

EU-Pakistan funding must be linked to freedoms for minorities

Written by Charles Tannock on 17 November 2014 in Opinion
Opinion

Support for Pakistan must be linked to reforms that protect Christians from persecution, writes Charles Tannock.



According to a report presented by the UK's prince of Wales on 4 November, across the world, Christians remain the most persecuted religious minority, while some Muslim countries are sadly among those states with the most serious reported violations of religious freedom. Among these, Pakistan is rated as one of the 14 countries with the worst track record of religious persecution.

The following day after the report was presented, according to Reuters, a mob in Pakistan beat a Christian couple to death and burned their bodies for allegedly desecrating a copy of the Qur'an. The latest incident took place in a village in the Punjab province where a local cleric called on his followers through the loudspeakers of his mosque to punish the couple for burning a few pages of the Koran. An angry crowd then gathered outside the house of Shehzad Masih, 32, and his wife Shama, in her 20s, dragged them out and beat them violently to death, according to the police report. Their bodies were

then set on fire in a brick kiln where they worked.

Christians make up only about four per cent of Pakistan's population and tend to keep a low profile in a country where Sunni jihadi extremists frequently bomb targets they see as heretical, including Christians, and Sufi and Shi'ite Muslims. Blasphemy is a serious accusation in Pakistan, with those accused often being lynched on the spot and when brought to court the death penalty is also a frequent demand of the prosecution, though mercifully not normally applied even when there is a conviction.

Recently, Asia Bibi, a Christian mother of five children was sentenced to death by a Pakistani court for allegedly making disparaging comments about Islam. Asia was accused after her neighbours objected to her drinking out of their water glasses because of her Christian faith.

On 26 September, in another tragic incident, Zafar Bhatti, a Christian pastor, and another man were shot dead in their prison cell after both were charged with blasphemy. Zafar Bhatti was said to be an activist who worked to protect the rights of Pakistan's Christian minority. Before the shooting, he was arrested and awaiting trial for sending text messages that were interpreted as insulting Islam.

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Pakistan has been to its credit engaged in a long fight during recent years to return to more enlightened democratic governance which places renewed respect on the fundamental rights and the protection of minorities as a top priority in its political agenda. The European Union has been at the forefront of supporting this effort in cooperating with the Pakistani leadership and providing help whenever that has been necessary to strengthen fundamental rights and freedoms. The EU funds dedicated to Pakistan for these reforms have been significant and a lot more has been pledged for the next years, either directly or indirectly as part of the EU generalised scheme of preferences and trade benefits agreed with Pakistan.

Nevertheless, recent developments indicate good intentions and policies from the Islamabad central government are not always implemented on the ground. Both the people of Pakistan and Europe need to see that these policies and adopted measures have an actual real effect on improving the quality of lives and security of people.

It is extremely important that the allocation of funds and efforts are conducted within a cost-benefit impact analysis framework, one that rewards improvements in structural reforms in Pakistani laws and institutions, which aim at safeguarding basic freedoms we all recognise. The condemnatory comments made the prime minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif after the brutal deaths of Shehzad Masih and his wife Shama, are most welcome. However, we must see more efforts that these good intentions are adopted at all the other levels within Pakistani society as well.

About the author

Charles Tannock is a member of parliament's foreign affairs committee

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