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Islam in South Asia: The Interplay of Faith, Political Dynamics, and Cultural Expression

Sandeep kumar
Central University of Jammu
Dr. Neeta Rani
neeta.nss@cujammu.ac.in

Central University of Jammu

Article

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Abstract

South Asia is home to the largest concentration of Muslims on earth — roughly 650 million people, A third of the region's population, spread across Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, the Maldives and Bhutan. This paper examines Islam in the subcontinent along three intersecting axes: belief (doctrine, sects and devotional practice, particularly the region's distinctive Sufi and syncretic traditions), politics (Islamization, blasphemy law, religious parties, minority rights and recent flashpoints such as India's Waqf Amendment Act and Bangladesh's 2024 political transition), and culture (language, festivals, art, and the everyday coexistence of Islamic and local traditions). Drawing on current demographic data, recent legal and political developments, and comparative indicators across four states, the paper argues that South Asian Islam cannot be understood through a single lens: it is simultaneously a private faith, a mobilised political force, and a deeply localised culture, and the balance among these three shifts sharply from one country — and one decade — to the next.

Introduction

Islam arrived in South Asia within decades of the faith's founding — Arab traders reached the Malabar and Sindh coasts in the seventh and eighth centuries — and over the following millennium it grew from a coastal and trading-community presence into the second-largest religion of the subcontinent, shaping empires, languages, art forms and, ultimately, the borders of modern states.

South Asia (Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan) has produced some of the greatest Islamic thinkers, such as Shah Wali Allah (sometimes also spelled (Waliullah; 1702–1763) who is considered one of the originators of pan-Islamism, Rahmatullah Kairanwi (1818–1892), Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), Syed Abul A'la Mawdudi (also spelled Maududi; 1903–1979), and Abul Hasan Ali Hasani Nadwi (1914–1999), (Aafreedi, 2019) who have all played a pivotal role in shaping political Islam and have all had global impact. The historical presence of Islam in the region predates the Mughal Empire by centuries (Mahajan, 2023)

Before the establishment of the Mughal dynasty in India, Islam, introduced by missionaries, traders, and warriors, had existed in South Asia for nearly a thousand years. Islam first came to South Asia in the seventh century with Arab traders, who first appeared along the Malabar coast of southern India and Sri Lanka. Non-Muslim kings patronised them, and they played an important role in the economy, connecting India with Southwest Asia and beyond through trade and circulation networks (Mahajan, 2023). Early Islamic presence spread through commerce and spiritual instruction rather than conquest, establishing patterns of cultural interchange that would shape the region's religious evolution.

In 21st-century South Asia, there are more Muslims than in the entire Middle East and North Africa combined (Times Prayer, 2026). However, the region's Islam is routinely discussed piecemeal: as a security problem in Pakistan and Afghanistan, a minority-rights question in India, or a post-colonial identity marker in Bangladesh. This paper treats the subject as a single, interconnected field with three dimensions.

First, belief: the theological and devotional substance of South Asian Islam, overwhelmingly Sunni-Hanafi but shaped by centuries of Sufi mysticism, saint veneration and syncretism with the region's Hindu, Buddhist and indigenous traditions. Second, politics: the use of Islam as a basis for statehood (Pakistan's founding ideology), as a contested constitutional category (India's minority and personal-law framework), and as a battlefield between competing visions of the state (Bangladesh since 2024, Afghanistan under the Taliban). Third, culture: language, cuisine, festivals, architecture, music and dress, through which Islam is lived rather than legislated. The sections that follow move from demography, through belief and politics country by country, to culture and a comparative synthesis, drawing on the most recent data and events available as of mid-2026. (Islam in South Asia, 2024)

Demographic Overview

South Asia's roughly 2.04 billion people include an estimated 650–655 million Muslims — about one-third of the region's population and close to one-third of the world's Muslim population. (Global Muslim Population, 2026) Pakistan and Bangladesh are Muslim-majority states (each above 90% Muslim); India hosts the world's third-largest national Muslim population and second-largest in South Asia, shown in Fig. 1 in absolute terms despite Muslims being roughly 14–15% of its population; and Afghanistan is almost entirely Muslim. (Religious Composition by Country, 2010–2020, 2025) Smaller but historically significant Muslim communities exist in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives, the last being the only South Asian state that is constitutionally 100% Muslim. (Constitution of the Republic of Maldives, 2008)

Figure 1. **Estimated Muslim population by South Asian country (millions), based on 2024–25 census and demographic estimates.**

Figure 1. **Paste here**

Islam's demographic weight in the subcontinent has grown steadily since partition. Taking India, Pakistan and Bangladesh together as the territory of undivided colonial India, the Muslim share of the combined population rose from about 20% in 1900 to 23.5% at partition in 1947, and to roughly one-third today, as shown in Fig. 2 (Kettani, 2010) — a trajectory driven historically by differential fertility and, since 1947, by very different national trend lines.

Pakistan's and Bangladesh's populations are overwhelmingly Muslim by construction. In contrast, India's Muslim population has grown in absolute terms even as fertility differentials with the Hindu majority have narrowed sharply in the past two decades. (Lai, 2022)

Figure 2. **Muslim population share in South Asia (1900–2025) Fig. 3—approximate sectarian composition of South Asian Muslims.**

Figure 2. **& Fig. 3 paste here**

Sectarian composition is heavily Sunni. Across South Asia, roughly 85–90% of Muslims identify as Sunni (predominantly Hanafi in legal school), with Shia communities — including Twelver, Ismaili and Bohra populations — concentrated in parts of Pakistan as shown in Fig. 3 (Punjab, Gilgit-Baltistan and Karachi), India (Lucknow and parts of Kashmir) and smaller pockets elsewhere. (Mapping the Global Muslim Population, 2009) The Ahmadiyya movement, though numerically small, occupies an outsized place in regional politics because of its formal exclusion from the definition of "Muslim" in Pakistani law since 1974. (Constitution Second Amendment Act, 1974, 1974)

Beliefs: An Exploration of Doctrines, Sects, and Devotional Practices

South Asian Islam is rooted in the Sunni orthodox doctrine, but its Sufi origins are deep. Chishti, Suhrawardi, Qadiri and Naqshbandi orders set up shrine networks in India from the twelfth century onwards, and figures like Moinuddin Chishti of Ajmer, Nizamuddin Auliya of Delhi, Data Ganj Bakhsh of Lahore, and Shah Jalal of Sylhet are still devoted to the shrine; in many cases, they are the places of worship for Muslims and not only non-Muslims. (Gaborieau, 2005, pp. 423–444) This shrine-centred, saint-venerating piety (sometimes called folk Islam or Barelvi Islam after the reformist movement in the nineteenth century) has long been the dominant mode of practice in much of Pakistan, North India and Bangladesh. (Barelvi movement, 2000) In the background of this, reformist and revivalist currents have been growing in influence since the eighteenth century: the Deobandi school (the school from which the Taliban and much of Pakistan's madrasa network emerge), Ahl-e-Hadith/Salafi-oriented reform movements, and Islamist movements such as the Jama'at-e-Islami (founded by Abul A'la Maududi in 1941) that reject folk devotional practice as a new invention (bid'ah) and instead see Islam as a comprehensive political and legal system rather than a private religion shown as figure – 4. (Haroon, 2007)

Figure 4. **Islamic Political Movement and Religious Practices in South Asia**

Figure 4. **Paste here**

Note

The dual visualisation was built as a custom statistical graphic using Python plotting modules (Matplotlib / Seaborn) to visualise the socio-political and jurisprudential diversity of Islam in South Asia.

There is a conflict of faith between shrine-focused Barelvi practice and reformist Deobandi/Salafi currents that is evident in many of the crises of South Asian Muslim life, including mosque control controversies and sectarian violence. (Sajjad, 2023) South Asian traditions also drive devotional life: qawwali devotional music at Sufi shrines; the celebration of Milad-un-Nabi (the Prophet's birthday) in Bangladesh and parts of India and Pakistan; regional Ramadan and Eid customs as well as similar syncretic practices (shared shrines, common festivals and similar folk cosmologies) that make it hard

for the common people of rural Bengal, Punjab and Sindh to discern between Muslim and Hindu popular religion. (Eaton et al., 2009, pp. 405–436)

Political Islam Across South Asia

Islam's relation to state power is different from that in the four largest Muslim-populated Muslim-majority states of the region, which are constitutional Islamic republics and a secular democracy with a large Muslim minority. This article reviews the four countries, covering 2025 to 2026.

Pakistan: Islamization and the Blasphemy-Law Regime

Pakistan was founded in 1947 as the home of Muslims in South Asia. (Pakistan, 2024) Still, its constitutional character as an Islamic Republic became entrenched with the military rule of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988), who introduced the Hudood Ordinances in Pakistan's judiciary, expanded blasphemy laws in the Pakistan Penal Code, and created the rapid growth of madrasas that served as the seedbed for Afghan and Pakistani Taliban movements within the country in the years to come. (Hudud Ordinances, 1979) Blasphemy law, though, is still the most visible and volatile form of state-sanctioned religion in Pakistan today: accusations of blasphemous conduct, credible or not, can lead to mob violence, lynching and social exclusion, as well as violence against Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus, Shia Muslims and Sunni Muslims. (Shea & Marshall, 2011) The situation since 2023 has worsened. In October 2025, the Pakistani state was confronted with two hardline Islamist movements simultaneously and in early 2026, the government banned Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). (Pakistan bans hard-line Islamist party known for its fierce anti-blasphemy stance, 2025) This group is based almost entirely on blasphemy law vigilantism and the legacy of Mumtaz Qadri (who assassinated Punjab governor Salman Taseer in 2011 for defending a Christian woman accused of blasphemy), and has reduced blasphemy-related mob violence. (Qadri, 2011) However, the dynamic (the elastic definition of "insult," rapid mob mobilisation, weak state deterrence) remains unresolved. The military is still the major force that decides the boundaries of religious politics, and it patronises and counters militant and sectarian elements. (Sheikh & Ahmed, 2019)

Figure 5. **Islamic Influence on Legal System Across South Asia**

Figure 5. **Paste here**

Note

The graphic is a custom heat map visualisation rendered using Python libraries (Seaborn/Matplotlib) to display comparative law indices across South Asian jurisdictions.

Bangladesh: Secularism Under Strain

Bangladesh was established in 1971 on secular Bengali nationalist principles and has oscillated since then between constitutional secularism and a state religion (added to the Constitution in 1988 and kept in place through amendments in 2011). (Absar, 2014) The mass uprising of July–August 2024 that ended Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government began a period of acute political fragmentation, which analysts believe is still ongoing: one year later, Bangladesh's interim government has been struggling to stabilise politics; Islamist parties (Jamaat-e-Islami, banned and then re-established) have sought to expand their sphere in a new party system in which the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and a fractured Awami League are struggling to find a place. (Bajpaee & Schröder, 2024) Bangladesh's trajectory mirrors a much wider regional pattern: secular-nationalist founding settlements are not static, and political rupture opens opportunities for religious and political actors to reconfigure their place in public life—in electoral politics, street mobilisation, and education and religious administration. (Hossain, 2024)

India: A Minority Between Constitution and Contention

India has the largest Muslim minority population in the world, and Islam's place in India's politics has been defined in all aspects of society since 1947, with secularism at the core of its laws and personal law at the same time, especially for Muslim family and endowment (waqf) matters. The most important recent development is the Waqf (Amendment) Act, 2025, passed by India's Parliament in April 2025 and immediately challenged in the Supreme Court by opposition politicians, including members of the Indian Union Muslim League, AIMIM leader Asaduddin Owaisi, and others. Critics argued that the law bans non-Muslim membership on the waqf boards and requires a person to show five years of practising Islam before establishing a waqf, and makes unregistered waqf properties "disputed." They believe that it is a particular burden for Muslim religious endowments, and potentially imposes state control on the autonomy of an estimated 200-million-strong minority (Beverley, 2011). The government defended the law as a transparency and anti-encroachment measure that leaves faith and worship untouched. In September 2025, a Supreme Court bench led by the Chief Justice of India stayed some of the most controversial provisions (the non-Muslim membership cap and the five-year practice limit) while refusing to stay the entire law (Supreme Court of India, 2025). Still, it said it would reserve a full stay for the "rarest of rare" situations. A case is ongoing and is regarded as a bellwether for the Hindu-majoritarian governing party's relations with the Muslim minority and for previous flashpoints like the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) and the history of mosque sites, religious conversion laws and bulldozer demolitions on Muslim-owned property after communal violence. (Dabhade, 2019) The Kashmir dispute is one of the longest-running and most militarised conflicts, rooted in religion, nationalism, and territory. (Behera, 2016, pp. 45–67) Kashmir's Muslim-majority status has been a central subject of Pakistan's claim since 1947, and the insurgency that developed after 1989 was much influenced by the wider growth of political Islam and cross-border militant networks in the 1980s and 1990s. (Insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir, 2024) India's 2019 decision to revoke Jammu and Kashmir's special constitutional status (Article 370) further affected the political climate of the region, with Kashmir still one of the

flashpoints in India-Pakistan relations and the reference point of both countries' homegrown religious politics. (Dave, 2019)

Afghanistan: The Taliban's Islamic Emirate

Even though Afghanistan is sometimes viewed as distinct from "South Asia" and "South Asia" as a whole, it is inextricably tied to the political-Islam dynamics of the region: the Taliban movement came from Deobandi madrasas in Pakistan's tribal areas and Afghan refugee camps in the 1990s, and Pakistan's security establishment nurtured the first Taliban regime as the basis of its Afghanistan policy. (Afghanistan's Islamist Groups, 2004) Since coming to power in August 2021, the second Islamic Emirate of the Taliban has imposed an increasingly strict interpretation of Islamic governance against girls' secondary and university education, restrictions on women's travel and employment, and morality codes through the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, yet has been plagued by internal divisions, with reports of disagreements within the Taliban's own leadership regarding the girls' education ban. (Afghanistan: Taliban 'Vice' Handbook Abusive, 2021) Afghanistan's trajectory since 2021 is the most extreme modern Islamist state formation story, and that is where the situation in Pakistan and, to a lesser extent, in India and Central Asian countries stands today. (Wani, 2021, pp. 365–380)

South Asian Muslim's Culture: Language, Festivals, Sufism and the Arts

South Asian Muslim culture is remarkably plural in language and expression: Urdu in Pakistan and North India; Bengali among the world's second-largest Muslim linguistic community, some 215–220 million Bengali Muslims concentrated in Bangladesh and India's West Bengal, Assam and Tripura (Bengali Muslims, 2020); Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Kashmiri, and numerous other regional languages, each carrying its own devotional poetry, Sufi literature and folk-Islamic tradition. Persian and Arabic supplied liturgical and literary vocabulary and script conventions. Still, everyday Muslim culture in the region is expressed overwhelmingly in local vernaculars — a pattern quite different from the Arabic-centred religious culture of the Middle East.

Festivals mark the calendar across the subcontinent: Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha as the major communal celebrations; Muharram processions, especially significant among Shia communities in Lucknow and parts of Kashmir (Raza, 2020); Milad-un-Nabi celebrations with distinctive South Asian processional and devotional forms (Malik, n.d.); and, at Sufi shrines, festivals marking a saint's death anniversary that draw devotees across religious lines. (Philippon, 2012, pp. 359–373) Architecturally, the Mughal legacy — the Taj Mahal, Delhi's Jama Masjid, Lahore's Badshahi Mosque — remains the most visible expression of Indo-Islamic synthesis, blending Persian, Central Asian and indigenous Indian building traditions. (Mughal Architecture – The Golden Age of Indo-Islamic Art, 2026) In music, the qawwali tradition associated with Amir Khusrau and Sufi shrine culture, and later popularised globally by artists such as Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, exemplifies the region's devotional-cultural fusion, as does the broader Sufi-

influenced folk and classical music tradition shared across Punjab, Sindh and Bengal. (Boivin & Delage, 2016)

Cuisine, dress, and everyday material culture likewise reflect centuries of exchange rather than a single "Islamic" template: Mughlai and Awadhi cuisines in North India and Pakistan; distinct Bengali Muslim culinary traditions; regionally specific dress conventions, from the shalwar kameez to the Bengali-Muslim sari and lungi. (V et al., 2024) This cultural pluralism often tensions with the homogenising tendencies of both state-led Islamization projects and transnational reformist movements, producing an ongoing negotiation between local, syncretic Islam and more standardised, text-centred articulations of the faith. (Riaz et al., 2009)

Comparative Analysis

A comparative analysis across Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Afghanistan shows a widespread difference in how far Islam is embedded in formal state structures versus contested in civil society and the courts. (Hakeem & Sulphey, 2023) The illustrative index below in Fig. 6, compiled qualitatively from the country reporting summarised above rather than any single official metric, is offered as a heuristic for comparing five dimensions: the formal role of Islamic law in the state, the intensity of blasphemy-law enforcement, the electoral strength of religious parties, the degree of pressure on religious minorities, and the visibility of Sufi/syncretic culture in public life.

Figure 6. **Illustrative comparative index of political-Islam indicators across four South Asian states (0 = low/absent, 10 = high/dominant). Compiled qualitatively from the country analysis in Section 4; not an official or standardised metric.**

Figure 6. **Paste here**

Note

The graphic itself is a custom qualitative data visualisation rendered using Python plotting packages (Matplotlib / Seaborn) to compare socio-political indicators of Islam across South Asian states.

If we look at Islamic states in terms of legal frameworks and cultural practices, then countries where Islam is more formally legal (Afghanistan and Pakistan) may see greater enforcement of blasphemy laws alongside pressure on minority rights. This means that as legal Islamization increases, minority groups become more vulnerable — so these two dynamics do not operate independently but together; they are interlinked.

In Pakistan and Bangladesh, too, blasphemy enforcement is strong, but Sufi and syncretic cultural practices survive — this is where interaction is more complex. Strong shrine cultures persist in these countries, so elite political Islamization may be growing, but popular devotional expressions may develop on different tracks. This shows that formal legal practices can diverge from grassroots cultural

expressions and raises the question of how they co-exist and influence each other within Islamic societies.

Table 1. Key comparative data points

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Challenges

- Minority protection: Ahmadis, Shia Muslims, Hindus and Christians in Pakistan; religious minorities in Afghanistan under Taliban rule; and India's Muslim minority under the Waqf Amendment Act litigation and recurring communal violence all have their own, but interlinked, pressures on religious freedom and legal equality.
- The educational rights: The Taliban’s decision to prohibit girls’ secondary and university education in Afghanistan is a blow to women’s rights on a religious level, and it is a matter of internal Taliban dispute and international pressure.
- Political instability: Bangladesh’s chaotic post-2024 transition and Pakistan’s ongoing political-military-Islamist conflict show how institutional dysfunction breeds religious-political mobilisation.
- Blasphemy and mob violence: Pakistan's TLP ban has limited vigilantism, but it has not eliminated it. This reduction will only be sustained if mob violence is consistently brought to justice and not just met with condemnation.
- Legal contestation over religious institutions: How far can the state regulate minority religious endowments without infringing constitutional rights, as in India’s Waqf Amendment Act, which is still before the Supreme Court?
- Demographic convergence: Fertility rates across religious communities in South Asia, driven largely by urbanisation and mobile internet connectivity, are closing long-term demographic gaps, while short-term political rhetoric about demography is becoming increasingly prominent.

Solutions Framework & Reform Pathways

Addressing the institutional challenges arising from the religion-politics nexus in South Asia requires balanced, realistic reform strategies. Rather than imposing rigid, top-down secular models that risk triggering a public backlash, regional actors can focus on strengthening pluralism within existing legal structures.

Figure:-7 Solutions Framework & Reform Pathways

TOWARD SUSTAINABLE PLURALISM IN SOUTH ASIA

SOCIO-LEGAL REFORMS

Repeal Vague Blasphemy /

Anti-Conversion Provisions

Decentralise Local Governance

INSTITUTIONAL SAFAGUARDS

Depoliticize Police Services

Independent Judicial Oversight

Protect Minority Seat Quotas

REGIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS MONITORING

SAARC Human Rights Charter Revival

Cross-Border Civil Society Alliances

Key Recommendations

- Procedural Judicial Reform: Set rigorous independent evidentiary standards for blasphemy and anti-conversion charges, so as not to allow them to be used in personal and civil disputes.
- Depoliticised Law Enforcement: Professionalise local police departments through specialised training so they can provide a neutral, rapid response in inter-communal disputes.
- Pluralist Educational Curricula: Review national textbook frameworks to ensure accurate, respectful representation of minority contributions to national history and development.
- Regional Human Rights Tracking: Support independent monitoring bodies across South Asia in developing standardised metrics for religious freedom.

Conclusion

The study finds that Islam in South Asia resists any single narrative. It is the founding ideology of one state (Pakistan), a constitutionally ambiguous but socially dominant force in another (Bangladesh), a minority faith navigating increasingly assertive majoritarian politics in a third (India) and the basis of an emirate in a fourth (Afghanistan). However, for the vast majority of the region's around 650 million Muslims, this is a devotional, cultural, and familial practice centred on Sufi shrines, vernacular languages, and locally rooted festival and artistic traditions largely untouched by high politics. Understanding the region, therefore, requires holding belief, politics, and culture together. Religious institutions, contested transitions of political power and generational shifts in piety and gender norms continue to unfold across South Asia, and it is likely to remain, as it has for over a millennium, one of the world’s most consequential and most internally diverse regions of Muslim political and cultural life.

Declarations

Limitations of the Study

The study has some limitations because the currency of available data varies across jurisdictions, institutions change rapidly, public records are not always as transparent as they could be and reporting cadences vary across borders. South Asia's demographic context is covered broadly, but the political-legal detail is deliberately restricted to Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, leaving smaller regional polities (Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives) out of the country-level index. Although South Asia is regional, the political-legal analysis is done at the granular level, so only Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan are included in the country-level index (not Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives). So while the analytical framework provides rigorous comparative utility across the legal systems chosen here, the findings should be taken as illustrative rather than universally generalisable throughout the subcontinent.

Author Contribution

Regarding author contributions, Sandeep Kumar served as the first author, leading the research design, primary data collection, and rigorous data analysis. Dr. Neeta Rani supervised the overall project, provided critical conceptual oversight, and actively contributed to the drafting, critical revision, and final writing of the manuscript.

Data Availability

This Study is a narrative comparative-synthesis research article. It does not use restricted datasets; all demographic, legal and political claims are drawn from publicly available sources listed in the reference list (Pew Research Centre reports, government and court documents (e.g. Supreme Court of India orders on Waqf (Amendment) Act, 2025; Constitution of Pakistan and Constitution of Maldives), peer-reviewed literature). These sources are freely accessible at URLs and DOIs given in the References section and Supplementary file. Figures no. 4 to 7 are original visualisations by the authors to illustrate qualitative comparisons described in the text (e.g. relative weight of Islamic legal, political and cultural indicators across four states); they are heuristic devices rather than outputs of a coded quantitative dataset and the classification basis for each is given in the surrounding text and figure notes. No additional raw data, code, or restricted materials exist beyond what is cited and described here.

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Table 1

Table 1 is available in the Supplementary Files section.

Figures

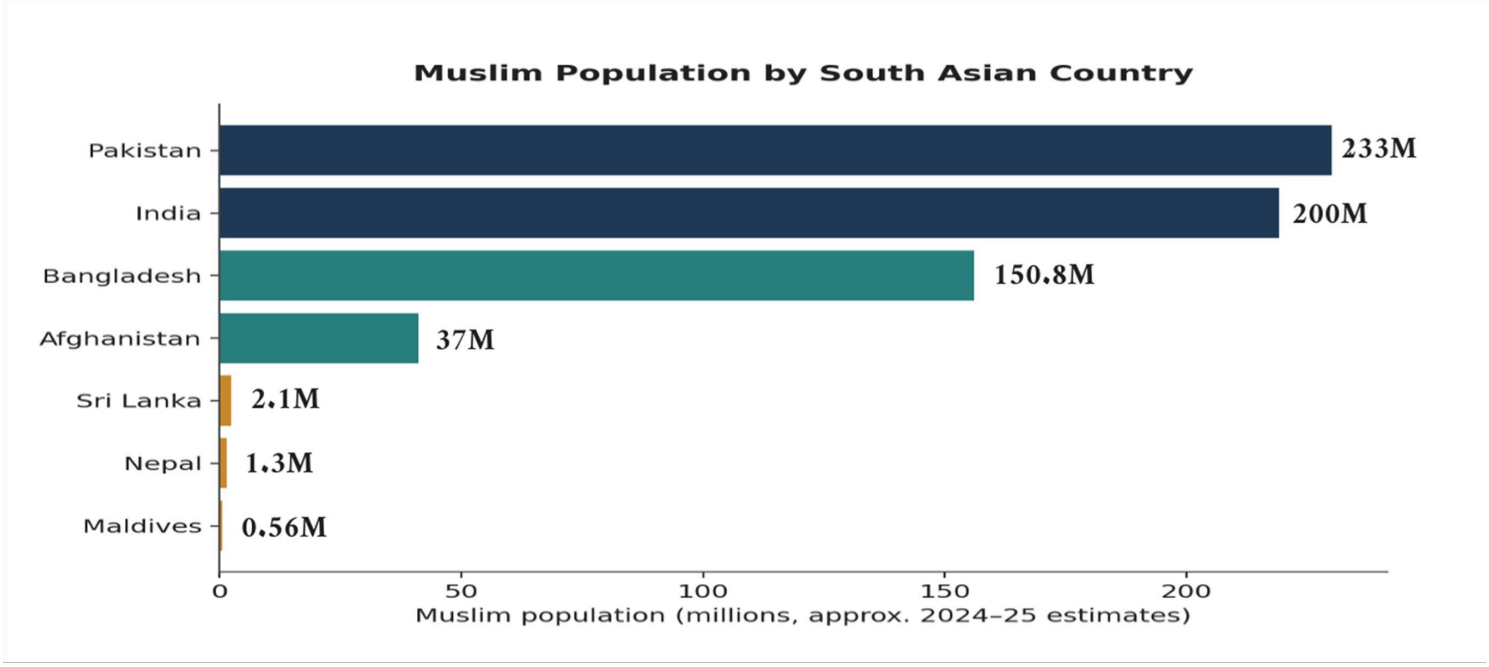


Figure 1

Estimated Muslim population by South Asian country (millions), based on 2024–25 census and demographic estimates.

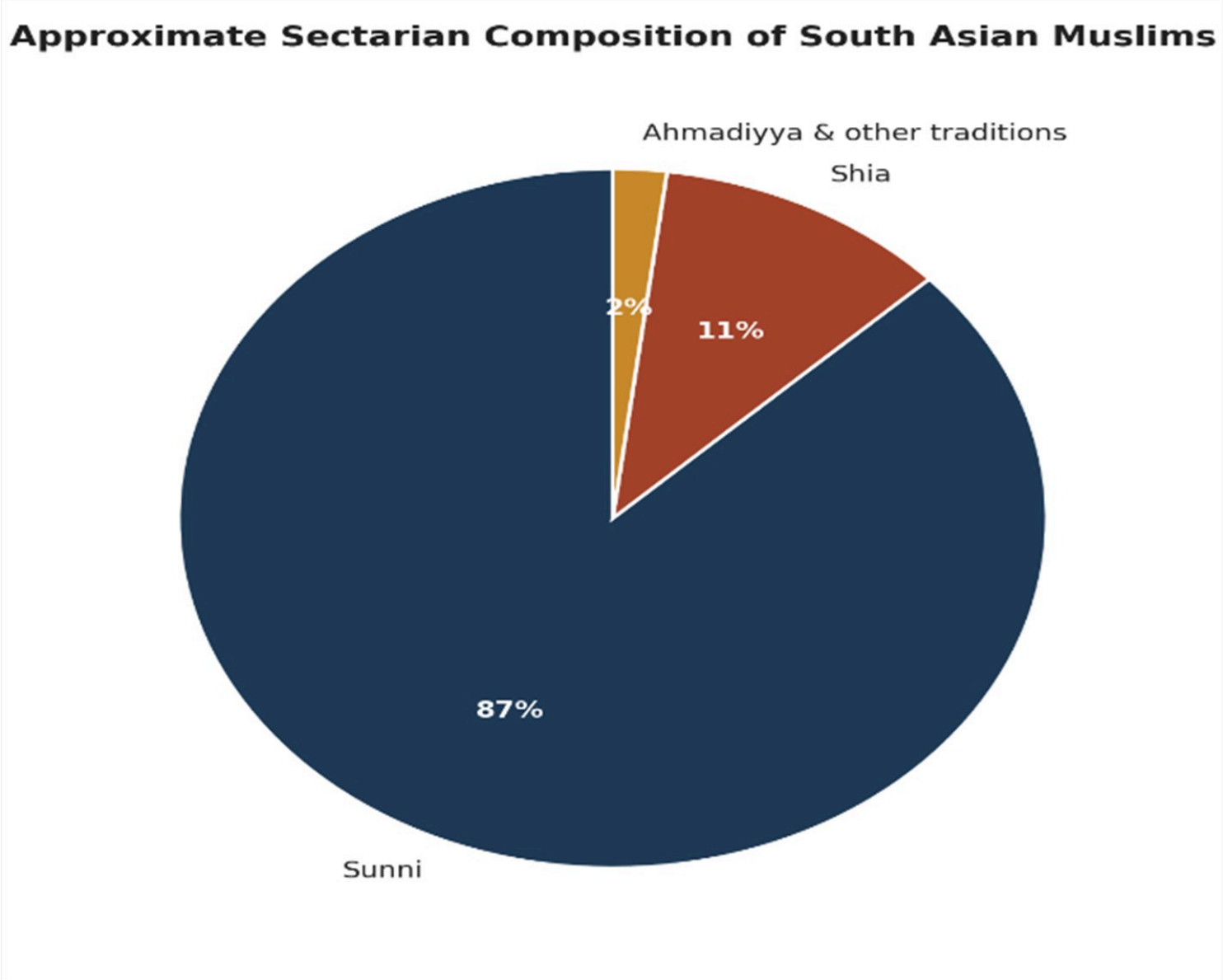


Figure 2

Muslim population share in South Asia (1900-2025)

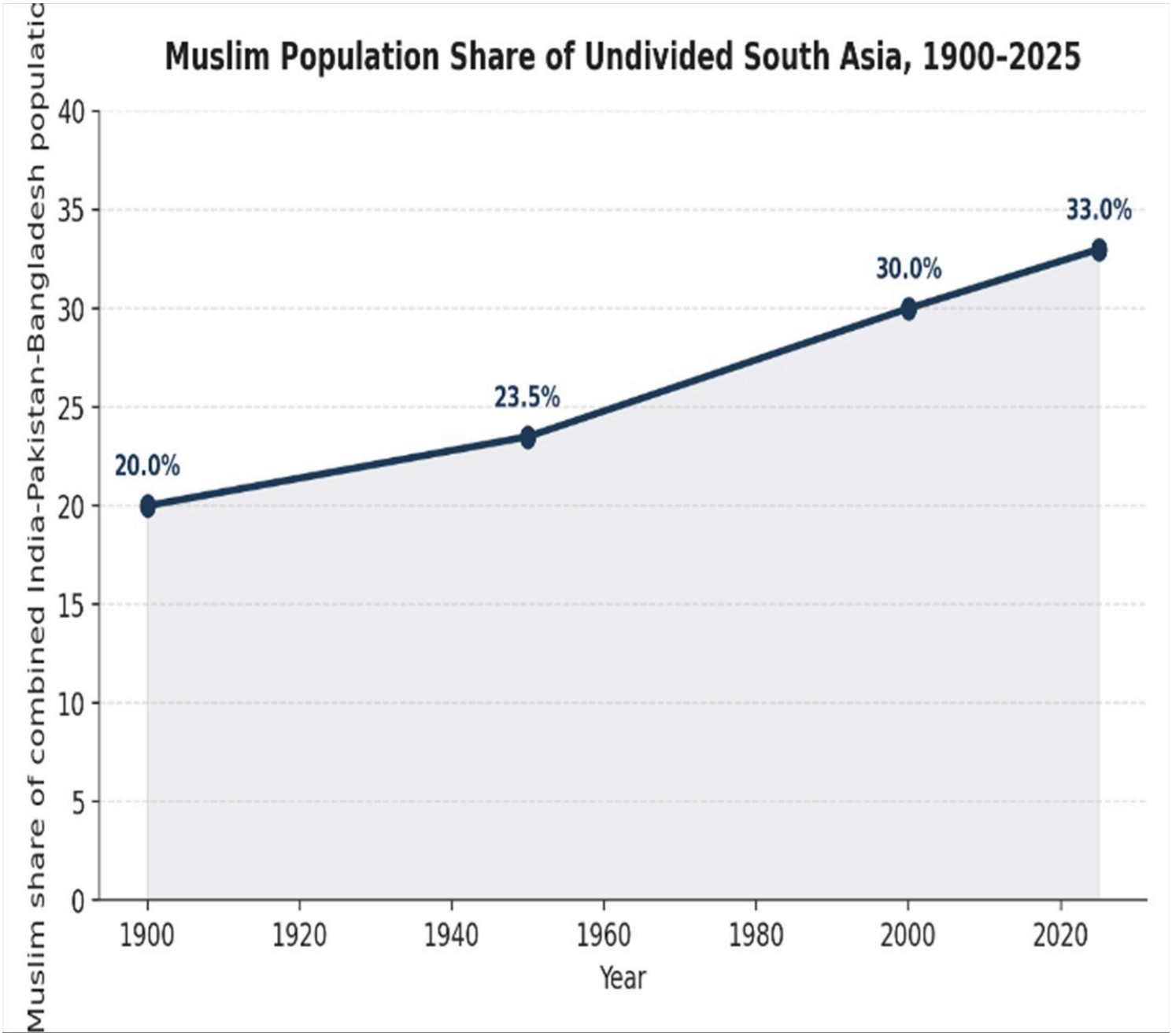


Figure 3

approximate sectarian composition of South Asian Muslims.

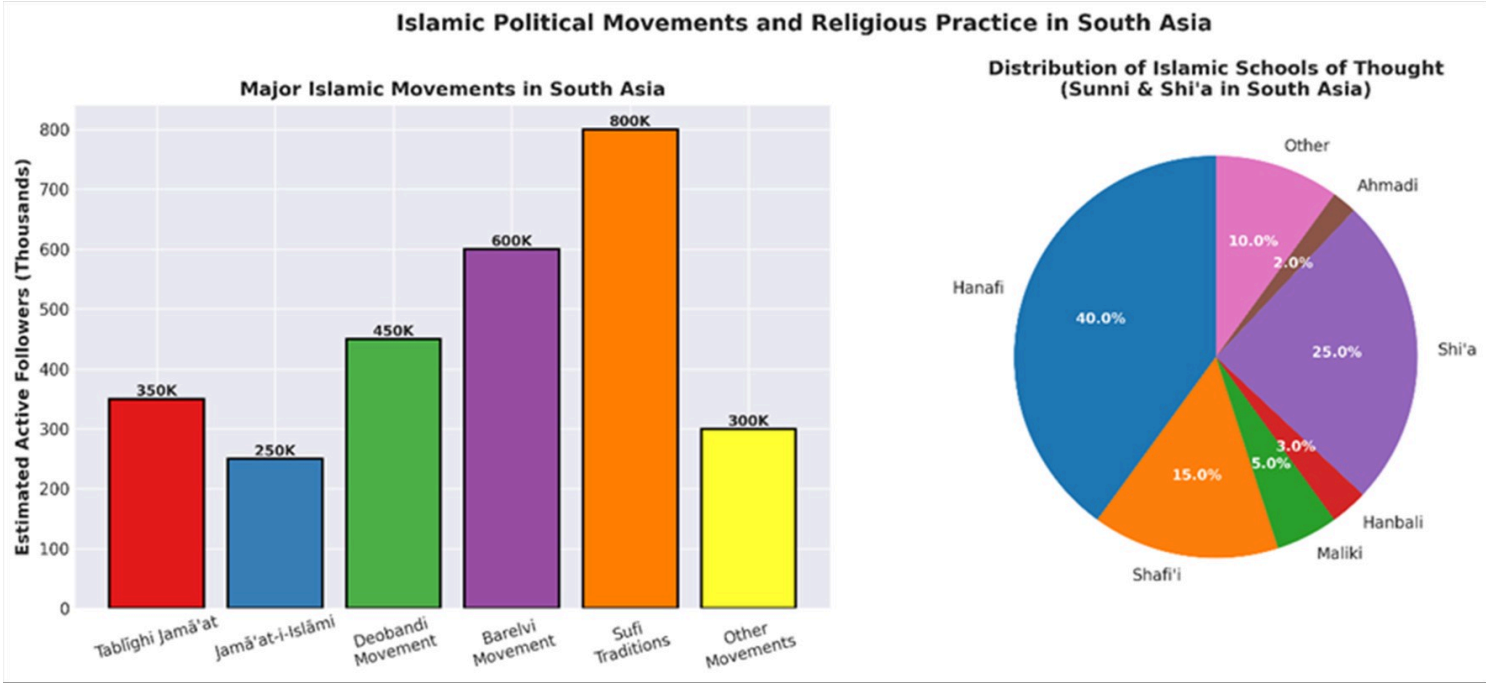


Figure 4

Islamic Political Movement and Religious Practices in South Asia

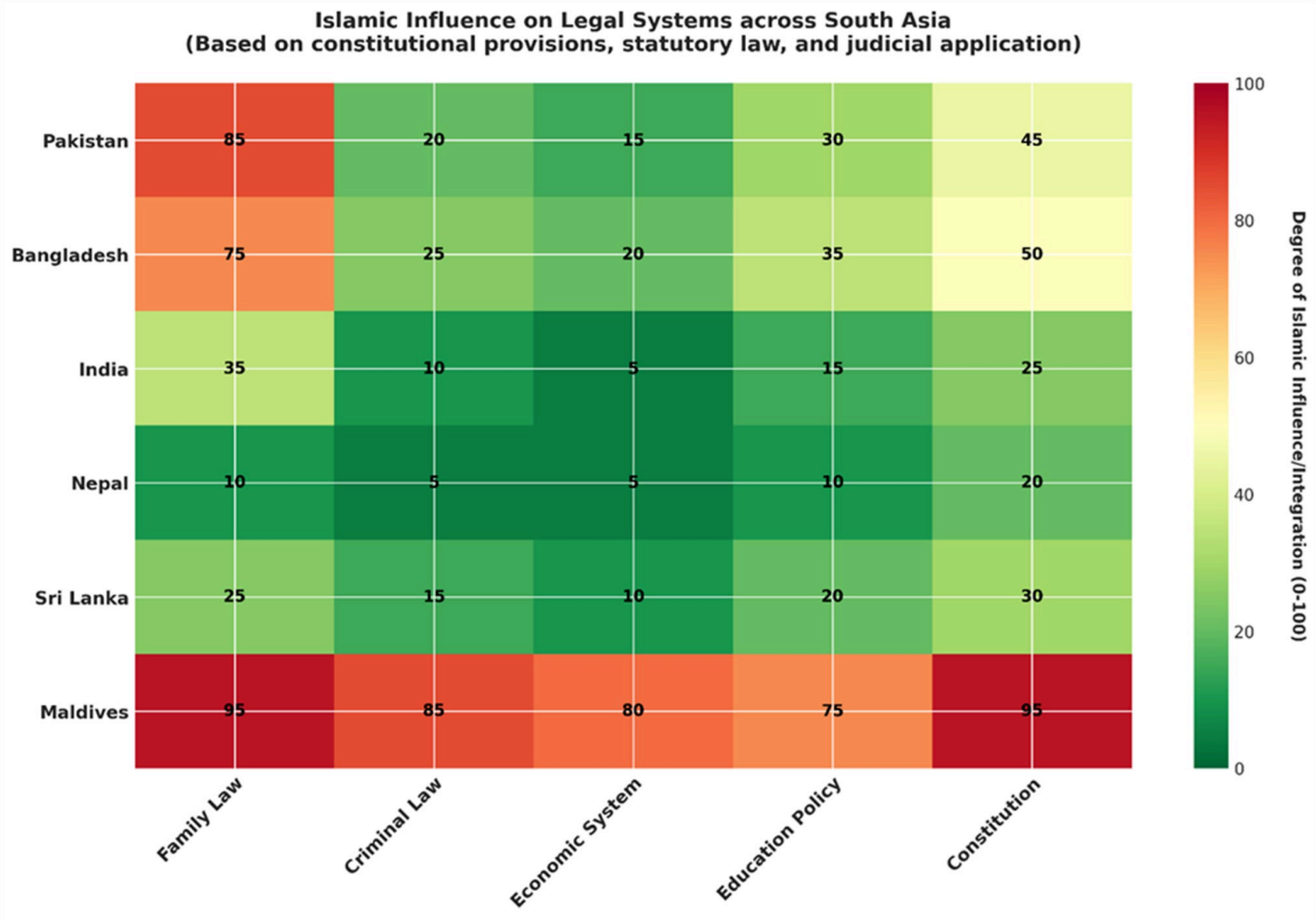


Figure 5

Islamic Influence on Legal System Across South Asia

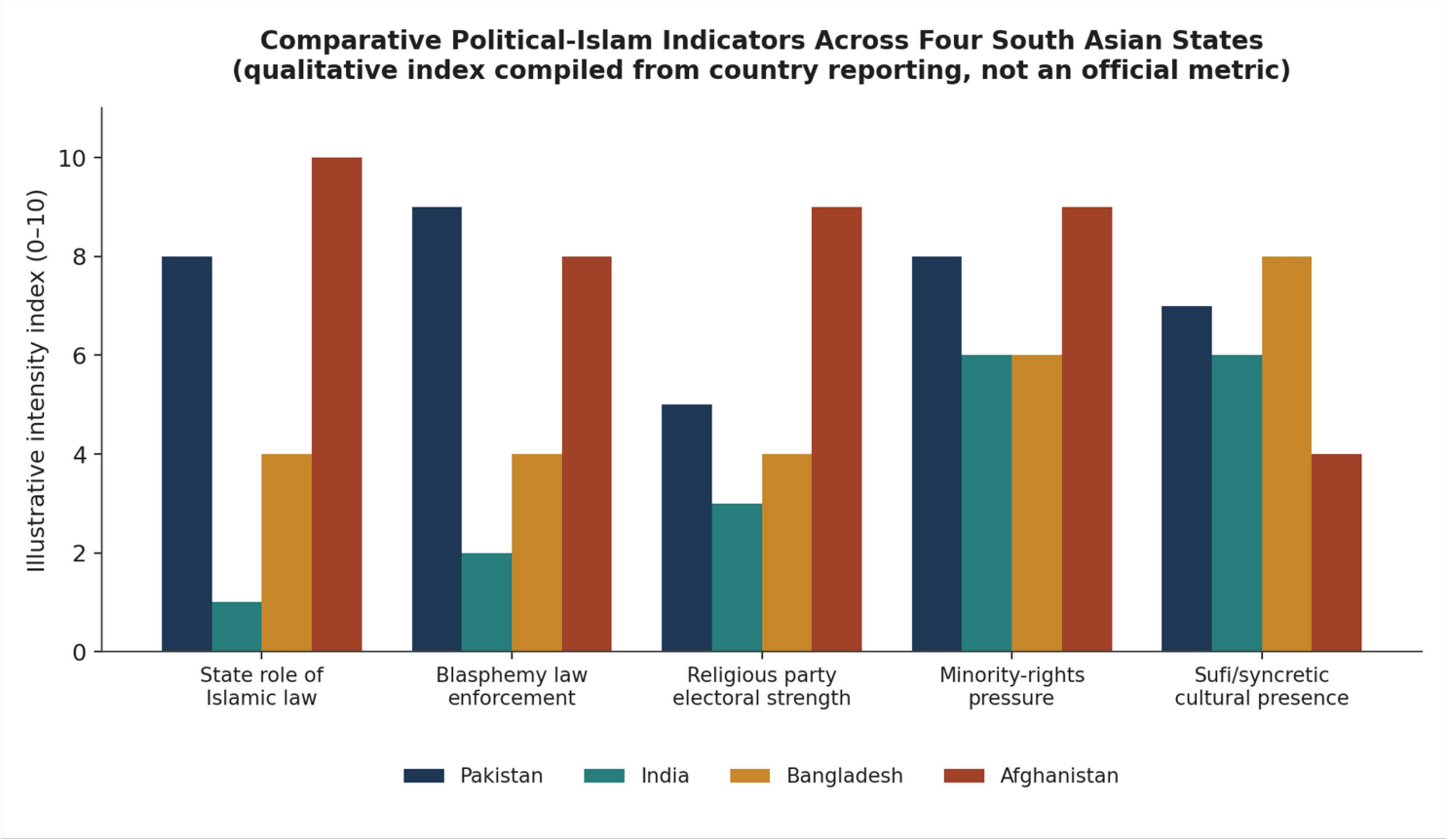


Figure 6

Illustrative comparative index of political-Islam indicators across four South Asian states (0 = low/absent, 10 = high/dominant). Compiled qualitatively from the country analysis in Section 4; not an official or standardised metric.

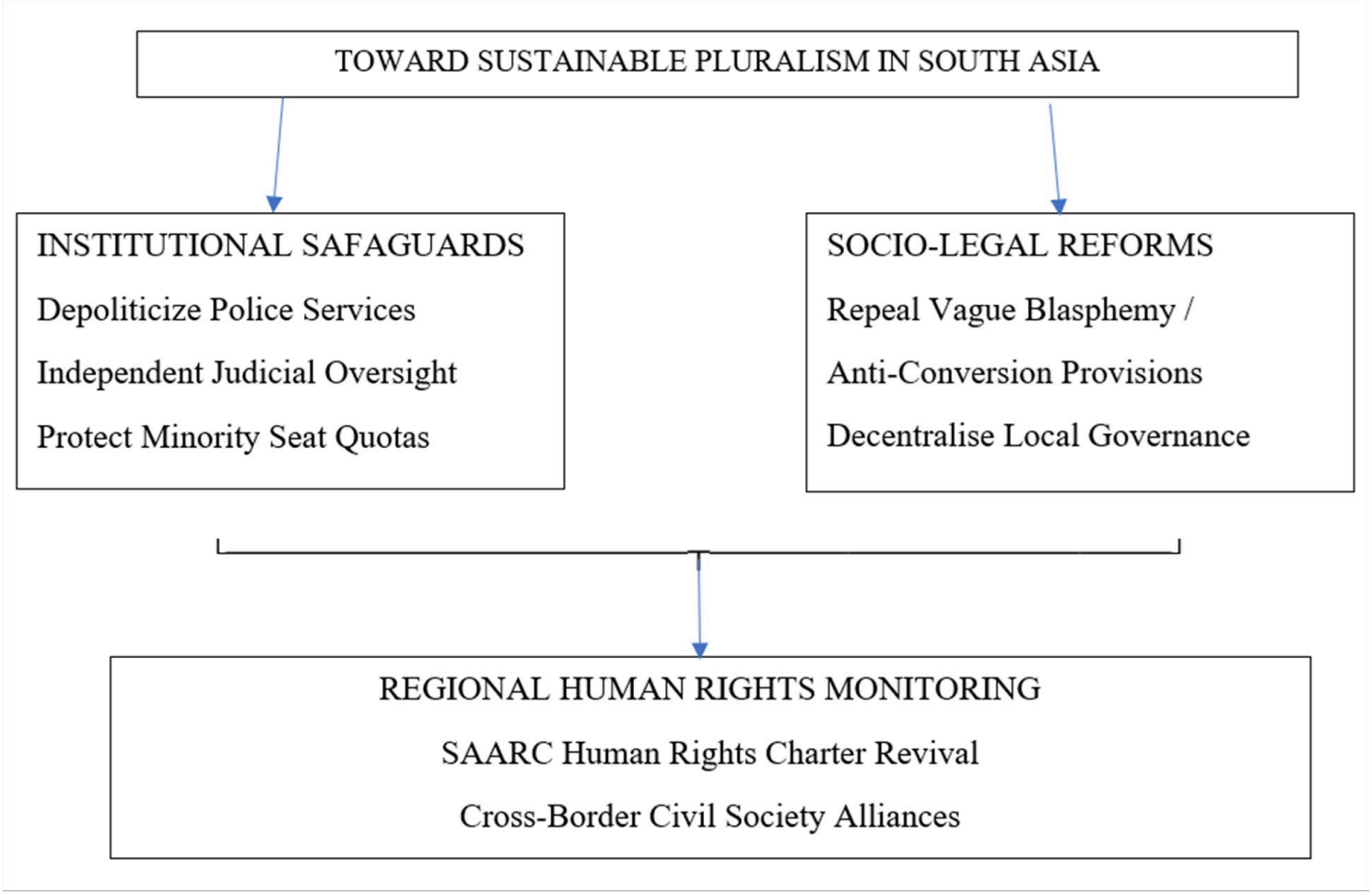


Figure 7

Solutions Framework & Reform Pathways

Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- Table1.pdf