

Assassination complicates controversial blasphemy law

by [Anto Akkara](#)

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BANGALORE, India (RNS) Church officials in Pakistan say the assassination of Salman Taseer, an outspoken critic of Pakistan's blasphemy law, is a "setback" for the campaign to overturn the law that makes illegal to speak against Islam.

"This assassination has made it now extremely difficult for us to campaign against the blasphemy law," Victor Azariah, general secretary of the National Council of Churches in Pakistan (NCCP), told RNS from his office at Lahore on Wednesday (Jan. 5). "Everyone here is scared."

Taseer, 64, was governor of Punjab province before he was shot dead on Tuesday by one of his security guards in the provincial capital of Lahore.

The alleged assailant, Malik Mumtaz Husain Qadri, immediately surrendered and told the police he carried out the murder to avenge the "insult" to the blasphemy law by Taseer, who had called it a "black law."

Taseer had drawn the ire of Islamic fundamentalists after he initiated an unsuccessful clemency bid for Aasia Bibi, a 45-year-old Christian mother who was sentenced to death on questionable blasphemy charges in early November.

Islamic scholars issued an apostasy decree against the governor, who had met Bibi in jail to listen to her story and lobbied for her to be granted clemency.

"When such a high government official is killed for speaking out (against the blasphemy law), what can the ordinary people do?" asked Azariah.

The assassination, he said, is "a setback to our demand for abolishing or amending the blasphemy law."

Archbishop Lawrence Saldana, president of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Pakistan, also acknowledged the assassination would have "a negative impact" on civil and church activists campaigning against the blasphemy law.

"This (assassination) will only add to the fear that is already there," said Saldana, who heads the Catholic Church in the overwhelmingly Muslim country.

Radical Muslim groups, meanwhile, publicly hailed the assassination of the outspoken governor who had tweeted a week ago that he was under "huge pressure to cow down ... on blasphemy. Refused. Even if I'm the last man standing."

"We pay rich tributes and salute the bravery, valor and faith of Mumtaz Qadri," said a statement by a group of fundamentalist clerics.

-- Anto Akkara