description and, in electoral practice, forcing a choice between apostasy and disenfranchisement (Khan, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023). Blasphemy provisions of the Pakistan Penal Code, though formally

religion-neutral in some clauses, have been shown by the Centre for Social Justice and Minority Rights Group to fall disproportionately on Christians, Ahmadis and Hindus as well as on dissenting Muslims, producing a climate of legal insecurity that chills public political activity (Minority Rights Group, 2023; Centre for Social Justice, 2023; South Asia Collective, 2025). Forced conversion, bonded labour among scheduled-caste Hindus and some Christians, and attacks on places of worship further shrink the civic space in which political organisation might occur (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom [USCIRF], 2026; Minority Rights Group, 2023). Minority legislators, in practice, are found to be consistently symbolically included. Although members of minorities raise issues of the welfare of minority communities, educational quotas, and protection of worship sites, they seldom hold positions at the table of decision making like that of a chairperson of a standing committee of the law, interior, finance or a federal cabinet minister (Abid & Alvi, 2025; Rais, 2007). Minority protection is a common feature in party manifestos, although only a few parties offer minority seat tickets in competitive constituencies and promise to amend the most vocally debated religious-offence laws (South Asia Collective, 2025). Recent research on the participation of Christians in politics indicates that lack of financial means, low literacy rates, and fear of being visible in politics remain significant constraints on mobilization of the grassroots Christians even when granted formal voting rights (Abid & Alvi, 2025). The 2025 National Commission for Minorities Rights has produced a body of literature all by itself, with commentators celebrating the commission's implementation of the Supreme Court's command of 2014, while pointing to the absence of an overriding-effect clause and suo motu powers, and the clear political stance that Ahmadis refusing the constitutional label of non-Muslim are not covered by the Commission's protective umbrella (Courting the Law, 2025; Library of Congress, 2026; Eurasia Review, 2025).

The literature provides three propositions which organize the remaining discussion in this article: Firstly, the formal constitutional guarantees and reserved seats are important but not enough conditions for inclusive governance. Second, a closed-list system of reserved seats deliberately reduces accountability to the minority groups and increases accountability to party elites. Third, there must not be a separation of political representation from the rest of the regime of religious classification, criminal law and social hostility; changes to seat formulae alone, if they do not extend to the legal regime, will lead to the revival of tokenism. These propositions are in accord with the comparative theory as well as the body of evidence that has accumulated in Pakistan (Pitkin, 1967; Phillips, 1995; Mehboob, 2024; Khan, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

### **Problem Statement**

Pakistan possesses a dense formal framework for minority political inclusion, yet religious minorities remain weakly represented in the institutions that make and implement public policy. Ten reserved National Assembly seats and four Senate seats cannot compensate for the near-absence of minority candidates on general seats, nor can they offset the structural exclusion of Ahmadis from the electoral roll as equal citizens. Representatives who enter assemblies through party lists lack an independent electoral base and therefore have limited bargaining power inside their parties and limited capacity to “act for” community interests when those interests conflict with party strategy. At the same time, insecurity generated by blasphemy accusations, communal violence and economic precarity reduces the supply of minority political talent willing to seek public office. The problem this article addresses is therefore not the total absence of legal recognition, but the persistent conversion of recognition into symbolic rather than substantive representation, and the consequent failure to realize inclusive governance as a working political practice.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To examine the constitutional and institutional framework governing political representation and minority rights in Pakistan.
2. To analyze the level and nature of political participation and representation of religious minorities in Pakistan.
3. To identify the major political and institutional challenges affecting minority representation.
4. To explore prospects for strengthening minority political participation and inclusive governance.

### **Research Questions**

1. What constitutional and institutional mechanisms exist for protecting minority rights and ensuring their political representation in Pakistan?
2. What is the nature and extent of political participation and representation of religious minorities in Pakistan?
3. What major political and institutional challenges limit meaningful minority representation?
4. How can political representation of minorities be strengthened to promote inclusive governance in Pakistan?

### **Research Methodology**

The study employs a qualitative, doctrinal and interpretive design suited to constitutional and institutional analysis. Primary sources include the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (1973, as amended), the Elections Act, 2017 and Election Rules, 2017, relevant constitutional amendments (notably the Second and Eighteenth Amendments), the National Commission for Minorities Rights legislation of 2025, and leading judgments of the Supreme Court, including the 2014 minority-rights directions. Secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed scholarship on representation theory and South Asian minority politics, reports of PILDAT, Minority Rights Group, Human Rights Watch, International IDEA, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, the Centre for Social Justice, and official census publications of the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. The analysis is structured by Pitkin's typology of representation and by process-tracing of institutional change from 1947 to 2026. No original survey data are presented; findings are therefore interpretive and should be read as a synthesis of the documentary record rather than as a statistical estimate of minority public opinion.

### **Constitutional and Institutional Framework**

There was a clear civic agreement to minorities in the founding political settlement. The early work of the Committee on Fundamental Rights and Minorities of the Constituent Assembly, the Objectives Resolution marking the commitment to 'adequate provision shall be made for the minorities freely to profess and practise their religions and develop their cultures', and Jinnah's speech on 11 August 1947, established a dual register: an Islamic republic that would also treat non-Muslims as rights-bearing citizens (Jinnah, 1947/2000; Government of Pakistan, 1973/2023; Binder, 1961). In 1973, the Constitution took part of that legacy and made it rights and principles of policy that are open to judicial review. Religious profession, practice, propagation and management of religious institutions, subject to law, public order and morality, are guaranteed under Article 20. The Constitution does not allow tax money to be used to promote a specific religion. Education Safeguards are provided in Article 22. Equality before the law is guaranteed by Article 25. Article 36, in the midst of the Principles of Policy, lays the responsibility on the state to protect the legitimate rights and interests of the minorities "including their due representation in the Federal and Provincial services" (Government of Pakistan, 1973/2023; Mahmud, 1995).

These rights are nestled in a constitution that also makes Islam the state religion (article 2), stipulates that all current laws be made compliant with the Quran and Sunnah (article 227), and requires the President and Prime Minister to be Muslims (article 41 and 91). The second amendment (1974) added a defining clause to article 260, thus stating that a person who does not believe in the absolute and unqualified finality of the Prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him), otherwise he/she is a non-Muslim. Not only religious rank of offices & identities, the dual structure of the equal-citizenship clauses is the deep grammar of the minority rights regime in Pakistan.

Parliamentary representation is organised by Articles 51, 59 and 106. Article 51 provides ten seats reserved for non-Muslims in the National Assembly. The whole country is a single constituency for these seats. Members are elected “through proportional representation system of political parties’ lists of candidates on the basis of total number of general seats won by each political party in the National Assembly” (Government of Pakistan, 1973/2023, art. 51(6) (e); International IDEA, 2023). Section 104 of the Elections Act, 2017, requires parties to file priority lists of reserved-seat candidates with nomination papers; allocation follows the party’s share of general seats (Elections Act, 2017; Supreme Court of Pakistan, 2024). The Eighteenth Amendment (2010) created four Senate seats for non-Muslims, one elected by each provincial assembly through the single transferable vote used for other Senate seats (Government of Pakistan, 2010; Senate of Pakistan, n.d.). Provincial assemblies reserve additional non-Muslim seats commonly cited as eight in Punjab, nine in Sindh, three in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and three in Balochistan, with modest post-FATA-merger adjustment in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Dawn, 2024b; Mehboob, 2024). Local-government statutes typically reserve about five percent of seats for minorities.

**Table 1: Reserved Seats for Non-Muslims in Pakistani Legislatures**

| Legislature                 | General seats (indicative) | Women reserved | Non-Muslim reserved | Total (approx.) |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| National Assembly           | 266–272                    | 60             | 10                  | 336–342         |
| Senate                      | 58 + others                | 17             | 4                   | 96              |
| Punjab Assembly             | 297                        | 66             | 8                   | 371             |
| Sindh Assembly              | 130                        | 29             | 9                   | 168             |
| Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly | 115–130                    | 26             | 4                   | 145             |
| Balochistan Assembly        | 51                         | 11             | 3                   | 65              |

*Sources: Constitution of Pakistan, Arts. 51, 59 and 106; Mehboob (2024); Dawn (2024b). Provincial totals follow the commonly cited post-merger distribution and may vary slightly with subsequent statutory adjustment.*

Two features of this design are constitutionally decisive. First, reserved-seat members are not chosen by minority voters as such; they are chosen by parties in proportion to a general-seat harvest produced overwhelmingly by Muslim-majority constituencies. Second, the number of National Assembly reserved seats has been essentially frozen at ten while general seats have expanded, so the reserved share of the House has declined relative to both the minority population and the size of the chamber (Dawn, 2024b; The News, 2024a). The 2024 reserved-seats controversy, in which allocation among parties became the subject of Supreme Court, Election Commission and parliamentary contestation, demonstrated that these seats also function as weights in the arithmetic of government formation (Dawn, 2024c; The News, 2025). That function is not illegitimate in a parliamentary system, but it underscores how far the seats have travelled from the idea of a community choosing its own advocates.

Beyond legislatures, the institutional framework includes administrative and quasi-judicial bodies. A five-percent quota in federal and provincial public services has been notified, though implementation studies report unfilled posts and clustering of minority employees in lower grades (The Friday Times, 2026). Personal-status law remains community-specific: the Hindu Marriage Act, 2017, and older Christian and Parsi statutes govern family relations, with periodic demands for updating colonial-era Christian family law (South Asia Collective, 2025). The Supreme Court's 19 June 2014 judgment, authored by Justice Tassaduq Hussain Jilani, directed the federal government to constitute a national council for minorities, curb hate speech in curricula and media, and develop a specialized police force to protect worship sites (Supreme Court of Pakistan, 2014). Implementation lagged for more than a decade. The National Commission for Minorities Rights Act, 2025, finally created a statutory commission with a multi-member composition including provincial and women's representation, mandated to monitor violations and advise government (International IDEA, 2025; Library of Congress, 2026). Parliamentary bargaining, however, removed an overriding-effect clause and curtailed suo motu investigative powers, and political leaders stated during debate that the law would not disturb the anti-Ahmadi legal structure (Courting the Law, 2025; Dawn, 2025).

International obligations supply an external benchmark. Pakistan is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, whose Article 25 guarantees every citizen the right and opportunity to take part in the conduct of public affairs and to vote and be elected without unreasonable restrictions and without distinction of religion (United Nations, 1966). The Human Rights Committee has treated religious tests for high office and discriminatory voter-registration practices as tensions with that standard. Domestic courts have sometimes invoked international norms in minority-rights litigation, but the operative hierarchy remains the Constitution as interpreted through its Islamic and definitional clauses (Mahmud, 1995; Khan, 2023). The institutional picture that emerges is therefore one of layered guarantees fundamental rights, reserved seats, service quotas, a new commission resting on a constitutional foundation that simultaneously ranks citizens by religion for the state's highest offices and for one community's very right to name itself.

### **Challenges to Effective Political Representation of Minorities**

The first and most structural difficulty is in the design of the reserved seats themselves. Minority communities are ineligible to choose their reserved-seat legislators and the legislators do not have to answer to their minority electorate to which they can seek cues on the efficiency of their work (Mehboob, 2024; UCA News, 2024). Thus accountability flows towards the party and not the group. Reserved seats have long been observed to be used to appoint loyalists, relatives of patrons or people who do not have a strong standing in the community (The News, 2024a; The News, 2025a). The initial justification for reserved quotas is further undermined when reserved seats are also utilized to create and strengthen government. Reserved seats are also used to manufacture or reinforce a government as the 2024–2025 allocation disputes demonstrated, thereby diluting the original protecting rationale (Dawn, 2024c). The power of the committees, control of the agenda and intra-party leverage on a critical mass cannot be achieved by a related quantitative problem of under-apportionment which has been the reality of the National Assembly, with the presence of ten members representing the non-Muslim population of about 3.6 to 4 percent of the country, and the presence of four in the Senate. (Dawn, 2024b; South Asia Collective, 2025)

The second one is the sealed general seats market. Parties have almost a monopoly on winning tickets. Although Hindu candidates have occasionally made their mark in the desert areas of Sindh, there has been no breakthrough in the National Assembly level in seven decades for

Christian candidates (UCA News, 2024; Dawn, 2024b). Minority politicians do not get the same level of legitimacy as general-seat winners, and are always reliant on reservation. The fragmentation within the minority communities further exacerbates this issue: The Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Parsis and others are competing for one single pool of minority allocation, and smaller groups are often left off the party lists (UCA News, 2024). It is thus possible for the system to generate descriptive representation of “non-Muslims” as a residual, while excluding certain communities.

The third challenge is the exceptional exclusion of Ahmadis. Electoral law and practice require Ahmadi voters either to register as non-Muslims or to sign a declaration incompatible with their theology. Separate supplementary rolls identify Ahmadi voters, creating both a dignity harm and a security risk by publishing a target list (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Khan, 2023). Most Ahmadis therefore do not vote. A community that is constitutionally classified as non-Muslim is simultaneously denied the ordinary political rights of other non-Muslims unless it accepts that classification. The 2025 Commission statute, by being framed around communities that accept non-Muslim status, extends this paradox into the new rights-protection body (Eurasia Review, 2025; Library of Congress, 2026).

The fourth cluster of challenges is extra-parliamentary but politically decisive. Blasphemy accusations, even when they do not end in conviction, impose years of detention, mob risk and social ruin; their disproportionate impact on minorities and the assassination of public figures who called for reform; Salmaan Taseer and Shahbaz Bhatti in 2011 teach a brutal lesson about the costs of advocacy (Minority Rights Group, 2023; USCIRF, 2026). Forced conversions and marriages, especially of Hindu and Christian girls in Sindh and parts of Punjab, signal that the state cannot reliably protect the bodily autonomy of minority citizens, which in turn weakens the credibility of political incorporation (Minority Rights Group, 2023). Poverty, informal labour and lower educational attainment among many Christian and scheduled-caste Hindu households reduce the resources required for campaigning, party work and sustained civic organisation (Abid & Alvi, 2025; Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Textbooks and public discourse that portray non-Muslims as historically disloyal or theologically inferior undermine the social meaning of equal citizenship on which descriptive representation depends (Centre for Social Justice, 2023; Supreme Court of Pakistan, 2014).

Finally, there is an institutional-capacity challenge. The Election Commission’s conduct of reserved-seat allocation has been legally contested; the former ad-hoc National Commission for Minorities lapsed into inactivity; service quotas go unfilled; and parliamentary minority caucuses lack research support and cross-party discipline (The Friday Times, 2026; Dawn, 2025; International IDEA, 2025). Inclusive governance cannot rest on paper rights administered by weak or politicized institutions.

### **Prospects for Inclusive Governance and Minority Political Empowerment**

Prospects for reform are neither absent nor automatic. They lie in a combination of institutional redesign, party-system change, legal recalibration and social investment. The first and most tractable prospect is reform of the reserved-seat method. PILDAT and minority-rights advocates have proposed that reserved-seat members be chosen through a more participatory process: either a separate minority ballot in which registered non-Muslim voters rank candidates, a primary or convention among community organisations whose results bind parties, or a mixed system in which a portion of reserved seats is filled by direct election in multimember minority-dense areas (Mehboob, 2024; Dawn, 2024b). Any of these options would restore a principal-agent link that the present closed list severs. An increase in the number of reserved seats, indexed to census shares and to the expansion of general seats, would address the relative

shrinkage of minority presence in an enlarged House (The News, 2024a). Reforms should, however, avoid recreating the ghetto of the pre-2002 separate electorate; the joint electorate for general seats remains a valuable channel of inter-communal political contact (Rais, 2007; Saeed, 2017).

A second prospect is the normalization of minority candidacies on general seats. Parties can adopt internal quotas or target constituencies where minority voters form a pivotal bloc parts of Sindh, selected urban constituencies in Punjab, and Islamabad and can pair minority candidates with Muslim running-mates in local government to build cross-communal machines. The election of Mahesh Kumar Malani and the elevation of figures such as a Christian deputy speaker in Sindh demonstrate that voters will support minority candidates where parties invest tickets and organisation (UCA News, 2024; Christian Daily International, 2026). Civil-society voter-education campaigns that raise turnout among minority citizens would increase the electoral cost of ignoring them. Inclusive governance in this sense is less a constitutional amendment than a change in party calculation.

A third prospect is the consolidation of an independent, well-resourced National Commission for Minorities Rights. Even in its compromised 2025 form, the Commission creates a statutory address for complaints, data collection and policy advice that the previous ad-hoc body lacked (International IDEA, 2025; Library of Congress, 2026). Subsequent amendment could restore investigative initiative, guarantee financial autonomy, require published annual reports to parliament, and most difficult politically clarify the Commission's writ in cases involving Ahmadis as citizens rather than as a doctrinal exception (Courting the Law, 2025). Parallel provincial commissions would bring protection closer to the sites of conversion disputes, school discrimination and police inaction. Implementation of the still-outstanding elements of the 2014 Supreme Court judgment, especially curriculum reform and specialised protection of worship sites, would reduce the insecurity that currently suppresses political participation (Supreme Court of Pakistan, 2014; Centre for Social Justice, 2023).

A fourth prospect concerns the legal environment that surrounds representation. Full repeal of religious-offence statutes is politically remote in the near term, but procedural safeguards mandatory senior-police review before registration of blasphemy cases, punishment of false accusers, in-camera trials, and transfer of cases out of inflamed districts would lower the risk that political activity becomes a predicate for accusation (Minority Rights Group, 2023; USCIRF, 2026). Updating Christian personal law, enforcing the Hindu Marriage Act, and enacting a robust prohibition on forced conversion of minors would strengthen the civil status of minority families and, indirectly, their capacity for public life (South Asia Collective, 2025). The most demanding reform, amendment of Articles 41 and 91 to open the presidency and prime ministership to any citizen, would convert equality from a clause about ordinary law into a statement about the highest offices of the republic. That change is not a precondition for every other reform, but it is the clearest possible signal that the state no longer ranks political dignity by creed (Government of Pakistan, 1973/2023; Christian Daily International, 2026).

A fifth prospect is socio-economic. Political presence is expensive. Scholarship programmes, enforcement of the five-percent service quota at officer grades rather than only in sanitation and clerical posts, and support for minority-led civil-society organisations would expand the pool of candidates who can survive a campaign (The Friday Times, 2026; Abid & Alvi, 2025). Local-government reserved seats, often dismissed as trivial, are in fact training grounds; strengthening local government after each cycle of recentralization would thicken the pipeline from union council to provincial and national assemblies.

None of these prospects will materialize without a shift in the dominant political language. Inclusive governance requires parties, courts, the Election Commission and religious interlocutors to treat minority citizenship as a first-order constitutional good rather than as a residual humanitarian concern. The theoretical literature is unambiguous that descriptive presence yields substance only when institutions create incentives for representatives to “act for” their group and when the surrounding civic culture does not punish that action (Pitkin, 1967; Phillips, 1995; Mansbridge, 1999; Dovi, 2007). Pakistan already possesses enough formal machinery to make that shift. What it lacks is the political decision to use that machinery for empowerment rather than for management.

### **Conclusion**

The argument of this article has been that Pakistan's system of minority political representation is more of a well-developed system of formal inclusion that systematically fails to deliver substantive representation. The Constitution ensures religious freedom and equality, leaves seats in the legislature reserved, and requires that the state consider the interests of minorities in providing public services. Statutes and rules regulate the distribution of reserved seats, the manner of notification of the quotas and, as from 2025, the monitoring of rights by a national commission. The census figures reflect that the minority of Hindus and Christians together, along with other smaller groups, are a relatively small but constant proportion of the rapidly increasing population. The architecture on the paper is impressive.

In practice, reserved-seat legislators are agents of parties rather than of minority electorates; general seats remain almost entirely closed to non-Muslim candidates; Ahmadis are pushed out of the franchise by registration rules that demand theological surrender; and a climate of legal and physical insecurity raises the price of political visibility. The 2024 reserved-seat litigation showed how easily a protective device can be absorbed into partisan arithmetic. The 2025 Commission statute showed both the possibility of institutional progress and the political limits of that progress when it approaches the Ahmadi question or the enforcement powers that would make a commission more than advisory (Mehboob, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2023; Library of Congress, 2026).

Research questions one through four can now be answered in compressed form. Constitutional mechanisms exist in abundance: fundamental rights, principles of policy, reserved seats, service quotas and a new statutory commission. The nature of participation is dual and unequal: minority citizens may vote on the joint electoral roll (Ahmadis excepted in practice) and may sit in assemblies, but they rarely enter through general seats and they do not elect their reserved-seat members. The major challenges are institutional design, party gatekeeping, Ahmadi disenfranchisement, legal insecurity and socio-economic precarity. Strengthening representation requires redesigning how reserved members are chosen, opening general-seat pathways, empowering the Commission, civilizing religious-offence procedure, and investing in the human capital of minority communities (Pitkin, 1967; Mehboob, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2023; International IDEA, 2025).

Inclusive governance doesn't need to mean that Pakistan loses its constitutional identity as an Islamic republic. It calls on the State to consider seriously the part of its founding vocabulary that is the other side of the coin, namely, that religion is not a license to grade citizenship. The changes in reserved seat elections, opening general-seat elections, providing resources for an independent commission, civilizing the administration of religious-offence law, and investing in the educational and occupational conditions for political participation are mutually reinforcing. They are also in line with Pakistan's commitments under Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and also with Jinnah's assertion in 1947 that temples, mosques and

the business of the state can coexist (United Nations, 1966; Jinnah, 1947/2000). Inclusive governance will not happen through the inclusion of another clause in the statute book, but when a Hindu, a Christian, a Sikh, or an Ahmadi can seek office, criticize policy and vote without having to negotiate the conditions of their inclusion.

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