



**Australian Government**  
**Refugee Review Tribunal**

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# Country Advice

## Pakistan

### Pakistan – PAK37941 – Christian Converts from Islam – Apostates – Blasphemy Laws

14 January 2011

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#### **1. Are Christian converts/apostates targeted or discriminated against in Pakistan, particularly in Karachi?**

Christians form one of several religious minorities in Pakistan who jointly account for 5 per cent of the population. Other minorities include Hindus, Parsis/Zoroastrians, Baha'is, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Ahmadis. The remaining 95 per cent of the population is Sunni or Shia Muslim.<sup>1</sup>

Islam is the state religion, and all elected ministers and members of the Senate and National Assembly are required to pledge to “strive to preserve the [state’s] Islamic ideology”. Although the Constitution provides for freedom of minorities to practice their religion, the government imposes limits on these rights. The Constitution also allows for freedom of speech to be limited by “any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam”. Furthermore, Pakistan’s blasphemy laws which prescribe the death penalty for defiling Islam are said to discriminate against religious minorities.<sup>2</sup>

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) reports that violence against, and harassment of, religious minorities increased throughout 2009. In particular, there were instances of “[r]eprisals and threats of reprisals against suspected converts from Islam”.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, conversion to minority religions often occurs “in secret to avoid societal backlash”.<sup>4</sup>

A November 2010 article from Christian news service *Compass Direct* reports the assault by a group of Muslim extremists of a Christian convert in Islamabad. Rev. Dr. Suleman Nasri Khan converted from Islam to Christianity in 2000, and was first attacked in 2008 after Muslim extremists learned of his conversion. The more recent attack occurred as a result of a fatwa (Islamic religious ruling) demanding his death. A fellow Reverend who found Khan unconscious after the attack claimed that “he couldn’t go to police or a hospital out of fear that Muslims would level apostasy charges against Khan”. The

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – Pakistan*, 17 November, Sections I, II – Attachment 1

<sup>2</sup> US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – Pakistan*, 17 November, Introduction, Sections I, II – Attachment 1; US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2009 – Pakistan*, 11 March, Section 2c – Attachment 2

<sup>3</sup> US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2009 – Pakistan*, 11 March, Section 2c – Attachment 2

<sup>4</sup> US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – Pakistan*, 17 November, Section III – Attachment 1

Muslim extremists have also reportedly named six Christian families from Khan's congregation on a hit-list.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to Christian converts specifically, Christians in general face discrimination and harassment in Pakistan. The US Department of State reported in November 2010 that acts of violence, as well as governmental and societal discrimination, against Christians continue to occur. Christians reportedly experienced difficulty in obtaining employment other than menial labour jobs, although improvements have occurred in recent years within the private sector.<sup>6</sup> The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) stated in August 2009 that "Taliban ideology has... underpinned an upsurge in attacks against Christians in Pakistan... Demands for sharia law to be applied in Pakistan are linked to the idea that Christians should be expelled from the country".<sup>7</sup>

A number of attacks on Christians have recently occurred in Karachi. The *Pakistan Christian Post* reported on 12 January 2011 that a Muslim police officer and Muslim gang members had been kidnapping and assaulting young Christian males, and forcing Christian women to convert to Islam. One Christian youth was found dead in early January after he was allegedly followed by a Muslim police officer.<sup>8</sup> Another attack on Christians in Karachi by Muslim extremists occurred in December 2010, following the conversion to Islam by a Christian youth in order to marry a Muslim girl.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, in May 2010, a Christian church in Karachi was attacked by Muslim extremists, who threatened to kill Christians in the area. After the church pastor reported the attack to police, a report was filed against four Christians for allegedly threatening the Muslims group's leader, a convert from Christianity to Islam.<sup>10</sup> *Compass Direct* reports that in April 2009, Christians in Taiser town, near Karachi, faced calls to convert to Islam or pay a tax for protection. Islamic militants in the town opened fire on Christians attempting to remove graffiti reading 'Long Live the Taliban', resulting in the death of a young boy.<sup>11</sup>

Other recent incidents involving Christians in various parts of Pakistan include the illegal detention of three men on false charges after their Muslim employer reported to police that they had refused to work on Sundays; the forced departure from Lahore of five Christian boys who were accused of blasphemy after desecrating an Islamic banner; the attempt by police to extort money from 47 Christians by falsely charging them with alcohol possession; intimidation and death threats made against a female Christian shop-owner after being accused of blasphemy by another shop-owner because she refused to sell him her shop; the killings of six Christians and injuries to seven others by militants in

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<sup>5</sup> 'After Fatwa, Pastor in Pakistan Beaten with Bricks' 2010, *Compass Direct*, 5 November – Attachment 3

<sup>6</sup> US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – Pakistan*, 17 November, Introduction, Section III – Attachment 1

<sup>7</sup> UK Home Office 2010, *Country of Origin Information Report – Pakistan*, 18 January, pp.112 – Attachment 4

<sup>8</sup> 'Christian boy shot dead in Karachi' 2011, *Pakistan Christian Post*, 12 January

<http://www.pakistanchristianpost.com/headlinenewsd.php?hnewsid=2556> – Accessed 13 January 2011 – Attachment 5

<sup>9</sup> 'Christians In Karachi Comes Under Attack From Islamists' 2010, ReligionNewsBlog website, 15 December <http://www.religionnewsblog.com/25507/christians-in-karachi-comes-under-attack-from-islamists> – Accessed 13 January 2011 – Attachment 6

<sup>10</sup> US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – Pakistan*, 17 November, Section II – Attachment 1

<sup>11</sup> 'Lawyer threatens to kill Christian charged with 'blasphemy'' 2009, *Compass Direct*, 6 May – Attachment 7

Quetta; extremist mob attacks on, and forced evictions of, Christian communities in Punjab; and the police abuse in custody of a Christian man charged with robbery.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, a September 2010 news report highlights claims of Christian NGOs in Pakistan that the widespread discrimination against religious minorities in Pakistan is also evident in the recent flood crisis, with Christians reportedly being denied relief aid from some Muslim charity groups unless they convert to Islam.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. To what extent are Pakistan's blasphemy laws applied against apostates/Christian converts?

Pakistan's blasphemy laws are outlined in Sections 295 and 298 of the Pakistan Penal Code, and include defiling Islam and/or the Holy Qur'an, and using derogatory remarks in respect of the Holy Prophet. Punishments under these laws range from fines to life imprisonment, and even the death penalty. Although there have not yet been any executions for blasphemy, some individuals have been sentenced to death, while those accused have been attacked, and some killed, by violent extremists.<sup>14</sup>

The British High Commission in Pakistan reported in January 2009 "that although apostasy was not illegal, people who change their faith are regularly charged with blasphemy and insulting Islam".<sup>15</sup> A July 2010 report on surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center found that approximately 76 per cent of Pakistanis support the death penalty for people who convert from Islam.<sup>16</sup>

In August 2010 a Christian man in Karachi was accused of blasphemy by Islamic extremists for marrying a Muslim woman, while his wife was threatened with death for leaving Islam. The family has been forced to continually move house in order to avoid being attacked or charged under blasphemy laws.<sup>17</sup> The *Pakistan Christian Post* reported in July 2010 that a Muslim family in Rawalpindi was accused of blasphemy after being baptised by a local pastor, whose life was also now in danger as a result.<sup>18</sup>

The blasphemy laws are also used to target and intimidate religious minorities, including Christians. In 2009, 6 out of a total 112 cases were registered against Christians, although many more faced threats and accusations on the grounds of blasphemy. Courts generally do not require evidence in blasphemy cases, and bail is often denied, resulting in lengthy detention where detainees are subject to ill-treatment. When blasphemy cases are heard in

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<sup>12</sup> US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – Pakistan*, 17 November, Sections II, III – Attachment 1

<sup>13</sup> 'Pakistan: some Christians denied aid unless they convert to Islam' 2010, All Voices website, 7 September <http://www.allvoices.com/contributed-news/6694816-pakistan-some-christians-denied-aid-unless-they-convert-to-islam> – Accessed 11 January 2011 – Attachment 8

<sup>14</sup> UK Home Office 2010, *Country of Origin Information Report – Pakistan*, 18 January, pp.93-94 – Attachment 4; US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – Pakistan*, 17 November, Section II – Attachment 1

<sup>15</sup> UK Home Office 2010, *Country of Origin Information Report – Pakistan*, 18 January, p.97 – Attachment 4

<sup>16</sup> Pew Research Center 2010, 'America's Image Remains Poor: Concern About Extremist Threat Slips in Pakistan', The Pew Global Attitudes Project website, 29 July pp.9, 26 – <http://pewglobal.org/files/pdf/Pew-Global-Attitudes-2010-Pakistan-Report.pdf> – Accessed 22 December 2010 – Attachment 9

<sup>17</sup> 'Blasphemy' threats send Pakistani worker, couple into hiding' 2010, *Compass Direct*, 24 August – Attachment 10

<sup>18</sup> 'Baptized Muslim family and Pastor under blasphemy in Pakistan' 2010, *Pakistan Christian Post*, 30 July <http://www.pakistanchristianpost.com/headlinenewsd.php?hnewsid=2180> – Accessed 11 January 2011 – Attachment 11

court, large numbers of extremists appear in the courtroom and make public threats against acquittals.<sup>19</sup> In 2009 a Christian man charged with blasphemy, Hector Aleem, was threatened in court by an Islamic lawyer, who stated “[i]f the judge does not punish Aleem according to the law, then [we] will kill him ourselves”.<sup>20</sup>

In November 2010 a Christian woman, Aasia Bibi, became the first female to be sentenced to execution under the blasphemy laws for allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur’an. Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab, visited Bibi in gaol and publicly criticised the blasphemy laws. As a result of his controversial views, Taseer was shot and killed in Islamabad on 3 January 2011 by an Islamic extremist after a fatwa was issued calling for his death.<sup>21</sup> A rally of more than 50,000 people was subsequently held in Karachi on 10 January 2011 to protest against calls for a reform to the blasphemy laws. Islamic leaders from Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Pakistan stated “that there was no need to mourn the death of Taseer [and] praised [his assassin] as a hero of Islam”.<sup>22</sup>

Further examples of the blasphemy laws being used against Christians in 2010 include the sentencing of a Christian man to life imprisonment on charges of blasphemy for comments he made about the Qur’an and the Prophet Mohammad, and the sentencing of a Christian couple to 25 years imprisonment for defiling the Qur’an by touching it with unclean hands. In September 2009, a Christian man accused of blasphemy died in police custody, with human rights groups claiming that he was killed extra-judicially.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Human Rights Watch 2010, ‘World Report 2010: Pakistan’, January – Attachment 12; US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – Pakistan*, 17 November, Sections II, III – Attachment 1; UK Home Office 2010, *Country of Origin Information Report – Pakistan*, 18 January, pp.94-95 – Attachment 4

<sup>20</sup> ‘Lawyer threatens to kill Christian charged with ‘blasphemy’’ 2009, *Compass Direct*, 6 May – Attachment 7

<sup>21</sup> ‘PAKISTAN: Hindu minority lives in mounting fear’ 2011, *IRIN News*, 6 January

<http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?Reportid=91544> – Accessed 10 January 2011 – Attachment 13; ‘Pakistan row over possible pardon’ 2010, *Al Jazeera*, 24 November

<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia/2010/11/20101124192246764876.html> – Accessed 22 December 2010 –

Attachment 14; Gall, C. 2011, ‘Pakistan Faces a Divide of Age on Muslim Law’, *The New York Times*, 10 January [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/11/world/asia/11pakistan.html?\\_r=1&ref=world](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/11/world/asia/11pakistan.html?_r=1&ref=world) – Accessed 11

January 2011 – Attachment 15; Georgy, M. 2011, ‘Pakistan governor buried, clerics warn against grief’, *Reuters*, 5 January <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE7010QP20110106> – Accessed 11 January 2011 – Attachment

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<sup>22</sup> Thuburn, D. 2011, ‘Pope calls on Pakistan to scrap blasphemy’, *The Age*, 11 January

<http://news.theage.com.au/breaking-news-world/pope-calls-on-pakistan-to-scrap-blasphemy-20110111-19lcf.html> – Accessed 11 January 2011 – Attachment 17; Aziz, F. 2011, ‘Tens of thousands rally against

changes in blasphemy law’, *Reuters*, 9 January <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE70826520110109> – Accessed 11 January 2011 – Attachment 18

<sup>23</sup> US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – Pakistan*, 17 November, Section II – Attachment 1

## Attachments

1. US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – Pakistan*, 17 November.
2. US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2009 – Pakistan*, 11 March.
3. ‘After Fatwa, Pastor in Pakistan Beaten with Bricks’ 2010, *Compass Direct*, 5 November. (CISNET Pakistan CX253647)
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