

Suicide Bombings Spark Renewed Debate Over Blasphemy Laws

The Sept. 22 suicide bombings of a church in Pakistan have reignited political debate on the country's controversial blasphemy laws.

Only three days before the incident, the Council for Islamic Ideology, the top clerical body in officially Islamic Pakistan, said the law should be amended to prevent its misuse. The day after the bombings, however, the council said existing laws are sufficient to deal with misuse.

Now a leading politician has come out with a clear message that there is a need to review them.

The **Pakistan** Tehreek-e-Insaf party, or PTI, leads the provincial government of Khyber, of which Peshawar is capital. Discussing the church bombings in the National Assembly on Tuesday, Sept. 24, PTI national President Javed Hashmi said he had first opposed the blasphemy laws when they were introduced by President Zia in the 1980s. He said "The blasphemy law is wrong ... and contrary to Islam," and "there is still opportunity" to rectify the situation."

No member of Parliament who depends on the popular vote has dared to speak against blasphemy laws like this before. He was supported by three other PTI MPs: Shireen Mazari, Arif Alvi and Lal Chand Mali.

Pakistan's leading *Dawn* newspaper noted Hashmi's stance: "This was the first public opposition from a right-wing party to the Zia-era law, which prescribes the death penalty for blasphemy and which has often been allegedly misused against members of the Christian community."

In the past, politicians either lost their lives or had to withdraw from the public arena after opposing these laws. In January 2011, the governor of Punjab province, Salmaan Taseer, was killed by his own security guard for calling the laws “black laws” and supporting a Christian woman, Aasiya Bibi, convicted for insulting the Prophet and given the death penalty in November 2010. In March 2011, federal minister for Minorities Shahbaz Bhatti, the only Christian in the Cabinet, was killed for seeking reform in the **blasphemy laws**.

Similarly, Sherry Rehman, a former lawmaker and later Pakistan’s ambassador to the U.S., had to go into hiding after tabling a bill in the National Assembly that sought to reduce the death penalty to 10 years’ imprisonment. She received death threats and in February a criminal case was lodged against her in connection with a 2010 TV talk show.

Bhatti and Rehman were selected by Benazir Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s Party, or PPP, for “reserved seats.” Taseer was appointed Governor by former PPP President Zardari, Bhutto’s widower. None of these critics of the blasphemy laws needed to go to the public for votes.

The PPP’s 2008 platform pledged that “[t]he statutes that discriminate against religious minorities, and are sources of communal disharmony, will be reviewed.” Though it held power from February 2008 to May 2013, the PPP never discussed the blasphemy laws in Parliament.

The PTI, politically to the right of PPP, gained a legislative majority in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in May. PTI chief Imran Khan is a strong advocate of talks with the Pakistan Taliban.

His party already had very little popularity among Pakistan’s religious minorities but the church bombings in Peshawar have further driven a wedge between them and PTI. Pastor Asif John, from the city of Quetta, Balochistan, and a member of PTI’s Provincial Political Strategy Committee, said he was resigning

from his position.

“Mr. Khan lacks prudent insight into Pakistan’s religious minorities and does not know how to deal with the menace of terrorism,” John said. “Hashmi’s view on the blasphemy laws is his own, and this card is only played at this time to appease the Christian community who completely distrust the PTI.”

However, Mazari, another PTI member of parliament and supporter of Hashmi in the National Assembly, told World Watch Monitor that “Mr. Khan had several times re-iterated that the PTI is against the misuse of the blasphemy laws.

“There are several loopholes in the law that need to be rectified, so that the innocent are not victimized and the law is not abused,” Mazari said. But she didn’t provide any time frame for introducing a bill in the Assembly to close the loopholes.

Just days before the Peshawar bombings, on Sept. 19, the Council of Islamic Ideology, which advises the National Assembly on laws that are “repugnant to Islam,” signaled its favor of an amendment.

“All the religious scholars agreed to put an end to the misuse of blasphemy laws,” said council member Allama Tahir Ashrafi, according to Agence France-Presse. “[T]he Council of Ideology has decided to fix the same penalty for the person who falsely accuses of blasphemy as the accused”. For this, and for its decision to allow the use of DNA evidence to prosecute rape cases, the council received praise from several quarters, including the Pakistan Association of Mental Health.

Days later, on Sept. 23, after the church bombing but before Hashmi’s speech in the National Assembly, Council Chairman Maulana Sherani declared there was no need to amend the law.

“The Pakistan Penal Code already has sections which deal with sentences for those who misuse any law,” he said.

Sources with knowledge of council workings told World Watch Monitor, on terms of anonymity, that the members opposing changes to the law are those who travel “internationally for inter-faith harmony, but keep a rather stricter stance inside the Council.”

The council has similarly maneuvered in the past. It recommended amendments to the blasphemy laws as early as 2001, but was ignored by Parliament.

Pakistan’s blasphemy laws were thrust into the international limelight in November 2010, when Aasiya Noreen, more widely known as Aasiya Bibi, was sentenced to death for insulting Islam. The Council of Islamic Ideology again made recommendations for a few amendments. However, vociferous protests opposing any weakening of the blasphemy laws, and the assassinations of Taseer and Bhatti in 2011 totally ended the public debate on the laws. The governing PPP refrained from publicly denouncing the assassinations.

After Pakistan’s national elections in May of this year, the Council of Islamic Ideology said minorities would be unsafe if the blasphemy laws were amended.

Council member Ashrafi, who also is chairman of the Pakistan Ulema Council, told World Watch Monitor the government’s Religious Affairs Ministry had sought, and received, the ideology council’s opinion on amendment in the blasphemy laws. He would not reveal the opinion.

He did say, however, that while no one wants to touch the blasphemy laws themselves, there is general acknowledgment that the misuse of the law should be prevented.

“I personally believe that procedural change should be introduced that could prevent its misuse,” Ashrafi said. “The blasphemy law is an internal matter of Pakistan and it should be resolved without any external pressure.”