



4.1.16

PAKISTAN | Government Leaves Blasphemy Laws Unchanged

Pakistan's government succumbed to seven out of 10 demands made by Mumtaz Qadri supporters, who have been protesting outside government buildings in Islamabad, including demands not to amend the country's blasphemy laws.

Mumtaz Qadri was executed Feb. 29. On Jan. 4, 2011 he shot dead the former governor of Punjab Province, Salman Taseer, an outspoken critic of the blasphemy laws who campaigned on behalf of Asiya Bibi, a Pakistani Christian woman currently on death row following a blasphemy conviction.

His supporters staged a sit-in in the D-Chowk Red Zone, a high security area where Parliament House and key government buildings are located in Islamabad, violating a district magistrate's notice to disperse by March 30. Since the protests, which began March 27, there has been a media blackout in Islamabad, as well as the suspension of mobile phone networks and bus services.

On March 30, and in exchange for an assurance that protestors would disperse, government officials agreed to seven of their 10 demands, including the release of those arrested during the sit-in, that no amendments be made to Article 295 A, B and C of Pakistan's blasphemy laws; and to show no leniency to anyone convicted of blasphemy. Civil society in Pakistan is shocked by the government's willingness to bow to the pressure applied by the protestors. This is seen as legitimizing the influence they wield.

Amjad Nazeer, Director of Institute of Development Research and Corresponding Capabilities, told Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), "Every single demand was and is lethal, immediately and in the longer term, to the diversity and plurality of the country. Such demands might eventually end up having a theocratic state of Pakistan."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "After the tragedy of the Lahore bomb attack the

government of Pakistan should be resolute in protecting religious minorities. These concessions highlight the government's inability to withstand pressure from hardliners and raises questions about its commitment to guarantee the rights of all Pakistani citizens, including religious minorities. Religious minorities are already vulnerable and subject to multiple threats, from the use and misuse of blasphemy laws to the promotion of hate speech and discrimination towards them. This regressive step is a betrayal to victims of the recent bomb blast and undermines the commitment by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to eliminate the extremist mindset.”