

Injured Convert in Pakistan Tries to Rebuild Life

Muhammad Kamran isn't sure who sent the men to beat him after his Muslim wife told both her family and his that he had become a Christian.

The 34-year-old native of Karachi said his wife's brothers had begun coming to his office to threaten him before unidentified assailants attacked him as he was returning home two years ago.

"I don't know who sent those men," Kamran said. "It could have been my family or hers. They beat me up mercilessly, the effects of which I'm suffering even today. My pelvic area and groin were badly injured by their kicks and punches, and still today I'm suffering from pain."

Two years later, he still has a pelvis injury from the beating that requires treatment. But even help from a local politician has not been able to procure medical treatment funding for a convert from Islam in Pakistan's current religious climate.

"The biggest hurdle I'm facing is his name," said the politician, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "Being a minorities leader, I can only recommend government funds for people belonging to minority communities, but seeking money for a man with Muhammad in his name and 'Christian' in the religion column of an official form is a recipe for disaster, and frankly the situation in Pakistan is not such where anyone will be willing to take such a big risk."

Raised in an ultra-conservative Muslim family, Kamran was baptized in September 2009 and began his life as a covert Christian, though he continued to openly question Islam.

"In 2010, my family started trying to force me to marry,

hoping that marriage would keep me from questioning 'the faith of my forefathers,'" he said. "I gave in to their constant prodding and was married to a girl from a Sunni Syed family."

At first he had hoped that he would be able to bring his wife to Christianity, he said.

"After some days of our wedding, I shared my faith with her and was delighted when she told me that she would stand by me," he said. "But my hope was dashed the very next day, when she told both of our families that I had turned away from Islam and had become a '*murtad*' [apostate deserving death]."

Kamran said his wife's revelation angered both families.

"Every other day, I was threatened either by my family or hers that if I ever renounce Islam I would be killed, and that I should mend my ways," he said.

Quarrels with his wife over religion became commonplace, he added.

"After a couple of months of continuous fights, I asked my wife to leave me if she could not live with someone who was having a conflict with faith," he said. "She refused, and instead told both families that I wanted a divorce."

Kamran said the dilemma quickly reached a crisis point.

"No one was willing to let me live the life I wanted—they say Islam is not a religion of compulsion, but no one has been able to tell me why Muslims who don't find satisfaction in the religion become liable to be killed."

After the torturous beating, Kamran said, he decided he would no longer remain in Karachi. He told the pastor who baptized him, whose name is withheld for security reasons, that his predicament had become unbearable. The pastor arranged a visitor's visa to Dubai for him. Upon reaching Dubai, he contacted his family and told them that he would not be

returning to Pakistan.

“In the next few days, my wife’s family sent me divorce papers, to which I readily agreed, and hence my marriage ended after nearly four months,” Kamran said.

After the expiration of his one-month visa, however, Kamran returned to Karachi.

“The kind pastor sent me to another pastor in Faisalabad, in Punjab Province,” he said. “He said that it would be safer for me to stay out of Karachi for some time because news of my conversion might put the community at risk.”

Kamran returned to Karachi in 2011.

“After some months, the pastor married me to a Christian woman,” he said. “For a few months everything went fine, and we were living a very peaceful life, but one day a cousin of mine saw us in a market and followed us to our home. He then informed my family that I was in Karachi and had a Christian wife. My father came to my house and demanded that I leave my wife and return home, but I refused. He made a lot of hue and cry and cursed me for ‘bringing disgrace to the family.’”

As soon as Kamran’s father left, the couple gathered their belongings and moved, Kamran said.

His family members found out where his wife worked, however, and have been threatening them ever since, he said. Kamran and his wife Asha, now eight months pregnant, have changed residences four times to avoid his family.

His wife told Compass they are living in constant fear.

“Every other day, we receive threatening phone calls,” she said. “They just won’t leave us alone. A few days ago Kamran’s family came to know that I was expecting our first child. They are now asking him to abandon us and renounce Christianity, threatening that they will kill me and our child.”

Identity Issue

Unable to work because of his injured pelvis, Kamran said the couple is unable to make ends meet on his wife's pay as a teacher.

"She cannot change her workplace because it's very difficult to find a decent job, but she is trying nevertheless," he said. "The other big problem I am facing is my medical treatment. We don't have the finances to get my operation done from a good hospital which will enable me to start sharing the financial burden with my wife."

Another major issue Kamran and other converts from Islam face in Pakistan is a new computerized national identity card.

"I want to change my name and amend the religion column in my record, but the National Database and Registration Authority has set the system in such a way that no Muslim can amend the religion column," he said. "I want to be identified as a Christian, but there's nothing I can do about it but lament the fact that I was born a Muslim!"

Path to Faith

Born into family belonging to the Ahle Sunnat Bareilvi sect of Islam, Kamran said he began to see his religion as "based on worshipping of graves and seeking forgiveness for our sins from the dead."

"My family is very religious and strongly believes in shrines and saints as a means to seek Allah's mercy and blessings," he said. "Even though I was brought up in such an environment, I could not help questioning the fundamentals of Islam, where people have to approach God through dead people."

The youngest among four siblings—he has two sisters and a brother—Kamran's urge to calm the spiritual battle within him led him to some Christian acquaintances "who were seemingly very much satisfied with their faith."

He asked Christian colleagues and friends at a bank where he worked about the Christian way of life.

“They told me how they worshiped God, sang hymns in His praise and, most importantly, how Christianity was based around the principle of love for one another,” he said. “Although I knew about Jesus Christ as a revered prophet in Islam, their depiction of Him developed a thirst in me to know Him better.”

Kamran asked a Christian friend to take him to church, and he took him to a Tuesday service, where not many people were present.

“The satisfaction and peace that I felt in my heart listening to the hymns and the **Scripture** and just being in that environment was overwhelming,” he said. “My spiritual experience was so good that I started attending the Tuesday service at the church regularly. I would take off early from the bank, and would go to church before heading home. One day a relative saw me entering the church, and that is when my period of tribulation began.”

When he returned home that day, his father and older brother confronted him, he said.

“I did not deny it and instead asked them why they wanted me to worship graves,” Kamran said. “Instead of answering me, both of them pounced on me and started beating me up. ‘The devil’s gotten into him,’ my father said as he kicked and slapped me ... I was warned not to go near a church again and was told that they would kill my Christian associates if I was seen in their company in future.”

Kamran still longed to know more about Christ, however, and after some time he resumed his trips to the church, managing to evade his family’s surveillance.

“I exercised extreme caution, which led my family to believe that their beating had ‘poured some sense into me,’” he said.

Kamran's pastor said he has shown exceptional resolve in his faith in Christ despite the hardships.

"I have been in regular contact with Kamran from the day he professed his interest in Christianity," he said. "I find it very encouraging to see how he has suffered at the hands of his family, yet he has not once regretted his decision of accepting Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior."