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Pakistan authorities must do more to protect religious minorities

The Pakistan Government has failed to protect religious minorities from systematic campaigns of violence and vilification, Amnesty International said today on the first anniversary of the assassination of Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti.

The only Christian member of the federal cabinet and one of a handful of Pakistan's leading politicians to call for changes to the country's controversial blasphemy laws, Bhatti died after armed men opened fire on his car as he travelled to work in the capital, Islamabad.

"Pakistani officials should honour Bhatti's legacy by challenging the systematic campaign of vilification and attacks on minorities," said Sam Zarifi, Asia-Pacific director at Amnesty International.

Although Shahbaz's brother Dr Paul Bhatti was made a special adviser to the President for religious minorities after his death, no one has replaced him as Minister for Minorities.

"The ministerial post remains vacant at this critical time, a sad reflection of the government's inaction in the face of continued violence against minorities."

The Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility for killing Bhatti over his criticism of the country's blasphemy laws – British-era criminal sanctions that were amended in the 1980s under the rule of Gen. Zia ul Haq, making it an offence to defile the Quran or Prophet Muhammad punishable by life imprisonment or death respectively.

Religious minorities have been disproportionately accused of blasphemy, but the largest proportion of victims are mainstream Muslims, reflecting the danger these laws pose to all members of Pakistani society and the rule of law.

"A year has passed since Bhatti was assassinated yet the perpetrators remain at large with no clear sign that they will be brought to justice any time soon."

In 2009, a year after replacing military ruler Gen. Pervez Musharraf, the current government pledged to review "laws detrimental to religious harmony," which includes the blasphemy laws.

But the government fell silent after former Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer was assassinated in January last year by one of his own security guards over his criticism of the blasphemy laws.

"After Taseer's assassination, Minister Bhatti remained resolute in his criticisms," Sam Zarifi said.

"Since Bhatti's death, the Pakistan government has allowed itself to be intimidated into silence. Pakistani officials must break that silence and speak out against those who seek to harm others because of their religion."

This year a coalition of extremist and militant religious groups has openly called for the murder of Shi'a and some Sufi Muslims, Ahmadis and Christians, and have held large rallies across Pakistan's major cities.

On Tuesday 28 February, eighteen Shi'a Muslims were brutally shot dead in the Kohistan district of Pakistan's north-west, after the perpetrators stopped their bus and singled them out from other passengers because of their religion.

The Pakistani government must do all it can to protect its citizens regardless of their religious background, especially where perpetrators candidly speak of committing violence against them.

“The failure to bring Bhatti's killers to justice or protect the most vulnerable citizens from violence while extremist groups publicly call for them to be killed tells the perpetrators of abuses that they will go unpunished if they disguise their crimes as the protection of religious sentiments, even when the targets are senior government officials,” Sam Zarifi said.

“Violence against religious minorities is leading to a break down in the rule of law and increased tension within Pakistan's diverse society.”

“The Pakistan government must take urgent, concrete measures to improve the quality of police investigations, and reform laws like those on blasphemy that promote abuses against religious minorities.”

Background

3 October 2011 - Pakistan: Authorities must tackle brazen attacks on Hazara Shi'a
<http://www.amnesty.org/zh-hant/node/27295>

21 September 2011 - Failure to protect Shi'a Muslims in Pakistan leaves many at risk
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/failure-protect-shia-muslims-pakistan-leaves-many-risk-2011-09-21>