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Religion-based terrorism, extremism on the rise in 2021

The yearly report of the authoritative Pak Institute for Peace Studies recommended urgent action by the Parliament.

By Marco Respinti

On January 5, 2022, the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PICS), a leading Pakistani think tank including prominent academics and journalists, released its yearly report on security for the year 2021.

The [section on terrorism](#) noted that ethno-nationalist and religiously motivated terrorist attacks increased by 42% in 2021 with respect to 2020, and the number of victims increased by 52%, the worst such surge in the last 15 years.

Year	No. of Terrorist Attacks (%Change)	No. of Killed (% Change)
2009	Baseline year (2,586 attacks)	Baseline year (3,021 Fatalities)
2010	18%↓	4% ↓
2011	7%↓	18%↓
2012	20%↓	14%↓
2013	9%↑	19%↑
2014	30%↓	30%↓
2015	48%↓	38%↓
2016	28%↓	12%↓
2017	16%↓	10%↓
2018	29%↓	27%↓
2019	13%↓	40%↓
2020	36%↓	38%↓
2021	42%↑	52%↑

Evolution of terrorist attacks in Pakistan, 2009–2021. Source: [PIPS](#) Pakistan Security Report 2021.

207 attacks took 335 lives, and left another 555 wounded. The surge is mostly due to “religiously inspired militant groups,” the report says, singling out “Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), local Taliban groups, and Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K)” as the worst

perpetrators. The developments in Afghanistan also made the situation in Pakistan worse.

More generally, as discussed [in a press conference on January 5](#), violent religious extremist groups are at work in all provinces in Pakistan. The PICS noted in particular the activities of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, a large Sufi but violent organization to which *Bitter Winter* devoted [a series of articles](#).

Against the “growing incidents of faith-based mob violence,” targeting in particular religious minorities harassed by different violent Islamic laws, the PICS believes that existing laws are not sufficient. It urged the Parliament to take action, enact new laws, and use the National Action Plan (NAP) as a tool against religious extremism and violence.

The PICS also recommended to strengthen the National Counter-Terrorism Authority (NACTA).

Photo : Bitter Winter

Pakistan’s top court grants bail to Christian facing blasphemy charge

CatholicNewsAgency (10.01.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3r4TDOn> - The Supreme Court of Pakistan’s decision to grant bail to a Christian accused of blasphemy should give hope to others facing the charge, according to a prominent lawyer.

Saif ul Malook welcomed the court’s ruling on Jan. 6 that Nadeem Samson should be released on bail.

“It is a very important ruling, the first in the judicial history of Pakistan,” the lawyer said in a video call [reported](#) by the [Jubilee Campaign](#), a nonprofit promoting human rights. Samson, identified as a [Catholic](#) by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom ([USCIRF](#)), was arrested in 2017 and imprisoned in Lahore, Pakistan’s second-largest city, after a property dispute.

He was charged with insulting the Muslim Prophet Muhammad under Section 295-C of the [Pakistan Penal Code](#).

The 42-year-old’s supporters believe that he was [falsely accused](#) of the crime, which is punishable by death in Pakistan, an Islamic republic in South Asia with a population of almost 227 million people.

Malook, who [represented Asia Bibi](#), a Catholic mother [acquitted](#) of blasphemy in 2018, petitioned the Supreme Court at a hearing on Jan. 5 to break with the practice of denying bail to people accused of blasphemy.

But asked if his successful petition was a signal that Samson would ultimately be released, the lawyer said: "That is a different story."

He noted that people accused of blasphemy, even without evidence, face significant risks, saying that "when Nadeem Samson is going to court he can be killed anytime."

There are around [4 million](#) Christians, including more than a million Catholics, in Pakistan.

The charity Open Doors ranks Pakistan as the [fifth-worst](#) country in the world in which to be a Christian.

"Christians in Pakistan face extreme persecution in every area of their lives," it said.

Among those currently awaiting trial for blasphemy are also humanists, Ahmadis, Sunnis, and Shiites.

In October 2021, U.N. human rights experts [criticized](#) the treatment of [Stephen Masih](#), a Christian from Sialkot District, in Punjab province, who was arrested in 2019 following a dispute with a neighbor. Three months after his arrest, he was informed that he was subject to blasphemy charges.

The Session Court in Sialkot denied Masih's bail request in August 2021.

"It is deeply alarming that a mere disagreement between neighbors could lead to the judicial harassment of an individual, based on his religious or other beliefs, and by the use of anti-blasphemy laws which may carry the death penalty," said the experts, who noted that Masih suffers from a psychosocial disability.

Photo : The Supreme Court of Pakistan in Islamabad. | Usman.pg via Wikimedia (CC BY-SA 3.0).

HRWF Project GSP+ EU/Pakistan: A Christian sentenced to death on blasphemy charges

CLAAS (06.01.2022) - <https://www.claas.org.uk> – A Christian man, Zafar Bhatti, 58, has been sentenced to death by the Pakistan session court of Rawalpindi, after being charged with blasphemy in 2012.

He is accused of sending blasphemous text messages from his phone but has always denied the allegation against him.

Bhatti faced a difficult situation when in the same year the District Bar Association Rawalpindi passed a resolution that no lawyers of District Bar Association would appear in any case under Section 295 of the Pakistan Penal Code on behalf of any accused.

Christian NGO Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS-PK) provided a lawyer but on May 3rd, 2017, Zafar was sentenced to life imprisonment for 295C, PPC, three years imprisonment, and fined ten thousand rupees for 298A PPC and one-year imprisonment and fined five thousand for 25D of the Telegraph Act.

An appeal against the conviction and life imprisonment was submitted to the Lahore High Court Bench in Rawalpindi, and since then the case has been transferred to different judges at least four times.

Last October high court judge, Mr. Justice Abdul Aziz, heard the case in Adiala jail and once again referred the case to the trial court to rewrite the judgment on technical grounds as he believed that Bhatti should have been given the death sentence instead of life imprisonment.

In September 2020 Bhatti suffered a heart attack in prison but because of swift medical attention his condition was stabilised but there are ongoing concerns for Zafar's physical and mental health. His lawyer, Tahir Bashir, called on the Lahore High Court (Rawalpindi Bench) to grant immediate bail on medical grounds and allow him access to medical treatment outside of jail, but the application was rejected. Bhatti also suffers from diabetes and his health condition continues to deteriorate.

He is held under high security due to threats to his life from extremists. All his case hearings have been conducted in Adiala Jail, Rawalpindi, causing great distress to him and his wife Nawab Bibi.

Nasir Saeed, director CLAAS-UK has expressed his concern stating that this is one of the longest imprisonment cases and it is only because of the Pakistan judicial system.

He said: "Since the promulgation of the blasphemy law in Pakistan, the law is oppressive and frequently misused. Provisions have been used as tools of revenge in personal conflicts, to target religious minorities and to oppress political opponents or critical voices, putting in jeopardy the lives of the accused and also their families, members of their communities, judges, lawyers and everyone that tries to seek justice.

"The situation continues to deteriorate, and minorities are living under constant threat as the government has failed to protect religious minorities in the last years, exacerbating existing religious divides and thus creating a climate of religious intolerance, violence and discrimination against vulnerable minority groups in the country, including Ahmadis, Hindus and Christians.

"In the recent year several blasphemy cases have been registered against Hindu, Christians and even against Muslims, on mere suspicion. At least six Christian nurses were accused of committing blasphemy, they were threatened, beaten and attempts made on their lives, but nobody has been brought to justice for attacking them and taking the law into their own hands.

"Several temples and churches were attacked and set on fire, while a 49-year-old Sri Lankan man, Priyantha Kumara Diyawadana, export manager of Rajco Industries, was lynched by a mob on 3 December 2021 in Sialkot, over allegations of committing blasphemy for removing a poster featuring religious content. He had lived and worked in Pakistan for eleven years, was beaten, killed and later set on fire by a mob in Sialkot."

Mr Saeed said that although Prime Minister Imran Khan has condemned the blasphemy killing and the military declared "zero tolerance" for extremists, that is not enough. He said this is the time for the government to take this matter seriously and make changes appropriately to stop the ongoing misuse of the blasphemy law.

Saeed also stated that CLAAS would maintain its support to the family.

Photo : Claas.org.uk
