

# Killing over blasphemy law deepens misery of Pakistani Christians

Outspoken politician is the second assassinated since January

By Omar Waraich in Islamabad

Thursday, 3 March 2011

Pakistan was reeling last night from the second assassination in as many months of a high-profile politician who spoke out against the country's draconian blasphemy laws that impose the death penalty for insulting Islam.

Gunmen ambushed Shahbaz Bhatti, the only Christian government minister, outside his mother's home in Islamabad and sprayed his car with at least 10 bullets, killing him instantly. The assassination was chillingly similar in execution to that of Salmaan Taseer, the Governor of Punjab, who was slain by his own bodyguard in January.

The assassination was claimed by "the al-Qa'ida organisation and the Punjabi Taliban". Before speeding away, the killers left behind pamphlets boasting of their act. "The only punishment for blasphemy against the Prophet is death," the pamphlet in Urdu said.

## Related articles

- [Andrew Buncombe: Those who dare to speak out become a shooting target](#)
- [Leading article: A nation on the verge of democratic collapse](#)
- [Progress on reform made a condition of aid increase](#)
- [Andreas Whittam Smith: Wholesale privatisation is not what people voted for](#)
- [Search the news archive for more stories](#)

"A white car stopped near us at a crossing," Mr Bhatti's driver Gul Sher, who was slightly injured, told reporters. "Four people were sitting in the car. One of them got out with a Kalashnikov... He came in front of the car and opened fire. I ducked. Minister died on the spot."

The killing has plunged Pakistan's long-suffering minorities into deeper despair, yet again raising the question of whether they can afford to continue living in the country. Mr Bhatti and Mr Taseer's attempts to review the draconian blasphemy laws, which have been responsible for persecuting minorities, were cast as an act of blasphemy.

Mr Bhatti, the Minorities Minister, had been receiving threats from militant groups for some time. In a video broadcast on the BBC and Al Jazeera before his death, he said: "The forces of violence, militant banned organisations, the Taliban and al-Qa'ida, want to impose the radical philosophy in Pakistan. Whoever stands against their radical philosophy, they threaten them."

Pakistan's Christians came on to the streets. "We've been attacked many, many times in our history," said Shimon Gill, a member of the All Pakistan Minority Alliance. "But now we have been orphaned. Who will speak up for us now?" In Mr Bhatti's village, Christians torched tyres, beat their chest in protest and denounced the killers.

Mr Bhatti had no guards to protect him. The Pakistan government claims that after Mr Taseer's assassination by a member of the police team supposed to be guarding him, Mr Bhatti had refused to have bodyguards. But Mr Bhatti's associates said that he was denied the security he asked for, and was not provided with a bulletproof vehicle.

Threats against Mr Bhatti escalated after he joined Mr Taseer and liberal parliamentarian Sherry Rehman in calling for a review of blasphemy laws. The three politicians were among the few prepared to call attention to the fate of Aasia Noreen, a 45-year-old Christian farmhand sentenced to death for alleged blasphemy. Her supporters dismissed the allegations and said charge stemmed from a falling out with a village elder.

Mr Bhatti, a Roman Catholic member of the ruling Pakistan People's Party, told friends he was prepared to die in pursuit of rights for his community. "These threats... cannot change my opinion and principles," he said. "I would prefer to die for my principles, and for the justice of my community, rather than compromise on these threats."

Human rights groups said the assassination laid bare the government's policy of appeasement towards extremists.

Since Mr Taseer's assassination, the religious right has gone from strength to strength, mounting huge demonstrations in support of blasphemy laws and exalting his assassin. In recent weeks, they have added to their cause demands that Raymond Davis, a CIA contractor who killed two Pakistani men in Lahore last month, be hanged. Washington is demanding Mr Davis be released.

[Sponsored Links](#)

[Ads by Google](#)

[TESOL Courses in Canada](#)



AFP/GETTY IMAGES

*Christians vent their anger over the politician's assassination*

Teach English abroad. Courses  
Across Canada. Job placement.  
[www.oxfordseminars.ca](http://www.oxfordseminars.ca)

**Teach English**

Teach in Canada and abroad!  
Full employment assistance  
[www.studytesl.com](http://www.studytesl.com)

**Ethical Volunteering**

Affordable community & conservation  
volunteer placements worldwide  
[www.globalteer.org](http://www.globalteer.org)

**Hotel Reservations @ 65%**

Motels, Hotels & Lodging Deals  
Hotel Reservations: 1-800-741-5072  
[www.HotelReservations.com](http://www.HotelReservations.com)

---

©independent.co.uk