

Christian Legislator in Pakistan Stuck with Muslim ID

Pakistan's rigid system of prohibiting Muslims from changing their religion status on their national ID cards nearly cost a Punjab politician his post—even though he has always been a Christian.

Rana Asif Mahmood's political opponents in April sought to disqualify him from the Punjab Provincial Assembly seat reserved for minorities on grounds that the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) identified him as a Muslim.

Mahmood said that NADRA had mistakenly identified him as a Muslim because of his name and then refused to rectify the error. The mistake not only cost Mahmood a cabinet position but also his part in proposing the provincial budget for 2012-13, he said.

The law establishing NADRA prohibits Muslims from changing the religion column on their Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC), though non-Muslims can easily obtain such changes—especially if they are converting to Islam.

"The situation was revealed to me when my son applied for a CNIC a few months ago," Mahmood said. "He was told that he could not put down Christianity as his religion because the records showed his father to be a Muslim."

When he approached NADRA officials for corrections, Mahmood said, they told him that there was no provision for changing the religion entry. He said that his passport identified him as a Christian, and that twice he had his religion section corrected on his passport because of the NADRA error of listing him as a Muslim.

Mahmood's political opponents filed a petition seeking his

removal from one of the seats reserved for minorities based on the error. Opposition parties accepted Mahmood's clarification only after he vehemently stated on the floor of the Punjab Assembly that he was born a Christian and appealed to them and the media not to indulge in propaganda against him that could incite Muslim extremists to kill him.

A NADRA official who requested anonymity said that while a person could get their religion changed in ID records from a religion other than Islam to another, the same could not be done if the person wanted to change their religion away from Islam.

"My understanding of the matter is that if stated by the person himself that he/she is a Muslim, the religion cannot be changed," he said.

At the same time, he added that if the CNIC recipient provided evidence of religion and established that there had been a clerical error, the request would be entertained.

"But a clerical error is highly unlikely," he said. "Data is cross-checked several times in cases of identity card entries."

He said that once a person applied for a CNIC and his personal information was recorded, they were sent a form for attestation, and that at that stage the applicant could report any errors.

That is precisely what Mahmood did, to no effect.

"I noticed the error in the entry for religion in my attestation form and reported it to NADRA. After some days I received my CNIC and it did not mention religion, so I assumed that NADRA had changed its records," Mahmood said.

Problems can be even more severe for converts such as Muhammad Kamran. After a pelvic injury he received from a beating by

unidentified men for converting to Christianity from Islam, the 34-year-old Kamran has not been able to obtain medical treatment because of his name.

A human rights activist criticized NADRA's policy.

"It is unfortunate and a violation of human rights," he said on condition of anonymity. "The policy appears to be a reflection of customs prohibiting Muslims from changing their religion, but it is still a violation of a person's basic human rights."