



General Assembly

Distr.: General
26 February 2025

English only

Human Rights Council

Fifty-eighth session

24 February–4 April 2025

Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[25 January 2025]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



School Education in Pakistan in the Dock

The Constitution of Pakistan states in Article 22 that “No person attending any educational institution shall be required to receive religious instruction, or take part in any religious ceremony, or attend religious worship, if such instruction, ceremony, or worship relates to a religion other than its own.”

The non-respect in practice of Article 22 is however challenged and criticized by human rights organizations in Pakistan itself.

A few years ago, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP)¹ published a report about the state of human rights in the country. In the section devoted to school education, it stressed that 80% of children were enrolled in government schools, 19% in private schools and 1% in madrassahs (religious schools mainly teaching Islamic subjects) and that 19% of children, mainly girls, remained out of school.

According to the Pakistan Education Statistics Report 2021-2022² by the Pakistan Institution of Education, 73% of the total institutes are governmental schools and 14% are religious schools (madrassahs), some of them being affiliated with political parties. Others are non-formal basic education schools (8%), education foundations (3%), technical and vocational institutes (1%) and degree colleges (1%). There are also 220 universities and 217 teachers training institutes in Pakistan.

Governmental Schools Are not Secular and not Inclusive

In August 2021, the prime minister officially launched the much-disputed Single National Curriculum (SNC) for governmental schools, claiming that this initiative would reduce educational disparities.

The SNC drew strong criticism from education experts and human rights defenders for its lack of inclusivity, the over-emphasis on Islamic religious content at the expense of religious minorities, and poor pedagogy. More broadly, school curricula and textbooks promote intolerance towards minorities, they say, and depict women in a way that is non-inclusive and is not compatible with international human rights standards.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan³ expressed deep concerns about the government perpetuating a singular view of religion in educational institutions through the SNC, depriving young students of the right to a secular education.

The SNC has also been criticized as an Islamization⁴ program, under which all facets of Pakistan’s core educational curriculum were infused with religious content aligning with the ideological bent of the existing Sunni Muslim orthodoxy” (Source: Qasim Hameed, “Minorities in Single National Curriculum”⁴, The Nation, 9 July 2021).

According to the 73-page Report of the Sallux/ ECPM Foundation⁵, “Pakistan, Education System, Curriculum and EU Funding” financed by the European Parliament and published in 2024, “a study by The Current revealed that Muslim religious ideas or texts were present in 7.7% of the SNC’s mathematics, social studies, science, general knowledge, English, and Urdu books. Additionally, “7.47 percent of books have references to Islam while 0.27 percent mention other religions in all non-religious books”.

In December 2022, the Provincial Assembly of Punjab, the most populated province of Pakistan accommodating about 50% of the total national population, passed an act which authorized an entity comprising Muslim clerics to censor educational content. While no other province has this arrangement, the Punjab Assembly adopted a resolution which disregarded the religious diversity of school classes and made mandatory the recitation of the Quran in private and public schools during assembly hour.

Moreover, in November 2021, the Lahore High Court ruled that district judges should conduct inspections concerning the teaching of the Qur’an in schools⁶ throughout the Punjab province.

Darwin’s Theory of Evolution Banned by the Clerics in Favor of Creationism

In October 2023, a symbolic incident took place in the northwestern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with a population of 35 million inhabitants.

Islamic clerics in Pakistan forced a college professor to publicly renounce teaching Charles Darwin's theory of evolution as against Islamic law.

His name is Sher Ali. He holds a Master of Science degree in Zoology from the University of Peshawar, and a Master of Philosophy degree in human genetics from the Quaid-e-Azam University of Islamabad.

In May 2022, Sher Ali's car was attacked with a magnetic bomb, leaving him in a wheelchair for months and raising the question among his students and followers whether he would continue to speak at seminars and teach openly.

Concerning the October 2023 incident, the German media Deutsche Welle 7 widely reported on the issue in their article “Pakistani clerics ‘cancel’ theory evolution. What is next?”. A video footage went viral on social media, showing Sher Ali, surrounded by clerics forcing him to say he considered all scientific views against the Shariah or the Islamic law, such as Darwin's theory, to be false. Moreover, he had to add that "According to Shariah, the woman's intelligence is inferior to that of man. I consider this the final word on this issue and believe that women should be covered from head to toe while venturing out. Women can only go out if it is needed or necessary."

This narrative was also confirmed by some Pakistani media outlets, such as Dawn 8 in their article “Clerics force zoology teacher to denounce Darwin’s theory of evolution”. The full text of his enforced statement was published by MEMRI 9 where it can be watched and listened to.

The serious incidents orchestrated by extremist clerics against Sher Ali and spread around in social media clearly pursue the objective to terrorize any teacher who would decide to support Darwin’s theory of evolution rather than the Islamic theory of creationism.

Controversial and Inequitable Image of Women and Girls in the Curriculum of Public Schools

The representation of women and girls is also controversial and inequitable.

The Current found that approximately 60% of SNC books included images of males, whereas females accounted for only 39% of images. Moreover, the portrayal of female characters is often one-dimensional rather than dynamic in terms of their appearances, character traits, and hobbies.

Traditional gender roles pervade SNC learning material, and approximately 42% of women and girls are depicted wearing some form of headscarf or hijab; only 29% appeared to be wearing western style clothing.

Contrastingly, 80% of male textbook characters donned western attire, with only 20% wearing traditional Islamic clothing. With regards to occupations, male textbook characters are often portrayed as career-oriented, serving in historically and traditionally masculine “power” roles such as doctors, lawyers, and soldiers.

Female textbook characters, on the other hand, take up stereotypically feminine and service careers, most notably teachers. Unsurprisingly, many women and girls are rather illustrated performing domestic roles such as cooking, cleaning, and caregiving.

The European Union Funding in the Dock: Misuse of Taxpayers' Money of the 27 European Union Member States

According to the 2024 Report of Sallux/ ECPM “Pakistan, Education System, Curriculum and EU Funding”, the EU directly invested € 94 million in education projects in Pakistan between 2016 – 2024.

Moreover, the authors were quoted as writing “The EU was and is a partner in other projects running from 2021 to 2026 that cover around € 137 million. As it is not disclosed how much the EU itself invested in these specific programs we take a very careful approach if we say that between 2016 and 2024 the EU invested at least € 100 million and likely between € 100 million and € 150 million in education in Pakistan.”

The ECPM Report contains over 40 pages of excerpts and pictures from textbooks showing that the views expressed in the official curriculum in Pakistan are not compatible with EU values as expressed in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Such an amount of concrete evidence cannot be ignored.

Moreover, beyond the incompatibility between the SNC and the UN standards, the pressure of many extremist clerics and fanaticized crowds can easily kill any reform attempt as long as perpetrators of intellectual terrorism, violence and hate crimes remain unpunished and can continue terrorizing 2.1 million teachers in Pakistan 10.

Conclusions

We recommend that the United Nations urge the authorities of Pakistan

- to make the Single National Curriculum compatible with the UN international human rights standards;
- to effectively protect their 2.1 million teachers against threats and aggressions perpetrated by Islamic extremists and prosecute the latter ones.

2 Pakistan Education Statistics Report 2021-2022

<https://pie.gov.pk/SiteImage/Downloads/PES%20Highlights%202021-22%20New.pdf>

3 Ibidem 1

4 Minorities in Single National Curriculum, by Qasim Hameed

<https://www.nation.com.pk/09-Jul-2021/minorities-in-single-national-curriculum>

5 Pakistan's Education System Curriculum and EU Funding, by Sallux/ ECPM Foundation

<https://ecpm.info/members-of-european-parliament.html>

6 World Report on Religious Freedom 2023, by Aid to the Church in Need International

<https://acninternational.org/religiousfreedomreport/reports/country/2023/pakistan#7>

7 Pakistani clerics cancel theory of evolution, what is next, by Deutsche Welle

<https://www.dw.com/en/pakistani-clerics-cancel-theory-of-evolution-what-next/a-67213124>

8 Clerics force zoology teacher to denounce Darwin's theory of evolution, by Dawn

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1782719>

9 Islamic Clerics in Pakistan force biology professor Sher Ali to read prepared statement renouncing evolution

<https://www.memri.org/reports/following-bomb-attack-islamic-clerics-pakistan-force-biology-professor-sher-ali-read>

10 Ibidem 2