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Pakistan Strengthens Blasphemy Laws, Raising Fears of Increased Christian Persecution

Pakistan's blasphemy laws, which can already carry the death penalty for those ruled to have insulted Islam or the Prophet Muhammad, can now also be utilized to punish anyone arrested for insulting people who were linked to the prophet.

The laws, fortified in Parliament last week, have allegedly been used to settle personal scores or persecute minorities.

The latest development has stoked fears among rights activists about the prospect of a rise in such persecution, especially of religious minorities, including Christians.

As Pakistani society has become more conservative and religious in the past several decades, religion and the showcasing of religiosity in public life have become more conspicuous.

Those convicted of affronting the Prophet Muhammad's wives, companions, or close relatives will now undergo 10 years in prison, a sentence that can be prolonged to a life sentence, along with a fine of one million rupees. It also renders the charge of blasphemy an offense for which bail is not permitted.

"The punishment for disrespecting these sacred personalities was almost nil earlier," said Abdul Akbar Chitrali, a lawmaker from a religious political party and author of the bill.

Deputy Speaker Zahid Akram Durrani lauded the legislation as "historic" as he congratulated the lawmakers for fulfilling what many regarded as their religious duty.

In response, rights activists said such a move has worried them even more.

"The new legislation is very worrying," said Saroop Ijaz, the senior counsel for Human Rights Watch in Asia. "Pakistan's existing blasphemy laws have enabled and encouraged legal discrimination and persecution in the name of religion for decades."

Those blamed for blasphemy against Islam are vulnerable to becoming targets of mob justice, fatally tortured or shot by angry mobs before legal proceedings can commence.

In many cases, the allegations have originated from personal enmities or feuds over land. Also, the majority Muslim population has regularly collided head-on with the minority Christian population.

Occasionally, political factors contribute to the tension in the country as well. For example, former Prime Minister Imran Khan survived an attempt on his life last November at a rally.

The accused attacker, as well as some officials in the incumbent government, have portrayed the shooting as religiously driven.



ameer_great/iStock/Getty Images Plus
Crowd in Karachi, Pakistan



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Fawad Chaudhry, a former federal minister and a senior leader of Khan's political party, said the government of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had organized a campaign on state-run television last year alleging that Khan had committed blasphemy during his political rallies. Khan and his party dismissed this claim.

Khan, who was ousted as prime minister following a no-confidence vote last April but has been attempting to launch a comeback, has posited that the assassination attempt against him was organized by his opponents, using religion as an excuse.

Moreover, Chaudhry said leveling blasphemy accusations against political opponents was a precarious trend and opined that the new legislation only fostered more opportunities for such misuse.

Making one's opinions on the issue can also be risky. In 2011, Salmaan Taseer, governor of Punjab province, was fatally shot by one of his bodyguards.

Taseer had been a vocal critic of the blasphemy laws and had campaigned for the release of Asia Bibi, a Christian convicted of insulting the Prophet Muhammad. In addition, Shahbaz Bhatti, a federal minister and a Christian who had also objected to the death sentence imposed on Bibi, was fatally shot the same year. Bibi, who left Pakistan in 2019 after her conviction was overturned, still receives persistent death threats.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), an independent rights group, said that it was deeply concerned over the latest legislation. "Given Pakistan's troubled record of the misuse of such laws, these amendments are likely to be weaponized disproportionately against religious minorities and sects, resulting in false charges, harassment, and persecution," the group declared in a statement.

"Moreover," it said, "increasing the penalty for alleged blasphemy will aggravate misuse of the law to settle personal vendettas, as is often the case with blasphemy allegations."

In 1860, India's British rulers first codified offenses linked to religion, before expanding these laws in 1927. Pakistan inherited these laws when it came into existence following the partition of India in 1947.

Between 1980 and 1986, a number of clauses were included in the laws by the military government of General Zia-ul-Haq. He wanted to "Islamicize" them and also legally to separate the Ahmadi community, declared non-Muslim in 1973, from the main body of Pakistan's majority Muslim population.

The law enforced by the British criminalized activities such as disturbing a religious gathering, trespassing on burial grounds, affronting religious beliefs, or intentionally destroying or defiling a place or an object of worship.

The 1980s saw the codification and expansion of the country's blasphemy laws in several phases. In 1980, making derisive remarks against Islamic personages was outlawed, with a maximum punishment of three years in jail.

In 1982, another clause prescribed life imprisonment for "wilful" desecration of the Koran, the Muslim holy book. In 1986, a separate clause was included to penalize blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad and the penalty recommended was "death, or imprisonment for life," in that order.

Based on a 2019 BBC report, figures from the National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP) depicted that a total of 776 Muslims, 505 Ahmedis, 229 Christians, and 30 Hindus were accused under various clauses of the blasphemy law from 1987 until 2018.

For decades, the HRCP has been keeping track of blasphemy cases. The group asserted in 2019 that



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Muslims were the majority of those punished under these laws, with the Ahmadi community trailing behind.

Most of these cases were filed for desecration of the Koran — far fewer for blasphemy cases against the Prophet Muhammad.

Yet opponents asserted that the noticeable number of minorities in the cases revealed how the laws were unjustly enforced. Frequently, the laws were invoked to deal with personal scores without much reference to religion.

Correspondents say the mere accusation of blasphemy is adequate to make someone a target for hardliners, as is protecting those accused of blasphemy or urging a reformation of the laws.



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