



A statue representing one of the Stations of the Cross at the Basilica of the Holy Rosary, Bandel, West Bengal. Almost 90% of pilgrims visiting the shrine are Hindus and Muslims, according to Salesian Fr. John Chalil, shrine rector. (Thomas Scaria)

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The harassment of a group of Catholic nuns in India's eastern state of West Bengal reflects a growing climate of hostility toward Christians since a pro-Hindu party came to power in the state in May, a prominent lay Catholic group has said.

About 60 activists entered the convent premises of the Auxilium Salesian Sisters in North 24 Parganas district on July 12 and allegedly threatened the nuns with violence unless they demolished a chapel and cemetery that were nearing completion.

Elias Vas, president of the All India Catholic Union, or AICU, told UCA News on July 14 that the mob used "abusive language and intimidation" against the sisters.

He said the incident was not an isolated episode but part of a broader pattern of harassment targeting Christians and their institutions in several districts of West Bengal following the change in government.

According to witnesses, some members of the mob shouted: "Your government is no more in power; now it is our government."

Local Christians say the slogan reflects the growing confidence of Hindu nationalist groups after the Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP won the state election, ousting a secular regional party.

Vas said the mob's demands amounted to a direct challenge to the constitutional rights of religious minorities to practice their faith and manage their own institutions and properties.

"The threats represent an attempt to bypass the rule of law through intimidation and fear," he added.

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The union, India's oldest Catholic lay organization, urged the state government to provide immediate security for the Salesian Sisters and protect the chapel and cemetery, which it said had been constructed after obtaining all the required government approvals.

The organization also demanded legal action against those involved in the incident.

"The right to worship and the right to maintain places of worship are fundamental rights guaranteed by the Indian Constitution," Vas said.

He warned that any silence or inaction by the authorities would embolden those targeting religious minorities.

Vas said the Catholic lay body would continue to monitor the situation and would approach higher authorities and the courts if the state government failed to protect minority communities.

A senior church leader in West Bengal, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Christians across the eastern Indian state were deeply alarmed by what he described as a recent surge in attacks.

"We are very worried that our people have been repeatedly subjected to attacks over the past two to three weeks," the church leader told UCA News.

"It is extremely disturbing," he added.