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## **Pakistan's most famous accused blasphemer escaped to Canada. Others remain on death row.**



*Islamist activists in Karachi, Pakistan, carry placards against Asia Bibi, a Pakistani Christian woman who was recently released after spending eight years on death row for blasphemy, during a rally in. (Asif Hassan/AFP/Getty Images)*

By Pamela Constable

The Washington Post (18.05.2019) - <https://wapo.st/2VUYzsv> - One prisoner is an illiterate Christian street cleaner who got into an argument with a Muslim friend while they were out drinking. Another is a U.S.-trained university professor whose liberal Facebook posts upset Islamist student activists.

A third is a middle-aged woman who occupies the cell vacated by [Asia Bibi](#), the Pakistani field hand who was sentenced to death for blasphemy in 2010 and acquitted by the

Pakistan Supreme Court twice. She was allowed to leave for Canada this month after spending nearly a decade on death row.

These three Pakistanis are among 40 imprisoned on blasphemy charges or convictions. About half are serving life terms, and half have been sentenced to death. Pakistan has never executed anyone for blasphemy, but many convicts are held in solitary confinement for years while awaiting appeals.

Bibi's acquittal and welcome abroad have given other long-term detainees cause for hope, but their lawyers and family members say it is a slim one. Accused blasphemers are reviled by the public, few lawyers are willing to represent them, and lower courts are pressured to convict. Appeals courts often commute death sentences to life terms, but only after years of tension, isolation and often declining health.

One convicted man, Wajihul Hasan, has been on death row since 2002. Just two weeks after Bibi was acquitted last November, two brothers in Lahore, Qaiser and Amoon Ayub, were sentenced to hang for making "derogatory remarks" about the prophet Muhammad on a Christian website.

"Now that Asia Bibi is free, I pray that God will help my husband too," said Sobia Masih, 30, the wife of Sawan Masih, a street cleaner in Lahore who was accused of insulting Islam in 2013 during a dispute. He was sentenced to death in 2014, and Sobia last saw him in prison at Christmas. "This has turned our lives upside down," she said. "I have to live in hiding, and my children do not tell anyone he is their father."

As with many blasphemy cases, the charges against Masih were widely reported to have ulterior motives. His family and neighbors said local industry owners wanted to seize the area to build steel mills. Nearby Muslims, enraged by rumors of Masih's offensive talk, attacked and [burned the Christian neighborhood](#) to the ground.

"I handed Sawan over to the police myself so the mob wouldn't kill him," said Joseph Francis, a Christian activist at a legal aid center in Lahore that assists blasphemy defendants.

Mob violence against accused blasphemers is common in Pakistan, though rarely prosecuted. This past week, a Pakistani court upheld death sentences for three Muslims, but acquitted two others, in the [2014 mob killing](#) of a Christian couple who were falsely accused of throwing Koran pages in the trash. They were beaten to death and thrown into an open-air brick furnace.

The ruling reflected growing judicial concern over religious violence at a time of increasing organized [agitation against blasphemy](#), including death threats against Bibi. Confrontations have spread from poor minority communities to college campuses with hard-line Islamist student groups.

In 2013, Fulbright scholar Junaid Hafeez had returned from studying at [Jackson State University](#) in Mississippi and was teaching English literature at a university in Multan city. An outspoken liberal, he was denounced by Islamist students for hosting feminist authors. They also accused him of posting offensive material on Facebook, including comments about the wives of the prophet Muhammad.

The police arrested him, searched his laptop and charged him with blasphemy. Hafeez has remained in solitary confinement since 2014, while efforts to defend him have been thwarted by threats and violence. His first lawyer quit after being hounded by conservative colleagues. His second lawyer, human rights activist [Rashid Rehman](#), was warned in court by prosecutors that he would not be alive for the next hearing on Hafeez's case.

Several days later, Rehman was shot dead in his office by unknown gunmen.

Hafeez is now represented by Asad Jamal, who said that repeated court delays have prevented his case from coming to trial. He said Hafeez, now 33, was seen as a threat by various campus interests and framed for provocative online writings that were circulated or electronically altered by others.

"There was complex conspiracy against him," Jamal said. "Junaid raised questions on many social issues, but there is nothing blasphemous in anything he wrote or posted." After five years in prison, he said, the outgoing academic and poet has become "an agitated, angry person."

Many Muslim countries have laws against blasphemy, but Pakistan's are exceptionally harsh and easy to abuse. Any act intended to "outrage religious feelings" is punishable by 10 years in prison. Defiling the Koran mandates a life sentence, and "derogatory" comments against the prophet Muhammad require "mandatory death."

There is a special law for Ahmadis, a religious minority that claims to be Muslim but is widely ostracized and legally banned from proselytizing. Ahmadis are frequent targets of personally motivated blasphemy charges, and four are in prison under death sentences. But the mere accusation, Ahmadi leaders say, can be ruinous.

"Once you are blamed for blasphemy, your life is gone," said Saleem ud Din, a spokesman for the national [Ahmadi Community](#) organization. "No matter how unfounded the allegations, and even if the court acquits, you can't take chances because you can be killed."

Even though Muslims such as Hafeez can be charged with blasphemy, most defendants are members of religious minorities, often Christians from poor communities. Increasingly, cellphones and social media are playing a role, and police investigators go to enormous efforts to track blasphemous content in emails or texts.

The woman imprisoned in Bibi's old cell, Shagufta Masih, was convicted with her husband Shafqat of sending blasphemous texts to the owner of an Islamic bookstall in Lahore. The couple have limited educations and had worked for years as school custodians, but police said they traced offensive English-language texts to their cellphone SIM cards.

In 2014, a judge ruled they had both committed a "heinous offense" against Islam and sentenced both to hang.

Saif ul-Maluk, the lawyer who previously defended Bibi, now represents the couple. He said the charges against them were fabricated and that someone had used their SIM cards to malign them, possibly due to a personal dispute. He said Shagufta had told him that the police beat her husband and threatened to "parade her naked in public" if he did not confess.

"The whole story was false," he said.

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## **Blasphemy: A Christian couple still awaits an appeal**

***Pakistan's other woman blasphemy victim and her disabled husband still await an appeal against their blasphemy conviction***

By Wilson Chowdhry

British Pakistani Christian Association (12.05.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2JV7bYP> - Following the joyous news of Christian Asia Bibi's release from jail in the early hours of Wednesday 8th May, we highlight the plight of a Christian Pakistani couple who have also been facing execution in a Pakistan prison for five years.

Shagufta Kousar and Shafqat Masih were sentenced to death on 4th April 2014 following a court trial where they were accused of sending blasphemous text under Islamic law to a Muslim man. Now Shagufta is imprisoned at Multan Jail and Shafqat is 150 miles away at Faisalabad District Jail both have not seen each other since their incarceration and are exhibiting signs of severe depression.

The couple, believed to be in their late 30's, hail from the city of Gojra from the Punjab province. They led a simple life and were living with their four young children in a church compound. Shagufta was employed as a cleaner and servant at the local church school.

On 18th July 2013, Muhammad Hussain, a Muslim, complained to his Mosque clerics about a blasphemous text that he had allegedly received on his phone whilst praying and whilst seeking legal advice, he claimed to have received more.

Despite Shagufta and Shafqat being illiterate and unable to text in English or having an understanding of alphanumeric symbols, local police registered a blasphemy case following the complaint of a cleric. This resulted in the couple being arrested on 21st July 2019 under charges of both "insulting the Koran" and "insulting the Prophet."

The police had obtained confessions from Shafqat which both defendants claim was given under duress. Shafqat has stated to his previous lawyer fighting his case at Toba Tek Singh District Court "To save my wife, I confessed,"

The couple have appealed the sentence at district court level on the grounds that the witnesses produced by the prosecution during the trial were related to the complainant and were therefore inimical towards the couple. The appeal stated: "Their statements require independent corroboration, which is lacking in this case."

Furthermore, evidence exists that Judge Mian Amir Habib, who sentenced the couple to capital punishment, was intimidated by hardline lawyers and religious leaders in the community.

Shagufta, a caretaker at St John Girls High School, Gojra said that her National Identity Card was stolen by a friend of Mr. Hussain who had used it to purchase a SIM card in her name that was then used to send the text messages which the prosecution denies.

Both Shagufta and Shafqat are arguing against their conviction on the basis that there is no evidence that they purchased the SIM involved and adding that as they are both illiterate, could not have possibly sent the messages which were written in English.

The couple have also stated that the motive behind the allegations made by Mr. Hussain was that he wanted revenge after a minor quarrel that took place between their children and their neighbours 6 months prior.

Shafqat is currently paralysed from the waist down following an accident in 2004 when he fractured his spine and is also suffering from depression. Moreover painful sores that he has developed since his incarceration are causing a rapid decline in his health which could lead to a premature death.

Mehwish Bhatti BPCA representative were told that the pair have received visitors rarely given the long distance for friends and relatives to travel to Multan jail and for safety reasons the couple are unable to see their 4 children Zain (15 yrs), Danish (12 yrs),

Joshua (10 yrs), Sarah (9 yrs). All the children are said to be looked after by their paternal aunt.

The couple who are being represented by the same legal team that helped Asia Bibi win her freedom led by Saif-Ul-Malook, have had their appeal delayed by an administration error and are still waiting for a new date of a hearing once re-listed.

Saif-Ul-Malook, spoke with BPCA and said:

"This is a sad situation, they did not get a fair trial.

"They are innocent."

It is believed that a known friend of the complainant who was also working there stole a copy of her National Identity Card (NIC). He then used the stolen document to purchase the alleged SIM card in her name and later misused the SIM card to implicate Shagufta and her husband - colluding with Muhammed Hussain.

However, the prosecution claim that the alleged SIM was purchased by Shagufta along with her husband from a JAZZ franchise.

Wilson Chowdhry, Chairman of the British Pakistani Christian Association, said:

"The arrest of Shagufta and Shafquat in 2014 for blasphemy sparked a worrying trend of Christians accused for derogatory text messages and social media postings.

"Mobile phones and social media which had up to that point done so much to help build the campaign for persecuted Pak-Christians began to be the very tool used to deliver life sentences and death by hanging to innocent victims.

"Five years on, the imprisoned couple are praying for their release and awaiting the relisting of a previously poorly administered appeal.

"The simple fact that the couple could not possibly have written the blasphemous text messages due to being hyper-illiterate should result in their immediate release, however in Pakistan primary evidence can often be ignored and worse still manipulated by powerful and wealthy people intent on doing malice.

"Despite a code of practice courts inevitably permit blasphemy charges without obtaining the necessary authorisation from Government - this flexibility with the rule of law has allowed perpetrators of injustice to allege blasphemy with ease.

"Moreover, the impunity which exist for those who commit perjury to convict innocent victims under false blasphemy charges, only serves to increase the application of such laws to persecute minorities and to settle personal vendettas.

"Laws exist which could easily penalise the perjurers and mobs which attack those accused of blasphemy but are rarely used, court procedures exist that could protect victims from the absurd charges but are ignored.

"This all points in the direction of apathy towards change - clearly no reform of Pakistan's draconian blasphemy laws will have any effect.

"The nation has only one choice if they want to be seen as a modern democracy which is to abrogate these pernicious laws forever."

## Asia Bibi is free at last

British Pakistani Christian Association (08.05.2019) - Pakistan's most famous blasphemy law victim Asia Bibi was finally released from her homeland where she has become the most hated figure in the country despite law courts exonerating her from the false charges that had kept her incarcerated in solitary confinement for almost 10 years.

In the early hours of the morning today(1am) BPCA received confirmation from a British diplomat that Asia Bibi had safely exited Pakistan. Asia Bibi bravely held on to her faith through the most brutal of incarcerations that involved her having access to sunlight for two hours per month. Now she finally travels to Canada to be reunited with her children.

Asia a berry-picker was beaten and raped for an alleged blasphemy offence in June 2009 when she reacted to the abusive treatment she was receiving for drinking from the same well as Muslims. While she was being beaten and berated by women colleagues she simply uttered the words 'my Christ died for me what did Muhammed do for you?' The men workers from her berry field then began their attack and returned with a mob a few days later to lynch her.

Other local Christians called the police to get her put into safe custody but then a local Imam (Islamic preacher) then accused her of blasphemy and stated that he had personally witnessed the blasphemy despite being at neither event where the alleged crimes took place.

Asia Bibi was failed her High Court Appeal in November 2016, however on 31st October 2018 a Supreme Court Appeal exonerated her original charges and although the decision was made through Pakistan's Apex Court, she was forced to remain in the country to address a petition to her Supreme Court decision submitted by extremist group Tehreek-e-lebaaik. This was after the country's prime minister Imran Khan capitulated to the demands of extremists whose riots had brought the country to a standstill.

On 29th January, three months after her acquittal by the Supreme Court, the court finally quashed the petition by Tehreek-e-Labaaik in essence finally declaring Asia Bibi free and freeing her from her original charges completely.

On 11 April 2019, Prime Minister Imran Khan stated that a "complication" has delayed the departure of Asia Bibi from the country.

British Pakistani Christian Association Chairman, Wilson Chowdhry has been communicating with the husband of Asia Bibi daily up until Monday 6th May 2019, he said:

"Ashiq has always remained hopeful of an imminent release from Pakistan and we have both been shocked at how long it has taken.

"Asia Bibi and Ashiq have remained resolute in their faith and have prayed daily for their release and today God has answered their prayers.

"BPCA are grateful that we have been able to be a part of this family's journey to freedom and will continue to pray for them and assist them where we can."

He added:

"Having spoken to various diplomats and Government officials I have been astounded by reports that the delay was caused by the myopic approach by leaders of Pakistan's

military who have prevented the exit of Asia Bibi through fear of the bad press the nation of Pakistan would receive.

"Their pernicious delays have only served to fuel more international shame on a country which has already hit rock-bottom with their poor human rights record.

"Asia Bibi is unwell and has suffered 10 years of isolation both in and out of captivity - she must be treated with utmost care and receive appropriate medical care now she is free.

"The Pakistani Government must ensure Asia and her family are compensated for the loss to their freedom and the fragile safety they have had to suffer under their auspices.

"Moreover moves must be made to reform or abrogate the infamous blasphemy laws of Pakistan."

Several campaigns prior to Asia Bibi's conviction and since have failed to alter or remove the draconian blasphemy laws of Pakistan. These laws were introduced to India by Britain in 1860 to protect Muslims from Hindus, but the Pakistan Penal Code was islamised in the 1980's by dictator Zia Ul Haq and have since been used as a tool for discrimination by Islamists and to exhort property and settle vendettas with Christians and Ahmadis by Muslims.

British Pakistani Christian Association has continued to track and support 14 Christian blasphemy accused, besides Asia Bibi throughout the years.

### **Report on Blasphemy victims still in Jail**

<b>Shugafta &amp; Shafqat</b>	<b>Accusation of Sending Blasphemous msg</b>	<b>Jul-2013</b>
<b>Shezad Masih</b>	<b>Using Blasphemous words</b>	<b>Jul-2017</b>
<b>Qaiser Ayub</b>	<b>Using Blasphemous words</b>	<b>Nov-2014</b>
<b>Sawan Masih</b>	<b>Blasphemous Comments</b>	<b>Nov-2013</b>
<b>Imran Masih</b>	<b>Blasphemous Video in phone</b>	<b>May-2016</b>
<b>Nabeel Masih</b>	<b>Posting a derogatory image on social media</b>	<b>Oct-2016</b>
<b>Perzvaiz Masih</b>	<b>Using Blasphemous words</b>	<b>Sep-2015</b>
<b>Patras Masih</b>	<b>Posting a derogatory image on social media</b>	<b>Feb-2018</b>
<b>Awais Qamar</b>	<b>Using PVC banner as carpet which had religious words</b>	<b>Jul-2015</b>
<b>Humayun Faisal</b>	<b>Burnt shreds of the Quran in a pile of Garbage</b>	<b>May-2015</b>
<b>Ishfaq Masih</b>	<b>Using Blasphemous words</b>	<b>Jun-2017</b>
<b>Asif Stephen</b>	<b>Burning of Quran</b>	<b>Aug-2017</b>
<b>Nadeem Masih</b>	<b>Blasphemous poem through text msg</b>	<b>Oct-</b>

British Pakistani Christian Association, continues to provide advocacy and humanitarian aid to Christians in Pakistan and the Pak-Christian diaspora.

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## Christians, Hindus and Muslims from Lahore: We need a law against forced conversions

By Shafique Khokhar

Asia News (03.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2CRQpFB> - **Every year in the country at least 1,000 minority girls are forced to recant their faith and convert to Islam. Christian demonstrator: "It is a disgrace that forcible conversions are not considered a violation of human rights". Activists of religious groups and civil society also demonstrated in Faisalabad.**

We need "a law against the frequent episodes of kidnapping, forced conversions and forced marriages of Hindu women and girls, Christians and other religious minorities". Pakistani Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and lay activists organized a Protest Camp in Lahore, facing the Punjab Assembly on March 30th, while a similar event took place in Faisalabad (see video) .

The initiative is inspired by the abduction of two Hindu sisters, forcibly converted and forced to marry two Muslim men. The participants affirm: "The minorities are afraid. A law must be passed to eliminate forced conversions ".

The phenomenon is not new and has deep roots in the rigid radical Muslim mentality and patriarchal traditions. According to the most recent surveys, every year at least 1,000 girls are forced to recant their faith and adhere to Islam. In the last 40 days this fate has happened to nine minors belonging to Hindu and Christian minorities.

The protest rally was led by Riwadari Tehreek [*Inter-religious Movement for Tolerance*, ed.], in collaboration with various religious and civil society associations. Activists call for the arrest of Mian Mithu, guardian of Barchundi Sharif in Ghotki district, and Ayub Jan Sarhandi, of Sarhandi mosque in Umerkot district. These are influential Islamic religious leaders, implicated in numerous cases of abduction and conversion, against which no provision has ever been adopted.

Samson Salamar, president of Riwadari Tehreek, says: "This horrible trend leaves minorities in a state of misery, pain, terror and insecurity. All this goes against international standards on human rights and against the Constitution of Pakistan, which guarantees religious freedom to every human being without discrimination ".

Saeeda Diep, president of the *Institute for Peace and Secular Studies*, adds: "Conversions to Islam in suspicious circumstances are a source of grave concern and spread even more terror and anger among minorities, already victims of other discriminatory forms".

According to Tariq Siraj, head of *Human Rights Concern Network*, "we need to launch an awareness campaign in civil society". For Katherine Sapna Karamat, director of Christians

"True Spirit," it is a misfortune that many do not consider conversions extracted by force as a violation of human rights ".

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## **Mentally disabled Christian accused of blasphemy in Pakistan**

### ***Islamic cleric leads mob to attack mentally disabled believer and family***

International Christian Concern (13.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Hy8SdO> - International Christian Concern (ICC) has learned that Stephen Masih, a 42-year-old mentally disabled Christian, was accused of committing blasphemy against the prophet of Islam. He was accused on March 11, 2019, in Badiana, a neighborhood in the district of Sialkot in Pakistan's Punjab province. Faraz Masih, the victim's nephew and an eyewitness, informed ICC that Masih has been mentally disabled since birth. According to Faraz, the entire neighborhood knows Stephen's mental status and local children often tease and beat him.

Stephen Masih was accused of derogatory remarks against the prophet Muhammad by Hafiz Muhammad Mudasir, a local Muslim. During the incident in question, Stephen was debating with his brother-in-law over fasting and praying during Lent. However, because of his mental state, he became exacerbated and began shouting loudly, attracting attention from the neighbors.

When Mudasir reached Stephen's house, he began beating Stephen, unprovoked. The family members protested against Mudasir's illogical interference into the family's matter. Mudasir, who identifies as a cleric, left Stephen's house in anger, warning that he would teach Stephen a lesson for insulting him. Shortly after, Mudasir returned, leading a mob of angry Muslims.

With direction from Mudasir, the mob began beating Stephen and other family members for the alleged crime of blasphemy. Police have registered a First Information Report (FIR) against Stephen under the country's blasphemy laws, section 295 C of the Pakistan Penal Code. Stephen is currently in police custody.

While speaking with ICC, Ayub Qaiser, Director of FGA Pakistan, said, "It is sad and shocking that blasphemy laws are being misused, even against special persons. The authorities must look into the situation and introduce amendments and special care of the mentally immature people." Qaiser urged for protection for Stephen's family members and a fair trial of the case.

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