

Victory of radical political group in Pakistani elections dashes hope for blasphemy law reform

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The chances of reforming Pakistan's blasphemy laws were reduced after a newly launched politico-religious group secured a significant amount of votes in a recent by-election.

According to [UCA News](#), the Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP), known for its hardline stance in support of Pakistan's laws against blasphemy, gained more than 10 percent of votes in the recent by-election.

The votes secured by the group were more than that of established political parties such as the Pakistan Peoples Party of slain former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

The TLP grew in popularity following the execution of Mumtaz Qadri, who had assassinated the liberal governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, after he called for reform to the country's blasphemy laws.

Qadri had been assigned as one of Taseer's bodyguards after he drew outrage for expressing his support for Catholic woman Asia Bibi, who was sentenced to death for blasphemy.



Following Qadri's execution in late February, thousands [defied](#) a ban on demonstrations to rally in support of the assassin.

Earlier this month, the Pakistani government was forced to negotiate a six-point agreement after the TLP's religious wing staged a week-long agitation in Islamabad.

UCA News noted that one of the elements of the agreement focused on assurances that Bibi will not be sent abroad despite her blasphemy conviction.

There had been fears that the government's compliance with TLP's demands only provides legitimacy and impunity for the radical group.

TLP supporters had blocked the route into Islamabad for days, demanding that the minister of law be sacked for what they say is blasphemy.

The party had blamed the minister, Zahid Hamid, for making changes to an electoral oath that could have allowed members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim sect to vote without declaring themselves to be Muslims.

The adherents of Ahmadiyya sect are accused of not accepting that Muhammad was God's final prophet and are [forbidden](#) from calling themselves as Muslims.

The ruling party in the Parliament had already withdrawn the minor change to the electoral oath and attributed it to a clerical error.

Hamid had promised to create a separate voters' list for Ahmadis as they would not be included in a list reserved for mainstream Muslims. But despite the law minister's assurances, the TLP had refused to end the road blockage in Islamabad.

A government official, Khalid Abbasi, said that protesters on the road were armed with rods and sticks. Pakistani authorities [issued](#) a final warning to the protesters on Nov. 17, but since that time, hundreds more party workers had joined the demonstration.

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