

I would like to begin by thanking the chairperson. My name is Usman Ahmad and I am a human rights defender focusing on religious minorities in Pakistan.

The persecution of religious minorities in Pakistan is well documented. The MRG itself has ranked Pakistan as one of the most dangerous countries in the world in this regard. Through a combination of legal discrimination and increasing societal hatred, minorities face regular violent attacks, are deprived of various civil and face problems in education and employment.

In recent years this hatred and bigotry has spilled onto social media platforms. If we take the example of Ahmadis, there are hundreds of anti-Ahmadi groups on Facebook which indulge in hate speech against the community and spread conspiracies about Ahmadis, similar to anti-Semitic canards. During the recent Covid-19 lockdown, regular trends targeting the community have been run on Twitter. On the 30th of April of this year, the top three trends in Pakistan were against the community. This spike in hatred was reported on by the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development. Shias have also been victims of increasing online harassment and hate campaigns, most notably in the weeks leading up to and during the Islamic month of Muharram. Christian and Hindu communities have also reported seeing increasing hostility in online spaces.

All of this has been an obvious cause of concern for minority communities as online hate speech often leads to real world consequences. In recent months three Ahmadis have been murdered for their faith in Peshawar, partly after numerous social media messages were spread against community members there.

I would like to call on social media companies to be more aware of and pro-active about removing online hate towards religious minorities in Pakistan, and for the Pakistani government to use the various internet related mechanisms they have put in place, to better protect minorities and curb hate speech against them.