

Asia Bibi marks nine years since arrest for blasphemy in Pakistan



The daughters of Pakistani Christian woman Asia Bibi pose with an image of their mother while standing outside their residence in Sheikhpura located in Pakistan's Punjab Province. Standing left to right is Esha, 12, Sidra, 18 and Eshum, 10. (PHOTO: Reuters)

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Yesterday (June 19 2018) marked the ninth anniversary of the arrest of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman sentenced to death for allegedly committing blasphemy in Pakistan.

The case against Bibi remains the highest-profile blasphemy case in Pakistan and has claimed the lives of several prominent Pakistani politicians.

In 2009, Bibi was accused of blasphemy following a dispute between herself and a group of Muslim co-workers harvesting

berries in Sheikhupura. An argument broke out when Bibi drank from the same water basin as her Muslim co-workers, because she was a Christian and considered by the Muslim women to be unclean.

A few days later, it was reported to a local cleric that Bibi had blasphemed against Islam by saying: "My Christ died for me, what did Muhammad do for you?"

Since her arrest, Bibi's case has become symbolic of the persecution facing Pakistani Christians and the widespread abuse of the country's blasphemy laws. Bibi was convicted and sentenced to death on blasphemy charges in November 2010 by the Session's Court in District Nankana, Punjab.

Governor murdered by bodyguard

Months later, the governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, visited Bibi in prison. Upon leaving the jail, he made a statement that the blasphemy laws had been misused in her case. Within days, he was murdered by his bodyguard, Mumtaz Qadri, who had been convinced by radicals that this was an attack on Islam.

Two months after this murder, in March 2011, the Federal Minister of Minorities' Affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti – the only Christian in the Pakistani cabinet – criticised the country's blasphemy laws, noting that they are easily manipulated. In Islamabad, shortly after the statement was made, an attacker sprayed his car with bullets. Police found a letter at the crime scene from the Tehrik-e-Taliban claiming responsibility for the murder, adding that Bhatti was killed for opposing Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

In October 2014, Bibi's appeal hearing was held in the High Court of Lahore. At that appeal, Justice Anwar-ul-Haq, one member of a two-judge bench, passed a short order on October 16, 2014, confirming Bibi's death sentence. On July 22, 2015, the Supreme Court of Pakistan accepted Bibi's petition for her case to be reviewed and suspended her death sentence.

Case indefinitely adjourned

On October 13 2016, the Supreme Court of Pakistan indefinitely adjourned Bibi's appeal after one of the three Supreme Court Justices hearing the case decided to recuse himself. Justice Rahman recused himself from the case, stating, "I was part of the bench that was hearing the case of Salman Taseer and this case is related." Since then, Bibi's final appeal has yet to be rescheduled by the Supreme Court.

William Stark, International Christian Concern's (ICC) Regional Manager, said: "It is disappointing to see Bibi mark her ninth year in prison. It has been nine long years since Asia had this false blasphemy accusation completely change her life.

"We here at ICC are hopeful that the Supreme Court will hear this final appeal at the soonest possible date. It is ICC's hope that when the appeal is heard, the Supreme Court will resist outside pressure from extremists and decide Asia's case on the merits.

"If decided on the merits, we believe that the court's only conclusion will be to acquit. We also hope that the Supreme Court's decision will lay a foundation for reforming Pakistan's notorious blasphemy laws. This will be a signal to both Pakistan and the world that justice will prevail over extremism, even when a religious minority is accused of blasphemy."

Indonesian pastor sentenced

to prison for evangelising to Muslim cab driver



Pastor Abraham Ben Moses (left) talks through a translator (right) from inside of a prison in Tangerang, Indonesia on May 6 2018. (PHOTO: screenshot Voice of the Martyrs)

Originally published in [The Christian Post](#)

An Indonesian court sentenced a Protestant pastor to four years in prison and slapped him with a hefty fine on Monday simply because he shared his faith with a taxi driver.

The Jakarta Post [reports](#) that a district court in Tangerang, Java, issued the four-year sentence and a fine equivalent to \$3 565 to Rev Abraham Ben Moses, a well-known former Muslim apologist.

Moses, who was arrested last December, was detained after a video was widely circulated that showed him sharing his faith with a Muslim taxi driver.

Reportedly asked driver to accept Christ

According to [Voice of the Martyrs](#), Moses can be heard in the

video speaking about the Muslim prophet Muhammad and his teaching on marriage. In the video, he is also reportedly shown asking the driver to accept Christ.

Because of the video, Muhammadiyah, one of Indonesia's largest Islamic organisations, filed a blasphemy complaint against Moses.

According to the Jakarta Post, the presiding judge, Muhammad Damis, stated that Moses was convicted under an Electronic and Information Transactions Law on grounds that he spread information that was intended to incite hatred on the basis of religion.

Moses' legal team will reportedly file an appeal.

"The sentence is too heavy for the defendant," Maxie Ellia, one of the evangelist's lawyers, said, according to the Jakarta Post.

According to the United States-based watchdog group [International Christian Concern](#), the sentencing was praised by Muhammadiyah.

"This decision should be appreciated and should serve as a valuable lesson for all parties," Muhammadiyah official Pedri Kasman was quoted as saying.



Abraham Ben Moses (right) is seen meeting with a visitor before a verdict hearing at the Tangerang District Court in Banten on May 7 2018. (PHOTO: [Jakarta Post](#))

Ranked 38th on World Watch List

Indonesia, where eight out of 10 citizens are Muslim, ranks as the 38th worst country in the world when it comes to Christian persecution, according to Open Doors USA's 2018 World Watch List.

In a [video testimony](#) shared by Voice of the Martyrs earlier this week, Moses stated from prison that the "strength that I get is from Jesus who strengthens me."

"He is a very good friend. He never leaves us. His promise is 'Yes' and 'Amen,'" Moses said through his translator. "He will take care of you and your whole family."

Other Christians have also been victimised by the nation's blasphemy law. Most notably, former Jakarta Gov Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, a Christian also known as "Ahok," was accused of blasphemy during the middle of his re-election campaign after a [doctored video](#) emerged in the fall of 2016. He was [sentenced last May](#) to two years in prison.

“The Indonesian government should revisit the country’s blasphemy law, as it is increasingly being exploited by radical Muslim groups to target individuals who they find to be offensive and theologically ‘out-of-line,’” ICC Regional Manager Gina Goh said in a statement. “To honour religious freedom as enshrined in Indonesia’s constitution, the government must respect all religions and stop criminalising Christians when they are merely exercising their right to free speech.”

Open Doors USA, which is a prominent persecution watchdog organisation, reports that the situation for Christians in the past several years in Indonesia has “deteriorated.”

“This is especially true in hot spots like West Java, where radical Islamic groups are powerful, exerting heavy influence on society and politics,” Open Doors [warns](#). “These radical groups cause problems for churches that proselytise Muslims and often pressure government officials to ignore applications for construction of church buildings. Meanwhile, converts from Islam usually face persecution from their own families, particularly in the form of isolation and verbal abuse.”

North Korea: US citizens set for release ahead of Trump-Kim talks



The three Americans have been detained on charges ranging from committing 'hostile acts' against the regime to spying for a foreign country

Originally published in [World Watch Monitor](#)

Three American citizens detained in North Korea seem set to be released ahead of a meeting between the two countries' leaders next month.

The BBC reported that the three men had been "relocated to a Pyongyang hotel and are receiving good food and medical care".

US President Donald Trump tweeted yesterday (May 2) that the US "has long been asking for three hostages to be released from a North Korean Labour camp, but to no avail. Stay tuned!"



Who are the Americans?

Kim Dong-chul, a pastor in his early 60s, was arrested in 2015 and sentenced to 10 years' hard labour after admitting spying for South Korea, which Seoul denied.

Tony Kim (also known as Kim Sang-duk) was detained in April 2017 for "committing criminal acts of hostility" against the North Korean government. Kim, in his 50s, had been involved in humanitarian work with orphanages and taught at the Pyongyang University for Science and Technology (PUST), which trains the children of North Korea's elite and has a volunteer staff that includes many evangelical Christians.

Kim Hak Song was arrested two weeks later, in May 2017, as he prepared to leave the country after working for several weeks as a lecturer at PUST. He was arrested on charges of "hostile acts" against the regime. *Reuters* reported that in 2015, he had posted a message on the website of a Korean-Brazilian church in Sao Paulo, saying "he was a Christian missionary planning to start an experimental farm at PUST and was trying to help the North Korean people learn to become self-sufficient".

Others released

In August last year Hyeon Soo Lim, a Korean-Canadian church leader sentenced to life in prison with hard labour, was released "on sick bail". Detained since February 2015, he was convicted later that year of numerous charges, including an attempt to overthrow the government.

Pakistan supreme court offers

sign of hope in Asia Bibi execution case



Asia Bibi

Originally published in [Charisma News](#)

Finally, after things have looked so bleak for Asia Bibi, the Christian mother of five sentenced to death by hanging in Pakistan on absurd blasphemy charges, there has been a sign of hope.

Asia Bibi was convicted of blasphemy in 2010 for offering a Muslim coworker a glass of water, and has since languished on death row, separated from her heartbroken family, and waiting for news of her appeal.

According to new reports, the chief justice of Pakistan's Supreme Court, Mian Saqib Nisar has now promised that the court will take up Bibi's appeal. The Chief Justice assured Bibi's attorney that he will be presiding over the appeal in her case personally.

"Your appeal in Asia Bibi [case] is going to be fixed soon as I myself will preside [over] the bench," the chief justice told Saiful Malook, the counsel for 51-year-old Bibi, on Saturday.

According to her attorney, the appeal is likely to be reviewed and a decision made possibly as soon as this summer.

Malook expressed the hope that the case might be listed for hearing in the next couple of weeks as the CJP [Chief Justice of Pakistan] had also assured him that all criminal appeals would be decided by July.

This is a significant development in her case. One year ago, we reported that “the Chief Justice of Pakistan has declined [Asia Bibi’s] request for an early hearing for the final judicial appeal of her death sentence.” Since that time, no legal progress had been made on her case. She was in legal limbo, sitting on death row in Pakistan because of her Christian faith, with no end in sight. Now there may be new hope.

We have mobilised our global offices, aggressively advocating before the UN to intervene for Asia in this clear human rights atrocity. We’ve sent multiple legal letters to Pakistan, demanding her immediate release. She has committed no crime—especially not one for which she should die and her children be made motherless. It’s an atrocity. She is on death row for her Christian faith.

We are hopeful that the chief justice will soon schedule the review of the case and Asia Bibi’s plight, and release her without delay.

While Pakistan claims to protect all religious minorities, it currently has a horrible track record for its treatment of Christians and other religious minorities. Violence against Christians in Pakistan just keeps escalating, and the government continues to look the other way. We recently told you about a Christian family of four who went in town to visit relatives for the Easter holiday and was gunned down a day later by jihadists on motorcycle.

Bloodthirsty mobs threaten the safety of entire towns full of

peaceful Christians, driving them from their homes with threats of violent attacks and murder. Multiple churches have been attacked and bombed. In one horrifying case, a Christian boy in eighth grade was dragged from his school and beaten to death by the local police.

But there have been small glimmers of hope. In the case of the murdered schoolboy, the court agreed with the prosecution that there was “tangible, convincing, and cogent evidence” against the police officers involved. Seeing that the legal system wasn’t going to look the other way this time, the men agreed to pay a \$30,000 restitution to the boy’s family.

Even in Asia’s case, we’ve seen small, but positive signs. Just recently we told you prison authorities allowed her to keep a crucifix given to her by the pope as a token of his prayers for her release. It was the first time she was allowed to keep any religious symbol in her cell. We pray this decision by Pakistan’s chief justice results in our ultimate goal—that Asia is set free and allowed to return home to her family.

We are actively monitoring Asia’s case and vigorously advocating across the globe on her behalf. We will also continue to appeal to the world’s leaders to intercede with Pakistan and demand that they abide by their international agreements to protect religious minorities and bring violent agitators to justice.

China bans online purchases

of the Bible



Catholic worshippers attend a mass on Holy Saturday, March 31, as part of the Easter celebrations at Beijing's government sanctioned South Cathedral. China has banned the sale of online Bibles, as part of its increasing crackdown on Christianity. (PHOTO: Greg Baker/AFP/Getty Images)

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In its ongoing crackdown on Christianity, the Chinese government has banned sales of the Bible by online retailers including Amazon.

Taoist and Buddhists texts are still available online, as is the Quran.

While Buddhism and Taoism are both encouraged by the Chinese government as traditional Chinese belief systems, other religions not viewed as historically Chinese, including Islam and to a greater extent Christianity, have been targeted.

What's the story?

China had already heavily restricted the in-store sale of Bibles, but the arrival of online ordering created a loophole

that has not been closed until now. Searches for Bibles on Amazon or other online retailers like JD.com and Taobao from China now come up empty, according to The New York Times.

This is not the first time that the Chinese government has cracked down on its Christian population.

The New York Times reported in May 2016 that “[f]rom 2014 to 2016, more than 1 500 crosses were removed from churches in one Chinese province with close ties to [Chinese President Xi Jinping].” The government said that the crosses were removed “for the sake of safety and beauty.” In January, the Chinese government demolished a well-known Christian megachurch.

A report by the US-based organisation Freedom House found that: “Since Xi Jinping took the helm of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2012, the authorities have intensified many of their restrictions, resulting in an overall increase in religious persecution.”

How many Christians are in China?

The number of Christians living in China is hard to pin down. Reports put the number of Catholics in the country anywhere between 5 million and 12 million, and the number of protestants at around 38 million. Other estimates put the total number of all types of Christians in China as high as 100 million.

The Vatican is currently negotiating to come up with a deal regarding Chinese Catholic bishops. As of now, bishops appointed by the Chinese government have been in conflict with bishops appointed by Rome, who are largely forced underground.

In a statement on Tuesday, Chinese senior official Chen Zongrong said that there was no place for Vatican influence over a church on Chinese soil.

“I think there is no religion in human society that is above the state,” he said. “Foreign forces cannot be allowed to

interfere with China's religious environment and religious affairs."

What about other religions?

In a 2016 speech, Xi told members of the Communist party that they needed to "resolutely guard against overseas infiltrations via religious means."

But even Protestant churches with their lack of a foreign authority are targeted by the government. In 2016, senior Pastor Gu Yue-se was arrested on trumped-up charges after he publicly opposed the removal of crosses from churches. The Chinese government sees Protestant Christianity as a "western" value inherently at odds with China.

This persecution has led to the formation of hundreds of underground home churches in the capital city of Beijing alone.

While Islam seems to be viewed more favorably by the government, China has also cracked down on the wearing of long beards or headscarves, and restaurants that don't serve pork in accordance with Islamic dietary restrictions.

14 Christian house church leaders abducted in china amid Communist crackdown on faith



Chinese police arrest an activist who was reportedly calling for more transparency and less corruption in the government. (PHOTO: Reuters via [The Christian Post](#)),

Originally published in [The Christian Post](#)

Fourteen Christian house church leaders who are part of the Middle Eastern evangelism network have been abducted by government security agents in China.

[ChinaAid](#) reported on Wednesday that the Christians, who weren't named, are being held captive at an undisclosed location by state authorities in the coastal Zhejiang province.

"This massive, enforced disappearance of 14 peaceful church leaders shows the Communist Party has no regard to rule of law and its citizens' religious freedom rights," said ChinaAid President Bob Fu.

The group, which monitors the crackdown on churches and arrest of Christians and human rights activists in China, said the Communist government continues to deny believers religious freedoms and basic human rights.

"ChinaAid urges international leaders to speak out against this blatant abuse against religious freedom and human rights, and calls on China to immediately and unconditionally release

these innocent Christians,” the group declared.

Back in January, Christians shared their fears that the persecution could get worse following the government’s [destruction of an evangelical megachurch](#) in the northern Shanxi province.

Chinese military police detonated explosives inside the Golden Lampstand Church in Linfen, destroying the house of worship which was owned by the Christians who worshiped there.

A video of the demolition was shared worldwide, showing the moment the church collapsed.

“My heart was sad to see this demolition and now I worry about more churches being demolished, even my own,” a local pastor who wasn’t named said at the time. “This church was built in 2008, there’s no reason for them to destroy it now.”

A Catholic church was also destroyed in a similar fashion in December, while at least 1,200 church rooftop crosses have been forcefully removed in Zhejiang province since 2015.

Chinese authorities have been known to raid worship services and detain dozens of Christians at once, such as what happened to [13 believers](#) in Guangdong province in November.

Police officers raided Qingcaodi Church, a small house church in Jingmen, with believers seeing their Bibles and other church-owned material confiscated.

Chinese lawyers who have stood up for Christians have also been persecuted. Several attorneys who sought to represent 40 Christians who were arrested over “cult” activities last year were told in January that their legal certifications [could be taken away](#).

Xiao Yunyan, one of the lawyers under government review, vowed that he and his colleagues will continue representing the Christians, with the lawyers working on a contingency plan.

China is listed No 43 on Open Doors USA's [World Watch List](#), which states that church life is heavily controlled by the government.

The watchdog group explains that Christians are “hedged in by authorities,” since at 100 million strong, they are the largest social group that is not controlled by the state.

Six Chinese Christians jailed for being part of ‘evil cult’



Christians pray together in Beijing.
(PHOTO: World Watch Monitor)

Originally published in [Charisma News](#)

A Chinese court in the southwestern province of Yunnan sent six Protestant Christians to prison last week for their membership of an “evil cult.”

The verdict comes as part of a provincial crackdown on cults, as the ruling Communist Party continues its national campaign

to restrict unregistered churches before new religious regulations come into force next week.

The six Christians received long sentences of up to 13 years by a court in Lincang City, west Yunnan, which found them guilty of being part of a sect called the Three Grades of Servants and of “using an evil cult to organise to undermine law enforcement”, their lawyer, Xiao Yunyang, told [Radio Free Asia](#).

According to [Release International](#), since 2016, China has used its campaign against the sect “as a pretext to round up about 200 Christians across Yunnan: some Christians have already been convicted, while others are awaiting trial”.

A local source told World Watch Monitor that the authorities “seldom give such long prison sentences for just religious reasons, even in a sensitive region like Xinjiang [in the Uyghur Autonomous Region]. But both the Three Grades of Servants and Falun Gong are well-known cults in China and leaders of [these movements] are subject to heavy punishment”.

The six men and women, who belong to an unregistered church group, denied all charges and, according to their lawyer: “The judges in Yunnan were really evil. They didn’t pay any attention to the arguments that no illegal acts had been committed, and that there was no harm of any kind to society.”

According to RFA, Xiao has been notified that his license to practice law will be reviewed to see if he was “illegally” defending his clients.

Prominent churches targeted

Meanwhile two pastors in neighbouring Guizhou province, Su Tianfu and Yang Hua of Huoshi Church, [were fined](#) the equivalent of more than \$1 million US earlier this month, after the money they received in collections and offerings from their congregation was deemed “illegal income.”

Huoshi Church and its leaders have clashed with the authorities before. In 2015 the church [was raided](#) by police during the opening ceremony of its new venue, which was attended by hundreds of guests, including some foreigners. The high-profile church was forced to close and its pastor, Yang Hua, was detained. The church did reopen but was then put under pressure to register as a state-sanctioned entity.

Yang Hua was last year [sentenced to two and a half years](#) in prison, while Su Tianfu remains under house arrest. A church deacon, Zhang Xiuhong, was also detained for more than two years before his release in August 2017.

A local source told World Watch Monitor the government specifically targets high-profile churches, but that many other congregations do not experience the same level of harassment.

“You have a high profile if you gather a big group of people – in particular in sensitive areas where there are minority people groups,” the source said. “Another thing [that creates this high profile] is if you have close contact with overseas groups, e.g. receive financial support from overseas, or, thirdly when you advocate in overseas media and draw the attention of human-rights agencies.”

Last week a high-profile church in northern China was [demolished](#), the second in less than a month. World Watch Monitor’s source said the order seemed to have come from the top, illustrated by the fact the state-run newspaper reported on it.

Another cultural revolution?

“These cases are consistent with a new focus on the control and management of religious activities by the government”, according to [Christian Solidarity Worldwide’s](#) chief executive, Mervyn Thomas. “Different approaches are being taken by different provincial authorities, but taken together these

cases may suggest a long-term plan to target independent religious communities.”

According to British peer [David Alton](#), the Chinese government is orchestrating a “determined crackdown of all unregistered churches. It will be a real test of the British government’s avowed commitment to freedom of religion and belief to see what steps they and Washington take to monitor this repression. Is this not another Maoist ‘Cultural Revolution’?”

In his speech at the Communist Party Congress in October, President [Xi Jinping reiterated](#) the importance of Chinese nationalism, saying the government would “uphold the principle that religions in China must be Chinese in orientation, and provide active guidance to religions so that they can adapt themselves to socialist society”.

The [new regulations on religious affairs](#) are due to come into force on February 1. They include guidelines on religious education, the types of religious organisations that can exist, where they can exist and the activities they can organise.

**China deports S Korean
Christians for helping
persecuted N Koreans**



PHOTO: [Christian Headlines](#).

Originally published by [Christian Headlines](#)

China's government is not only cracking down on its own Christian citizens, it is also [targeting South Koreans](#) who are in the country and who allegedly helped persecuted North Koreans that escaped Kim Jong-un's oppressive regime.

According to The Christian Post, the Chinese provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang have together deported hundreds of South Korean Christians who are evangelising and engaging in missionary work.

In the province of Jilin, all South Korean churches have reportedly been closed due to China's campaign to "eradicate extremism."

Christians who continue to participate in unauthorised religious activities can face up to \$45 200 (R642 884.12) in fines and possible arrest and imprisonment.

According to Bob Fu, the founder and president of China Aid, a ministry which seeks to help persecuted Chinese Christians, "the top leadership is increasingly worried about the rapid growth of Christian faith and their public presence, and their social influence. It is a political fear for the Communist Party, as the number of Christians in the country far outnumber the members of the Party."

China's president Xi Jinping, who is commissioning the

crackdown on Christians, is becoming more and more powerful. Last month, the Communist Party in China voted to enshrine Xi's name in its constitution in order to ensure his legacy.

Nepal criminalises Christian conversion and evangelism



Prayer wheels in a Hindu temple (PHOTO: [Christianity Today](#) via Flickr).

Originally published in [Christianity Today](#)

Last week Nepal enacted a law to curb evangelism by criminalising religious conversion, joining neighbouring countries like India and Pakistan, where the region's small-but-growing Christian minority faces government threats to their faith.

The "Nepali government has taken a regressive step as this law severely restricts our freedom of expression and our freedom of religion or belief," said Tanka Subedi, chair of the national Religious Liberty Forum, to Christian Solidarity

Worldwide (CSW). The pastor is one of an estimated 375 000 Christians living in the former Hindu kingdom.

The criminal code bill, which the parliament approved in August and President Bidhya Devi Bhandari signed last Monday, establishes further constitutional protections for Hinduism (which 80% of the population practices) by restricting religious conversion and "hurting of religious sentiment," or blasphemy.

According to a Nepali Christian site, a section of the new law reads:

No one should involve or encourage in conversion of religion.

No one should convert a person from one religion to another religion or profess their own religion and belief with similar intention by using or not using any means of attraction and by disturbing religion or belief of any ethnic groups or community that being practiced since ancient times.

If found guilty; there will be punishment of five years of imprisonment and penalty of 50 000 rupees (R219.00) . If foreigners are found guilty they will have to be deported within seven days after completing the imprisonment in third clause.

The amended criminal sanctions come a decade after the longtime Hindu monarchy declared itself a secular state, and two years after it adopted a new constitution.

Article 26 of the constitution stated that, "No one shall attempt to change or convert someone from one religion to another, or disturb/jeopardize the religion of others, and such acts/activities shall be punishable by law."

At the time, Christianity Today reported how religious freedom advocates worried that this line in particular could be used as "groundwork for future restrictions and discrimination."

The fears of Elijah Brown, chief of staff at the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative, and others have come true.

Last year, courts dropped charges against Christians accused of evangelising to students in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in Kathmandu, but the case was enough to raise concerns over the “forcible conversion” law.

CSW founder Mervyn Thomas noted that anti-conversion laws tend to target religious minorities and worsen religious tensions. He stated in a press release: “We urge the Nepali government to repeal this unjust law and amend Article 26 (3) of the constitution as they both curtail the right to freedom of religion or belief and undermine Nepal’s commitments under international law, a contradiction made even more striking as Nepal assumes its seat on the Human Rights Council.”

Some Christian commentators on the criminal code bill initially declared it a worse threat to minority faiths than living under the officially Hindu state in the years before. The bill proposed “five years of imprisonment and a penalty of 50 000 rupees (R11 000) for anyone found guilty of converting a person from one religion to another.”

A Catholic human rights activist in Nepal wrote last year: “If the bill is passed, it’s feared that it will result in a situation worse than Pakistan’s blasphemy law – a type of bill that can be misinterpreted and misused by anyone wanting to make a false accusation against anyone else.

“More locally, this bill would mean Nepal would revert to a worse state of affairs than the previous Panchayat System (1960-1990), which resulted in minority religious groups being persecuted by the state.”

As Christian Today previously reported, Christians were banned from living in Nepal prior to 1960. Over the following decades, “Christianity grew by 10 to 20 percent annually, especially among Dalits at the bottom of Hindu society, making

Nepal one of Asia's most stunning church growth stories."

Despite the legal threats in recent years, Nepal has seen its Christian population triple over the past decade or so due to conversions. Popular folk singer Raju Pariyar joined the faith and was baptised in 2015. But Christians still make up just 1.4 percent of the 29 million residents.

The US State Department flagged anti-conversion and blasphemy laws as one of its biggest concerns for religious freedom globally, stating in 2012 that "such laws often violate freedoms of religion and expression and often are applied in a discriminatory manner".

Nepalese Christians released after false imprisonment for witchcraft



A Christian boy holds a placard in a Christian protest in Nepal, where Christians account for less than 2%

of Hindu-majority Nepal's 28 million people. (PHOTO: Reuters)

Originally published in [Christian Today](#)

Four Nepali Christians who were sentenced to five years' imprisonment for 'violence and witchcraft' after praying for a woman with mental illnesses, have had their sentences overturned, according to [World Watch Monitor](#).

Lali Pun, Bimkali Budha, Ruplal Pariyar and his wife Ganga were imprisoned in July 2016 for 'witchcraft, forceful imprisonment and violence'. They were found guilty in December despite the woman for whom they prayed, Seti Pariyar, testifying in court that she had been healed through their prayer, with her husband claiming they were innocent.

Nate Lance, Advocacy Manager for [International Christian Concern](#), said of the release of the Christians: 'International Christian Concern is so pleased that this situation has reached its rightful resolution. However, the imprisonment of these Christians should have never taken place as the facts of their innocence were clear. This is a step in the right direction for religious freedom in Nepal, but there is still much work to be done. No one should fear imprisonment for the free expression and practice of their religion.'

The five had been imprisoned since July 2016 for 'witchcraft, forceful imprisonment and violence' towards the woman, despite her husband saying they did not behave in a forceful or aggressive manner.

They were also questioned in court about trying to convert the woman, although they were not charged with proselytization, which was outlawed in Nepal in 2015.

Pariyar met the four Christians at a church, to which she had been sent by her father-in-law for healing prayer from apparent 'demonic possession'.

After Pariyar left the church, she was found shouting and self-harming in a nearby forest, and escorted home.

This incident was described over a month later by a local businessmen to the media and, on the basis of that story, Bhisma Pariyar filed a complaint against Pun, Budha, Ruplal and Ganga Pariyar, and one other who was found innocent, which led to their arrest.

Their wrongful imprisonment signals the increasing restrictions on religious freedom in Nepal. This year, it was made illegal to convert to any non-Hindu religion, even though Nepal's 2015 constitution already limits freedom of religion and conversion.