

PAKISTAN: Protests break out following Asia Bibi's acquittal. Christian schools close indefinitely in Lahore

Police set up roadblocks on Punjab highways as radicals protest in the province and the capital Islamabad. The authorities are monitoring the situation from a central control centre, including "red zones" in sensitive areas.

By Kamran Chaudry

AsiaNews (31.10.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2PdYRrd> – This morning Pakistan's Supreme Court cleared Asia Bibi of all charges. The Christian woman spent nine years in prison for blasphemy is now free. Her acquittal has plunged the country into chaos and confusion.

Islamic radicals quickly reacted, organising demonstrations and roadblocks in the major cities. As a result, in Lahore, Church authorities ordered the indefinite closure of Christian schools and asked parents to come and take their children home. Likewise, "Schools will remain closed till further notice," said a sign at St Peter's High School, which is run by the Diocese of Raiwind of the Church of Pakistan.

In view of the situation, the Province of Punjab invoked Section 144 of the Penal Code, which forbids public

demonstrations with more than four people. The ordinance was not enough to stop extremists in the streets of the provincial capital Lahore.

Police barriers blocked Tehreek-e-Labbaik demonstrators from reaching the Provincial Assembly building. Rangers were deployed in Youhanabad, Lahore's largest Christian enclave. The first arrests took place in the city of Multan.

After Punjab, Sindh too banned public gatherings under Section 144 over "possible terrorist activities".

Local authorities set up a control room to "monitor the prevailing law and order situation" and liaise with various agencies: police, other law enforcement agencies, commissioners and their deputies.

Meanwhile, Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan blocked the Power House Chowrangi roundabout in Karachi pledging to stop the whole city.

In the federal capital Islamabad, Jamaat-i-Islami party called on Muslims to join the protests.

The Capital Territory's deputy commissioner, Muhammad Hamza Shafqaat, twitted that "Aabpara Chowk and Faizabad are blocked", but the "Bara Kahu, Tarnol and Kashmir Highway is still open."

For their part, police set up a “red zone” around Rawal Lake.

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PAKISTAN: Pakistani Christian Asia Bibi has death penalty conviction overturned

By Sophia Saifi and James Griffiths

CNN (31.10.2018) – <https://cnn.it/2JsxC5V> – Pakistan’s Supreme Court has acquitted a Christian woman who has been on death row for almost eight years on blasphemy charges.

Asia Bibi, a mother of five from Punjab province, was convicted of blasphemy in 2010 and sentenced to hang after she was accused of defiling the name of the Prophet Muhammed during an argument the year before with Muslim colleagues.

The workers had refused to drink from a bucket of water Asia Bibi had touched because she was not Muslim. At the time, Asia Bibi said the case was a matter of women who didn't like her "taking revenge."

She won her appeal against the conviction and subsequent death sentence on Wednesday.

The court quoted Shakespeare's "King Lear" in its ruling, saying Asia Bibi appeared to have been "more sinned against than sinning."

"Even if there was some grain of truth in the allegations leveled in this case against the appellant still the glaring contradictions in the evidence of the prosecution highlighted above clearly show that the truth in this case had been mixed with a lot which was untrue," the ruling said.

David Curry, CEO of Open Doors USA, an organization that lobbies on behalf of Christian minorities, said in a statement that "we are breathing a sigh of relief today."

“These charges stemmed from her Christian identity as well as false accusations against her,” he said. “We are hopeful that Pakistan will now take additional steps to offer religious freedom and basic human rights throughout the country.”

Islamist movement Tehreek-e Labbaik had previously vowed to take to the streets if Bibi was released, and protests broke out in Islamabad and Lahore soon after the ruling was announced.

Within hours, the protests were large enough that government officials in the cities were urging people to stay inside and avoid adding to the chaos.

Controversial law

Under the Pakistan penal code, the offense of blasphemy is punishable by death or life imprisonment. Widely criticized by international human rights groups, the law has been used disproportionately against minority religious groups in the country and to go after journalists critical of the Pakistani religious establishment.

Her case has attracted widespread outrage and support from Christians worldwide, and condemnation from conservative Islamist groups in Pakistan, who have demanded the death penalty be carried out and threatened widespread protests in the event of her being freed.

The case has been extremely divisive within Pakistani society,

splitting liberals and conservatives and leaving even many supporters afraid to speak out on Asia Bibi's behalf.

In 2011, senior politician Salman Taseer was shot dead by his own bodyguard for voicing support for Asia Bibi and condemning the country's stringent blasphemy laws. His killer, Mumtaz Qadri, immediately surrendered to police and was later executed, becoming a martyr for many hardline Islamists.

At his funeral in 2016, thousands converged on the northern city of Rawalpindi as the Pakistani media was blacked out to prevent riots. Leaders of prominent Islamist political parties attended the funeral as supporters of Qadri carried signs in celebration of his "bravery."

Qadri's grave, in the capital city of Islamabad, has since become a shrine for those supporting Asia Bibi's death sentence.

Polarizing case

Amnesty International researcher Rabia Mehmood said that one of the reasons the Asia Bibi case has become so polarizing and controversial is the Pakistani government's failure to take "effective measures to curb the campaign of hate and violence incited by certain groups in the country following her conviction, in fact the state has shown immense tolerance for the narratives of hate."

She previously highlighted a tweet by a media organization linked to Tehreek-e Labbaik, which last year led to violent anti-blasphemy protests, warning the court to "think carefully

before making any decision.”

In May this year, Pakistan’s Interior Minister, Ahsan Iqbal, was shot and wounded in his shoulder in an incident police sources linked to the 2017 demonstrations.

“We can only hope that (the Asia Bibi case) becomes a watershed moment when it comes to blasphemy laws in Pakistan,” Mehmood said.

A verdict in Asia Bibi’s favor, sends “out a message of hope and will be a step in addressing human rights abuses, religiously motivated discrimination and violence targeted at religious minorities and even Muslims who are accused of committing blasphemy.”

CNN understands that at least two Western countries have offered Asia Bibi asylum once she has been released. Such a move will likely be greeted by mass protests by Islamist groups, which could turn violent.

It will also prove a key test for new Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, who courted the country’s religious right during his successful campaign and has voiced support for blasphemy laws.

Khan should “take a stance against the intimidation of Tehreek-e-Labbaik, whose leaders have demanded that Khan fulfill his promises to make Pakistan an ‘Islamic state’,”

Pakistani journalist Rafia Zakaria wrote for CNN last month.

“Instead of snubbing the international community, one that Islamists see as impinging on Pakistan’s move toward a full theocracy, Khan could emphasize the need to embrace it and to work with it. In other words, Khan could choose to stand with the innocent woman instead of the rabid and bloodthirsty extremists.”

Religious battle

Outside of Pakistan, Asia Bibi’s case has become a rallying call for many Christians, particularly Catholics.

Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) led prayers for Asia Bibi’s release last week in the UK, at a ceremony attended by her husband Ashiq Masih and daughter, Eisham Ashiq.

“We have prayed 10 years now for our sister, Asia, and I am confident that our prayers will be heard, and the judgment will go in favor of Asia, her family and the entire Pakistani Christian community,” Father Emmanuel Yousaf said in a statement from the group.

The family met with Pope Francis at the Vatican in February, during which the Catholic leader reportedly described Asia Bibi as a “martyr,” according to ACN President Alessandro Mondeduro.

Francis' predecessor, Pope Benedict, previously called for Asia Bibi's release.

In her 2012 book "Get Me Out of Here," Asia Bibi included a letter to her family urging them not to "lose courage or faith in Jesus Christ."

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PAKISTAN: Pakistan acquits 112 in case of torching Christian homes over

blasphemy rumour

Reuters (29.01.2017) – <http://reut.rs/2jRlMVD> – A Pakistani court acquitted 112 suspects in the 2013 torching of hundreds of Christian homes in the eastern city of Lahore over a rumour that one of the residents there had blasphemed, a lawyer said on Sunday.

In March 2013, more than 125 homes in Lahore's Josep Colony were burned by a mob of more than 3,000 Muslims responding to rumours that a local Christian man, Sawan Masih, had made derogatory remarks about the Prophet Mohammad.

No one was killed in the incident but there was widespread damage to the property of the mostly destitute Christians living in the neighbourhood. Two churches and dozens of Bibles were also desecrated in the attack.

Defence lawyer Ghulam Murtaza Chaudhry said an anti-terrorism court in Lahore had acquitted 112 people accused of torching and ransacking hundreds of houses.

"They were acquitted by the court because of lack of evidences against them," Murtaza told Reuters. "The state witnesses could not identify the accused and their statements were also contradictory."

All 112 suspects were already out on bail.

A road sweeper in his late twenties, Sawan Masih told police after his arrest on blasphemy charges that the real reason for the blasphemy allegation was a property dispute between him and a friend who spread the rumour.

In Pakistan, conviction under the blasphemy laws can carry a mandatory death sentence.

Masih was sentenced to death in 2014, a decision he has appealed.

Critics of Pakistan's blasphemy laws say they have long been used by individuals and religious groups to settle disputes.

This month, the Pakistani Senate's human rights panel said it would debate how to prevent the country's blasphemy laws being applied unfairly, the first time in decades that any parliamentary body had considered a formal proposal to stop the abuse of the blasphemy laws.

Many conservatives in Pakistan consider even criticising the laws as blasphemy, and in 2011 a Pakistani governor, Salman Taseer, was assassinated by his bodyguard after calling for reform of the laws.

His killer Mumtaz Qadri was hailed as a hero by religious hard-liners. Tens of thousands of supporters attended his funeral after he was executed last year and a shrine was built over his grave soon after his burial.

Hundreds of Pakistanis are on death row for blasphemy convictions.

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