



Written by [James Heiser](#) on June 1, 2012

## Intimidation Drives Blasphemy Convictions in Pakistan

More than a year after Pakistan's prime minister declared that his nation's blasphemy laws were "[categorically excluded](#)" from amendment, new attention is being focused on a nation where criticizing Mohammed can lead to a death sentence.

Islamists in Pakistan have earned a reputation for simply killing those whom they perceive to stand in opposition to their agenda. When the Muslim governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, had the audacity of opposing the execution of a Christian woman on dubious charges of blasphemy, Taseer himself was assassinated. The reaction of much of Pakistan's legal community — [including 500 attorneys in Islamabad](#) — was to support the assassin.



In March 2011, Jihadists murdered the only Christian serving in the government of Pakistan. Shahbaz Bhatti was Pakistan's Minorities Minister — the person responsible for representing the interests of Christians and other subjugated minorities — until terrorists [shot him to death in his own driveway](#).

Now, more than a year after the murder of Bhatti, an United Nations expert in human rights, Gabriela Knaul, is drawing attention to the deformation of Pakistan's legal system. According to Knaul, such charges need little — if any — substantiation to lead to conviction because of the systemic pattern of pressure placed on judges to quickly convict those individuals who are accused of blasphemy. According to an article for the Associated Press, such pressure is nothing less than intimidation:

Gabriela Knaul, the U.N.'s Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, told a news conference that lawyers are also reluctant to defend clients accused under the blasphemy laws because of intimidation.

Pakistan's blasphemy laws call for the death penalty for anyone insulting Islam, its holy book or the Prophet Muhammad. Pakistani Christians live in fear of being arrested under the laws, which critics say are often misused to settle personal scores or family feuds.

"I am especially concerned regarding cases brought under the so-called blasphemy law as it was reported to me that judges have been coerced to decide against the accused even without supporting evidence," Knaul said.

"They are afraid of reprisals by local communities because of their interpretation of the law," she added.

Of course, such irregularities in Pakistan's legal practices regarding evidence are nothing new. As Perry Smith wrote for in an article ("[Silent Witness: Discrimination Against Women in the Pakistani Law of Evidence](#)") for the Spring 2003 issue of the *Tulane Journal of International and Comparative Law*:

Pakistan's evidence laws have achieved a certain notoriety. On January 17, 2002, Pakistan's Joint



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Action Committee, a collective of civil society organizations, issued a plea to the Pakistani government to abolish laws discriminatory to women and minorities. The committee specifically targeted Pakistan's blasphemy laws, criminal laws, and evidence laws, stating that they "undermine the equal status of women and minorities and are a legacy of [a] draconian martial law regime." The committee stressed that it would support all efforts to "help in making Pakistan a free, democratic and tolerant society," and that the "government still had to go a long way to realize the dream of [a] truly democratic Pakistan."

Over a decade later, Knaul's claims continue to substantiate Smith's assessment. Knaul's recent visit to Pakistan draws attention from the UN — attention which the Islamist regime had managed to avoid for several decades. [As Patrick Goodenough recently wrote for CNSNews:](#)

The criticism by Gabriela Knaul, a "special rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers," came at the end of an 11-day visit to Pakistan to study the country's judicial system, the first by a U.N. human rights expert since 1999.

Pakistan generally manages to sidestep censure at the U.N. Human Rights Council, a body in which it wields substantial influence through its leadership of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). But although the post held by Knaul, a Brazilian judge, reports to the HRC, it is also independent.

The competence of the United Nations to criticize any nation for its human rights record is questionable, at best. The UN has demonstrated a propensity for ethical myopia over the course of decades, and established a track record of being incapable of seeing atrocities perpetrated by communist regimes, even as it engaged in collective hand-wringing over various perceived faults in the West. However, the substance of Knaul's criticisms are of interest when trying to grasp the true nature of conditions within Pakistan. In short, the nature of Pakistani justice has not changed, but Knaul's statements may help raise awareness, as was noted in [an article for CatholicCulture.org:](#)

"The issue is not new, but we are happy that is raised at the United Nations," said Father James Channan, a Dominican who ministers in Lahore. "We hope that this position has an impact and that justice is guaranteed in Pakistani courts."

Photo: The former head of All Pakistan Minorities Alliance Shahbaz Bhatti, left, who was assassinated in 2011, shows a threatening letter that Michael Javed, right, a Christian resident of Charsadda town, received during a press conference in Islamabad, Pakistan, May 16, 2007 : AP Images



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