

# Pakistani Christians Still Wary of Blasphemy Laws

by Laura Lynch, February 27, 2012

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Christians living in Pakistan are getting ready to mark a sad anniversary. Just over a year ago, on March 2nd, the country's Minister for Minorities was assassinated in Islamabad. In the months that followed his death, tensions appear to have eased, but the law that some blame for promoting discrimination against Christians is still on the books.

Shabbaz Bhatti appeared to foretell his own death just days before it happened. In a video, the government minister described death threats he had received from the Pakistani Taliban and he took them seriously.

"And I'm ready to die for a cause. I'm living for my community and suffering people and I will die to defend their rights. These threats and these warnings cannot change my opinions and principles I would prefer to die for my principles and for the justice of my community rather than to compromise on these threats," Bhatti said.

The killing came on the streets of Islamabad. Gunmen riddled his car with bullets as he was returning from a visit to his mother. Taliban pamphlets were dropped at the scene. Bhatti was not just any politician. He was the only Christian in the government and a staunch Roman Catholic.

Far away from the mosques in the city, along a muddy path and beside a gully filled with garbage and raw sewage, the Catholic faithful gather for mass inside a tiny, one-room church.

The hymns here carry a distinctive south Asian rhythm for the dozen worshipers who sit on a stone floor in front of a modest altar. They are among the roughly three million Christians in Pakistan. One year on from the assassination, the deacon, Babu Ashraf, says it's not always easy to live their faith.

"The fear is there. We cannot openly talk to people about religious matters because it becomes easy for them to create an issue, and then they threaten us with repercussions. It's a kind of psychological torture," said Ashraf.

The threat of more violence has certainly taken a toll on the family of Shabbaz Bhatti. In the wake of his assassination, most of his family fled to Canada. But Paul Bhatti decided to continue his brother's work. He now lives in Islamabad and acts as an adviser to the Prime Minister on religious minorities. Bhatti knows he is running a risk.

"In some ways it's true, but somebody has to do that," he said. "You can't step back on this and we can't leave our people in this condition so we have to take the risk."

Shabbaz Bhatti was not the only victim of violence that appears to be related to religion. Two months before Bhatti was killed, the governor of Punjab province was murdered by his own bodyguard. The governor was not Christian, but he had something in common with Shabbaz Bhatti. Both had openly criticized Pakistan's blasphemy law. The law prohibits blasphemy against any religion, but in practice, it is only applied to Islam. In 2010, a Christian woman was jailed for blasphemy and sentenced to death in what her family says was a trumped up charge. That case, like the assassinations, have left their mark.

In the poverty of the slums, people try to earn a few rupees any way they can. A woman with only bangles to sell is calling out to prospective customers. The scowl her face suggests business is not good. Christians tend to band together in a few slums like this, scattered across Islamabad. Some have moved here for work, others to escape persecution in small towns by melting into the crowds of the big city.

Razia Parveen came here two years ago from a village near Faisalabad hoping for a better life. When we begin talking, she tells me she has not had trouble because of her faith. Within minutes though, the stories start to come out.

"I work as an aide at a school taking care of children, and sometimes the people I work with say very hurtful things about my faith. I tell them that if they think there are problems with my beliefs, that is their personal opinion, and I have my own point of view," said Parveen.

It is one thing for people to insult her, she said, but what really upset Parveen was what happened to her children a few months ago.

"They used to go for extra tutoring after school to a nearby center, and when the tutor found out they were Christian, she refused to teach them. My younger son doesn't understand that sometimes this is how Muslims and Christians behave with each other. So my son came to me and said, Mommy, are we Christian? Is that why my teacher refused to teach me anymore? I feared that my children would begin to think there was something wrong with them. So I do not want them exposed to such prejudices, because it can affect them psychologically at such a young age."

For Parveen, the criticism and the humiliations are all indirect results of a law that has, in practice, made non-Muslims second class citizens.

"The blasphemy law is evil, terribly evil. It should be abolished. Innocent people are accused, people who have never even said anything bad are charged with committing offenses against the Koran. They treat people with such viciousness," said Parveen.

Still, few signs point to the government's willingness to make changes in the face of threats and violence. Even Paul Bhatti, who knows his brother was deeply opposed to the law, is not calling for the it to be abolished, or even rewritten.

"In this case even if you change the law and the mindset of the people remains the same, you will not get any results. Making demands to change the law will not produce a result because it will not change the mindset of the people," said Bhatti.

Instead, Bhatti says he's focusing on bettering the lives of Christians through reducing poverty and increasing literacy. Still, he has to do all this in a bubble: he has a large security detail protecting him wherever he goes. It is one more reminder of the challenges that remain.

"We are trying our best to find a solution which is possible and to bring peace first of all in this country. It is a big priority for everybody here."