

PETITION TO THE AMBASSADOR OF PAKISTAN TO IRELAND

Calling for reform of Pakistan's Blasphemy Laws (June 2023)

**TDs and Senators who signed petition to Ambassador of Pakistan to
Ireland to call for reform of controversial blasphemy laws**



From top left to bottom right:

Ivana Bacik, Seán Canney TD, Michael Collins TD, Noel Grealish TD, Seán Haughey TD, Brendan Howlin TD, Mattie McGrath TD, Senator Rónán Mullen, Carol Nolan TD, Senator David Norris, Brendan Smith TD, Peadar Tóibín TD.



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SOURCES

This report draws on information published by the following sources:

Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement

European Parliament

Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

Houses of the Oireachtas

International Christian Concern

Morning Star News

UK All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief

United Nations Human Rights Council

United States Commission for International Religious Freedom

Church in Chains is an independent Irish charity that encourages prayer and action in support of persecuted Christians worldwide. It is a member of the Department of Foreign Affairs Committee on Human Rights.

This report has been researched by Susanne Chipperfield
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TEXT OF PETITION TO AMBASSADOR OF PAKISTAN CALLING FOR REFORM OF BLASPHEMY LAW

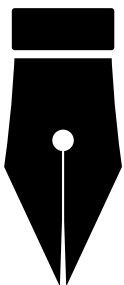
I write, as a member of the Oireachtas, to express my deep concern at the continuing misuse of the blasphemy law in Pakistan and its disproportionate effect on religious minorities including Christians.

It is clear, based on the multiplicity of reports from monitoring agencies including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, that Pakistan's blasphemy law provides a pretext for false allegations, arbitrary arrest and violence against religious minorities. More people are imprisoned under blasphemy charges in Pakistan than in any other country in the world.

The blasphemy law in Pakistan has attracted wide international concern, including at the European Parliament in 2021 when a motion was passed describing its effect as "exacerbating existing religious divides and thus fomenting a climate of religious intolerance, violence and discrimination".

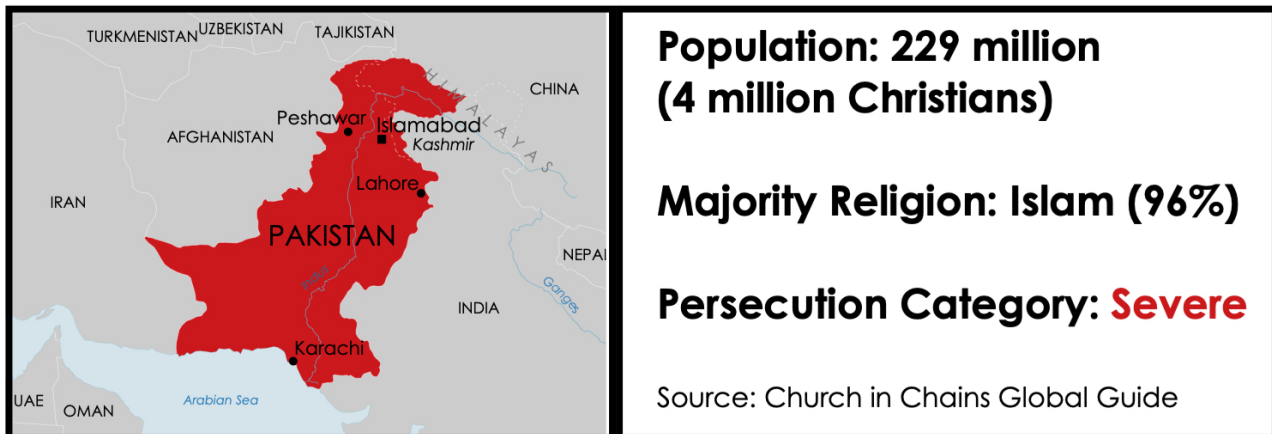
I ask therefore that you convey our appeal to your government to act now to reform the blasphemy law to ensure that false accusations (often made to settle personal scores) are penalised and that cases are dealt with speedily rather than the present situation where blasphemy law cases are adjourned repeatedly, prolonging the suffering of those accused.

Signed by:



Ivana Bacik TD, Seán Canney TD, Michael Collins TD, Noel Grealish TD, Seán Haughey TD, Brendan Howlin TD, Mattie McGrath TD, Senator Rónán Mullen, Carol Nolan TD, Senator David Norris, Brendan Smith TD and Peadar Tóibín TD.

PAKISTAN COUNTRY PROFILE



Pakistan's founders in 1947 protected religious freedom – the vision of founding father and first Governor-General Mohammed Ali Jinnah was that Pakistan would be a home for religious minorities alongside Sunni Muslims. However, successive governments have pursued a policy of Islamisation of the legal system, taxation and public life that has led to discrimination against religious minorities (notably Christians, Ahmadi and Shi'a Muslims and Hindus) and Sharia law has increasingly been applied, even to Christians and Hindus. Under Pakistani law leaving Islam (apostasy) and the proselytising of Muslims are not offences and Christians have freedom to worship. Under Sharia, however, apostasy is punishable by death.

In recent years, Pakistan has experienced tension between progressive modernists and Muslim fundamentalists, and minorities face the threat of extremist attacks, exacerbated by the influence of the Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan.

While Pakistan's constitution guarantees religious freedom, in practice members of religious minority groups are considered second-class citizens and experience social hostility. Christians face discrimination in every aspect of their lives.

Most Christians are from very poor backgrounds, with little education, and work in badly-paid, dirty and sometimes dangerous jobs such as cleaning sewers and sweeping streets or are trapped in slavery as bonded brick kiln labourers. Christians often live together in colonies or groups in slums or poor areas of rural villages, making them easy targets for mob attacks by Muslim extremists.

In recent years, militant Islamists have killed or injured hundreds of Christians in attacks on churches, schools and hospitals. The deadliest attack on Christians was the bombing of All Saints Church, Peshawar in September 2013, which killed 127 people. In March 2015, 17 Christians were killed in suicide attacks on two churches in Lahore. On Easter Sunday 2016, 72 people were killed in an anti-Christian suicide bomb attack in Lahore by Jamaat-ul-Ahrar and over 370 people were injured. The terrorists were targeting Christian families who had gone to a park after Easter services in a nearby church. Those killed were mainly women and children, many of them Muslim.

A major religious freedom issue in Pakistan concerns the controversial blasphemy laws, which cover offences such as defiling the Quran and defaming the prophet Mohammed and are often misused to settle personal scores, resulting in many innocent people spending years enduring appalling conditions in prison awaiting trial, their families forced into hiding for fear of attack by extremists. Several Christians have spent years on death row for alleged blasphemy, notably Punjab farm labourer Asia Bibi.

Another serious issue for Christians is abduction, forced conversion and marriage. Every year hundreds of Christian girls and women are kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam and marry their abductors, generally much older Muslims who are often already married with children. This has increased in frequency in recent years and is also an issue for Hindus. Perpetrators know that the likelihood of conviction is low, as police often help the suspects rather than investigating the abductions. In many cases the women and girls are condemned to a life of sexual abuse by their "husbands" or are even trafficked into prostitution.

PAKISTAN'S BLASPHEMY LAWS

Overview

Blasphemy is dealt with under Section 295 of Pakistan's Penal Code. The original law, based on the British colonial penal code of 1860, simply forbids damaging or defiling a place of worship or a sacred object. It was amended in 1927 by the insertion of Section 295-A, which deals with deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings, punishable by up to two years' imprisonment. In 1982 the president, General Zia, added an amendment, Section 295-B, which made wilfully defiling the Quran an offence punishable with life imprisonment.

These blasphemy laws require that an offence be intentional. They were seldom used until 1986, when General Zia amended them again, adding Section 295-C to forbid defamation of the prophet Mohammed. Initially, the punishment for breaking this law was either the death penalty or life imprisonment, but a 1991 ruling made the death penalty mandatory. Unlike the rest of Section 295, section 295-C omits any requirement for the offence to be committed deliberately or with criminal intent.

The mandatory death sentence and lack of requirement to prove criminal intent make this law a cause of fear to the Christian community, stoked by the influence of local mullahs in rousing Islamists against alleged blasphemers. Muslims as well as members of minority religions are at risk, and it is easy to break the laws accidentally. In March 2013, a 3,000-strong mob destroyed nearly 300 homes in a Christian colony in Lahore over a false allegation of blasphemy.

In January 2023 Pakistan's National Assembly voted to extend the blasphemy laws, unanimously passing a bill that increases punishment for insulting the Prophet Mohammed's companions, wives and family members from three years' to ten years' imprisonment, along with a fine of 1 million Pakistani rupees (€3,700 approx.).

Death row

Several Christians have spent years on death row for alleged blasphemy, notably Punjab farm labourer Asia Bibi. Since 1986, more than 1,000 people have been accused under the blasphemy laws, with over 50% of the cases involving religious minorities, including Ahmadis, Sikhs and Hindus as well as Christians. No one has been executed for blasphemy by the government, but since 1990 extremists have murdered at least 78 people over blasphemy allegations, including lawyers, two judges and over fifty defendants on release (at least 15 of whom were Christians). Once an accusation has been made, some extremists see it as their duty to kill the person concerned, whether or not their guilt has been proven.

Lawyers who defend those accused of blasphemy face threats of violence and judges are often afraid to hear prominent cases, knowing their lives are in danger. Extremist organisations often bring busloads of protesters to intimidate those involved in legal proceedings. A Human Rights Commission of Pakistan lawyer was shot dead in May 2014 for defending a university lecturer accused of blasphemy.

Assassinations

Several senior politicians have attempted to reform the blasphemy laws or amend them to prevent their abuse (including Benazir Bhutto in 1994) but this has never happened because of mass demonstrations and extremist threats. In February 2011, Pakistan People's Party MP Sherry Rehman withdrew her attempt to amend the laws after receiving numerous death threats.

In 2011, two senior government figures – Salman Taseer and Shabaz Bhatti – were assassinated for their opposition to the blasphemy laws and their support for Asia Bibi.

Punjab Governor Salman Taseer was a liberal Muslim who spoke out against the misuse of the blasphemy laws. He visited Asia Bibi in prison in November 2010 and arranged for her to sign an appeal for clemency. In January 2011, his bodyguard shot him dead. In March 2011, the Taliban shot dead Minorities Minister Shabaz Bhatti, the only Christian in cabinet, who also had been an outspoken opponent of the blasphemy laws and had supported Asia Bibi.

FOCUS CASES

ZAFAR BHATTI



First Information Report Number: 526/12

Sections Charged: 295-C; 25-D of the Telegraph Act

Date Arrested: 22 July 2012

Case Status: Sentenced to Death; Awaiting Appeal

Pastor Zafar Bhatti (57) has been in Rawalpindi's Adiala Central Jail since July 2012, when he was charged with sending blasphemous text messages. On 3 May 2017, Zafar was sentenced to life imprisonment for blasphemy, a charge he denies. The mobile phone in question was not registered to his name. Appeal hearings were adjourned repeatedly until, in January 2022, a district court ruled that he be sentenced to death. Subsequent appeals have all been adjourned – most recently in Rawalpindi High Court in March 2023.

Zafar has developed diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, headaches and problems with his eyesight since being imprisoned. He is also suffering from depression and feels great sadness over the years he has lost. His wife Nawab Bibi is also struggling with deteriorating health.

<https://www.churchinchains.ie/prisoner-profiles/zafar-bhatti/>

ASHFAQ MASIH



First Information Report Number: 797/17

Sections Charged: 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code

Date Arrested: 15 June 2017

Case Status: Sentenced to Death, Awaiting Trial

Ashfaq Masih (34), a bike mechanic from Lahore, has been in prison in Pakistan since 2017, when he was accused of blasphemy after he was involved in a dispute with a Muslim customer over payment for repairing a motorbike. His court hearings were cancelled repeatedly until he was sentenced to death in July 2022. The appeal against his death sentence is pending in the Lahore High Court.

Ashfaq and his wife Nabeela have a daughter, who was three when he was arrested. His family fled the neighbourhood when he was accused of blasphemy, but has since returned home.

<https://www.churchinchains.ie/prisoner-profiles/ashfaq-masih/>

ASIF PERVAIZ



First Information Report Number: 678/13

Sections Charged: 295-A; 295-B; 295-C; 25-D of the Telegraph Act

Date Arrested: 30 October 2013

Case Status: Sentenced to Death; Awaiting Appeal

Asif Pervaiz (38), a Christian father of four from Lahore, was accused of sending blasphemous text messages in October 2013 and has been in prison ever since. In September 2020, he was sentenced to death.

In October 2020, Asif was moved to Faisalabad Jail, where only his wife Marilyn can visit him. She travels from Lahore once a month to visit him, but the round trip takes ten hours, sometimes for only an hour's visit with Asif. He is being held alone in a death cell and feels lonely and depressed. On 31 May 2023, an appeal hearing was adjourned to 8 June.

Asif and his wife Marilyn have three sons and a daughter. After Asif was sentenced to death, Marilyn and the children had to go into hiding for fear of extremist attacks – they had been living in Youhanabad with relatives but moved away to a more secure location.

<https://www.churchinchains.ie/prisoner-profiles/asif-pervaiz/>

SHAGUFTA KIRAN



First Information Report Number: N/A

Sections Charged: 295-A; 295-C; 298; 298-A; 109; 11 Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016

Date Arrested: 29 July 2021

Case Status: Awaiting trial

Shagufta Kiran is a Christian nurse from Islamabad, who was arrested in July 2021 for forwarding a WhatsApp message that allegedly contained blasphemous content. Since then she has been waiting in Central Jail Rawalpindi for her trial to be heard. On 14 April 2023 the Islamabad High Court rejected Shagufta's petition for bail – an application will be made to the Supreme Court. Shagufta is in solitary confinement, but is allowed to get out and walk around during the day.

Shagufta and her husband Rafique have four children: an 18-year-old daughter, and three sons between the ages of 10 and 15. Following the blasphemy charge, Rafique and the children had to flee from Islamabad because of threats and had to live in hiding for some time. They have since moved to Rawalpindi.

<https://www.churchinchains.ie/prisoner-profiles/shagufta-kiran/>

OTHER CASES OF CONCERN (CHRISTIAN)

QAISAR AYUB & AMOON AYUB

First Information Report Number: 105/11

Sections Charged: 295-A; 295-B; 295-C

Arrest Date: 10 November 2014; 17 November 2014

Location: Lahore

Case Status: Sentenced to Death; Awaiting Appeal

YAQOOB BASHIR MASIH

First Information Report Number: 41/15

Sections Charged: 295-B; 295-C

Date Arrested: 4 June 2015

Location: Mirpurkhas

Case Status: Sentenced to Life Imprisonment; Awaiting Appeal

NADEEM JAMES

First Information Report Number: 301/16

Sections Charged: 295-A; 295-C

Date Arrested: 12 July 2016

Location: Yaqoobabad

Case Status: Sentence to Death; Awaiting Appeal

SHEHZAD MASIH

First Information Report Number: 273/17

Sections Charged: 295-C

Date Arrested: 13 July 2017

Location: Dinga

Case Status: Sentenced to Death; Awaiting Appeal

SUNNY MUSHTAQ & NOMAN ASGHAR

First Information Report Number: 353/19

Sections Charged: 295-C

Arrest Date: 29 June 2019

Location: Bahawalnagar

Case Status: Awaiting Trial

ANWAR MASIH

First Information Report Number: 237/2020

Sections Charged: 295-B, 295-C

Date Arrested: 2 June 2020

Location: Lahore

Case Status: Awaiting Trial

SOHAIL MASIH

First Information Report Number: 894 /20

Sections Charged: 295-A, 295-C

Date Arrested: 5 August 2020

Location: Nowshera Virkan

Case Status: Awaiting Trial

DAVID MASIH

First Information Report Number: 460/2020

Sections Charged: 295-B

Date Arrested: 30 August 2020

Location: Nowshera

Case Status: Awaiting Trial

FANSAN SHAHID

First Information Report Number: 17/2022

Sections Charged: 295-C; 295-A; 11 Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016

Date Arrested: 16 March 2022

Location: Lahore

Case Status: Awaiting Trial

IMRAN REHMAN

First Information Report Number: N/A

Sections Charged: 295-A; 295 B; 298; 109/34; 11 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016; 6; 7; 8;; 9 of the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997

Date Arrested: 14 September 2022

Location: Lahore

Case Status: Awaiting Trial

ISHTIAQ SALEEM

First Information Report Number: 187/2022

Sections Charged: 295-A; 295-B; 295-C; 298-A; 11 Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016

Date Arrested: 29 November 2022

Location: Islamabad

Case Status: Awaiting Trial

NOMAN MASIH

First Information Report Number: 366/2019

Sections Charged: 295-C

Date Arrested: 1 July 2019

Location: Bahawalpur

Case Status: Sentenced to death 30 May 2023

CASES OF CONCERN (OTHER RELIGIONS)

JUNAID HAFEEZ

Religion: Muslim

Date Arrested: 13 March 2013

Brief Summary: Hafeez, a university lecturer, was arrested after his students accused him of insulting the Prophet Muhammad on social media.

Case Status: Sentenced to Death; Awaiting Appeal

MUHAMMAD HASHMI

Religion: Muslim (Ahmadi)

Date Arrested: 20 June 2019

Brief Summary: Hashmi was accused of sharing Ahmadi content in an online group he created. He was charged with "inciting interfaith hatred".

Case Status: Awaiting Trial

WAWHEEM ABBAS

Religion: Muslim (Shia)

Date Arrested: June 2020

Brief Summary: Abbas was arrested after he was accused of sending written letters insulting the Prophet Muhammad.

Case Status: Sentenced to Death; Awaiting Appeal

ROHAN AHMAD, HAFIZ TARIQ SHEZAD, MALIK USMAN & ZAHEER AHMAD

Religion: Muslim (Ahmadi)

Date Arrested: 2 May 2020, 29 September 2020 and 1 October 2020

Brief Summary: Rohan Ahmad was arrested on the accusation that he possessed Ahmadiyya literature. Usman and Shezad were arrested when they visited the Cybercrime Office in Lahore to try to join the investigation. Zaheer Ahmad was arrested two days later when he visited the three in prison.

TAHIR AHMAD NASEEM

Religion: Muslim (Ahmadi)

Dated Killed: 29 July 2020

Brief Summary: Naseem had been in prison on a blasphemy charge since his arrest in 2018, allegedly after claiming he was a prophet. He was shot and killed in a courtroom in Peshawar where his case was being heard.

MARUF GUL

Religion: Muslim (Sunni)

Date Arrested: 18 September 2020

Brief Summary: Authorities arrested Gul after he was accused of questioning the story of Abraham's offering to sacrifice his son Ismail to God with his Shi'a Muslim landlord. A mob reportedly attacked Gul and his family home.

SHIRAZ AHMAD

Religion: Muslim (Ahmadi)

Date Arrested: 25 February 2021

Brief Summary: Authorities arrested Ahmad after he was accused of creating a WhatsApp group and sharing Ahmadi content in it.

MANSOOR TAHIR AHMAD

Religion: Muslim (Ahmadi)

Date Arrested: 31 March 2021

Brief Summary: Authorities arrested Ahmad after he was accused of making negative comments about a religious programme.

IBTISAM MUSTAFA

Religion: Muslim

Date Arrested: July 2021

Brief Summary: Mustafa was accused of insulting the Prophet Jesus and the Prophet Muhammad by uploading a derogatory poem.

Case Status: Sentenced to life in prison; Awaiting Appeal

ASIF FAREED & ABDULLAH FAREED

Religion: N/A

Date Arrested: August 2021

Brief Summary: Authorities in Abbottabad arrested the two brothers after they were accused of burning pieces of the Qur'an and other religious literature.

QAISAR ZADA

Religion: N/A

Date Arrested: August, 2021

Brief Summary: Zada, whom reports identity as transgender, was beaten by a mob and arrested after he was accused of burning a copy of the Qur'an.

PRIYANTHA DIYAWADANA

Religion: Buddhist

Dated Killed: December 2021

Brief Summary: Diyawadana, a Sri Lankan national, was lynched by colleagues at the factory where he worked, after he was accused of desecrating posters bearing the name of Prophet Mohammed.

MUSHTAQ AHMED

Religion: Muslim

Date Killed: 12 February 2022

Brief Summary: Ahmed, said to be suffering from mental illness, was killed by a mob in Khanewal, after he was accused of burning pages of the Qu'ran.

SAFOORA BIBI

Religion: Hindu

Date Killed: 29 March 2022

Brief Summary: Bibi, a teacher at a madrassa in Dera Ismail Khan city was murdered by three of her colleagues after she was accused of blasphemy.

MUKTHAR AHMAD, SAEED AHMAD & SHAKEEL AHMAD

Religion: Muslim (Ahmadi)

Date Arrested: 10 July 2022

Brief Summary: The three men were arrested in Faisalabad for sacrificing animals on the Eid-ul-Adha holiday. They were charged with "posing as Muslim" (298-C).

ARSHAD PERVAIZ & ZAFAR ALI

Religion: Muslim (Ahmadi)

Date Arrested: 12 July 2022

Brief Summary: Father and son were arrested in Faisalabad for sacrificing animals on the Eid-ul-Adha holiday. They were charged with "posing as Muslim" (298-C).

ASHOK KUMAR

Religion: Hindu

Date Arrested: 21 August 2022

Brief Summary: Kumar, a sanitation worker, was arrested in Hyderabad after he was accused of burning a Qur'an.

"LOVE KUMAR" (pseudonym)

Religion: Hindu

Date Arrested: 22 November 2022

Brief Summary: "Love Kumar" (a young boy) reportedly went missing in November 2022. In December 2022, his family was informed that he was in jail, charged with blasphemy for a post on social media perceived as blasphemous.

MAULANA NIGAR ALAM

Religion: Muslim

Date Killed: 6 May 2023

Brief Summary: Alam, a cleric, was killed by a mob after he was accused of making a blasphemous reference during a political rally of former Prime Minister Imran Khan's party.

PAKISTAN'S BLASPHEMY LAWS

Voices calling for reform

European Parliament (Motion passed April 2021)

"Is concerned at the continued abuse of blasphemy laws in Pakistan, which is exacerbating existing religious divides and thus fomenting a climate of religious intolerance, violence and discrimination; stresses that Pakistan's blasphemy laws are incompatible with international human rights laws and are increasingly used to target vulnerable minority groups in the country, including Shias, Ahmadis, Hindus and Christians; calls, therefore, on the Government of Pakistan to review and ultimately abolish these laws and their application; calls for judges, defence counsel and defence witnesses to be protected in all so-called blasphemy cases.

"Urges Pakistan to repeal sections 295-B and C of the national Penal Code and to respect and uphold the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and expression throughout the country, effectively banishing the use of blasphemy laws; further calls on the Government of Pakistan to amend the 1997 Anti-Terrorism Act to ensure that blasphemy cases are not tried in anti-terrorism courts, and to provide opportunities for bail to be granted in alleged blasphemy cases."

Human Rights Commission of Pakistan ("A Breach of Faith" report 2023)

"The low threshold of evidence for blasphemy must be raised to ensure that the laws in question are not weaponised by people to settle personal vendettas, as is so often the case.

"In the medium term, the state should aim, at the very least, to reform the laws to lower chances of conviction, for example, by ensuring that every provision contains a clear mens rea requirement.

"While the discussion around minimising the enforcement of the death penalty is welcome, capital punishment should be abolished, including for blasphemy-related offences under S. 295-C."

UK All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief ("Freedom Declared " report 2016)

"As a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention Against Torture (CAT), the Pakistani Government should be supported in maintaining its international obligations that include protecting against violations of freedom of religion or belief and repealing punishments (including those for blasphemy convictions) that are inhuman and degrading or amount to torture.

"Members of Pakistani Ahmadiyya, Christian and Hindu communities face violations of fundamental human rights, including the right to life and the right to liberty and security. The real risk of persecution is evident from existing national and provincial laws in Pakistan, such as the blasphemy laws under Section 295-C of the Penal Code as well as from practices of law enforcement agencies and judicial officers.

"The Pakistani blasphemy laws are a vehicle for egregious violations of religious freedom and related human rights. Pakistan's continuing refusal to reform or repeal the blasphemy laws creates an environment of persistent vulnerability for minority communities, placing all members of such communities at real risk of persecution.

"All sections of law under the chapter of Pakistan's Penal Code entitled "Offences relating to Religion" that are discriminatory or undermine fundamental rights or principles of due process and fair trial should be repealed."

PAKISTAN'S BLASPHEMY LAWS

Voices calling for reform

Micheál Martin (Minister for Foreign Affairs) (Reply to Dáil Question April 2023)

Ireland consistently engages with Pakistan on human rights, both bilaterally and multilaterally. Mostly recently, in January 2023, Ireland made an intervention on blasphemy legislation during Pakistan's Universal Periodic Review at the 42nd Session of the UN Human Rights Council. We recommended that Pakistan amend blasphemy legislation to avoid unjustly targeting or discriminating against any religious minority. We also recommended that Pakistan establish an independent inquiry into all suspected cases of enforced disappearance, and hold alleged perpetrators to account. Ireland will continue to support Pakistan's efforts to advance human rights through this UN Human Rights Council mechanism, acknowledging progress where appropriate.

The Embassy of Ireland in Türkiye, which is accredited to Pakistan, actively monitors the human rights situation in Pakistan, in close consultation with the EU Delegation in Islamabad. Our Ambassador to Pakistan visited Islamabad in November 2022 and discussed human rights issues with a number of Pakistani governmental officials. Earlier, in February 2021, she also met with Pakistan's then Federal Minister for Human Rights, Ms Shireen Mazari.

At an EU level, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Mr Eamon Gilmore met with Minister Mazari in February 2022, as part of a visit to reaffirm the centrality of human rights in the EU-Pakistani relationship. At the EU-Pakistan Joint Commission in October 2022, both sides discussed civil and political rights.

Ireland will continue to engage on human rights issues with Pakistan bilaterally, in multilateral settings and as a member of the EU. We contribute actively to the development of EU policies towards Pakistan and remain engaged on the human rights situation there, reflecting the fact that the promotion and protection of universal human rights is a cornerstone of Irish foreign policy.

Simon Coveney (Minister for Foreign Affairs) (Reply to Dáil Question Sept 2021)

Ireland has consistently condemned all forms of persecution on the basis of religion or belief, irrespective of where they occur or who the victims are. The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is guaranteed by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which has been ratified by Pakistan. I am concerned by reports regarding the position of religious minority groups in Pakistan and alleged misuse of blasphemy laws.

Ireland actively engages with Pakistan on human rights issues both bilaterally and multilaterally through EU and UN channels. In the context of our bilateral relationship Ambassador Sonya McGuinness met with Pakistan's Federal Minister for Human Rights, Shireen Mazari, earlier this year to discuss human rights challenges in Pakistan, including freedom of religion.

EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Mr. Eamon Gilmore also met with Minister Mazari, as part of ongoing EU-Pakistan human rights dialogue in the context of the EU's Strategic Engagement Plan with Pakistan which aims at strengthening cooperation in many areas, including to "enhance intercultural and inter-faith dialogue and understanding to promote tolerance and harmony".

Most recently, at the EU-Pakistan Joint Commission in June 2021, the EU raised its concerns specifically about the abuse of blasphemy laws by certain groups. Ireland participates actively in EU dialogues with Pakistan.

PAKISTAN'S BLASPHEMY LAWS

Voices calling for reform at United Nations Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review 42 (January 2023)

Summary of stakeholders' submissions on Pakistan Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS)

Recommended to repeal and replace current blasphemy laws (Sections 295 to 298 of the Pakistan Penal Code) with provisions in conformity with Pakistan's Constitution and the international human rights law instruments to which Pakistan is a party.

The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ)

Urged the Government [of Pakistan] to provide due process of law and protection of fundamental rights, including life and liberty, to all, especially the vulnerable groups such as women and minorities. Further, the Government of Pakistan must take measures to stop the abuse of blasphemy laws.

Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF)

Recommended to repeal all anti-blasphemy laws, and ensure that the State's domestic laws, policies and practices comply with the international human rights covenants, in particular articles 2, 18, 19 and 26 of the ICCPR.

Selected country contributions

USA

"United States welcomes the delegation from Pakistan. We support Pakistan's dedication to democratic processes and encourage Pakistan to comply with its obligations under international human rights law. In the spirit of constructive engagement we recommend that Pakistan repeal or amend blasphemy laws and end other discriminatory laws used against members of the Ahmadi Muslim community and members of other religious minority communities and the extra-legal use of force as well as use of enforced disappearances especially against journalists."

GERMANY

"Germany welcomes the delegation of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. However, Germany remains deeply concerned about the blasphemy legislation in Pakistan, its increasing application and impunity for false blasphemy accusations. Germany therefore recommends to apply and implement effectively existing legislative protections against blasphemy laws."

IRELAND

"Ireland welcomes the delegation of Pakistan. Ireland acknowledges Pakistan's efforts to advance human rights domestically and notes progress made since the last UPR cycle. Ireland is concerned however about Pakistan's compliance with its human rights obligations with regard to freedom of religion or belief and the rights of persons belonging to minorities. Ireland recommends Pakistan amend blasphemy legislation to avoid unjustly targeting or discriminating against religious minorities."

PAKISTAN'S BLASPHEMY LAWS

Recommendations for reform

1. Ensure that false accusations (often made to settle personal scores) are penalised. (Oireachtas Petition)
2. Ensure that cases are dealt with speedily rather than the present situation where blasphemy law cases are adjourned repeatedly, prolonging the suffering of those accused. (Oireachtas Petition)
3. Replace current blasphemy laws with provisions in conformity with Pakistan's Constitution and the international human rights law instruments to which Pakistan is a party.
(CLAAS submission to UPR 42)
4. Amend blasphemy legislation to avoid unjustly targeting or discriminating against religious minorities.
(Ireland's contribution to UPR 42)
5. In advance of reform, expedite the legal cases involving Christian prisoners Zafar Bhatti, Asfaq Masih, Asif Pervaiz and Shagufta Kiran.
(Church in Chains)