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Pakistani minister gunned down

By Syed Saleem Shahzad
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Al-Qaeda-affiliated militants on Wednesday shot dead Pakistan's Federal Minister for Minorities Shahbaz Bhatti in broad daylight, then fled the scene in an automobile.

The four militants left pamphlets saying that the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (Pakistani Taliban - TTP) and the Fidayan-e-al-Qaeda had killed Bhatti, who was the only Christian in the cabinet, because of his opposition to a harsh blasphemy law that imposes the death penalty on those considered to have insulted Islam.

TTP spokesperson Ehsanullah Ahsan called media organizations to claim responsibility for the assassination.

Bhatti was on his way to a cabinet meeting when the attackers struck in a residential area reserved mostly for top foreign and civil service bureaucrats. The attackers blocked his car before spraying it with bullets.

The killing follows the assassination on January 4 of Punjab provincial governor Salman Taseer, who was also a strong critic of the blasphemy law and who had sought presidential pardon for a Christian. Taseer's confessed killer - his security guard Malik Mumtaz Qadri - said he had killed Taseer because of his criticism of the law.

Bhatti, head of the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance, was appointed in 2008, and at the time said he had accepted the post for the sake of the "oppressed, down-trodden and marginalized" of Pakistan and that he had dedicated his life to "struggle for human equality, social justice,

religious freedom and to uplift and empower the religious minorities' communities".

After Taseer's killing, intelligence agencies warned of possible strikes on Bhatti as well as on former information minister and member of parliament Sherry Rahman, who with Taseer and Bhatti had led a liberal segment of society to mobilize public opinion against the blasphemy law. Rahman had also presented a private bill in parliament to propose amendments to the law

The government completely distanced itself from the three who were campaigning against what they called a "black law", and after Taseer's death it was made clear that there would be no changes to the controversial legislation.

Bhatti and Rahman continued to speak out in public, though, and the minister has now paid with his life.

Militants have made it clear that they intend to break a ceasefire agreement not to attack Pakistani cities, and security officials fear major terror activity this year, especially as militants have regrouped in many parts of the tribal areas as well as in the cities of Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa province, from where they were routed last year. Mardan, which is close to Islamabad, has experienced at least three high-profile attacks in the past few weeks, including one on a Punjab regimental center and Tuesday's attack on a girls' college.

Bhatti's murder was carefully planned; the militants had obviously cased the area, knew his schedule, had pamphlets published in advance claiming responsibility, and managed to enter and exit what is supposed to be a secure zone unscathed. This points to the militants' increasing capacity to hit any target of their choice despite the government's best security efforts.

The incident also brings into question the ideological underpinning of the militancy in Pakistan. Despite successful military operations in Swat, South Waziristan and other tribal areas, it has not been possible to uproot the militants. Until a coherent ideological discourse is opened that could defeat the arguments of the militants in their own jargon, the concept of complete security in Pakistani society remains a dream.