

Pakistani religious minorities criticize recent government initiative

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Bangalore, India, July 6 (ENInews)--Christians and other minority leaders in Pakistan have spoken out against the government's move to relegate issues regarding religious minorities to provincial governments in the Muslim-majority nation, instead of dealing with them on a national level.

"This is obviously a major setback to Christians and other religious minorities," said the Rev Maqsood Kamil, spokesperson for the Presbyterian Church of Pakistan (PCP). Kamil was reacting to the government's approval on 28 June to place seven federal ministries, including the Ministry for Religious Minorities, under the control of provincial governments. The move is in accordance with the 18th Amendment to Pakistan's constitution, passed in April.

Pakistan is divided into five provinces with elected provincial governments enjoying limited autonomy.

"Now the concerns of the minorities will be dealt at the provincial level only. It is sad that we will lose our voice at the national level," said Kamil.

"The presence of Christians at the federal level is crucial, as they face continual injustice, prejudice, and discrimination inscribed in legislation," said Julius Salik of the World Minorities Alliance in statement decrying the move. A Christian member of the Pakistani National Assembly, Salik pointed out that concerns of religious minorities "are national issues that bear no relation to provincial autonomy."

Besides Christians, minority groups such as Hindis and Ahmadis have also criticized the decision, pointing out that it would deny a voice to the already marginalized minorities in Pakistan, where nearly 95 percent of the country's 180 million people are Muslim.

"This is extremely harmful to minorities which are already suffering," said Arjun Daas, chairman of the Pakistan Meghwar Council, according to a release from the Union of Catholic Asian News.

Pakistan's Ministry for Religious Minorities was created in 2008 by the newly elected federal government, led by the Pakistan People's Party. It was entrusted to outspoken Catholic Shabaz Bhatti, who was assassinated on 2 March for protesting against the blasphemy law.