



## Jihadists Murder Only Christian in Pakistan's Government

The latest victim of Jihadist violence in Pakistan is the man who was the only Christian serving in that nation's government. Until his murder on March 2, Shahbaz Bhatti was Pakistan's Minorities Minister; when he accepted that office in 2008 he said that he was doing so for the sake of the "oppressed, down-trodden and marginalized" of Pakistan. Now he has given his life while fulfilling that responsibility.



[The Associated Press account of the details](#) of the assassination make it clear that it was a carefully premeditated act; at least three Jihadists were directly involved in the attack which took the life of the defenseless Bhatti:

Bhatti had just pulled out of the driveway when three men opened fire, said Gulam Rahim, a witness. Two opened the door of the car and tried to pull Bhatti out, Rahim said, while a third fired a Kalashnikov rifle repeatedly into the dark-colored Toyota, shattering the windows.

The gunmen then sped away in a white car, said Rahim, who took shelter behind a tree. Bhatti was hit with at least eight bullets and was dead on arrival at hospital.

In leaflets left at the scene, al-Qaida and the Pakistani Taliban Movement in Punjab province claimed responsibility. They blamed the government for putting Bhatti, an "infidel Christian," in charge of an unspecified committee, apparently in reference to his support for changing the blasphemy laws.

"With the blessing of Allah, the mujahedeen will send each of you to hell," said the note, which did not name any other targets.

Bhatti's assassination is the second in Pakistan this year which has involved a high-ranking official; [Punjab Governor Salman Taseer](#) was murdered on January 4 because he sought to reform Pakistan's brutal law regarding blasphemy. Bhatti has long helped to lead the fight for reforming those laws.

The assassination of Shahbaz Bhatti also comes only days after the latest case of a Christian woman being charged with blasphemy under Pakistan's Sharia-influenced law. According to press reports, [Agnes Nuggo](#) was accused of blasphemy after she refused a deal which would have allowed Muslims to acquire a plot of her land.

Following the death of Taseer, Bhatti understood that his life could be in danger and had requested a bulletproof car. In fact, given the level of violence against non-Muslims in the past year, he had every reason to be concerned. [According to the Washington Post](#), the past year has been the bloodiest period of persecution in Pakistan in decades, and this increase is part of a trend in recent years:

An estimated 509 people died in sectarian attacks last year in Pakistan, the highest total since the New Delhi-based South Asia Terrorism Portal began compiling figures in 1989, according to the monitoring group's website. Many of those have been members of the minority Ahmadi sect or



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non-Muslims, mainly Christians or Hindus, who form 5 percent of the population.

The blasphemy law was passed in 1987 under the army rule of General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq as part of his policy of building a more explicitly Islamic state in Pakistan. While no one has been executed by the state under the law, killings over alleged blasphemy cases have included seven Christians amid riots in 2009 in Gojra, Punjab, and two shot dead in July in the city of Faisalabad.

According to press reports, the death of Bhatti has been met with a muted reaction; Islamic clerics have been slow to denounce the heinous crime or, even more despicably, have spun tales of outsiders trying to heighten tensions between Christians and Muslims. (Presumably, the world is supposed to forget the very public act of [over five hundred 'moderate' Islamic clerics and scholars](#) in Pakistan publicly supporting the assassination of Governor Taseer.)

Bhatti's longstanding commitment to the defense of Pakistan's minority religious groups (including his fellow Roman Catholics) will be difficult to match. Given the climate of fear which each arrest and every murder heightens among those who know how Islam treats those who do not share its dogmas, it is not hard to imagine that the days ahead will be made more difficult by the loss of the most significant advocate for the rights of non-Muslims in Pakistan.

When Bhatti became Minorities Minister in 2008, [AsiaNews.it ran a story on the newly installed member](#) of the government of Pakistan. His words at that time foreshadow the faithful fulfillment of a responsibility which was his lifelong mission:

After taking the oath of office, the minister-elect said that he accepted the post for the sake of the "oppressed, down-trodden and marginalized" of Pakistan, and that he has dedicated his life to "struggle for human equality, social justice, religious freedom, and to uplift and empower the religious minorities' communities." He added that he wants to send "a message of hope to the people living a life of disappointment, disillusionment and despair." "Jesus is the nucleus of my life," says Bhatti, "and I want to be His true follower through my actions by sharing the love of God with poor, oppressed, victimized, needy and suffering people of Pakistan."

Shahbaz Bhatti founded the Christian-inspired APMA movement in 1985. One of his first battles was against the law on blasphemy, introduced in 1986 and used to repress religious minorities in the country, with particular focus on the Christian community, the one hardest hit by the new norm.

After a quarter-century fighting for the sake of Christians and other religious minorities in Pakistan, the death of Shahbaz Bhatti testifies as to how far that nation is from the spirit of toleration for which he struggled for so long.

*Photo: Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan's government minister for religious minorities, who was shot and killed by gunmen on Wednesday March 2, 2011.*



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