

Pakistan Christians riot after churches bombed

by [Taha Siddiqui](#) in the [April 15, 2015](#) issue

*(The Christian Science Monitor)* An unprecedented set of riots by Christians in Pakistan following suicide bombings in two churches shows that religious minorities here are increasingly fearful of being targeted in the majority Sunni Muslim nation.

Christians clashed with police and vandalized property after Taliban militants attacked Catholic and Protestant churches in Lahore on March 15, with at least 15 congregants killed and dozens wounded.

The bombings took place in one of the largest Christian neighborhoods in Pakistan, known as Youhanabad, which has nearly 100,000 residents. Lahore itself is the home of Pakistan prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

While the Christian protests started peacefully and included children, they turned angry and ugly. Christians took to the streets in a number of cities, and in Lahore three people were killed. A Muslim wrongly accused of helping the suicide bombers was subsequently lynched that day. The following day, two Christians were run over by car, according to police.

The Taliban appear to be using religious minorities as “soft targets” in Pakistan—on the assumption that attacks on Christians and Shi’ite Muslims will win them sympathy with a local audience here that has been steadily radicalized over a number of years.

“The religious minorities in Pakistan feel disconnected when it comes to government policies,” said Peter Jacob, director of the Center for Social Justice, a minority-rights NGO in Lahore. “And if such gaps are not addressed, there will be further polarization in a society that is already so intolerant toward religious minorities.”

Jacob, who grew up in a Christian household, does not condone rioting, though he can see how it arises, especially in youths from minority groups.

They are “frustrated with government’s lack of protection for their community,” he said. “There is an utter sense of deprivation among the Christian community and

other such religious minorities.”

Human rights activists say the government should introduce reforms that improve relations between different parts of society. Studies show numerous forms of discrimination in areas ranging from school curricula to the media to the law.

Christians make up 2 percent of Pakistan’s population, which is 95 percent Muslim. Less than 15 percent of those Muslims are Shi’ites, and they resent what they often say is second-class status.

Analysts describe minorities as an alternative target by the Pakistani variant of the Taliban. The Pakistani Taliban’s high-profile assault on an army school in Peshawar in December left nearly 150 students and teachers dead. Following a national outcry over the killings, the Pakistan government vowed to crack down and unveiled a national action and counterterrorism plan.

The Taliban’s response has been to assault four Shi’ite mosques and now two churches, apparently with the calculation that such attacks would be met with little significant pushback.

“The government does not come under the same pressure from the public, media, and the civil society as it does when mainstream Pakistanis are attacked,” said Rabia Mehmood, a researcher at the Islamabad-based Jinnah Institute.

Mehmood, who has worked extensively on minority rights and is compiling a report on the topic, believes that since the pressure is not there, the government response is weak.

“Also, attacking minorities only ensures that terrorist groups like the Pakistani Taliban do not lose their appeal within the larger Muslim Sunni society, especially the religious extremist groups from where they find recruits,” she said.