

PAKISTAN: The lessons of the Asia Bibi case

Pakistan has released the purported blasphemer against Islam. Now what nation will have the courage to grant her asylum?

By Nina Shea

National Review (16.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2A0wodU> – Asia Bibi, the Catholic mother imprisoned in Pakistan for nine years and condemned to hang for violating that country's strict blasphemy law, has drawn broad sympathy throughout the West. Lacking credible evidence, and despite her denials, lower courts plainly yielded to Islamist pressure in making the illiterate field hand the first Pakistani woman to be given a death sentence for insulting Islam's prophet, Mohammed. Then on October 31, Bibi finally received justice in an acquittal by Pakistan's supreme court. But when she was released a week later, she found that mobs were baying for her blood throughout Pakistan – and, most surprisingly, that the West held out no firm offer of a safe haven.

Islamabad has given assurances that Bibi has been taken to a secret, secure location inside Pakistan, pending a permanent place of refuge. But her escape seems stalled. The West's response so far of passive hand-wringing while Bibi faces mortal danger indicates more than poor planning; it shows a failure to fully comprehend the deeply radicalizing effects of the blasphemy taboo within the world's second-largest Muslim nation – and the inroads it has made in the West.

Western leaders have consistently expressed concern for Bibi during her nearly decade-long ordeal. Human-rights advocates, such as the indefatigable Lord David Alton, who just last month met personally in Pakistan with the chief justice, have vigorously championed Bibi in the British parliament. Yet when the moment of truth arrived, London quickly decided it would not give her asylum owing to security concerns. The U.K. has its own radical Islamist leaders within its million-strong Pakistani community to worry about, including Anjem Choudary, paroled last month following a terror-law conviction. Lord Alton called the British decision “craven.”

In Paris, the city hall had an enlarged photo of Bibi by its front entrance when I last visited several years ago, and France has long been discussed as a place of asylum for her. But deadly Islamist attacks against Charlie Hebdo’s editors for blasphemy, and most recently against French Jews, make asylum there unthinkable. Last week Italy and Canada revealed their engagement in “sensitive” multilateral talks on Bibi’s case, but so far neither has offered an actual legal grant of asylum. Also last week, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau apologized for Canada’s turning away the MS St. Louis and its 907 desperate Jewish passengers seeking refuge from German Nazis 79 years ago. Hopefully, he will apply the St. Louis lesson to throw a lifeline to Bibi.

A recent appeal on Bibi’s behalf by 190 European parliamentarians demands her safe passage from Pakistan but says nothing specific about where she can go next. The European countries most welcoming to refugees – the Scandinavian states, Germany, the Netherlands – all have a recent history of Islamist rioting and murder over perceived

blasphemy against Islam: by irreverent cartoons, Theo van Gogh and Ayaan Hirsi Ali's film on the treatment of women, a papal speech at Regensburg University, etc. Providing indefinite, round-the-clock security to a marked person such as Bibi would be costly, as the U.K. learned with Salman Rushdie. And Amsterdam has already had to withdraw much of its embassy staff from Pakistan this week following threats received after the nation granted asylum to Bibi's lawyer and the Dutch politician Geert Wilders mocked the Muslim prophet on Twitter.

In a landmark blasphemy case in October, the European Court for Human Rights upheld an Austrian court's conviction of a political activist on charges similar to Bibi's, albeit they don't carry the death penalty. For the sake of keeping social peace, Europe's highest civil-rights court validated that country's interest in criminalizing speech that "defames" the prophet Mohammed and in establishing a right to have "religious feelings protected." The Austrian defendant had criticized the prophet as a "pedophile" for marrying a six-year-old; Bibi's alleged insult is not disclosed, since repeating it would be deemed another act of blasphemy in Pakistan.

In truth, the anti-blasphemy movement went international several decades ago. After Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa in 1989 against anyone connected with Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, several of its editors, translators, and sellers were either attacked or murdered in Japan, the United States, Norway, and Turkey. The Saudi-based Organization of Islamic Cooperation leveraged the 2005 Danish cartoon crisis to get Europe to police speech to protect Islam. Since then, the EU has adopted hate-speech bans on anything deemed Islamophobic by anyone. (Charges in the Austria case were brought by a secular magazine, not Muslims.)

Europe is trying to placate the Islamists by giving in on the blasphemy issue, but Bibi's experience is a case study on how legitimizing religious speech taboos only fans the flames.

Bibi was arrested in 2009 after she triggered a dispute with Muslim women when she, an "infidel," took a sip of water from a communal cup while harvesting a hot field. The Muslim women accused Bibi of blaspheming their prophet during the course of this heated exchange. At trial, the Muslim berry pickers gave conflicting testimony and were manipulated by a local imam – facts that were overlooked by the trial court and Bibi's devastatingly inexperienced trial attorney but would be determinative for the supreme court. In 2010, Bibi was convicted and sentenced under section 295-C of the 1986 blasphemy law. For her own protection, she was confined in an isolation cell, where she cooked her own food to avoid poisoning.

With the blasphemy law already infamous as an oppressive tool for settling personal scores against Christians and other minorities, Asia Bibi attracted the sympathy of Punjab's governor, Salman Taseer, and Pakistan's minorities minister, Shahbaz Bhatti. Both were assassinated in 2011. The murder of Bhatti, a Christian, occurred with impunity, while Mumtaz Qadri, the killer of the Muslim governor, was arrested, tried, and sentenced to death, whereupon he became lionized as a martyr for the faith.

Qadri's fans include a large part of the Pakistani lawyers' association, whose members, in their trademark black suits, showered rose petals on him as he entered the courthouse. They

volunteered by the hundred to defend him pro bono. In 2008, this same lawyers' association was enthusiastically cited by the New York Times as a hopeful sign for upholding Pakistan's liberal tradition," and as "perhaps the most consequential outpouring of liberal, democratic energy in the Islamic world in recent years." But as lawyers rallied around the blasphemy issue, it became deeply illiberal. Saiful Mulook, one of the last of the true liberals, who represented Bibi in her appeal, had to flee for his life last week and go to the Netherlands.

Another figure inspired by Qadri is hardline cleric Khadim Rizvi, who organized Tehreek-eLabbaik (TLP), a burgeoning political party centered on fighting blasphemy against Islam. Last week TLP incited massive protests against Bibi in Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi, paralyzing key transportation routes. To restore order, the government blocked cellphone service and social media throughout the country for three days. Prime Minister Imran Khan also reportedly gave Rizvi a chance to appeal the supreme court's decision to release Bibi and promised to block her from leaving the country. Meanwhile, Rizvi has been calling for the murder of the judges, It's not clear what the prime minister will do if Bibi gets an actual visa and promise of asylum from the United States, for example. So far he hasn't had to cross that bridge.

Bibi's husband, Ashiq Masih, told me two and a half years ago, after a conference – held in New York and sponsored by the Holy See – on persecution that Pakistan's supreme court wanted to release his wife but, concerned about anti-blasphemy rioting, was waiting "until things cooled down." The court, tired of waiting, finally released Bibi last week, and Pakistan's ensuing descent into radicalism, wholly separate from the Taliban, has been on full display. Asia Bibi is the litmus test of whether the United States and the rest of the

West are really willing to defend persecuted religious minorities around the world.

Nina Shea

Director, Center for Religious Freedom

November 16th, 2018

National Review Online

Promoting American leadership and global engagement for a secure, free, and prosperous future.

.....

If you want to be regularly informed about different violations of human rights in the world, click here for a free subscription to our newsletters!

Also:

HRWF database of news and information on over 70 countries: <http://hrwf.eu/newsletters/forb/>

List of hundreds of documented cases of believers of various faiths in 20 countries: <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>