

## Pakistan – Justice for Religious Minorities Hard to Find

During what should have been a joyful occasion, Pakistani Christians met unspeakable tragedy. Last year, while celebrating Easter in a crowded public park, Christian families became the targets of a suicide blast that left more than 70 people dead and 300 wounded. When the Taliban claimed responsibility following the attack, they reiterated that Christians had been the target.

In response to the attack, Christians demanded justice and were met with an unresponsive legal system and law enforcement. Thus 2016 passed as a year of increased discrimination: arbitrary detentions of Christian men and boys; heavy scrutiny of Christian telecommunication channels; and abduction of activists. Asia Bibi, a Christian mother of five unjustly accused of blasphemy and sentenced to death in 2009, remains on death row with failing health. Pakistan's Supreme Court again delayed her final appeal so her fate is uncertain and her family in hiding.

In this hostile environment, ordinary Pakistani minorities live in constant fear. Churches, temples and mosques, homes, schools, and businesses are burned, and livelihoods destroyed. Pakistani Taliban suicide bombers attacked two churches in Lahore on the day that officials from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom departed Pakistan after their first-ever visit in March 2015. Many non-Muslim citizens face pressure to convert to Islam.

Violence against religious minorities is not new in Pakistan. Draconian blasphemy laws continue to act as justification for institutionalized discrimination, especially against religious minorities. A November 2014 editorial in the *Daily Times* stated, "The blasphemy law provisions have emerged as a convenient catchall justification for literally murder. All one has to do to eliminate a rival or someone from whom material benefit can be derived is to accuse them of blas-

phemy, mobilize a vigilante mob with the help of some local frothing-at-the-mouth cleric, and the deed is done. ... "[T]he mere accusation of blasphemy, true or false, often seals the fate of the accused."

Even high-profile citizens are not exempt. In 2011, Salman Taseer, the Muslim governor of the most populous state, criticized his nation's blasphemy laws as discriminatory against religious minorities. As a result, he was killed by Mumtaz Qadri, his own bodyguard. Qadri was tried and convicted for this high-profile assassination, but thousands of Pakistanis rallied in his support, regarding him as a hero. In March 2016, when Qadri was executed by the military, large scale protests broke out. A few days later, a Pakistani Taliban group attacked a court in Peshawar, killing at least ten, to avenge the death of Qadri.

The murder of Taseer, Qadri's trial and execution, and subsequent backlash were deeply divisive and are emblematic of the mounting pressure Pakistan faces in confronting these issues. Pakistani authorities appear unable to respond effectively to attacks on religious minorities. Impunity is prevalent and allows for institutionalized discrimination of minorities.

The Pakistan Catholic Bishops' Conference has asked their government to apprehend those responsible for attacks, better protect all places of worship, and address the religious and sectarian intolerance that threatens the security of all Pakistanis. In 2015, the Pakistan government authorized its first National Commission for Human Rights, and in January 2017, Pope Francis praised Pakistani Minister of Human Rights Kamran Michael, a Christian, for his service and prayed for his continued efforts. In his 2017 World Day of Peace Message, Pope Francis mentioned Pakistan's Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. Khan developed nonviolence as a model to combat discrimination and promote social reform, a model sorely needed in Pakistan to protect the religious freedom rights of all.



Fortnight  
for Freedom

2 0 1 7

Freedom for Mission  
June 21 – July 4

Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development  
Office of International Justice and Peace  
[www.fortnightforfreedom.org](http://www.fortnightforfreedom.org)

