

# Why is Asia Bibi under death sentence?



**Asia Bibi is a 45 year-old Christian who is a victim of Pakistan's controversial blasphemy laws** which are often misused to settle personal scores and persecute minorities. In June 2009 local Muslims accused her of making derogatory comments against the prophet Mohammed. Asia had been working in the fields with other women when she was asked to fetch drinking water. Some of the others – all Muslims – refused to drink the water as it had been brought by a Christian and was therefore "unclean". This sparked a row about religion, during which Asia refused to recant her

faith in Jesus. It was reported that she had been under pressure from her fellow labourers to convert to Islam.

**Asia has been in prison since June 2009 and in November 2010 was sentenced to death.** She is reported to be living in fear in prison, where she is being held in solitary confinement for her own safety. Asia has an Urdu Bible in prison, given to her by supporters. Although she is not a fluent reader, she has taken particular comfort from John 14v1, "*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.*"

Demonstrations have been staged in Pakistan, by Christians calling for her release and by Muslims warning against a pardon and calling for her to be executed.

**Salman Taseer**, governor of the Punjab, visited Asia in prison (see picture) and arranged for her to sign an appeal for clemency, which he later presented to President Asif Ali Zardari. His support for Asia and his outspoken criticism of the Blasphemy Laws led to his assassination on 4 January 2011, when he was shot dead by one of his own guards.



# What are the blasphemy laws?

Pakistan has had blasphemy Laws since British colonial rule but two new sections were added in the 1980's during the rule of General Zia al-Haq. **Their aim is to protect Islam and to punish anyone who damages the Qur'an or who speaks against the prophet Mohammed.** Unfortunately, the laws have been misused frequently – many people have made false accusations to get other people into trouble. The wording of the laws means that the accused person does not even had to be proven guilty of intent and there is no penalty for false accusations.

**Over 1,000 people have been accused under the blasphemy laws since 1986 – over 50% of cases involve religious minorities who comprise just 3% of population.** No one has ever been executed by the Government but 32 people (mostly accused but also 2 judges) have been killed by militants.

In July 2010, Two Christian pastors, **Rashid Emmanuel** (32) and his brother **Sajid Emmanuel** (30) were shot dead while being led in handcuffs back to jail.



*Police with the body of Pastor Rashid Emmanuel – shot dead in court grounds in July 2010*

**Benazir Bhutto** (who was assassinated in 2007) – abandoned plans to reform the laws after threatened 3 day strike. The policy of the current government to reform the laws was also abandoned after protests and a general strike on 31 Dec and assassination of Salmaan Taseer, Governor of Punjab).

## TEXT OF THE BLASPHEMY LAWS

### **Section 295-B – Defiling etc. of copy of Holy Qur'an:**

Whoever wilfully defiles, damages or desecrates a copy of the Holy Qur'an or an extract there from or uses it in any derogatory manner or for any unlawful purpose shall be punishable with imprisonment for life.

### **Section 295-C – Use of derogatory remarks etc., in respect of the Holy Prophet:**

Whoever by words, either spoken or written or by visible representation, or by any imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, **directly** or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) shall be punished with death.

# Living in fear – Christians in Pakistan

**Pakistan has been gripped by political uncertainty and turmoil in recent years**, grappling with tensions in society between progressive modernists and Muslim fundamentalists. The tensions in the country have been exacerbated by outside influences including the US-led “War on Terror” (in which Pakistan has been a key ally) and the influence of the Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan.



Although the country is an Islamic Republic, religious freedom was initially protected and encouraged by its founders. However, successive governments have pursued a policy of Islamisation of the legal system, taxation and public life which has led to discrimination against all religious minorities. Islamic (Sharia) law has been increasingly applied, even to Christians and Hindus, despite its contravention of the constitution.



**Shab haz Bhatti**  
**KILLED MARCH 2011**

**Christians have also been the victims of several violent attacks in recent years** – on churches, schools and hospitals. Christians in the North West Frontier Province (bordering Afghanistan) have been ordered to leave the area, convert or face death.

The number of Christians in Pakistan is about 4 million (out of a total population of 184 million). Many Christians are nominal (not practising their faith). The main churches are Church of Pakistan(Anglican), Roman Catholic and Presbyterian. There are over 1 million evangelicals. Very few Christians from a Muslim background.

**Most Christians come from the poorest levels in society, living in city slums and village colonies.** They sweep streets, pick up litter and earn a living performing tasks too menial for Muslims. Many Christians are illiterate having received very little education. The current government has publicly pledged to support minorities and appointed **Shab haz Bhatti** (a Roman Catholic human rights activist) as Minister for Minorities. He was assassinated outside his mother's house in March 2011.

# Living in fear – Christians in Pakistan

**Church in Chains** and many other religious freedom and human rights organisations have campaigned for many years for the abolition of the blasphemy laws in Pakistan. **Church in Chains** has had meetings with successive Pakistani ambassadors to Ireland and has also discussed reforms with Benazir Bhutto and Shab haz Bhatti.

Since the death sentence was handed down to Asia Bibi, **Church in Chains** has been in dialogue with the Embassy of Pakistan in Dublin and also with the Irish government (officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs have also been in contact with the Embassy of Pakistan).

## ADD YOUR VOICE

**PRAY...** For the safety of Asia Bibi and her family (husband, two children and three step-children are living in hiding ) and for her release.

For God's protection on Shab haz Bhatti (who has received death threats).

For courage for the government of Pakistan to take steps to reform the blasphemy laws.



**WRITE...** Support Asia Bibi by sending a postcard to the Embassy of Pakistan in Dublin.

**CAMPAIGN...** Encourage others (your family, friends, prayer group, neighbours, fellow students etc.) to send off a card.

Order a pack of 10 postcards (*free of charge*) from the Church in Chains office. Get in touch by phone, email or post (details below)

*This information leaflet has been produced with reference to many sources including Barnabas Fund, Compass Direct, Echoes of Service and Operation World.*



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