

# **PAKISTAN: Minorities denounce government for rebuffing 'Prohibition of Forced Conversion Bill'**

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**18 October 2021: Religious minorities in Pakistan criticised Prime Minister Imran Khan's government for rejecting the proposed 'Prohibition of Forced Conversion Bill.' The bill provides protection to Hindu and Christian minor girls from kidnapping, forced conversion and forced marriages. The bill proposed the age of conversion to Islam should be 18 years. It also criminalised the act of forced conversion by awarding a punishment to be 5 to 10 years imprisonment and a fine of Rs.1 to 2 lakh (US\$584 to 1168).**

On 13 October, Federal Minister for Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony Sahibzada Noor-ul-Haq Qadri strongly opposed the act. Therefore, the bill was rejected by the majority members of the committee on the grounds that it was "un-Islamic, against public interest and a controversial bill." According to Senator Maulvi Faiz Mohammad, 18 years of minimum age for conversion is unacceptable. According to Muslim religious leaders, a person, even a minor one, can convert to Islam at any age. The chair of the committee, Senator Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar, did not deny the fact of the problem, but argued that "the problem is not religious but mainly financial and social."

A couple of Hindu and Christian legislators presented minorities' concerns during the meeting. After the meeting, Lal Chand Malhi, a Hindu lawmaker of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI, the ruling party), said that the conservative mind-set of some PTI members is a barrier to the bill. According to daily Dawn, a Pakistani newspaper, Malhi said that the rejection would make minorities' lives in Pakistan a living hell. Another legislator of PTI, Ramesh Kuman Vankwani said that The All India Muslim League, the major political party of Muslims, which demanded a separate country for Muslims of the sub-continent, demanded in 1927 that age of conversation should be 18 years. Other Hindu and Christian MNAs, Kesho Mal, Jai Parkash, Naveed Amir Jeeva and Senator Danesh Kuman, who attended the meeting also rejected the arguments of the committee.

A number of committee members said the forced conversion issue did not exist in Pakistan. However, they did not explain then why the committee was formed if there was no such issue. Federal Minister Qadri told the media that the bill would create problems for the minority communities in the country. He was clearly unable to answer the relevant questions, which were raised by Shahzab Khanzada during a TV programme on 14 October. According to the minister, the forced conversion problem was limited to just "three districts of Sindh province" whereas remaining a rarity in other three provinces; Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and Punjab. However, Benazir Shah, a Muslim journalist, dismissed those claims and said that majority of cases were reported in Bahawalpur and Lahore of Punjab province.

Two years ago, the Prohibition of Forced Religious Conversion Act 2019 was drafted by the Federal Ministry of Human Rights. On 27 August 2021, the bill was rejected by the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII, a constitutional body). Sadly, CII invited Mian Mitu, the main accuser of forced

conversion in Sindh, for a briefing, who presented the conservative view regarding the forced conversion issue. Before that, on 24 September 2020, a Senate Committee also rejected a bill to protect religious minorities.

The minority community reacted strongly against the decision of the committee by organising peaceful demonstrations and issuing statements. Through press statements, many minority rights organisations, including Minority Concern, Cecil & Iris Chaudhry Foundation and Minority Women Forum, rejected the objections of the parliamentary committee.

Religious minorities urge the government to fulfil its obligation to protect the rights of minorities under the constitution of Pakistan (Article 20), and the international human rights treaties; article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Pakistan is also a signatory of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Under CRC, the state parties should protect the rights of children, including girls.

Safina Javed, a Pakistan human rights defender, said that minorities in Pakistan demand nothing less than the implementation of the promises made by Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, but unfortunately the government of Pakistan through such acts (rejecting the religious conversion bill) is working against the assurances of Jinnah to religious minorities.

Pakistani media reports show that many Hindu and Christian minor girls are suffering because of kidnapping, forced conversion and then forced marriages to their kidnappers. According to a study, each year, nearly 1,000 girls from minority communities forcibly converted to Islam in Pakistan. Marginalised girls are sexually abused but accusers never get punished. These incidents destroy the lives of many innocent underage non-Muslim girls. Unfortunately, the state institutions have failed to protect them. Tragically, the majority view prevails whenever a bill presented for the protection of non-Muslim citizens of Pakistan. "Therefore, the government should pass a bill, so there should be a minimum age of conversion from one religion to another," minority leaders demanded.

Human rights organisations consider that minorities are already experiencing discrimination and persecution on the daily basis. Therefore, the rejection of the anti-forced conversion bill will make minorities more vulnerable in socially and religiously conservative society. The Joint Action Committee for People's Rights (a forum of 37 human rights organisations) demanded Imran Khan's government to legislate against forced conversion and build an effective legal framework for the protection of minority girls against inhuman practices and violence.

Pakistan is an Islamic country where Muslims make up more than 96 percent while religious minorities, including Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Kalash and other communities, make up only less than 4 percent of the total population of the country.

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