

# Violence, injustice keep Pakistan's Christians living in fear in 'lawless' society

**The nation's religious minorities, subjected to abductions, church burnings and murder, find little recourse in a country that treats them as second-class citizens**

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**By Mark O'Keefe of The Oregonian staff**

RAWALPINDI, Pakistan -- According to the law, no one should have been able to take Seema and Khushi Masih's three daughters away from them.

According to the law, all parents in Pakistan -- including Christian parents such as the Masihis -- have the right to raise their children in their own faith.

But the law isn't always followed in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Particularly when it comes to Christians.

The girls were taken Jan. 25 by the family's landlady and her husband with police escorts. The couple contended that the children had converted to Islam and should no longer remain in a Christian home.

The Masihis maintain that their daughters are still Christians, no matter what anyone says, and that even if they did convert to Islam, they should stay with their parents.

But 14-year-old Nadia, 11-year-old Nyla and 9-year-old Nabila are gone, and it's unclear whether they'll ever be allowed to return home.

The city magistrate overseeing the case admits he decided against the Christians not on the basis of law but on public sentiment and a concern that he could have a religious riot on his hands.

"Legally speaking, they should have been given to their parents," says Kamran Abdullah Siddiqi, leaning back in a cushioned chair in his office, where two armed policeman sit against a wall.

But Siddiqi says if he did that, "Some crazy person would come and say these are the children of Islam. They'd say we're going to chop you. We're going to shoot you. We're going to -- what did the KKK used to say in America? -- lynch you."

Article 36 of Pakistan's Constitution promises to safeguard the rights and interests of religious minorities. But human rights organizations say that's not happening. The U.S. State Department agrees, citing a government-fostered "atmosphere of religious intolerance" that has led to violence against religious minorities. In Pakistan, 97 percent of the population is Muslim; the rest is made up mostly of Christians but also of Hindus, Buddhists and other groups.

Partly at the prodding of concerned American Christian groups, the U.S. Congress earlier this month passed legislation requiring the president to take action against nations that engage in a pattern of religious persecution.

In the 1980s, the United States gave Pakistan billions of dollars for economic development. But in recent years, concern that Pakistan was developing a nuclear bomb has prompted sanctions, slashing aid to the millions of dollars, most of it for humanitarian, food and counter-narcotics efforts. Pakistan's decision to test nuclear weapons in May further cooled U.S.-Pakistan relations.

Pakistan's pattern of religious persecution, documented for years in State Department reports, could lead to further sanctions.

### **Legal protections fall far short when it comes to Christians**

David Forte, a professor at Cleveland State University and an expert on Islamic law who testified before Congress, says Pakistani Christians encounter the same institutionalized injustice African Americans experienced before civil rights.

"In both instances," he says, "the minority is disenfranchised. It has no effective vote. It is subject to a legal system arrayed against it. And arbitrary violence against it goes unpunished."

Glynn L. Wood, a professor at the Monterey (Calif.) Institute of International Studies who has studied Pakistan for 30 years, says general social turmoil contributes to the problem. "The Pakistani Christians are right in saying that when their people are murdered, justice is not being pursued vigorously," he says. "But it's not being pursued vigorously for the rest of the population as well. It's very, very lawless. Pakistan has always been somewhat lawless around its frontiers, but now the rest of the country is going that way. It's a mess."

Amnesty International says Pakistan shows "complete disregard for the rule of law."

Even some representatives of the government agree. Ahmed Balal, deputy director of the new human rights department of Pakistan's ministry of law and justice in Lahore, holds up an evening newspaper chronicling a typical day in Pakistan and summarizes the articles: "Federal minister and provincial adviser beaten with shoes by disgruntled crowd"; "24 women injured during political rally"; "Five people murdered in Lahore"; "Ten party members killed in Karachi"; "Crowd charged by baton-wielding police in Islamabad"; "Deputy superintendent of police fired upon."

His point: that everyone -- not just Christians -- has something to fear in Pakistan.

"Compare a Christian with a Muslim citizen of this country," Balal says. "Is he any less protected? The majority of the people are unprotected. Everyone is unprotected."

Yet Christians in Pakistan say they are protected even less.

"We are unequals among equals," says M.L. Shahani, who, until he left the bench earlier this year, was Pakistan's only Christian judge.

"We are being treated as second-class citizens," says Bishop-elect Inayat Ejaz of the Church of Pakistan, a Protestant denomination made up of Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists and members of the Church of Scotland.

### **Pakistan wrestles with Islam's role in its identity, laws**

Pakistan came into being in 1947 through the partition of British India. For half a century, the nation has grappled with a fundamental question: Is Pakistan to be a state for Muslims or an Islamic state?

Is it to be a nation that celebrates its Islamic identity, while still giving equal rights to adherents of other religions? Or will it be a nation like Saudi Arabia, Iran and Afghanistan that follows Shari'a law, merging religion and state through the teachings of the prophet Mohammed, as interpreted by Islamic scholars?

Shari'a law has no separation of church and state, no distinction between religion and other aspects of life. Nothing is secular. Everything submits to Islam in an effort to return to a religious, and presumably more perfect, society. In some countries, Shari'a law has led to punishing thieves with amputations and adulterers with floggings.

Islam is anything but monolithic in its views. Pakistan's 72 Muslim sects have vigorously argued about what the role of religion should be in their nation.

For the most part, Christians worship as they please. There has been no attempt to make everyone a Muslim.

But through time, minority rights have eroded, especially as politicians sought the favor of fundamentalist groups, which did not necessarily represent the entire electorate.

In 1986, Pakistan changed its penal code to impose the death penalty on anyone who "defiles the sacred name of the Holy prophet Mohammed" -- a move that the Pakistan Human Rights Commission says gives "a killing edge" to extremists. In 1991, a limited version of Shari'a law was implemented.

Now the nation's Senate is taking up a constitutional amendment -- backed by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and by the National Assembly -- to implement Shari'a law more fully.

Opponents of the Shari'a amendment argue that it violates the vision of the country's founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, who is as revered in Pakistan as George Washington or Thomas Jefferson is in the United States.

In 1947, Jinnah said, "There will be no end to the progress you will make" if no matter what a person's "color, caste or creed" he is seen as "first, second and last a citizen of this State with equal rights, privileges and obligations."

"Shari'a law says no one else should have any religious rights whatsoever because this is an Islamic state," says Wood, now on a teaching sabbatical in Sri Lanka.

"You're here to be our guest. You behave the way we want you to, by God, or we'll throw you out. That's not to say Muslims wouldn't be hospitable to a Christian living in their midst. But that Christian better not dare show his or her faith."

### **Nation's largest religious minority group is poor, unwanted**

Pakistani Christians are dirt poor in a poor country, where the average income is less than \$500 a year.

British missionaries brought Christianity to Pakistan in the 1800s and 1900s. Today, no one knows for sure how many Christians are in Pakistan, but they are the nation's largest religious minority group.

Fewer than half the citizens can read and write; fewer than 7 percent of Christians can. Christians often do the low-level sanitary work, cleaning toilets and collecting garbage, that others refuse to do.

Because of this association with filth, Muslims in some parts of Pakistan will not touch a utensil used by a Christian unless it is washed first.

### **Abduction tears family apart, but officials haven't helped**

Seema Masih cleans houses for a living.

She is a Christian woman with 11 children. Five of them are grown and married. Before she lost her three daughters, there were six children at home.

Masih says she came home early on Jan. 25 and was washing dishes. Suddenly, the landlady, Rosina Butt, shouted from outdoors for 14-year-old Nadia. Masih says she looked through her kitchen window and saw five policemen, a city councilman, a robed Muslim spiritual leader, a parked van and a growing crowd of onlookers.

Masih refused to send her daughter outside.

Then, she says, the landlady and her husband, Liaqat Butt, burst into the apartment, punched her, kicked her and threw her to the ground. Then they took her daughters.

Masih's husband, Khushi Masih, was at work, driving a bus.

The police, standing outside, did nothing but watch, she says. "We had no expectation that any of them would help us," she says.

Three siblings, 6-year-old Mariam, 8-year-old Haroon and 10-year-old Akheem, looked on.

"I wanted to stop them," Haroon says. "I wanted to beat them. But I'm little. If I would have been a big man, I wouldn't have let them take my sisters like that."

News of an abduction spread throughout the Christian community in Rawalpindi. The family was advised that its best chance of getting the children back would be to hire a Muslim lawyer.

S. Zulfiqar Abbas Naqvi, a Muslim who says he has received death threats for taking similar cases, took on this one, at no charge.

"Please show me one law, just one, pertaining to Islam, pertaining to the Hadith, pertaining to the Pakistan Constitution, that says Christian parents aren't entitled to the custody of their kids," Naqvi says. "No one can show me this."

Siddiqi, the magistrate, says the Butts argued that the children converted to Islam while their mother worked and that they, as Muslims, should have custody. The position of magistrate, inherited from the British, oversees the police and has some judicial authority as well.

An article in The Daily Islamabad emphasized the girls' conversion. It quoted Nadia as saying: "Islam has given me peace of mind and soul." She was also quoted as saying, "My relatives are unreasonably raising hue and are calling my acceptance of Islam an act of force."

Siddiqi credits the Butts with "playing a smart game." He calls Liaqat Butt a "corrupt, useless person" whose "ultimate aim" is to sexually molest the children.

Nonetheless, he didn't return the girls to their Christian parents, fearing an uproar in the Muslim community. Instead, he placed the girls in Dar-ul-Aman, an Islamic women's and children's shelter.

As of Saturday, they remained there.

The girls insist they are Muslims, Naqvi says. He says the eldest, Nadia, has asked for legal custody of her younger sisters because she recently reached puberty.

Under Islamic law, once a woman menstruates, she is no longer considered a minor, Naqvi says.

Complicating matters, the parents have fled Rawalpindi and have been out of contact with their attorney. A priest and family friend, the Rev. James Channan, says they are in hiding after receiving death threats.

The Pakistani equivalent of a circuit court judge is expected to rule on the case. No date has been set.

### **Observers see pattern in way religious minorities are treated**

Wood, the American professor, while not familiar with this case, says the magistrate's handling of it is consistent with other cases he has studied.

The goal is "keeping a lid on" social unrest, not administering justice, he says.

"These magistrates are not necessarily sympathetic to the extremists," Wood says. "They're generally nice people you and I would like to sit with and talk to. But they're just holding on by their fingernails. They are working in a system that can't support them politically when it comes to religious minorities."

Asma Jehangir, chairwoman of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, says that she thinks things are getting worse, not better, for Christians.

"They are just surviving," she says. "Incidents are increasing. Insecurities are increasing. You have legislation that is discriminatory. You have court judgments that are biased. It's not just that people are socially discriminated against now," she says. "It's persecution."

As a result, Jehangir says, stickers have appeared on buses, cars and walls in her hometown of Lahore, with the message "find her and kill her." A practicing Muslim, and an attorney, Jehangir said the police don't offer her protection. She defends Christians, she says, because "justice must be given to all."

### **Blasphemy harshly punished, sometimes with death sentences**

Under the blasphemy law, a mere complaint by a private citizen can result in an arrest without a warrant, even if there is no evidence. Bail is often hard to obtain or not granted at all.

Former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto tried to amend the law but backed away when radical Islamic groups called for the death of anyone supporting change.

According to Compass Direct, an American-based Christian news service that monitors worldwide religious persecution, more than a dozen people have been jailed on blasphemy charges in the past seven years. No one has been executed, though four have been sentenced to death and five have been killed while in custody, the organization says.

In April, a young Pakistani Christian, Ayub Masih, was condemned to death for allegedly making a positive reference to Salman Rushdie's book "The Satanic Verses," which Iranian religious leaders have declared blasphemous.

Roman Catholic Bishop John Joseph came to Masih's defense. In a development that sent both Muslims and Christians to the streets in protest, the bishop killed himself on April 27. Supporters say he did it to draw worldwide attention to the blasphemy law, even though his church considers suicide a sin.

### **After accusation of blasphemy, schoolteacher goes into hiding**

Although only a handful of people have been convicted of blasphemy, others, such as schoolteacher Katherine Shaheen, have had their lives shaken through a mere accusation.

Forced into hiding, she agrees to tell her story on condition that her location not be identified. In 1995, she was accused, then cleared, of committing blasphemy.

As she speaks, she wears a shawl over her shoulders, peers solemnly through black-rimmed glasses and clasps her hands.

All she ever wanted to do, she says, was "follow Jesus Christ, the perfect teacher," by being a teacher herself.

She was the only Christian on the staff of the Government Girls High School in Rangpur, teaching biology and chemistry. But problems emerged, she says, when one school administrator told her she must convert to Islam and another ordered her to allow his relatives to cheat on an exam.

Shaheen says she refused and was accused of blasphemy by several students and teachers at the school. A judicial inquiry was held, and the charges were dropped.

Members of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan attended the public proceedings and wrote that "the false and baseless" charges were motivated by "professional jealousy, personal grudges and religious intolerance." It added, "the case against Ms. Shaheen was a clear example of abuse of the blasphemy law."

Shaheen thought the matter was over. But it was just beginning.

She had been labeled an enemy of Islam in the Nawa-e-Waqt, a daily newspaper. A mob burned her in effigy in front of the school, shouting "blasphemer" and "kill her."

She fled. Since then, she says police have harassed her family. A photograph from her school file has been copied and distributed throughout the country.

"They're looking for me," she says, "so they can kill me," even though, under the law, she is innocent.

"Anyone who wants to settle a personal score, if he doesn't find any other reason, can use this law as a weapon," Shaheen says.

### **Pastor stabbed in his home becomes a martyr for Christians**

In Shekhupura, a rural area 19 miles from Lahore, Pakistan's third biggest city, the story of Rev. Noor Alam's murder and the burning of his church has been told again and again.

Christians here say Alam was a martyr.

According to Alam's widow, Sakina Alam, and his daughter, Shazia Alam, the story began in 1948, one year after Pakistan's founding. That's when Alam's father, who preached the gospel to 12 villages, first talked about building a church for the handful of Christian believers.

Alam's father died before he could build the church.

Then, in 1997, for 12,000 rupees, the equivalent of \$275, collected from villages and some donations from the Presbyterian Church of Pakistan, Alam bought a plot of land from a Muslim leader in the area.

In a few months, the walls of a church had gone up, and a door was put on its hinges at the main entrance. On the door, Alam painted eight red crosses.

Three months later, on Dec. 6, 1997, according to Sakina Alam, a mob ran through the streets just after midnight. "If any Christian comes out to protect the church, we will kill," she heard them yell.

The mob destroyed the church.

Alam held Christmas service in his home that year. Sakina Alam says he told the 25 families making up his Presbyterian congregation: "'Even if I have to lay my life down for the rebuilding of this church, I will.'"

On Jan. 28, he did.

Alam's daughter, Shazia, a 25-year-old schoolteacher, says she watched television with her father that night. Then, preparing for bed, she put a scarf over her head as a sign of respect.

"Lord, we are thankful that you have protected us throughout the whole day. We pray that you protect us tonight," she prayed with her father.

Just after midnight, Alam heard a noise in the house. He walked upstairs and encountered three men wearing bedsheets over their heads, according to Alam's wife and daughter.

Sakina Alam remembers the crimson stain on her husband's white T-shirt. He was stabbed in the chest, stomach and above the right eye.

"I feel satisfied that my husband was martyred," Sakina Alam says. "As Jesus was crucified, and as blood dripped from his head, he was silent. And so was my husband."

No one has been arrested or charged in the crime, but the police say they are investigating.

"This wasn't a religiously motivated murder," says Ghulam Rasul, the police officer overseeing the investigation.

He speculates that the three attackers were robbers from outside the region, caught by Alam in an act of thievery.

"If we know where the accused are hiding, we don't delay for a minute," Rasul says.

"But we don't know where they are."

Police Superintendent Syed Mohammed Abid Qadri, the region's top law enforcement official, agrees. "I have my religion, they have theirs. As far as I am concerned, and this district is concerned, there is no problem whatsoever.

"They are human beings, just like us," says Qadri, a Muslim.

Joseph Francis, head of the Centre for Legal Aid, Assistance & Settlement, a Pakistan-based human rights organization, says Alam's church was one of four destroyed in a four-month period. He says a pattern of "anti-Christian sentiment" has been established, a pattern authorities deny but of which Christians are acutely aware.

"In present circumstances, we are absolutely hopeless," says Akhter Bhatti, Alam's brother-in-law.

"Whatever happens in Pakistan, neither the courts, nor the executive nor the legislature care for our Christian community."