

Pakistan moves toward more stringent blasphemy law

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ISLAMABAD, Pakistan (BP)—Pakistan's lower house of parliament passed a bill strengthening punishment for blasphemy despite international outcry and security concerns among Christians and other religious minorities there.

Blasphemy already carries punishment as severe as death in the majority-Muslim country, but the Criminal Laws Bill amendment passed Jan. 17 in the National Assembly would increase jail terms from three years to 10 years for insulting the prophet Mohammad's companions, wives and family members, Christian Solidarity Worldwide reported. Fines of more than \$4,343 (1 million Pakistani rupees) would accompany prison time.

The unanimous passage of the Criminal Laws Bill on Jan. 17 makes it likely the bill will gain final passage and the president's signature within months, Christian Solidarity Worldwide said.

"The ease with which it passed the lower house does not bode well," a Christian Solidarity Worldwide spokesperson said. "It is likely to pass again."

Mervyn Thomas, founder and president of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, is among many international religious freedom advocates expressing concern.

"Existing blasphemy legislation has resulted in extra-judicial killings and countless incidents of mob violence based on false accusations," Thomas said. "Policymakers have ignored the long-standing demands of civil society organizations and minority community leaders for the repeal of the

blasphemy laws or, at the very least, the introduction of procedural amendments to curb the misuse of these laws.”

Blasphemy laws feed mob violence

At least 16 individuals received the death penalty for blasphemy in 2021, the U.S. State Department said in its 2021 International Religious Freedom Report, but added the country has never carried out its death sentences in such cases. Instead, those suspected or convicted of blasphemy, as well as attorneys representing those accused and leaders advocating for the repeal of blasphemy laws, face repercussion and death by angry mobs.

After Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab Province and a prominent critic, tried to reform blasphemy laws, his bodyguard killed him in 2011.

[Asia Bibi](#), a Pakistani Christian sentenced to death by hanging in 2010, was released from death row in 2018 after the Pakistan Supreme Court reversed her conviction. She was safely transported out of the country under cover of secrecy.

Pakistan is widely noted for religious persecution despite religious freedom stipulations in its national constitution. Religious freedom advocates cite Pakistan’s blasphemy laws and its inability to protect religious minorities from societal persecution and violence.

In its [Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#), the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom highlights 55 individuals detained or imprisoned for blasphemy charges in Pakistan.

Among those named are Tabitha Gill, a Christian nurse accused of blasphemy in January 2021 by her colleagues and beaten and tortured by hospital staff. In December 2021, a violent mob killed and burned the body of Sri Lankan national Priyantha Kumara over blasphemy allegations, the

commission said.

Used for personal revenge

Pakistan's blasphemy laws are poorly defined and require low standards of evidence, CSW said. The statutes criminalize anyone who insults Islam, including by "outraging religious feeling," and are often used as a weapon of personal revenge against religious minorities including Christians.

"Pakistan must do more to protect its most vulnerable minority communities by upholding its international obligations and guarantees enshrined within the country's constitution," Thomas said. "And the international community must hold the government to account for where it fails or refuses to do so."

The U.S. State Department deems Pakistan a Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, a designation USCIRF also recommended.

The Open Doors U.S. 2023 [World Watch List](#) of Christian persecution deems Pakistan the seventh most dangerous country for Christians.

In its 2023 Global Prayer Guide, Voice of the Martyrs describes Pakistan as a "restricted" country where all "Christians face difficulties, discrimination and persecution because of their Christian identity." Voice of the Martyrs encourages widespread prayer for the repeal of blasphemy laws there, and for the "courage, wisdom and protection" of Christians there.