

# **Pakistani church urges constitutional amendments to end discrimination**

LAHORE, Pakistan - The Catholic Church in Pakistan has urged the country's new government to end religious discrimination and establish the equality of all citizens under the law through proposed constitutional amendments.

"In order to make the constitution more democratic, the multireligious and multicultural aspect of Pakistani society should be recognized," the Pakistani bishops' National Commission for Justice and Peace said June 1.

Archbishop Lawrence Saldanha of Lahore and Peter Jacob, commission chairman and executive secretary, respectively, signed the statement, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News.

The church statement came in response to a proposed constitutional reform package introduced May 24 by the Pakistan People's Party-led federal coalition, sworn in following February's general election. The package is being discussed among coalition partners before being introduced in Parliament.

The proposed amendments contain provisions that would ensure a parliamentary democracy, do away with some presidential powers, and ensure at least a minimum representation of minority religious communities in the Senate. About 95 percent of Pakistan's 160 million people are Muslim. Less than 2 percent are Christian.

The commission maintained in its statement, however, "It cannot be assumed that increasing the number of reserved seats in the Parliament as proposed in the package announced will change the humiliating socioeconomic conditions of the religious minorities in Pakistan."

Members of minority communities have long been demanding representation in the Senate, where all 100 members are Muslim. Religious minorities have representation in various provincial assemblies as well as in the lower house of the

Pakistani Parliament.

"In the wake of the constitutional (amendment) package, NCJP would like to point out the existence of religious biases and discriminatory sections in the present constitution which need amendments to make it a useful document to build peace and interreligious harmony," the statement said.

"Besides making overt reservations for (the) office of president on the basis of religion, the oath for all parliamentary offices in the constitution assumes that all citizens belong to the majority religion," the commission said. "The religiously biased articles 41(2) (and) 260(3) will have to be amended to accommodate religious plurality and remove religious discrimination in the affairs of the state."

Article 41(2) of the constitution states: "A person shall not be qualified for election as president unless he is a Muslim of not less than 45 years of age and is qualified to be elected a member of the National Assembly," Parliament's lower house. Similarly, only Muslims are allowed to become prime minister, chief of any of the armed forces or chief justice.

The commission's statement also said "both use and abuse of badly drafted blasphemy laws and incompatible personal laws have led to human rights violations, (and the) destruction of places of worship and properties of religious minorities." Hence, constitutional safeguards about religious freedom and nondiscrimination need reinforcement through constitutional amendments dealing with social justice and the protection of minorities, it said.

Catholic priests say discrimination and abuse of blasphemy laws, which severely punish vaguely defined insults to the Prophet Mohammed or the Quran, are serious concerns in their work, UCA News reported. Church leaders have long charged that the laws are abused for personal gain and that religious extremists are furthering their agenda by abusing the blasphemy laws. However, many believe fundamentalist pressure has kept the government from openly discussing changes.

The bishops' commission lamented the lack of any statutory body to oversee the enforcement of human rights or to investigate human rights violations and redress grievances. It also urged the government to provide economic relief to "already

impoverished religious minorities” through a package of national and provincial budget measures.

Pakistan is beset by political and sociocultural tensions, including attempts by Muslim militants to impose an intolerant version of Islam. In addition to violence between the two major Islamic communities, Sunni and Shiite, a number of attacks on Christians have occurred in recent years.