

# Pakistani Christian sentenced to death for 'blasphemous texts'

*Asif Pervaiz, 37, who has been in custody since 2013, given death penalty for sending 'blasphemous' text messages.*

By Asad Hashim

Al Jazeera (08.09.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2Fi6rNf> – A court in the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore has sentenced a Christian man to death for having committed “blasphemy”, his lawyer says, in the latest case of Pakistan’s strict religious laws being applied against minorities.

Asif Pervaiz, 37, has been in custody since 2013 when he was accused of having sent “blasphemous” text messages to a former supervisor at work, lawyer Saif-ul-Malook told Al Jazeera.

The court rejected his testimony wherein he denied the charges and sentenced him to death on Tuesday.

“The complainant was a supervisor in a hosiery factory where Asif was working under him,” said Malook.

“He denied the allegations and said that this man was trying to get him to convert to Islam.”

Speaking in his own defence in court earlier in the trial, Pervaiz claimed the supervisor confronted him after he quit work at the factory, and when he refused to convert he was accused of having sent blasphemous text messages to the man.

### ***Blasphemy laws***

Muhammad Saeed Khokher, the complainant in the case, denies wanting to convert Parvaiz, according to his lawyer, Ghulam Mustafa Chaudhry.

“He has taken this defence after the fact, because he had no other clear defence,” Chaudhry told Al Jazeera. “That’s why he accused him of trying to convert him.”

Chaudhry said there were other Christian employees at the factory, but none have accused Khokher of proselytising.

Pakistan’s strict blasphemy laws prescribe a mandatory death penalty for the crime of insulting Islam’s Prophet Muhammad, and strict penalties for other infractions such as insulting Islam, the holy Quran or certain holy people.

There are currently at least 80 people in prison in Pakistan for the crime of “blasphemy”, with at least half of them facing life sentences or the death penalty, according to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

(USCIRF).

Those accused under the laws are mainly Muslim, in a country where 98 percent of the population follows Islam, but the laws disproportionately target members of minorities such as Christians and Hindus.

### ***Aasia Bibi case***

In one of the most high-profile blasphemy cases in the country's history, the Supreme Court ruled in October 2018 that a Christian woman, Aasia Bibi, had been framed in her case and that the laws had inadequate oversight for false accusations.

Those accusations can have deadly consequences. Since 1990, at least 77 people have been killed in connection with blasphemy allegations, according to an Al Jazeera tally.

Those killed have included people accused of blasphemy, their family members, lawyers and judges who have acquitted those accused of the crime. Bibi fled Pakistan in 2019 due to threats against her life.

The latest such murder took place in July when a man accused of blasphemy was shot six times in a courtroom during a hearing in his case.

His murderer was apprehended and was garlanded with roses by far-right supporters during subsequent court appearances.

This month has seen a sharp spike in blasphemy cases being registered in Pakistan, particularly in the most populous province of Punjab. Many of these cases have targeted the country's sizeable Shia Muslim minority, which forms roughly 15 percent of the population.

Since a series of large-scale sit-in protests on the issue of blasphemy in 2017, political parties have increasingly been including messaging on blasphemy in their platforms.

The Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) political party, formed by firebrand scholar Khadim Hussain Rizvi ahead of the 2018 polls, campaigned on a platform based on defence of the blasphemy laws.

While it won few seats, it garnered the fourth-highest share of the countrywide popular vote by a single party.

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**WORLD: One in three Christians face persecution**

# in Asia, report finds

*Threat levels rise in China amid crackdown and India enters top 10 for first time*

By Harriet Sherwood

The Guardian (16.01.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2ARc7bX> – The persecution of Christians in China is the worst it has been for more than a decade, with at least 50 million people expected to experience some form of repression this year as the government tightens its controls over religious worship, according to a global monitoring body.

The crackdown on religion in China is part of a pattern of increasing Christian persecution across Asia over the past five years, Open Doors said in its 2019 World Watch List, which ranks 50 countries. One in three Christians face high levels of persecution in Asia, with India entering the top 10 for the first time.

Open Doors estimates that 245 million Christians worldwide face high levels of persecution this year, up from 215 million last year.

The publication of its annual league table comes three weeks after Jeremy Hunt, the UK foreign secretary, ordered an independent, global review of the persecution of Christians of all nationalities. The review will make recommendations on the

practical steps the UK government can take to support those under threat.

## **Persecution against Christians is rising across Asia, with India and Pakistan among countries with extreme levels of repression**

North Korea tops the World Watch List for the 18th year in a row, with 10 other countries categorised as having “extreme” levels of persecution. Countries that have moved up more than 10 places in the list in the past year include China, Algeria, Central African Republic, Mali and Mauritania.

China has risen from no 43 on last year’s list to 27 in 2019. Henrietta Blyth, the chief executive of Open Doors UK and Ireland, said: “In China, our figures indicate persecution is the worst it’s been in more than a decade – alarmingly, some church leaders are saying it’s the worst since the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976.”

There are an estimated 93 million to 115 million Protestants in China and about 10 million to 12 million Catholics. Most belong to unregistered churches. If the rate of growth continues, China is expected to have the world’s largest Christian population by 2030.

In the past year, the Chinese government has tightened its control on religious worship, shutting down hundreds of unofficial churches, detaining pastors and worshippers, removing crosses from buildings, banning the online sale of bibles and increasing the surveillance of congregations. Last month, the celebration of Christmas was banned in some schools and cities.

“There is a very strong control agenda combined with a new era of digital surveillance,” said Ronald Boyd-Macmillan, the head of strategy and research at Open Doors.

He said persecution was being driven by three factors: the strong ideological leadership of China’s president, Xi Jinping, the government’s unease over the growth of Christianity, and the harnessing of technology as a repressive tool.

In September, the Vatican signed a provisional deal with Beijing on the appointment of Catholic bishops, aimed at a rapprochement in diplomatic relations. However, critics denounced it as a betrayal, with Cardinal Joseph Zen, the former archbishop of Hong Kong, saying the consequences would be “tragic and long lasting, not only for the church in China but for the whole church because it damages credibility”.

India, the world’s largest democracy, rose to 10th place on the list, having been 28th five years ago. Open Doors said ultra-nationalism was behind the increase in violent attacks by Hindu extremists on Christians and churches.

“It’s shocking that India – the country which taught the world the way of ‘non-violence’ – now sits alongside the likes of Iran on our World Watch List. For many Christians in India, daily life is now full of fear – totally different from just four or five years ago,” Blyth said.

The report also highlights the rise in gender-specific persecution, saying Christian women are subjected to sexual violence, rape and forced marriage in the top five countries on the list.

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