

## Catholic critic of blasphemy law is shot dead in Pakistan

Pakistan's leading Catholic politician has been murdered in the capital Islamabad. Minorities minister Shahbaz Bhatti died this morning after gunmen opened fire on his car while travelling to work through a residential district.

Mr Bhatti, 42, a leader of the ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP), had just left his home when at least two gunmen ambushed his car, police official Mohammad Iqbal said. He was rushed to the nearby Shifa hospital, but was dead on arrival.



Mr Bhatti had received numerous death threats after calling for changes to the country's controversial blasphemy law. The blasphemy law carries a death sentence for anyone who insults Islam, and critics say it has been used to persecute minority faiths. In January, Punjab Governor Salman Taseer, who had also opposed the law, was murdered by one of his bodyguards.

The first Christian to hold a cabinet post in Pakistan, [Mr Bhatti spoke about the threat facing him last month](#), during a visit to Canada to raise awareness about his country's blasphemy laws. He said: "I have been told by pro-Taliban religious extremists that if I will continue to speak against the blasphemy law, I will be beheaded."

However, he said: "As a Christian, I believe Jesus is my strength. He has given me a power and wisdom and motivation to serve suffering humanity. I follow the principles of my conscience, and I am ready to die and sacrifice my life for the principles I believe."

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack, but leaflets issued by Tehrik-i-Taliban Punjab, a branch of the Taliban in Pakistan's most populous province, were found at the ambush site, according to the private TV channel Express 24/7.

A government spokesman condemned the assassination. Farahnaz Ispahani, an aide to President Asif Ali Zardari, said: "This is concerted campaign to slaughter every liberal, progressive and humanist voice in Pakistan.

"The time has come for the federal government and provincial governments to speak out and to take a strong stand against these murderers to save the very essence of Pakistan."

John Pontifex of Aid to the Church in Need said this morning: "I had the pleasure of meeting Shahbaz Bhatti on a trip to Pakistan with Aid to the Church in Need a few years ago. He was a very kind and thoughtful guide to the region with a deep commitment to improving the lot of the disadvantaged, especially those suffering persecution and oppression on account of their faith.

"Shahbaz Bhatti had the courage to speak out against the suffering that has its root in the country's blasphemy laws, and we at ACN will be praying for his soul following his murder.

"Despite having received death threats for his stance Mr Bhatti continued to stand up heroically for Christians and other religious minorities who have been victims of mob violence after they were accused of blasphemy."

Ed West - Catholic Herald