

Pakistani Christians Angered by 'Sweeper' Comment

Pakistani Christians have been angered by a statement by the chief minister of the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that only "non-Muslims will be recruited as sweepers."

The province, known for short as KPK, borders Afghanistan. Its chief minister, Pervez Khattak, who is in former international cricketer Imran Khan's party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI), says that he was quoted out of context and misinterpreted.

Khattak denied that he intended anything derogatory. He said he was only responding to minorities' concerns over access to jobs they have traditionally taken now being denied by applicants who claim that as Muslims they cannot do "unclean" jobs anyway.

Nevertheless, the Christians' anger (sparked when a local Urdu channel, Capital TV, reported the statement) went viral and has hit national headlines because it highlights long-entrenched discriminatory practices rooted in the Indian subcontinent's history and still faced by Pakistan's Christians and low-caste Hindus.

Christians took Khattak's remark to be deeply offensive, with many saying that it showed the "true" stance of PTI, whose election slogan in May was "Justice, Humanity and Self-Esteem."

Khattak is PTI's first-ever provincial chief minister. In May, PTI surprisingly won the militancy-hit northwestern KPK and now runs its first coalition government there.

Christians are the main minority in Pakistan, although a small number of Hindus and Sikhs also live there. Hence, Christians took the chief minister's statement as a direct reference to

them, although others add that non-Pashtun ethnic groups, such as Persian-speaking Hazaras, might also have been implicated.

As the Christian community took offense, the opposition Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader Napoleon Qayyum on July 11 filed a petition for an apology in the Lahore high court. The petitioner made Khattak and the two Capital TV talk-show hosts parties to the "offensive statement."

Albert David, chairman of the Pakistan United Christian Movement, asks how Khattak could say that Muslims are not eligible for sweepers' jobs and that only members of the minority communities could perform this task.

"Whatever the context, it is very insensitive to say that the jobs of sweeping would only be given to minorities," he says.

Article 27 (1) of the Constitution of Pakistan says, "No citizen otherwise qualified for appointment in the service of Pakistan shall be discriminated against in respect of any such appointment on the ground only of race, religion, caste, sex, residence or place of birth."