

Pakistan's Christians targeted in attacks, marginalized in society

by [Michael Holtz](#); added sources in the [April 27, 2016](#) issue

[\(The Christian Science Monitor\)](#) The suicide bombing on Easter Sunday at a park in Lahore, Pakistan, along with comments attributed to the militant Muslim group that claimed to have carried it out, underscored the precarious position of Pakistan's Christians.

Ehsanullah Ehsan, spokesman for Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, a breakaway Taliban faction in Pakistan, said the attack specifically targeted Christians.

"It's our message to the government that we will carry out such attacks again until Shari'a law is imposed in the country," he told the *Washington Post*.

The nation observed three days of mourning for the dozens killed and hundreds injured in the attack, including children who were at the park with their families, according to news reports.

Eric Sarwar, a pastor in the Presbyterian Church of Pakistan who is currently a doctoral student in the United States, noted that the attack in Lahore killed both Christians and Muslims.

"But the response of the city's residents is remarkable," he wrote. "Militant Muslims were mutilating Christians, but moderate Muslims are donating blood."

Peter Jacob, who heads the Center for Social Justice, a Christian rights activist group, lives in Lahore, and members of his community died in the attack.

"This is once again a reminder to Christians of their insecure existence and uncertain future in Pakistan," he said.

Among Pakistan's majority Muslim population of 190 million, Christians are the second-largest minority group after Hindus. Earlier in March, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif officially recognized Easter as a holiday along with the Hindu festival of Holi. Sharif's opponents see him as liberal and pro-Western.

There are disagreements about how many Christians are in Pakistan. Officially, they make up about 1.6 percent of the total population—or more than 2 million people—but critics argue that the government deliberately undercounts their numbers. Some say Christians make up closer to 5 percent of the population.

Most Christians in Pakistan are the descendants of low-caste Hindus who had converted during the years of British rule, in part to escape the caste system.

Even today the majority of Christians remain in the most marginalized sector of society. While some have risen to become government officials or run businesses, the poorest work as toilet cleaners and street sweepers. Entire villages in parts of Punjab are made up of Christian laborers and farmhands.

Before partition with India in 1947, Pakistan was more multiethnic, with minorities making up 15 percent of the population. Many Christians supported the creation of a Muslim-majority Pakistan. Then the mass migration of people after 1947 and the split with Bangladesh in 1971 led many non-Muslims to leave the country.

“The period between 1947 and 1977 was one of peace for Christians,” wrote Sarwar in a commentary for Religion News Service. “But during the military regime of Zia-ul-Haq from 1978 to 1988, the powerful Islamic extremists and religious-political parties imposed blasphemy laws on minorities.”

Today, many of the attacks on Christians in Pakistan are related to those blasphemy laws. Accusations of blasphemy have led to mob violence against Christians.

The attack on Easter occurred as people held demonstrations in other parts of the country to protest the execution in February of a man who murdered a secular politician five years ago. The murdered politician was Salman Taseer, who campaigned against the blasphemy laws.

“Pakistani civilian leadership needs to realize that it needs to strengthen democratic values if it wants a pluralist Pakistan,” said Ijaz Khan, a professor at Peshawar University.

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