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Interfaith Harmony in Pakistan and the World: Policy Developments and Grassroots Efforts to Counter Religious Extremism and Hate Speech**Mr Hamza Amir Khalil Sayed**

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This research article examines the dynamics of interfaith harmony in Pakistan and the world, focusing on policy developments and grassroots efforts to counter religious extremism and hate speech. Using a qualitative approach grounded in Contact Theory, the study analyses international and Pakistani interfaith policies, including the comprehensive Interfaith Harmony Policy 2025 and the National Action Plan. It highlights the critical role of grassroots initiatives such as the Peace and Education Foundation in transforming attitudes and preventing violence at the community level. The research identifies persistent gaps between policy formulation and implementation, due to weak coordination, political challenges, and resource constraints, and emphasises civil society's vital role in bridging these divides. Drawing comparative insights from global cases, the study offers practical recommendations for integrated multi-stakeholder approaches, sustained funding, educational reforms, and enhanced legal safeguards. This work contributes to the understanding of how synergistic policy-practice integration can foster sustainable interfaith harmony and offers directions for future research in this vital area of peacebuilding.

Keywords: Grassroots Peacebuilding, Hate Speech, Interfaith Harmony, Pakistan, Policy Implementation, Religious Extremism

1. Introduction

Society in the 21st Century, ethically and strategically, requires interfaith harmony to help maintain security and peace in order to support sustainable development. Today, Pakistan and various parts of the world are being impacted by religious extremism along with hate speech, which is destroying the unity in society and endangering the basic human rights of many people. In the modern era, the rapid technological progress has enhanced the capabilities of extremists to promote sectarianism, hate speech and discriminatory content on social media, and this requires immediate attention because the same can be used for positive communication (M. Al-Malik, 2024).

To add to it, the international community is developing a response towards religious extremism, which is not solely security-focused, but soft approaches are also being utilised, such as education, community engagements and dialogue to increase cooperation, tolerance, and respect among interfaith communities (UN, 2025). As an example, the establishment of the World Interfaith Harmony Week in 2010, which is observed in the first week of February every year, sets a benchmark for interfaith dialogue and a culture of peace (WIHW, 2025).

Pakistan today is a frontline state against extremism and terrorism, creating a perfect case study for an interfaith harmony initiative. 96.28% of Pakistan's population is Muslims from various sects, while the rest are minorities, which include Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and various other religious groups. Articles 20 to 22 mentioned in the 1973 constitution of Pakistan help protect religious freedom. However, it still suffers from the menace of terrorism, extremism and sectarian-ethnic violence due to existing fault lines as well as due to being sponsored by its eastern neighbour using Afghanistan's soil (Sayed, 2025), which makes Pakistan's experience with hate speech and violent extremism a classic case study for broader understanding about religious coexistence in diverse societies.

The contemporary era brings in both chances and challenges for the people of various faiths, sects, ethnicities and cultures to coexist peacefully. To add to it, "The Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism", along with "The UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy", is helping establish religious communities which can contribute to opposing religious fundamentalism. The European Union's Article 17 TFEU requires member states to maintain constant communication with religious organisations because it acknowledges their vital role in European social and political development (Georgescu, 2024). Moreover, programs like the Asia-Pacific Interfaith Networks are ongoing in the Asia-Pacific region to bring people of various religions together by teaching them to cooperate and co-exist peacefully. However, while these programs prove to be effective, religious extremism in the world is still growing with an increasing number of violent uprisings against minorities in many countries, and thus these incidents are becoming common.

Many theories exist today, developed by researchers, such as Contact Theory and Social Identity Theory. The Contact Theory explores the phenomenon of interaction among people of various communities/faiths and how it can help reduce religious hatred. On the other hand, the Social Identity Theory evaluates different segments of society and groups and how they identify themselves based on specific traits, based on colour, race, intelligence and culture, which can increase conflict within the society, but at the same time also help understand what makes them different. Tools like the Multidimensional Religious Extremism Framework explore the causes of religious extremism and how policymakers can develop policies

that can ultimately resolve the problems based on psychological, historical, cultural, religious and ethnic factors among various groups of a society. So, these theories can help with developing an understanding to create an environment where interfaith harmony and peace can bloom, however, only Contact Theory will be utilised for this research.

Currently, Pakistan in the international society faces multiple challenges of enhancing interfaith harmony, among other domestic issues. The 'National Action Plan' and the 'Interfaith Harmony Policy 2025' serve as examples of policies which demonstrate how Pakistan can integrate international strategies with domestic policy development. The Centre for Inclusive Governance and The Peace and Education Foundation serve as examples of grassroots organisations which demonstrate how civil society actors can build sustainable interfaith cooperation through their local relations and community-based narratives.

Thus, this research paper analyses how international policies affect domestic execution strategies through an analysis of Pakistan, while making comparisons with global case studies. The research assesses current methods for achieving interfaith harmony and countering religious extremism to develop improved strategies for building a peaceful, inclusive environment. This research is pertinent due to the reason that Pakistan introduced its 2025 Interfaith Harmony Policy and the European Union modified its religious dialogue policies, while global religious intolerance and violent extremism continue to grow. In this article, the following questions will be explored:

1. How are Pakistan's government rules and plans for promoting peace between different religions similar or different from global or international plans on the same topic, and what things help or hurt Pakistan's efforts to stop religious extremism and hate speech?
2. How can grassroots initiatives play a role in promoting peaceful dialogue among various faiths and help reduce religious extremism?
3. What are the key reasons for growing extremism and hate speech in the Pakistani society, and how are they similar to the patterns observed in other international societies?
4. How can Contact Theory explain the success or failure of interfaith harmony initiatives in reducing religious prejudice and fostering social cohesion in Pakistan and internationally?

2. Literature Review

The research work on interfaith harmony, violent religious extremism-fundamentalism, terrorism, and a bottom-up approach to conflict resolution has grown significantly in the 21st Century. Research scholars and their work reflect that societal development and technological advancements can only occur if these global issues are addressed, leading to a peaceful society of coexistence. Therefore, this literature review analyses central themes which help explain policy development and community-based initiatives

against religious extremism and hate speech by studying Pakistan's examples alongside global policy frameworks.

Interfaith harmony basically means to have a peaceful environment where communities within a society can live peacefully while having different faiths, while encouraging different concepts like "live and let live", allowing peace to be sustained through interpersonal and institutional communication (Imran et al., 2023; Kewuel et al., 2019). In the 21st Century, this concept has gained recognition as a roadmap to peaceful coexistence, mutual understanding and interfaith tolerance in heterogeneous societies (Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony, 2025). Thus, Interfaith dialogue works as an organised process that brings people of different faiths and sects together to learn about the religious differences between them. Gatherings and meetings are not enough as they require formal dialogue to foster mutual respect, coordination, and conflict resolution (Seljak, 2009; Smock, 2003).

Moreover, there is an abundance of literature available on the drivers of religious extremism and violence. For instance, 'The United Nations Development Programme' in 2016 presented eight core elements within society that lead to extremism, such as global politics, economic exclusion, political marginalisation of a particular group in society, inequality and lack of justice within the society, disenchantment with the governance system, failure to accept diversity, poor governance capacity, and changing global culture. Once a particular ethnic group feels alienated from these structural elements, this often leads to an identity crisis, hopelessness, psychological traumas and feelings of injustice (UNDP, 2016).

Similarly, research scholars have identified various factors that contribute to religious intolerance and extremism. In a research article written by Khan (2023), he identified that misuse of religion for political purposes, socioeconomic inequalities and lack of education are among the reasons for interfaith intolerance in Pakistani society. To add to it, Kazmi (2022) documented public approval for religious extremism along with the intersection of religion, religiosity and extremism with political, psychological, sociological and anthropological dimensions. One such example is the post-1980s Afghan Jihad period, where Islamization policies for political purposes developed a conducive environment for religious extremism.

Furthermore, peacebuilding efforts have improved due to a grassroots interfaith initiative as compared to a top-down approach. The case study of Uganda provides a classic example of how the 'Uganda Joint Christian Council' and the 'Muslim Centre for Justice and Law' have developed interfaith harmony through peer-to-peer outreach, community interaction, and intercultural activities, empowering youth (Faith to Action Network, 2022). Likewise, the Peace and Education Foundation has been working in Pakistan since 2009 to promote interfaith harmony by engaging community

leaders of various faiths, including Hindu Pandits, Imams, Sikh Gyanis, and Priests, to foster a peaceful environment for interfaith dialogues and conflict resolution (Peace Direct, 2023).

Researchers on counter speech strategies have identified that the only way to effectively counter hate speech requires an individual to confront it instead of just denouncing its hatefulness. Moreover, Mun et al. (2023) have identified that six psychologically inspired strategies, such as alternate groups, alternate qualities, counterexamples, external factors, broadening, and general denouncing, are effective in challenging stereotypes, and in addition, human-written counter speeches are more useful in countering hatefulness as compared to machine-generated responses. To conclude, according to Windisch et al. (2022), online programs such as those which communicate social norms, promote acceptance of diversity and teach people how to recognise hate speech can foster interfaith harmony and reduce the amount of hate speech and hate speech promoters online and offline.

3. Research Gap

Despite the scholarly literature, significant gaps still exist. Only a handful of studies examine how well the policy and grassroots actions work together or conflict with each other, especially in places like Pakistan, where the constitution, Articles 20 to 22, protects the minorities but at the same time contradicts societal religious intolerance. Furthermore, researchers have not done enough studies on the comparison of how different nation-states learn from each other and develop new policies, nor are there relevant examples showing how these ideas spread across nations over time. Theories like Contact Theory do provide limited, valuable insight into how different societal groups reduce prejudice through positive interactions; however, with the emergence of the digital environment, the contemporary era has seen most interaction happen online, and Contact Theory is unable to fill the gaps of interaction for the internet age.

Promoting peace between different religions and fighting extremism need to be studied together more deeply. According to Akbar and Yaseen (2020), everyone—like parents, teachers, religious leaders, and politicians—should work to encourage religious harmony. However, not much scholarly work has been done to evaluate how these groups can work together in an organised way, and only a handful of studies evaluate if local, community-based projects can have a long-lasting effect after they end.

Finally, having strong, clear policies followed by involvement from local communities for peace, scholarly research combined with on-ground implementations, and enough flexibility within those frameworks to adapt to change and situations can bring interfaith harmony among various religions. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the government rules and policies in Pakistan and their implementations at the domestic

level. These findings would then be compared to evaluate the international society.

4. Global Policy Frameworks for Interfaith Harmony

To enhance the probability of peacemaking and reducing hatred, a robust policy framework is required at the domestic, national, regional and international levels. International institutions play a vital role in the promotion of peace and interfaith harmony. This part of the research will evaluate the international efforts for countering extremism and what strategies various regions adopt for collaboration for interfaith tolerance, which will help Pakistan and, in broader terms, the world, understand the improvements they can make to their existing policies intending to counter extremism.

4.1. United Nations Initiatives and International Frameworks

The United Nations (UN), which emerged after devastating World War II to help maintain peace and avoid further wars, has helped in shaping international discourse around the world with relevance to interfaith harmony. This International Governmental Organisation believes that each individual in this world has a right to follow a religion of their choice (United Nations, 1948). Since 1948, the UN has worked to promote this agenda through targeted programs, global observances and resolutions.

4.1.1. World Interfaith Harmony Week:

A resolution A/RES/65/5 was adopted by UN General Assembly back in 2010 which necessitated that every year, the first week of February would be observed as World Interfaith Harmony Week and the purpose of which was to encourage the nation-states to work on developing peaceful relations among people of various faiths through dialogues to create an environment of conflict resolution (United Nations, 2010).

4.1.2. Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (2015):

In 2015, the UN Secretary-General, while highlighting the dangers of violent extremism and its implications on societal peace and development, presented a detailed plan which included top-down policy making and grassroots engagements (United Nations, 2015). The purpose of this plan was to adopt a proactive approach instead of a reactive approach, a way to solve problems before they even start by focusing on educational institutions to teach tolerance, empowering civil societies for interfaith harmony and dialogues, and media campaigns to debase extremism instead of using a kinetic military approach.

4.2. Regional Approaches: European Union, ASEAN, and OIC

Interfaith harmony is considered a necessity for protection of democracy and human rights by the European Union (EU) and the Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) institutionalized dialogues to be held among various religious, ideological and philosophical, thus recognizing the importance of diversity and their valuable contribution to the society (European Union, 2012). Moreover, the EU officially funds

the campaigns against violent extremism, hate speech, discrimination, and educational programs which help develop a peaceful living environment in Western countries. (European Parliament, 2024).

Similarly, ASEAN states, with their bodies like the ASEAN Committee on Social Culture and Development (ACSC) have developed legal frameworks to encourage interfaith dialogue. For this, educational campaigns, international, regional and national conferences are held, along with cultural exchange programs. These regular events gather religious leaders from Southeast Asian member countries with a vision to revive the Southeast Asian civilizational heritage and promote religious tolerance among the youth (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019).

On the other hand, Islamic countries around the world, including Pakistan, under OIC, have continually advocated the policy of tolerance, peace and Islamic unity. OIC in its summits has been an advocate of religious harmony and fight against Islamophobia, a recent phenomenon that has emerged following the war against terrorism, which has targeted Muslims within Western countries. Furthermore, the legal framework of OIC strictly forbids hate speech and promotes religious tolerance (OIC, 2021).

4.3. Challenges and Contrast

Despite these IGOs working tirelessly to promote interfaith harmony, they face significant challenges and have a limited scope of enforcement. For instance, if we look at the UN frameworks, although it encourages nation-states to nurture religious tolerance, it lacks the authority to get it implemented on the national level. In contrast, the way the EU, ASEAN and OIC execute their interfaith harmony framework differs significantly. The EU focuses on pluralism by paying special attention to maintaining and respecting cultures from around the world amid migration challenges. ASEAN, on the other hand, faces challenges related to religious freedom, despite the serious efforts that have been made for coexistence, while OIC tackles religious intolerance through Islamic principles.

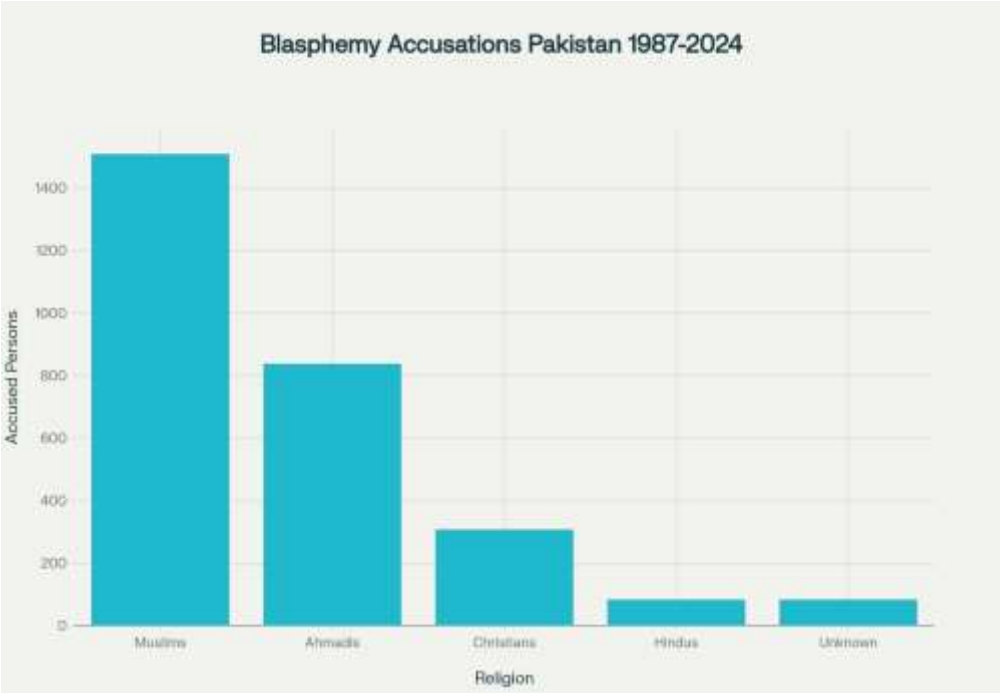
Moreover, significant gaps exist in many regions when implementing policies. While there is unanimity in the slogans to promote dialogue and tolerance, the implementations face serious hurdles due to bureaucratic red tapism, local unacceptability for change, and lack of political will. This gap is evident in OIC, ASEAN and EU member states in how they promote interfaith harmony and, in the meantime, fail to provide actual protection to minority faiths, discrimination based on race and religion.

5. Pakistan's Policy Landscape on Interfaith Harmony

Pakistan, through its constitutional guarantees, laws and government actions, has made efforts to stop religious discrimination; however, it faces a lot of challenges to make these work well. The 1973 constitution of Pakistan declares Pakistan as an Islamic State and provides religious protections to minorities according to the established rules within the Islamic framework. For instance, Articles 20 to 22 of the 1973 Constitution

guarantee that "every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice and propagate his religion" and "guaranteeing that no person attending any educational institution shall be required to receive religious instruction or participate in religious ceremonies contrary to their own faith" (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973).

However, the established research proves that sections 295-B and 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code, also known as blasphemy laws, have been used by extremist groups and even non-extremist groups for personal benefits. For instance, these laws have been frequently misused to settle personal disputes. It is well documented that from 1986 to 2015, at least 633 Muslims, 494 Ahmadis, 187 Christians, and 21 Hindus have been accused under these laws (ICJ, 2015).



(Bar chart showing the number of people accused under blasphemy laws in Pakistan by religion from 1987 to 2024, with Muslims comprising the largest number at 1,508 accused)

Data gathered from various sources establishes that since 1987, almost 1508 Muslims have been accused, the highest numbers, followed by Ahmadis at 837, Christians at 307 and Hindus at 83 (Amnesty International, 2021; Centre for Research and Security Studies [CRSS], 2024; Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2025; Morningstar News, 2025). This clearly demonstrates that since the highest numbers are Muslims, these laws are misused by people with deviant behaviour to resolve personal disputes, personal

grudges, ulterior motives, professional rivalry to achieve economic gains and in some cases religious prejudice against non-Muslims.

5.1. The Interfaith Harmony Policy 2025: Objectives and Mechanisms

To counter the challenges of religious tolerance and challenges to the existing legal framework, Pakistan's Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony developed a comprehensive Interfaith Harmony Policy 2025 (Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony, 2025), which will prove to be a strategic and long-term systematic initiative for preventing violent extremism. The policy articulates a vision "to build an inclusive and religiously tolerant Pakistan by promoting interfaith harmony, safeguarding religious freedoms, fostering mutual understanding, enhancing social integration and ensuring equal opportunities for all" (Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony, 2025, p. 5).

5.1.1. Key Objectives

- i. **Enhance Public Awareness:** The foremost objective of this policy is to promote awareness among the people of Pakistan of religious freedom that is guaranteed to citizens under the Constitution of Pakistan 1973 and the international conventions. This will play a key role in reducing violence between interfaith communities.
- ii. **Facilitate Interfaith Dialogue:** The second objective is to bring together religious leaders, different societal groups and establish district-level Interfaith Harmony Committees. This will encourage collaboration, address misconceptions, and reduce engineered hate.
- iii. **Develop Monitoring Mechanisms:** Hate speech preached at educational institutions is mostly brushed aside. A mechanism would be established to monitor hate speech, provocative published material, and those inciting conflict against other faiths.
- iv. **Educational Reform:** Under this policy, lessons will be included in national curricula that would cultivate values of respect. The goal would be to help young students grow up understanding and appreciating the differences among various faiths, and see it as a strength for Pakistan and its development.
- v. **Empower Law Enforcement:** Furthermore, law enforcement agencies will be granted special powers to prevent the misuse of section blasphemy laws and ensure protection of those who have been falsely accused, and in the meantime, detain those inciting hate and religious extremism.
- vi. **Establish Institutional Mechanisms:** The government of Pakistan would also make sure that special groups working in coordination with each other are created, both at the federal, provincial and local levels to implement policy objectives systematically.

5.2. National Action Plan and Counter-Extremism Strategies

On 16th December 2014, 132 schoolchildren were killed in a terrorist attack. This tragic incident led to the creation of the National Action Plan (NAP) to counter terrorism and extremism. Approved by the parliament on 24th December 2014, the 20-point plan agenda showed the seriousness of Pakistan to counter violent extremism, moving beyond a military approach and addressing the root cause of this menace (NACTA, 2014).

Under NAP, it was decided to take strict action against literature that would promote hatred and extremism, stop religious persecution, registration and regulation of religious seminaries, develop curricula that would promote tolerance, ban activities that promote and glorify terrorist organisations, and deal firmly with sectarianism (NACTA, 2014). For the implementation of NAP agenda points, the National Counter Terrorism Authority was established.

Moreover, Pakistan also developed a national narrative to ideologically counter those involved in heinous acts against innocent civilians. This narrative, based on a soft approach, advocated that rebelling against the state is forbidden in Islam, and those doing so were declared Fitnah-al-Khwarij, referring to those being excluded from Islam according to Islamic principles (NACTA, 2023).

5.3. Challenges in Policy Implementation

Despite developing comprehensive strategies, Pakistan has faced many challenges in actual implementations and bringing tangible improvements in interfaith harmony. The foremost challenge faced by Pakistan is a weak institutional capacity due to limited technical expertise, lack of financial resources, and coordination (Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony, 2025). Moreover, a lack of political will has caused significant gaps between the policy rhetoric and actual implementation (ISSRA, 2025). When it comes to changing the national curriculum and bringing in madrassah reforms to cope with emerging challenges, stiff resistance is faced from community groups due to vested interests. The Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies notes that "lack of interfaith dialogue, misinterpretation of religions, poor political will, self-centred biased thoughts, lack of social and cultural assimilation, poor religious knowledge, political instability, economic crisis" all contribute to interfaith tension (Planning Commission of Pakistan, 2013, p. 112). Finally, apart from the coordination gap and socioeconomic marginalisation, today the social media, digitalisation of the world, and online hate speech are playing a crucial role in inciting violence against religious communities (Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony, 2020). The rise of digital platforms has outpaced regulatory capacity, enabling rapid dissemination of extremist narratives and hate speech with limited accountability or enforcement of existing laws.

6. Grassroots Initiatives: Case Studies and Analysis

In this section of research, the grassroots initiatives in Pakistan and internationally through the lens of Contact Theory will be explored, the bottom-up approach, because the real change actually occurs at the local level, where community groups work in coordination with people, as these community-driven efforts prove more effective in transforming traditional opinions and opening up minds to new ideas. This helps create an environment for inclusivity and harmony.

6.1. Community-Based Interfaith Dialogue in Pakistan

- i. **The Peace and Education Foundation:** The Peace and Education Foundation (PEF), founded in 2009, is among Pakistan's core grassroots-level organisations (Peace Direct, 2023). It usually works by inviting various religious leaders from diverse communities, including imams, pandits, priests, Gyanis and religious teachers, with the purpose of holding dialogues and conflict resolution (Peace Direct, 2023). Training is provided by PEF to bring up "peace champions" who could lead and stop religious extremism in society, along with teaching essential skills to others within their respective communities through workshops, seminars and meetings (Peace Direct, 2023). Many of its "Peace Champions" have helped in stopping violence, extremism and terrorist attacks (Peace Direct, 2023).
- ii. **The Cavish Development Foundation:** This foundation usually worked within the province of Punjab, particularly in areas like Khanewal and Rajanpur, to reduce tensions. Since young people, aged 15 to 20, are more likely to get involved in deviant behaviour, CDF has usually targeted these age groups to promote peace and interfaith harmony. CDF is made of District Peace Committees, which include peace activists, local politicians, educationists, and religious leaders, who are responsible for organising talks and promoting interfaith harmony at the domestic level (Peace Insight, 2023). Father Arshad from Islamabad said, "CDF's program is the only one he saw that truly shows real interfaith harmony, with honest participation and care from different religions" (Peace Insight, 2023).
- iii. **Search for Common Ground - Youth for Humanity:** This NGO worked in Pakistan from September 2020 till June 2023 to help people respect each other and live peacefully. The project focused on cities like Karachi and Lahore to increase interfaith harmony, empower youth leaders, and use media campaigns to encourage tolerance. One of the participants said, "I am now more committed than ever to promoting interfaith dialogue and understanding in my community. I believe that by promoting

empathy and understanding, we can create a more peaceful and inclusive society" (Search for Common Ground, 2023).

- iv. **Pathfinder Interfaith Harmony Initiative (PIHI):** This initiative was recently launched in 2025 by young activists representing Generation Z, is focused on building a peaceful environment where people from diverse backgrounds can collaborate, celebrate common values and counter extremism through mutual understanding. Their source of spreading the message is through arranging workshops, educational programs, and community-based projects (Defence Journal, 2025).

6.2. International Examples of Successful Grassroots Initiatives

- i. **Uganda: Communities Richer in Diversity (CRID) Project:** From September 2018 to December 2019, the Uganda Joint Christian Council (UJCC) and Muslim Centre for Justice and Law (MCJL) worked on a peace project in Yumbe District to calm tensions between mostly Muslim and minority Christian groups (Faith to Action Network, 2022). They chose young people called Community Own Resource Persons (CORPs) to lead change by talking to peers in villages and religious places. Faith and cultural leaders helped with community talks and fun activities like music, dance, drama, and sports for peace (Faith to Action Network, 2022). A study of project records showed UJCC and MCJL used religious ideas and language to improve Christian-Muslim relations, promoting respect and peace. They believed building peace in small local areas helps end violence and supports peace across the country (Faith to Action Network, 2022, p. 1).
- ii. **Indonesia: Interfaith Harmony through Pancasila:** Indonesia, the largest Muslim-majority country with many religions, uses special local methods based on Pancasila, its main ideas about God, fairness, unity, democracy, and justice (Maruf, 2024). Their interfaith efforts show that Islam, modern life, and democracy can work together (European Network Against Racism, 2022). Groups like the Betawi community show strong unity, where families follow different faiths and teach children to respect all religions (European Network Against Racism, 2022). The SHIFT project by Search for Common Ground (2023-2024) helps youth, minorities, and women to support new ways for religious freedom and peace (Search for Common Ground, 2024). Education, local programs, media, and cooperation with religious leaders supported by the government all help reduce conflicts and encourage dialogue (Maruf, 2024). Research says religious leaders in Indonesia play a key part in promoting tolerance and peaceful living (Hutabarat, 2023, p. 1).

6.3. Applying Contact Theory

The Contact Theory, developed by Gordon Allport in 1954, helps understand how community engagement on the grassroots level helps reduce prejudice between heterogeneous social groups. According to this theory, the contacts established between diverse groups can work best if four components are met: 'groups have equal status, share common goals, work together, and are supported by laws and leaders' (Allport, 1954; Agrawal et al., 2019). International initiatives like Uganda's CRID and Malaysian programs, which include cooperation within workshops and promoting inclusivity based on equality by inviting community and religious leaders from various faiths, are more successful in reducing prejudice and increasing respect (Majid et al., 2020).

Similarly, the Peace and Education Foundation (PEF) in Pakistan uses similar components of the Contact Theory by bringing together religious leaders from various faiths, such as imams, priests, and Gyanis, for dialogues. Due to being seen as equal within their respective communities, it provides a chance for cooperation to work on the common goal of countering extremism (Peace Direct, 2023). However, there are certain gaps within the Contact Theory which require special attention. Although a direct contact based on equality does reduce hatred and prejudice especially if Gordon Allports four components are met, but contact alone is not always enough, "conscious process, through which deliberate efforts toward understanding the religious stranger is implied and organized formal dialogue designed to promote respect for difference, encourage cooperation, and overcome conflict" (Seljak, 2009, cited in Agrawal et al., 2019). In order to reduce interfaith hatred and increase interfaith harmony, structured dialogue that encourages understanding and respect is necessary for real change.

7. Synergies and Gaps Between Policy and Practice

To counter extremism and promote interfaith harmony, what matters the most is the capacity of a policy to work in accordance with local efforts. While having good policies gives initiatives to have better rules and laws, the real achievements are always made when different societal groups cooperate on the grassroots level. This section of the research will analyse how implementation and cooperation at the local level help further strengthen the policies developed at the national level and outline best practices for integration.

7.1. How Grassroots Efforts Complement Policy Frameworks

Most of the time, formal governmental structures are unable to address policy implementation gaps. Such gaps can be filled through grassroots initiatives. The overall strategy is provided by national policies; however, for them to be implemented thoroughly at the domestic level, the grassroots groups are the best option since they have a better understanding of the local context (OSCE, 2018). For example, the PEF and IHP 2025 work in

coordination with each other, while the Peace and Education Foundations work at the grassroots level, the Interfaith Harmony Policy 2025 sets national goals (MoRA, 2025). The national policies often focus on providing abstract goals, but these goals are translated into activities by the grassroots organisations through tournaments, religious dialogues, education and conflict resolution (SFCG, 2023).

Similarly, the grassroots organisations have the capacity to detect emerging tensions, contributing to the national security of a country. "It is the responsibility of a state to protect the welfare, survival, and sovereignty of its citizens and institutions against a wide range of internal and external threats" (Rehman et al., 2025). Since it is the responsibility of a state to protect its citizens, the grassroots organisations, through early detection of emerging tensions, can also contribute to the national security of a country. For instance, the District Peace Committess established by Cavish Development Foundations, including several other organisations and NGOs, is one of the organisation in Pakistan that serves as an early warning channel, since they are able to engage at local level, understand the perspectives of people and can help the government in detecting rising tensions or emerging threats by informing NACTA.

7.2. Implementation Gaps and Coordination Challenges

Pakistan's Interfaith Harmony Policy 2025 acknowledges that "federal ministries, provincial governments, law enforcement agencies and the legal system have not effectively addressed the root causes of growing extremism" due to "limited technical expertise and financial resources, hindering their ability to implement comprehensive solutions" (MoRA 2025, p. 4). Pakistan lacks interfaith initiative, cooperation and coordination, which results in repetition of activities, missed opportunities for synergy and waste of resources. Moreover, the gap between policy rhetoric and resource allocation leads to complications and challenges of implementation at the grassroots level, since implementation requires human resources, financial resources, and technical expertise, all of which remain insufficient.

Furthermore, policies made at the national level many times contradict practices at the domestic level, including religious groups, culture, tribal history, and social structures. The practical grassroots mechanism that would work for Tharparkar is unlikely to work for the tribal areas of Pakistan. Therefore, for the policies to work, they must be changed to fit the requirements that policy frameworks fail to fulfil. Subsequently, community-led counter-violent extremism initiatives in Pakistan face challenges from "mistrust between local communities and government-led programs", which "weakens their effectiveness" (Ullah et al., 2024). This happens because in Pakistan, historically, some NGOs had been identified as engaging in espionage, and as a result, NGOs face mistrust within the local community and face regulatory constraints, surveillance, and

restrictions on foreign funding, which restrain their ability to operate and work with domestic communities (Dawn, 2015).

8. Recommendations and Conclusion

This research has examined interfaith harmony policies and grassroots initiatives in Pakistan and globally, analysing how these complementary approaches address religious extremism and hate speech. To promote interfaith harmony in Pakistan and address religious extremism, grassroots initiatives and national policies can be improved through strengthening the legal framework and ensuring justice by establishing specialised courts along with training programs that would help in processing blasphemy cases, preventing false accusations, as well as enforcing penalties for false accusations. Ensuring that those who accuse others for personal benefits are punished will drastically decrease their misuse.

Additionally, establishing functional multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms will ensure that consistent implementation is achieved across the country without contradicting or interfering with provincial and local autonomy. This can be achieved through the operationalisation of 'District Interfaith Harmony Committees' with proper budget allocation, resources, experts and manpower under the Interfaith Harmony Policy 2025.

Thirdly, by establishing a dedicated government-backed and community-based fund to support, the grassroots organisations working for interfaith harmony would not have to rely on international donors. This would allow for transparency, reduce mistrust between local communities and NGOs, enable locally driven priorities and allow for more freedom to operate within Pakistan with fewer governmental restrictions.

Fourthly, if Pakistan manages to transform its educational system by bringing reforms in the national curriculum, including bringing in inclusive educational programs, this would aid in fighting religious extremism. As a result of this inclusive-based education, teacher training programs for promoting interfaith dialogues and developing conflict resolution skills, along with the creation of youth councils in schools, would benefit in countering extremism.

Finally, since the digitalisation of the world in the 21st century, countering hate speech through better strategies is a need of the hour. This can be achieved through establishing a government-funded and community-based independent media monitoring mechanism that can monitor hate speech across various platforms. The individuals of Pakistan should also be provided with monetary benefits without bureaucratic red tapeism if they report hate preachers promoting extremism within their surroundings or online, supported by evidence.

In conclusion, Pakistan will have to fight through numerous obstacles to establish permanent interfaith peace in the country. These obstacles are a result of conflicting legal systems and political exploitation of religion, economic problems, and insufficient state capacity. Developing policies

that could address domestic problems and could be applied across various communities will certainly promote religious tolerance. “Interfaith dialogue will not only improve the religious matters of the people but also bring a social and economic revolution”, provided it is implemented with political will (Mahmood, 2018). Through Pakistan’s Interfaith Harmony Policy 2025, the government plans to create a society, a nation that would tolerate inclusivity. It can be achieved through cooperation between the government and socio-religious leaders society supported by grassroots organisations, which should be permanent rather than temporary. In summary, if Pakistan manages to develop national policies that could supplement local initiatives to create a tolerant society, success would be imminent. This transformation is essential for the peace, security, and human rights of all people in Pakistan.

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