

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



USCCB Fact Sheet

Pakistan: Fear and Hope for Religious Minorities

One step forward, one step back. This could characterize Pakistan's approach to protection of religious minorities. On the plus side, 2019 saw the release of Asia Bibi, the Christian mother of five who was unjustly accused of blasphemy and imprisoned for 10 years, often in solitary confinement. The Supreme Court's decision to let her go led to violent demonstrations. Bibi's travel to Canada to re-join family who had fled there for safety was kept secret by Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan and his government. Khan had refused calls that Bibi be killed and instead arrested the leader of a hate speech campaign against religious minorities, charging him with terrorism and treason.

On the negative side, in the lead up to the 2018 elections, it was Prime Minister Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party that defended the blasphemy laws. While the British first introduced blasphemy laws, they became more severe after the mid-1980s, targeting Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, other religious minorities as well as Muslims. In the last 20 years, over 1,500 have been charged with blasphemy.

Draconian blasphemy laws continue to act as justification for 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 blasphemy, 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. Shahbaz Bhatti, Federal Minister for Minority Affairs and a Catholic, and Salman Taseer, Provincial Governor and a Muslim, were assassinated because they sought to reform the blasphemy laws. Taseer was killed by his own bodyguard, Mumtaz Qadri. Although Qadri was convicted for this high-profile assassination, thousands regarded him as a hero so that his execution in March 2016 by the military was done in secret.

Violence against religious minorities continues in Pakistan. Churches, temples and mosques, homes, schools, and businesses are burned, people killed, and livelihoods destroyed. In 2016, the Taliban targeted Christian families celebrating Easter in a park in Lahore, leaving 70 people

dead and over 300 wounded. In 2018, when a Christian teenager was accused of posting a "sacrilegious photo" on social media, mobs threatened to burn down his predominantly Christian neighborhood, threatening to burn it down; nearly 800 Christians were forced to flee. Independent reports estimate that 1,000 Hindu and Christian girls are kidnapped, raped or married against their will, and forcibly converted to Islam each year. Ahmadis, who consider themselves to be Muslim but according to the Pakistani constitution are "non-Muslim," often face blasphemy and terrorism charges and their mosques are destroyed.

Provincial textbooks include content derogatory of non-Muslims, sowing mistrust and intolerance. In 2017, Pakistan's Parliament passed a bill requiring that all Muslim students in both public and private schools receive lessons in the Quran but failed to establish religious education for other faiths.

In this hostile environment, Pakistani minorities live in constant fear. Pakistani authorities appear unable to respond effectively to attacks on religious minorities so impunity prevails. For example, Pakistani Taliban suicide bombers attacked two churches in Lahore on the day that a U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom delegation departed Pakistan after their first-ever visit in March 2015. Recognizing the danger to the rule of law posed by impunity, in 2018, a Parliamentary committee proposed punishing those who make false blasphemy charges, but few politicians have signed on for fear of retribution by extremists. But in a hopeful sign, Muslims joined with Catholics in April 2019 to raise funds to renovate one of Pakistan's oldest churches in Karachi. The Muslim governor supported the project, saying "interfaith harmony is the need of the hour," and praised the contributions that Christians have made, particularly in education and health care.

The Pakistan Catholic Bishops' Conference asked the 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. In his 2017 World Day of Peace Message, Pope Francis mentioned Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a Pakistani who developed nonviolence as a model to combat discrimination and promote social reform. That model is sorely needed in Pakistan to protect the religious freedom rights of all.



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