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Life sentence upheld for Christian in blasphemy case

Islamist pressure again appears to influence judges in Pakistan.

Morning Star News (27.06.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3h4HG7B> - A court in Rawalpindi, Pakistan upheld the life sentence of a Christian convicted of sending blasphemous text

messages in spite of the prosecution's manipulated evidence and failure to establish his involvement, his lawyer said.

Zafar Bhatti, 56, had been handed the life sentence, which in Pakistan is 25 years, on May 3, 2017, under Section 295-C of Pakistan's blasphemy laws for allegedly sending text messages derogatory to Islam's prophet. The Christian continues to deny the charge.

On Tuesday (June 22), an additional sessions judge in Rawalpindi District upheld Bhatti's conviction even though new evidence presented by the prosecution again failed to directly link Bhatti with the alleged offense, according to his attorney.

In a bid to convert his life term into a death sentence, the complainant in the case, Ibrar Ahmed Khan, last year filed an application in the Lahore High Court (LHC) Rawalpindi Bench seeking forensic examination of cellular company audio samples to try to establish Bhatti's direct involvement in the texts, attorney Tahir Bashir said.

Police had obtained audio samples from the cellular company during the trial, but they could not be examined forensically due to absence of a testing facility at that time, he said.

Police obtained samples from three people, including the SIM card's registered owner, Ghazala Khan, who used to work with Bhatti.

"When someone calls the cellular company for activation of the SIM card, their voices are recorded," Bashir said. "In this case, the SIM used in the alleged offense was activated thrice – the first two times by some people related to Ms. Khan, and the third time by the woman herself. Bhatti never possessed the SIM, but his phone set was mysteriously used to send those blasphemous text messages. It's quite clear that the convict was trapped in the case through his phone."

Khan was also arrested and charged with blasphemy in 2012. At her trial in April 2013, Justice Khalid Mehmood of the LHC Rawalpindi Bench refused to pass judgment against her and instead tried to convince the complainant to forgive her. Khan said she was innocent and did not want forgiveness but to be freed on merit.

The judge showed leniency and granted her bail. She died in November 2016 from Hepatitis C, aged 39.

Bashir said that on April 15, LHC Rawalpindi Bench Justice Sadaqat Ali Khan remanded the case to Rawalpindi Additional Sessions Judge Sahibzada Nazeem Sultan with the direction to complete the examination of "new evidence" within two months.

Citing "evidence manipulation," Bashir said that the CD allegedly containing Bhatti's voice sample from the cellular company's records turned out to be blank when it was played in court.

"The police then sought time from the judge and manufactured a new CD containing Bhatti's audio samples from the recordings that were made in the presence of a magistrate during the trial in 2017," he said. "They presented this CD as a record from the cellular company even as I argued that the audio record should be directly summoned from the company."

During the initial trial, the judge was not satisfied with the evidence purported to incriminate Bhatti, so he had sentenced him to life imprisonment even though the mandatory punishment under Section 295-C is death, the attorney said.

"The trial court judge had given the verdict under immense pressure, because the complainant was an office bearer of the Islamist extremist outfit Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat," Bashir said. "I believe the verdict delivered this time was also under pressure, because there's no direct evidence against Bhatti."

Lower court judges routinely hesitate to make rulings based on merit or free those accused of blasphemy, instead transferring their burden to higher courts while the accused and their families suffer.

Bashir said that he had filed an appeal against Bhatti's conviction in the Lahore High Court in 2017, but it had been repeatedly adjourned on one pretext or the other over the years.

"On the other hand, the LHC ordered reexamination of the evidence on a single application by the complainant," he said. "It's very unfortunate that innocent people are made to suffer in jail, and their appeals are kept pending by the higher courts for years." Despite the "disappointing verdict" and delay tactics, he said he was still hopeful that the LHC would accept his appeal and order Bhatti's acquittal.

Church officials and human rights groups say blasphemy allegations are frequently used not only to settle personal scores but to target religious minorities in Pakistan.

A Senate Special Committee on Human Rights and the Islamabad High Court in 2018 recommended that those making false blasphemy accusations be given the same punishments as those for blasphemy convictions, but the government dismissed the recommendation. The recommendation also stated that anyone registering a blasphemy case at a police station must bring two witnesses.

While punishment for blasphemy ranges from several years in prison to death in Pakistan, a person making a false accusation faces potential punishment of only six months in prison or a fine of 1,000 rupees (US\$6). Successive governments have acknowledged that the blasphemy laws are blatantly misused, but little effort has been made to stop the abuses.

Rights activists say it's unlikely that any government will move to repeal or amend the blasphemy laws due to fierce Islamist sentiments in the Muslim-majority country. They say Pakistani authorities must be urged to immediately implement effective procedural and institutional safeguards at the investigative, prosecutorial and judicial levels to prevent abuse of these laws.

At least 35 people in prison in 2020 received death sentences for blasphemy, compared with 29 the previous year, according to the U.S. State Department's 2020 International Religious Freedom Report. The report cites the Center for Social Justice, a national Non-Governmental Organization, as reporting that at least 199 people were accused of blasphemy offenses in 202, the highest number of blasphemy cases in a single year in the country's history. Most of the accused were Shia (70 percent of cases) and Ahmadis (20 percent), according to the report.

The U.S. State Department in December re-designated Pakistan among nine other "Countries of Particular Concern" for severe violations of religious freedom. Previously Pakistan had been added to the list on Nov. 28, 2018.

Pakistan ranked fifth on Christian support organization Open Doors 2021 World Watch list of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.

Photo : Market in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. (Trueblood7886, Creative Commons)

Court acquits Christian couple on death row for 7 years of blasphemy charges

See our [10 May article](#) about our campaign for the release of the Christian couple and our news on Pakistan in [2021](#) and [2020](#)

By Emily Wood

The Christian Post (03.06.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3fXs6ub> - A Pakistani court acquitted a Christian couple of their blasphemy charges after being "left to die" on death row for nearly eight years over false allegations that they insulted the Islamic prophet Muhammad through text messages.

Police arrested Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar [in July 2013](#) when Maulvi Mohammed Hussain, a mosque leader, claimed Emmanuel used his wife's phone to send him an offensive message insulting Muhammad with other blasphemous statements.

A two-member bench of the Lahore High Court finally ordered their release from jail on Thursday after hearing arguments from both sides, [Daily Pakistan](#) reported.

Emmanuel claims that the police extracted a false confession from him by torturing him in front of his wife and children, according to the United States-based persecution watchdog group [International Christian Concern](#).

The couple was charged with "insulting the Quran" and "insulting the prophet," though little evidence was presented regarding the couple's charges. Saif-ul-Malook, the couple's attorney, told ICC he was "just happy to get justice for this couple."

Malook had previously told the [Union of Catholic Asian News](#) that it was a "bogus case" that judges were afraid to hear.

"A session judge who visited the Faisalabad jail described Shafqat as a hopeless case," Malook said. "It means that being Christian and a blasphemy accused is itself sufficient for being hated by police, judges, lawyers and the overall society. They are left to die."

The phone that sent the "blasphemous" messages was registered in Kausar's name, but she claims Hussain stole her National Identity Card to purchase a SIM card in her name to send the incriminating messages to himself to frame her.

The texts were also written in English, which the couple does not even speak.

The couple claims the arrest stemmed from a minor quarrel between their children and neighbors six months before the arrest.

Emmanuel, who is a paraplegic and suffers from deteriorating health due to a lack of adequate medical care, was sent to a separate prison from his wife in 2014.

[Amnesty International](#) wrote an appeal to the inspector general in April urging the prison to provide Shafqat with adequate healthcare as he was in "sharp decline" due to painful bedsores and reliance on prison guards for his care.

"The couple should not be in jail at all, let alone at risk of execution," Amnesty International wrote in the letter. "Pakistan's blasphemy laws do not meet human rights law and standards, they lack essential safeguards to minimize the risk of rights violations and illustrate the dangers faced by the country's religious minorities. The urgency with which the injustices in this case must be remedied is heightened by Shafqat's pain and lack of access to appropriate health care. ..."

"I strongly urge you to grant Shafqat prompt, regular and unrestricted access to adequate health care as necessary," the letter added. "In addition to that, [he] and his wife Shagufta should be immediately and unconditionally released. I call for the couple and their lawyer to be provided with adequate security upon their release."

The couple's children remained in hiding as their parents' case was [delayed](#) since the blasphemy accusations could lead to extremist attacks against them.

ICC Regional Manager William Stark said it was "great to see such a prolonged blasphemy case justly resolved," even though the family remains in danger.

"However, we remain deeply concerned for the safety of the Christian couple and their family," Stark said in a statement. "Extremists in Pakistan are known to target individuals accused of religious crimes, like blasphemy, even after they have been acquitted."

"The abuse of Pakistan's blasphemy laws must be curbed, and false allegations must be rooted out and punished," he continued. "Too often these laws have been a tool in the hands of extremists seeking to stir up religiously motivated violence against minorities. Without reform, religious minorities will continue to face false blasphemy accusations and the violence that often accompanies these accusations."

A Christian mother of five, Asia Bibi, was acquitted by the Pakistan Supreme Court in 2018 after sitting on death row for around eight years after being falsely accused of [blasphemy](#). Bibi wrote a [memoir](#) entitled *Finally Free* about her ordeal.

Blasphemy charges against minority faiths are common in Pakistan. While no one has been executed on a blasphemy charge, many accused of blasphemy are impacted by retaliatory [mob violence](#), mass lynchings or vigilante murders carried out by extremists.

False accusations of blasphemy are widespread in Pakistan and often stem from ulterior motives, religious hatred and personal vendettas. Many charged with blasphemy never reach the courtroom.

Pakistan is the fifth-worst country in the world for Christian persecution due to Islamic extremist oppression, according to Open Doors USA's 2021 [World Watch List](#). It is also ranked as the second-most dangerous country in Asia for Christians.

The U.S. State Department recognizes Pakistan as a "country of particular concern" for tolerating or engaging in egregious violations of religious freedom.

The [U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom](#) reports that human rights activists have advocated for decades to reform Pakistan's blasphemy laws that disproportionately charge religious minorities and are often based on false accusations.

"Vague provisions" found in sections 295 and 298 of Pakistan's Penal Code criminalize any speech or acts "insulting a religion or belief or defiling the Quran, the [Islamic] prophet Muhammad, a place of worship, or religious symbols," according to USCIRF.

Lisa Curtis, the senior director for South and Central Asia at the U.S. National Security Council during the Trump administration, [said](#) at the 2019 State Department Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom that more people are imprisoned for blasphemy in Pakistan than all the other countries in the world combined.

Photo: Reuters

Do not forget victims of blasphemy laws who are behind bars

The European Parliament has voted a resolution against blasphemy laws and for the release of a Christian couple on the death row for seven years in Pakistan.

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HRWF (10.05.2021) - On 29 April, MEPs voted [a resolution against blasphemy laws](#) in Pakistan in which they expressed their concerns for the health and wellbeing of Pakistani couple Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel, who were sentenced to death on blasphemy charges in 2014. Since their conviction, based on deeply flawed evidence, they have been held captive and isolated from each other and their families, while their appeal process has been postponed repeatedly, MEPs say. The resolution was adopted by 681 votes in favour, 3 against with 6 abstentions.

The resolution notes that Pakistan's controversial blasphemy laws, despite never having led to official executions, incite harassment, violence and murder against those being accused. There have been cases of mob violence against accused who were finally freed and against judges who had released them. Asia Bibi, a Christian who had been sentenced to death by hanging in 2010, was released in October 2018 when the [Supreme Court of Pakistan](#) acquitted her based on insufficient evidence, though she was not allowed to leave the country until the verdict was reviewed. She had to hide all the time to avoid being killed by extremist groups.

The European Parliament calls on the Pakistani authorities to release Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar immediately and unconditionally and to overturn their death sentence.

Should they need to leave Pakistan, EU countries must issue emergency visas and offer international protection to the couple, MEPs urge, as well as for their lawyer Saiful Malook and others that stand accused for peacefully exercising their rights.

On 7 May 2019, Canada granted Asia Bibi political asylum. EU member states 'did not rush' to provide her a safe haven at that time.

Blasphemy Laws

Pakistan Penal Code Sections 295 A, B, and C and Section 298 A, B, and C ¹

295-A. Whoever, with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the 'religious feelings of any class of the citizens of Pakistan, by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representations insults the religion or the religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years or with fine or with both.

295-B. Whoever wilfully defiles, damages or desecrates a copy of the Holy Qur'an or of an extract therefrom or uses it in any derogatory manner or for any unlawful purpose shall be punishable with imprisonment for life.

295-C. Whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation or by any imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to fine.

298-A. Whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation, or by any imputation, innuendo or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of any wife (Ummul Mumineen), or members of the family (Ahle-bait), of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him), or any of the righteous Caliphs (Khulafa-e-Rashideen) or companions (Sahaaba) of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years, or with fine, or with both.

298-B. (1) Any person of the Qadiani group or the Lahori group (who call themselves 'Ahmadis' or by any other name) who by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation,

(a) refers to, or addresses, any person, other than a Caliph or companion of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), as 'Ameer-ul-Mumineen,' 'Khalifa-tul-Mumnineen', Khalifa-tul-Muslimeen, 'Sahaabi' or 'Razi Allah Anho';

¹ Legislative Council, Pakistan Penal Code (Act XLV of 1860)

(b) refers to, or addresses, any person, other than a wife of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), as 'Ummul-Mumineen';

(c) refers to, or addresses any person, other than a member of the family (Ahle-bait) of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), as Ahle-bait; or

(d) refers to, or names, or calls, his place of worship as 'Masjid': shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years, and shall also be liable to fine.

(2) Any person of the Qadiani group or Lahori group (who call themselves 'Ahmadis' or by any other name) who by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation, refers to the mode or form of call to prayers followed by his faith as 'Azan', or recites Azan as used by the Muslims, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years, and shall also be liable to fine.

298-C. Any person of the Qadiani group or the Lahori group (who call themselves 'Ahmadis' or by any other name), who directly or indirectly, poses himself as a Muslim, or calls, or refers to, his faith as Islam, or preaches or propagates his faith, or invites others to accept his faith, by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representations, or in any manner whatsoever outrages the religious feelings of Muslims shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years and shall also be liable to fine.

Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel :A timeline of the proceedings

18 June 2013: Blasphemous text messages were sent to a cleric and a lawyer from a phone allegedly registered in Shagufta Kausar's name.

21 July 2013: Shagufta and her husband Shafqat Emmanuel were arrested and charged with blasphemy.

4 April 2014: A sessions court in Toba Tek Singh, Punjab Province, sentenced Shagufta and Shafqat to death.

6 February 2016: Shafqat filed a petition in the Lahore High Court for bail, pleading: *"I have developed bedsores and I may die in jail."* He also said, *"There are serious contradictions in witness accounts against me and my wife and we are hopeful of an acquittal on our appeal."*

May 2019: Asia Bibi's lawyer Saiful Malook, who has taken up the couple's case, stated: *"They did not get a fair trial. They are innocent."* He visited Shagufta in April and reported, *"Shagufta needs help from the world, she is constantly weeping that she cannot spend any more time there. And Shafqat is disabled on the bed, he can't move. The latest doctor's report indicates that his whole back is almost destroyed from the bed sores. He may die in prison."*

June 2019: Lahore High Court set 25 June 2019 as the appeal hearing date for Shagufta and Shafqat.

March 2020: It was reported that a final verdict in the couple's case was expected to be read by the Lahore High Court on 8 April 2020. Shagufta and Shafqat's new defence lawyer Khalil Tahir Sandhu said he was "*confident*" of a positive outcome because "*there is no clear evidence against the two of them*". On 20 February, a judge reportedly ordered a fresh probe into what he called "*dubious evidence*" used to sentence them to death on blasphemy charges.

8 April 2020: Shagufta and Shafqat's appeal verdict was due to be read out by Lahore High Court but was postponed due to the Covid-19 crisis. No new date was given.

3 June 2020: Shagufta and Shafqat's appeal hearing, which had been rescheduled for 3 June, was postponed until 22 June 2020.

22 June 2020: Shagufta and Shafqat's appeal hearing was postponed again and rescheduled for 10 September 2020.

10 September 2020: The appeal hearing was adjourned because one of the two panel judges failed to appear. It was rescheduled for 24 September.

24 September 2020: Shagufta and Shafqat's case was called but the judges said they would hear the case the following week, without giving any reason for the postponement.

29 September 2020: A new date of 22 October 2020 was set for the appeal hearing.

17 October 2020: Lawyer Saiful Malook tweeted that the hearing was to be rescheduled because the bench was not available for 22 October.

21 October 2020: Saiful Malook tweeted that the hearing was rescheduled for 4 November 2020.

14 December 2020: Saiful Malook tweeted that the hearing, due to be held on 16 December, was to be rescheduled.

22 January 2021: The hearing was rescheduled for 15 February at Lahore High Court.

15 February 2021: The scheduled hearing was adjourned to 4 March.

8 March 2021: Saiful Malook tweeted that the appeal "*is ordered to be heard on second week of April*".

15 April 2021: Shagufta and Shafqat's appeal, scheduled to be heard on 15 April, was postponed because of an increase in Covid-19 cases. Amnesty International recently

reported that Shafqat's health is rapidly deteriorating. His lawyer says he has multiple bed sores that are not being given adequate treatment and are increasingly painful. Shafqat was in a coma for three days in March, according to his family, but was not taken to the prison hospital.

51 names of blasphemy prisoners in HRWF Database

Ahmadis (5)

AHMAD Mubasher - AHMED Ehsan - AHMED Ghulam - WAQAR Ahmad - WARAICH Shaheed Ahmad.

Catholics (1)

KENNETH Anwar

Protestants (29)

ASGHAR Muhammad - ASGHAR Noman - ASHRAF Malik - FAISAL Humayun - AYUB Qaisar - BHATTI Zafar - BIN Hajaj - EMMANUEL Shafqat - FAROOQ Malik - GILL Aftab (Pastor) - ISHAQ Soofi - JAMES Nadeem - KAREEM Abdul - KAUSAR Shagufta - KAUSER Shaguftah - LATIF Shafeeq - MASIH Imran - MASIH Ishfaq - MASIH Patras - MASIH Sajjad - MASIH Sajjad - MASIH Shahbaz - MASIH Yaqoob Bashir - MUSHTAQ Sunny - PERVAIZ Asif - SAMSON Nadeem - STEPHEN Masih.

Shias (1)

SATTAR Abdul

Sunnis (15)

AHMAD Maqsood - ALI Muhammad - ALI Rehmat - ASIF - ASLAM Muhammad - HAFEEZ Junaid - HAMEED Abdul - MAHDI Arif - MUSHTAQ Muhammad alias MASTA - RASOOL Inayat - RAZA Taimoor (Shia) - SHAFI Muhammad - SHAHZAD Muhammad - UD DIN Shamas - YOUSAF Muhammad.

As of 10 May 2021, at least 20 were on the death row and 15 got a life sentence.

See details of their cases [here](#) and the 64-page report of UK Home Office "[Country Policy and Information Note – Pakistan: Christians and Christian Converts](#)" (February 2021), which also mentions details of HRWF's Database of FORB Prisoners.

Conclusions

Up to now Pakistan has ignored United Nations repeated appeals to repeal its blasphemy laws or, at the very least, ensure the necessary safeguards are in place to prevent the abuse of these laws.

In 2014, Pakistan entered the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+), which "should provide a strong incentive to respect core human rights and labour rights" among others but this has been proven not to be the case. Despite continuing violations of human rights, including religious freedom, the European Commission certifies that Pakistan remains eligible for the scheme. The European Parliament calls on the European

Commission “to urgently submit a report to the Parliament explaining why Pakistan remains eligible for the GSP+”, suspecting that business seems to prevail on human rights concerns.

Human Rights Without Frontiers supports this position and will monitor the follow up of this initiative as European regulations stipulate that countries not respecting human rights are not eligible for GSP+ status, that allows products to come into the EU market from vulnerable developing countries without import duties.

European Parliament: Pakistan blasphemy law incompatible with trade benefits

A motion asks the Commission to reconsider the privileged GSP+ status accorded to the country, because of its gross violations of religious liberty.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (05.03.21) - <https://bit.ly/3vUsIWt> - On April 30, 681 members of the European Parliament voted in favor of [a motion censoring Pakistan](#) for its human rights and religious liberty violations. Only three MEPs opposed it.

The motion focuses on Pakistan’s law on blasphemy, and on the case of the Christian couple Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel. They were arrested in 2013 and sentenced to death in 2014 for blasphemy. The case originated from messages insulting Prophet Muhammad sent to a Muslim cleric using a SIM card registered in Shagufta’s name. However, the couple denies any knowledge of the messages, and claims that the SIM card was purchased and used by an unknown person who impersonated Shagufta when registering it.

While their appeal hearing keeps being delayed, the couple remains in jail. Shagufta is in solitary confinement. Shafqat’s lower body is paralyzed, and he relies on prison guards for mobility. He also has multiple pressure ulcers that are not being properly treated. In March, the motion says, “he was reportedly in a coma for three days and was not taken to the hospital.”

The motion states that this is not a unique case. Unfortunately, “the blasphemy laws of Pakistan are notoriously broad, vague and coercive, and establish the automatic and mandatory imposition of the death penalty.” These laws “violate the State’s human rights obligations, inter alia, to respect and fulfil the right to life, equality before the law, prohibition of discrimination, freedom of opinion and expression, and freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief.”

Defendants cannot expect a fair trial, the European Parliament says. “Judges are pressured and intimidated into convicting defendants, defense lawyers have been killed in court and witnesses and families have had to go into hiding out of fear,” In general, “fear of violence prevent lawyers, the police, prosecutors and judges from conducting their work in an effective and impartial manner.” Today, at least 17 people remain on the death row on blasphemy charges, with new accused being constantly added to the list.

The motion notes that “blasphemy laws create a climate of terror and coercion in Pakistan, which affects all religious minorities, including Christians, Hindus, Sikhs as well as “Sufi, Ahmadiyya and Shia Muslims,.” All religious minorities “are prevented from freely and safely engaging in religious activities and express their beliefs and non-beliefs, as they are vulnerable to violence, arbitrary detention and persecution.”

More broadly, the motion says, “blasphemy laws in Pakistan are also used to silence voices that are critical of the government,” including journalists and artists. Women are taken into forced marriages. “The religious party Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) is building considerable barriers to human rights by persecuting politically and religiously dissenting voices and accusing them of blasphemy.”

Noting that Pakistan has ignored United Nations appeals to repeal its blasphemy laws, the Parliament calls on the European Commission “to urgently submit a report to the Parliament explaining why Pakistan remains eligible for the GSP+; when preparing the report, calls on the Commission to take into consideration the persistent and serious human rights violations.”

The GSP is the Generalized Scheme of Preferences (GSP), that allows products to come into the EU market from vulnerable developing countries without import duties. However, European regulations stipulate that countries not respecting human rights are not eligible for GSP+ status. The European Parliament now suspects that this may have been ignored, and the status accorded to Pakistan, by those who made the fact that European Union is #1 Pakistan trading partner prevail on human rights concerns.

Photo : *European Parliament and its President, David Sassoli* ([credits](#))

Another Ahmadi mosque attacked

A mob demolished the minarets and mihrab of the building in Muzaffargarh. Again, the police sided with the thugs.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (15.04.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3dsQthS> - Despite international protests, [attacks against Ahmadi mosques in Pakistan](#) continue unabated.

On April 11, a crowd gathered around the Ahmadi mosque in a village in the area of Muzaffargarh, in Punjab, and started demolishing the minarets and mihrab.

Local Ahmadis called the police, which sided with the attackers, and actually arrested five members of the minority religions.

The incident proved, once again, that the Supreme Court 2014 directives for the protection of places of worship of minority religions are not respected in Pakistan. The Ahmadis are regarded as “heretics,” and officially declared non-Muslim by Pakistani law. Referring to their places of worships as “mosques” is prohibited.

Apart from any theological dispute, Pakistan should guarantee the freedom of religion or belief to all its citizens, and protect them from harassment coming from violent mobs and

militias. When it comes to the Ahmadis, this almost never happens, and hundreds of them have been killed, with perpetrators rarely punished.

[Hindu](#), Sikh, and [Christian](#) minorities are also subject to various forms of discrimination and persecution in the country.

Two Christian nurses in Pakistan falsely accused of blasphemy by Muslim co-worker

Mob Shuts Down Hospital Calling for Christians to be Hanged

International Christian Concern (09.04.2021) - <https://bit.ly/31YIOBw> - International Christian Concern (ICC) has learned that two Christian nurses in Pakistan have been formally accused of committing blasphemy against Islam. According to local sources, the Christians were accused by a Muslim coworker of desecrating wall hangings that contained Quranic verses.

On April 9, Mariyum Lal and Newsh Arooj, two Christian nurses working at Civil Hospital in Faisalabad, were falsely accused of committing blasphemy. Local sources report that Lal was directed to remove old wall hangings and stickers from a wall by Rukhsana, a senior nurse at the hospital. Following Rukhsana's instructions, Lal removed the wall-hangings and stickers.

Rukhsana, who reportedly holds a grudge against Lal, provoked other Muslim staffers at Civil Hospital by claiming Lal desecrated wall hangings that contained Quranic verses. In response, a Muslim staffer at the hospital's pharmacy, named Waqas, attacked Lal with a knife as she was attending a patient in the hospital's medical ward. Lal received several injuries to her arm but survived the attack.

The false blasphemy allegation against Lal soon spread to the broader community and a mob of enraged Muslims staged a protest outside of Civil Hospital. Members of the mob demanded Lal be arrested and hanged for committing blasphemy.

"This is an alarming situation for the weaker segments of society," Asif Munawar, a member of the Ministry of Human Rights and Minority Affairs Punjab, told ICC. *"This is the second case within three months where a nurse is being accused of committing blasphemy."*

"The authorities must take notice of these practices," Munawar continued. *"Mariyum Lal must be protected in police custody for a fair investigation to take place."*

Police registered a First Information Report (FIR # 347/21) in connection with the blasphemy allegation. According to the FIR, Mariyum Lal and Newsh Arooj are both accused of violating Pakistan's blasphemy laws under Section 295-B.

In Pakistan, false accusations of blasphemy are widespread and often motivated by personal vendettas or religious hatred. Accusations are highly inflammatory and have the potential to spark mob lynchings, vigilante murders, and mass protests.

Since Pakistan added Section 295-B and 295-C to the country's blasphemy laws in 1987, the number of blasphemy accusations have skyrocketed. Between 1987 and 2017, 1,534 individuals in Pakistan have been accused of blasphemy. Out of that 1,534, 829 accusations (54%), were made against religious minorities. With Christians only making

up 1.6% of Pakistan's total population, the 238 accusations (15.5%) made against Christians is highly disproportionate.

ICC's Regional Manager, William Stark, said, "We here at International Christian Concern condemn the false blasphemy accusation that has been leveled against Mariyum Lal and Newsh Arooj. In Pakistan, blasphemy allegations ruin the lives of the accused, even if proved to be false. We call on Pakistani authorities to thoroughly and fairly investigate this false allegation and bring the false accuser to justice. Pakistan's blasphemy laws must no longer be allowed to settle personal scores or incite religious hatred. Too often these laws have been a tool in the hands of extremists seeking to stir up religiously motivated violence against minorities."

Khatam-e-Nabuwat demolishes Ahmadi mosque with police help

The journalist who reported on it is now himself at risk of being arrested.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (25.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/31rTRmm> - Khatam-e-Nabuwat is a radical Barelvi Muslim organization in Pakistan, which opposes any change to blasphemy law and calls for increased repression of the Ahmadis, a religious movement that offers its own interpretation of Islam and is regarded as non-Islamic by Pakistani law.

Not content with the harsh existing anti-Ahmadi legislation, Khatam-e-Nabuwat activists often take the law in their own hands. Last week, journalist Bilal Farooqi **tweeted** that Khatam-e-Nabuwat members had demolished the dome and minaret of an Ahmadi mosque in Garmola Virkan village, Gujranwala district, Punjab, and also desecrated the *kalima* (a text on the fundamentals of Islam) inscribed on it. The journalist accused the local police of having actively cooperated with the extremists.

Bilal Farooqi is a well-known journalist in Pakistan. He was already **arrested last year** for his reporting and posts, and is now under investigation again for having posted on Twitter about the Ahmadi mosque destroyed in Punjab.

But in fact, Khatam-e-Nabuwat had advertised the event itself. One of its members **tweeted** that "Mujahideen Khatam-e-Nabuwat have saved Islam after demolishing the minarets of Ahmadiyya mosque in Garmula Virkan and erasing the Kalima from the mosque," and posted a video with militants celebrating after the attack.

Leading international human rights organization have protested the long-lasting persecution of the 2,5 million Ahmadis living in Pakistan, where they are treated as second-class citizens and often attacked by extremist mobs. So far, the Pakistani government has failed to protect them against serious violence and frequent killings.

The case of Garmula Virkan is just the latest one in a long series of incidents where local police have sided with mobs attacking the Ahmadis rather than protecting the religious minority. Journalists who report on the attacks are also at risk.

Petition filed to make the death penalty the only punishment for blasphemy in the Pakistan Penal Code

CLAAS-UK (25.03.2021) - Pakistan's attorney general and provincial advocate general have been issued notices by the Peshawar High Court regarding a petition calling for the removal of all punishments except the death penalty for blasphemy from the country's penal code.

The notices were issued because the bench said the matters raised in the petition needed serious consideration.

The petitioner claimed the issue of an alternative punishment of life imprisonment had already been decided by the Federal Shariat Court, but it had not been implemented by federal and provincial governments.

According to him, the Federal Shariat Court said an alternative punishment of life imprisonment went against the injunctions of Islam.

The hearing will be fixed later.

The respondents in the petition are the federation of Pakistan through law secretary, federal law minister, KP governor and its chief minister, KP Assembly through its secretary, provincial law minister, provincial chief secretary and law secretary, and KP Assembly's speaker.

According to the petitioner it is the responsibility of the respondents to bring all existing laws in conformity with the injunctions of Islam as laid down in the Holy Quran and Sunnah, under Article 227 of the Constitution.

Nasir Saeed, director of CLAAS said: "This is not the time to relive the issue of whether the only punishment for those who commit blasphemy should be the "death sentence" for, but this is the time to think about how to stop the misuse of the blasphemy law, as we see everyday how this law is being misused.

Since the blasphemy law was amended in 1986, we have seen the unimpeded misuse of this law by individuals and religious groups to achieve their goals and settle their personal grudges, especially against religious minorities.

A few years after this law was passed, we started seeing the negative impact of this amendment on society.

In 1992 the first 'blasphemy murder' took place of the Christian Punjabi poet and teacher Naimat Ahmar. Then after a few years, thousands of Muslims attacked the Christian village, Shanti Nagar, calling them blasphemers.

During the attack 785 houses and 4 churches were destroyed, while 2,500 Christians were also forced to flee their village. And the incidents continued after that with the attacks on Gojra and Korian, Sangla hill and Joseph colony, Lahore.

Dozens of people have been extra judicially killed including the Governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, the only Christian minister Shahbaz Bhatti and Shama and Shahzad who were burnt alive in the brick kiln factory. The killings also continue.

Several dozen innocent people are languishing in the country's prisons and it takes them years and years to get justice and prove themselves innocent.

Imran Ghafur, Asia Bibi and Wajih-ul-Hassan are just a few examples, and nobody has any remorse, neither the lawmakers nor the courts.

The need to amend to the law was recognised even after a few years. Several governments have pledged to stop its misuse, and even recommended 10 years imprisonment for a false accusation, but until today nothing has changed. Instead voices against the misuse of the blasphemy law have been forced into silence.

And now the issue has been reignited with calls for the removal of the word “or” and to make the death penalty the only punishment for blasphemy, while the majority know that this law is being misused.

Mr Saeed further said that the government must take this matter seriously and take appropriate steps to stop the ongoing misuse of this law.

Pakistani convert seeks protections at Europe’s top court

ADF International (22.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3vXdUae> - A Pakistani national is fighting for his life at the European Court of Human Rights. Swiss authorities had rejected his request for religious asylum. The man, known by the initials “M.A.M”, appealed against his deportation based on his conversion from Islam to Christianity – a religion known to face severe persecution in parts of South Asia. Human rights group ADF International has intervened at Europe’s top court, providing up-to-date information on the situation for converts in the region and highlighting the robust legal protections for not just believing something, but being able to live in accordance with those beliefs. The court’s rulings impact more than 800 million Europeans in 47 countries.

“Nobody should be persecuted for their faith. Pakistan is one of the most dangerous countries for Christians with its draconian blasphemy laws and increasing violence towards Christian groups. Converts face not only socio-political marginalization and institutionalized discrimination, but also blasphemy charges, arrest, long prison sentences, and vigilante mob violence. The detention of Christians systematically involves mistreatment and abuse, both physical and psychological. Even when released, Christian converts must go into hiding or flee for their safety as friends and neighbours often turn against them. Such factors must form part of any risk assessment for those, such as M.A.M, who are claiming asylum based on religious grounds,” said Jennifer Lea, legal counsel for ADF International at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

Call for international action amidst alarming threats to Christian converts

While the Federal Administrative Court of Switzerland affirmed that M.A.M’s conversion was indeed credible and occurred prior to his asylum rejection, they nevertheless found that his rights to life, to protection from inhumane treatment and to freedom of thought, conscience or religion would not be in jeopardy were he to be returned to Pakistan.

Pakistan is currently placed at number 5 on the World Watch List, which ranks countries based on their level of Christian persecution. The persecution level is classed as “extreme” due in part to its blasphemy laws which carry the death penalty. Converts from Islam are considered apostates and face particular risk.

The case of Asia Bibi, a woman accused of blasphemy and held on death row for eight years until she was acquitted, serves as a well-known example of the current threat. After her acquittal, there were violent demonstrations across Pakistan threatening her life. Following intense international pressure, she was finally allowed to leave and thereafter sought asylum in Canada.

Forced marriages of minors

ADF International allied lawyers are currently supporting the case of Maira within the Pakistani courts. The 14-year-old girl was abducted, raped and married as part of a "forced conversion" which she faced because she is a Christian. Maira waits in hiding while her pro bono legal team works to annul this marriage certificate. Her story is just one example of a violent phenomenon which affects an estimated 1,000 girls from religious minorities in Pakistan every year.

"International law protects the right to express one's faith in public and in private. But, in Pakistan, simple attempts by Christians to talk about the faith with Muslim neighbours can be prosecuted under blasphemy laws, which can result in the death penalty. The cases of Asia Bibi and Maira, which gained international media attention, provide very real examples of the persecution that many Christians face. We hope the European Court of Human Rights will recognize the dangers faced by in particular by Christian converts in Pakistan, and afford protection to M.A.M and others like him," said Tehmina Arora, Director of Advocacy, Asia for ADF International.

Photo: ADF International

Adventist sentenced to death for blasphemy

Sajjad Masih Gill was serving a life sentence from 2013 for allegedly offensive SMS. On appeal, judges said this was not enough.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (22.03.21) - <https://bit.ly/3r9b4LF> - Is life imprisonment an adequate punishment in Pakistan for sending an SMS critical of Prophet Muhammad? No, said last week the [Lahore High Court](#): only the death sentence would do.

Sajjad Masih Gill is a 35-year Seventh-day Adventist from the district of Pakpattan, in the province of Punjab. In 2011, he was accused of having sent blasphemous SMS defaming Prophet Muhammad and arrested. The police did not find any evidence in his cell phone that the SMS had in fact been sent, but said it had been able to trace the messages back to his phone number through a cellphone tower. He and his lawyers maintained he had simply been framed as part of a crackdown on the Adventist community.

On July 13, 2013, the court of Gojra, Punjab, sentenced him to life imprisonment. His appeal got international support, including [by the American Jewish Committee](#), but was [repeatedly delayed](#) and moved from one court to another.

The case went on in a climate of violence. On October 22, 2015, Sajjad's brother, Sarfraz Masih Gill, and nephew, Ramiz Gill, [were attacked](#) when they were returning home after visiting Sajjad in jail. They had to live in hiding ever since. [On January 29, 2016](#), two

lawyers from Sajjad's defense team were stopped by armed men and threatened on the road from Kasur to Lahore.

Last week, the appeal (or, rather, revision) verdict was finally pronounced, with the judges accepting the prosecutors' argument that the only possible penalty for blasphemy is death. The lawyer who led the final argument for the prosecution, Zeeshan Ahmed Awan, celebrated the success by posting on Facebook that "Honorable Lahore High Court accepts our prosecution argument that 'Capital Sentence is the only possible Sentence in Blasphemy and Imprisonment for Life though provided in 295 C PPC, awarded by Trial Court is illegal being repugnant to injunctions of Islam!'"

Sajjad's legal team announced its intention to continue the legal fight, in what is another sad chapter in the enforcement of Pakistani law on blasphemy.

Photo: Sajjad Masih Gill (from Twitter)

Two Christians charged under blasphemy law for distributing Christian literature

CLAAS (14.02.2021) - On 13 January Model Town police station, Lahore registered a blasphemy case under section 295 -A, B and C, Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), which has a mandatory death penalty, against two young Christians, Haroon Ayub Masih and Salamat Mansha Masih.

The complainant Haroon Ahmad said in his statement that while he was in the Model Town Park with his friends Harris Khalid, Zakir Ali and Zulqarnain, two Christian boys approached them and introduced themselves as Haroon Ayub and Salamat Mansha and handed over a copy of a Christian booklet "Water of Life" and started preaching about Christianity.

They further said that the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had strayed on the path of religion while Christ had never married and continued His preaching while their prophet had got married to extend his line.

Ahmad further told the police that the men further said the Bible is the true book while the Holy Quran is not a true book. He claimed Mansha Masih repeated this sentence, hurting their religious feelings. Ahmad said such words against Islam and their disrespect of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is an act of terrorism and intentionally committing a blasphemy against Islam and the prophet (PBUH), therefore a case should not just be registered against Haroon and Mansha but the whole group involved in distributing this literature should be arrested and also this whole blasphemous literature should be confiscated.

The police arrested Salamat Mansha while Haroon Ayub escaped, and the whole family has gone into hiding.

Nasir Saeed Director of CLAAS-UK said: "This is the 2nd case of this year. Last month a Christian staff nurse and gospel singer was charged under the blasphemy law, while

according to her she has not committed blasphemy, but she was falsely implicated in the case by her Muslim colleagues because she used to tell them to do their duty honestly and not bother patients for money. She used to offer prayers and respects all religions, including Islam.”

Mr Saeed further said that the constitution of Pakistan or any Pakistani law imposes no restriction on anyone preaching or propagating their religion.

He added: “Although endeavours are continuing to convert Pakistan into a theocratic state and impose shariah law in the country, so far Pakistan is a democratic state and everyone has the right to preach and propagate their religion.

“This is not a right that only the majority religion has. Pakistan has signed international conventions on religious freedom and freedom of speech, therefore Pakistan must respect them.

“Unfortunately, Pakistani society has been torn apart by intolerance and violence, a far cry from the original ideal of a tolerant country.

“Religious minorities are increasingly the targets of bigotry, which is often instigated by extremist forces, Islamic political parties and their leadership.”

Protestants in prison

HRWF (03.02.2021) - As of 1 February 2021, HRWF had registered and documented 53 cases of believers of all faiths who were in prison in Pakistan: 28 Protestants, 15 Sunni Muslims, 5 Ahmadis, 2 Anglicans, 1 Catholic, 1 Hindu and 1 Shia (See <https://hrwf.eu/prisoners-database/>). All Christians behind bars were prosecuted on blasphemy charges. See here after what we published in our global report “In Prison For Their Faith 2020”. See full report at (<https://hrwf.eu>)

Reasons for the Persecution of Protestants in Pakistan

In July 2018, the US government estimated the total population of Pakistan to be 207.9 million. According to the provisional results of a national census conducted in 2017, 96% of the population is Muslim. According to the 2014 government registration documents cited by the press, there are approximately 1.4 million Hindus and 1.3 million Christians.²

In 1956, Pakistan was established as an Islamic Republic. Islam is still the official state religion, but the Constitution protects religious freedom by banning faith-based discrimination and upholding the right to religious practice and education. However, in practice, the state’s blasphemy laws have created a hostile environment and incited mob violence that targets members of minority religious groups such as Protestants.³

² For more religious statistics, see U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Report on international Religious Freedom: Pakistan 2018*, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/pakistan/>.

³ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF Recommended for countries of particular concern: Pakistan 2020*, 2020. <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Pakistan.pdf>.

Blasphemy laws have created 'a culture of impunity for violent attacks following accusations',⁴ as some religious fanatics believe that they are entitled to take the law into their own hands. There have been many instances where the local administration and police have either colluded with perpetrators or have stood by and done nothing to assist the accused out of fear of the crowd.

Additionally, the use of blasphemy laws has become a quick way of resolving conflicts arising from business rivalry, honour disputes, and disagreements over money and property. These laws have been instrumentalised for private settlement of scores in many cases. The accused are often lynched or killed by mobs before authorities can place them under arrest.

Pakistan is second only to Iran in its deviation from international law principles with its blasphemy laws, as well as in the severity of penalties for those convicted under them.⁵

Protestants in Prison in Pakistan

All Protestants in prison have been victims of Pakistan's blasphemy laws which are used and abused to persecute non-Muslim minorities and to settle private disputes.

Protestants behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 June 2020, HRWF documented **31 cases** of Protestants in its Prisoners' Database.⁶ All of these individuals were either convicted of or charged with blasphemy. Ten of them were sentenced to death, seven received a life sentence, two were given six years in prison and in 12 cases the sentences are unknown or they are awaiting trial.

It is common for there to be a lengthy delay with trials related to blasphemy as these cases are often moved between judges and lawyers are too afraid to defend the accused. This is unsurprising considering the pressure placed by radical and violent religious groups on judges to convict, and the hostile targeting of lawyers and politicians alike.⁷ In the past, judges have been attacked for acquitting blasphemy defendants and two politicians who discussed reforming the legislation have been shot dead.

Articles of the Penal Code

Prisoners are typically charged under the blasphemy laws in the Pakistani Penal Code:

Section 295-A: 'Deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs. Whoever, with malicious and deliberate intention of outraging the religious feelings of any class of the citizens of Pakistan, by words, either spoken or written or by visible representations, insults or attempts to insult the religion or religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, or with fine, or with both'.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Respecting rights? Measuring the World's blasphemy Laws*, April 7, 2016.

<https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Blasphemy%20Laws%20Report.pdf>.

⁶ Our Database is updated on a regular basis. For more details about imprisoned Protestants, see <https://hrwf.eu/prisonersdatabase/>.

⁷ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF Recommended for countries of particular concern: Pakistan 2020, 2020*.

<https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Pakistan.pdf>.

Section 295-B: 'Defiling the Holy Qur'an. Whoever wilfully defiles, damages or desecrates a copy of the Holy Qur'an or of an extract there from or used it in any derogatory manner or for any unlawful purpose shall be punishable with imprisonment for life'.

Section 295-C: 'Use of derogatory remarks in respect of the Holy Prophet. Whoever, by words either spoken or written, or by visible representation, or by imputation, innuendo or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Mohammad (peace upon him) shall be punished by death and shall also be liable to fine'.⁸

In the last 20 years, Pakistani authorities have not executed individuals sentenced to death on blasphemy charges;⁹ instead they are incarcerated indefinitely.

International advocacy

In a resolution dated 15 June 2017 concerning human rights defenders and the death penalty in Pakistan, the **European Parliament** stated that it:

Is deeply concerned at the continued use of the 'blasphemy law', and believes this is heightening the climate of religious intolerance; notes the findings of the Supreme Court of Pakistan that individuals accused of 'blasphemy' 'suffer beyond proportion or repair' in the absence of adequate safeguards against misapplication or misuse of such laws; calls, therefore, on the Pakistani Government to repeal Sections 295-A, 295-B and 295-C of the Penal Code, and to put in place effective procedural and institutional safeguards to prevent the misuse of 'blasphemy' charges; calls also on the government to take a stronger position in condemning vigilantism towards alleged 'blasphemers'.¹⁰

On 19 January 2018, the **European Commission** released a report for the European Parliament and Council regarding *The EU Special Incentive Arrangement for Sustainable Development and Good Governance ('GSP+') assessment of Pakistan covering the period 2016 – 2017*. In this report, the European Commission raised concerns about Pakistan's blasphemy laws being used to persecute individuals on religious grounds several times, and the state of religious freedom in Pakistan more broadly. The European Commission stated that:

Pakistan is requested to follow up on the recommendation to repeal all blasphemy laws or to amend them in compliance with the strict requirements of the Covenant; and to ensure the investigation and prosecution of those involved in incitement of or engagement in violent acts against others based on allegations of blasphemy.¹¹

In its 2020 Annual Report, the **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom** (USCIRF) recommended that the US State Department designate

⁸ Pakistani Penal Code <http://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/legislation/1860/actXLVof1860.html>, and, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/49b920582.pdf>.

⁹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF Recommended for countries of particular concern: Pakistan 2020*, 2020. <https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/Pakistan.pdf>.

¹⁰ European Parliament, Resolution on Pakistan, notably the situation of human rights defenders and the death penalty (2017/2723(RSP)) June 15, 2017. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0268_EN.html.

¹¹ European Commission, *The EU Special Incentive Arrangement for Sustainable Development and Good Governance ('GSP+') assessment of Pakistan covering the period 2016 -2017*, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (SWD (2018, 29 final), January 1, 2018. https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2018/january/tradoc_156544.pdf.

Pakistan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for 'engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom'. Despite being listed as a CPC in 2019, the US State Department waived Pakistan from any sanctions due to "important national interest of the United States". USCIRF recommended that this waiver is rescinded in 2020 in light of the extreme abuses of religious freedom in Pakistan.¹²

USCIRF also recommended that the Pakistani government:

- release blasphemy prisoners and other individuals imprisoned for their religion or beliefs;
- repeal the blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws; until repeal is accomplished, enact reforms to make blasphemy a bailable offense, require evidence by accusers, ensure proper investigation by senior police officials, allow authorities to dismiss unfounded accusations, and enforce existing Penal Code articles criminalizing perjury and false accusations.

Christian staff nurse and gospel singer accused of committing blasphemy

By Nasir Saeed

CLAAS (28.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2YDx2uL> - A Christian staff nurse and gospel singer Tabita, 30, from Karachi has been accused of committing blasphemy.

On January 28, Tabita's colleagues at Sobhraj Maternity Hospital, Karachi, where she has been working for the last nine years, accused her of committing blasphemy.

Before then there had been no such complaints against her.

According to reports Tabita had not said anything against the Islam or in the respect of the Prophet (Peace be upon him), but the whole issue was prompted up because of a misunderstanding between colleagues.

According to reports she was tied up with ropes and locked in a room before the police were called.

The police arrived and took Tabita with them to the police officers of Aram Bagh, police station, Karachi.

According to our colleagues the police of Aram Bagh handled the case wisely and during their careful and impartial investigation police found all charges against Tabita baseless.

The police found that Tabita had committed no blasphemy, but it was just misunderstanding between the colleagues.

The investigating officer cleared Tabita of blasphemy charges and allowed her to leave the police station safely without any further restriction.

¹² United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF Recommended for countries of particular concern: Pakistan 2020, 2020*.
<https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Pakistan.pdf>.

We tried to speak to speak to Tabita, but she was so fearful, and she said she was not in the right state of mind to have a conversation.

She promised to explain the situation later on and has left her home and gone into hiding at an unknown place.

Nasir Saeed, Director CLAAS-UK has condemned the incidents and said it is a relief that the accusation against Tabita raised by her colleagues have been found to be baseless.

He added: "Unfortunately her life will never be the same again, as she has already left her home and gone into hiding. But the most important thing is that she is not charged under the blasphemy law, otherwise she would have had to spend the rest of her life in jail."

Mr Saeed also praised the role of the police for their quick, fair and impartial investigation. He said the police have a basic and important role to determine whether blasphemy has been committed or if the accusations are fabricated just to settle personal scores.

Mr Saeed said: "Unfortunately, according to our own study, blasphemy laws continue to be misused by individuals to settle their personal scores. Last year alone nearly 60 people including nine Christians and forty-seven Muslims (40 from Shia community) were been charged with blasphemy, while at least three innocent people - one Christian, one from Ahmadiyya community, and one Muslim - have been killed by individuals."

Criticising the government, he added that it is a need of the times to look into this matter to see how to stop the growing misuse of the blasphemy law against innocent people and bring changes where necessary.

Mr Saeed said the wording of the blasphemy law is so broad and vague that it has allowed a wide range of acts and its continuous misuse.

"As we saw last year senior politician and ex foreign minister Khawaja Asif was accused of committing blasphemy when he said all religions are equal.

"In another instance, a Pakistani academic, Arfana Mallah, had to tender an apology for hurting the sentiments of fellow Muslims and religious leaders for calling the blasphemy law a "black law", Mr Saeed said.

For more information contact Nasir Saeed: info@claas.org.uk - Website: www.claas.org.uk

About CLAAS:

Centre for Legal Aid, Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS) is an interdenominational organisation working for Christians who are being persecuted because of their faith in Pakistan. CLAAS works for religious freedom, to stop persecution of Christians in Pakistan because of blasphemy and other discriminatory laws, raise awareness, disseminate information and highlight the plight of Christians on an international level. CLAAS provides free legal aid to victims of religious intolerance in Pakistan, as well as shelter and financial support for the victims and their families.

Pakistan seeks to block US-based website of minority Ahmadis

By KATHY GANNON

AP (21.01.2021) — <https://bit.ly/3iHDN7V> - Pakistan has ordered a U.S.-based website propagating the faith of Pakistan's minority Ahmadis shut down over allegedly blasphemous content, one of the site's managers said Thursday.

Harris Zafar said Pakistan's Telecommunication Authority earlier this month issued a legal notice for him and fellow American Amjad Mahmood Khan, who also manages Trueislam.com, demanding that the site be shut down.

Zafar said the website is based in the U.S., where both he and Khan live and work, and called Pakistan's action "a brazen act of suppression of freedom of expression and freedom of religion."

"All content is U.S. based and all activities are in the U.S. as well," said Zafar. "There is nothing about Pakistan on the site. "

The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority did not immediately respond to an AP request for comment and Zafar and Khan's website is not available in Pakistan.

Zafar, who lives in Portland, Oregon but has relatives in Pakistan, said in an email to The Associated Press that he and Khan were also threatened with a \$3.1 million fine and warned of charges under Pakistan's controversial blasphemy law, which can carry the death penalty for insulting Islam.

Blasphemy has been a contentious issue in Pakistan where domestic and international human rights groups say blasphemy allegations have often been used to intimidate religious minorities and to settle personal scores.

Pakistan's parliament declared Ahmadis non-Muslims in 1974. Since then, they have repeatedly been targeted by Islamic extremists in the Muslim-majority nation. An Ahmadi can get 10 years in prison for claiming to be a Muslim.

The legal notice accuses Zafar and Khan, a lawyer, of violating Pakistani laws for hosting and disseminating content on their website related to members the Ahmadi community who are "not allowed to preach or propagate their faith or invite others to accept their faith."

Zafar said he and Khan were both born in the U.S. and did not flee persecution in Pakistan, though he stressed they "do get involved in helping persecuted Ahmadis in Pakistan and other parts of the world."

The Ahmadi faith was established on the Indian subcontinent in the 19th century by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, whose followers believe he was the messiah that was promised by the Prophet Muhammad. Pakistan's parliament declared Ahmadis non-Muslims in 1974. Since then, they have repeatedly been targeted by Islamic extremists in the Muslim-majority nation.

Pakistan attempts to prosecute Ahmadi US citizens for digital blasphemy

By Aysha Khan

Religion news (13.01.2021) - <https://cutt.ly/njUYJTf> - Pakistani authorities have asked leaders of the American Ahmadiyya Muslim community to take down its official website, claiming that the U.S.-based site violates Pakistan's strict blasphemy laws and new cybercrime regulations.

The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority said in a legal notice issued on Dec. 24 to the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community USA's spokesmen, Amjad Mahmood Khan and Harris Zafar, that failure to remove the website TrueIslam.com would result in fines of up to \$3.14 million or criminal sanctions, including possible 10-year-prison sentences.

"This is a new frontier in persecution of Ahmadi Muslims in the digital space," said Khan, a lawyer in Los Angeles who has testified before Congress about blasphemy and religious freedom. "Pakistan wants to impose its abominable blasphemy laws on the whole world by targeting U.S. citizens and U.S. websites."

Brad Adams, who heads Human Rights Watch's Asia Division, said "censoring Ahmadis and using blasphemy laws to airbrush them from Pakistani society" is part of the "widespread and rampant discrimination and social exclusion" Ahmadis face in Pakistan. In Pakistan, home to about 4 million Ahmadis, the constitution and penal code declare members of the Ahmadiyya sect non-Muslims and impose harsh penalties — including death — for those who call themselves Muslims or publicly engage in religious activities. Ahmadis accept the sect's 19th-century founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, as the messiah and as a subordinate prophet to the Prophet Muhammad, a belief many Muslims consider blasphemous.

"This is a malicious attempt to chill free speech and expression by a Muslim American website," attorney Brett Williamson of O'Melveny & Myers, which is representing TrueIslam.com pro bono, wrote in a letter to PTA on Monday (Jan. 11). He described the takedown notice as "legally infirm, but also patently absurd in its reach."

The website is registered and hosted in the U.S. and is aimed at an American audience. Zafar and Khan are both U.S. citizens and the threat of extradition is virtually nil, but both have relatives in Pakistan and say penalties would make it impossible to travel there.

Law professor Arturo Carrillo, who directs George Washington University Law School's Global Internet Freedom Project, said this case shows that the Pakistan government is now using its controversial cybercrime laws in an effort "to repress online expression and content emanating from outside the country's borders because the government has deemed it to be undesirable and unlawful."

PTA officials did not respond to requests for comment.

In 2016, Pakistan enacted digital regulations that allowed authorities to block online content in the "interest of the glory of Islam." Last year, the government passed blanket censorship laws that would allow authorities to order tech companies to remove digital pornography, blasphemy and anti-state content, drawing ire from Google, Facebook, Twitter and other platforms.

But human rights experts say the takedown notices also come amid increased targeting of Ahmadis' online religious expression.

One day after issuing the takedown notice to TrueIslam.com, PTA also sent notices to Google and Wikipedia, threatening penalties and prosecution if the platforms failed to remove "sacrilegious content" associated with the Ahmadi sect's beliefs.

PTA said it was responding to complaints regarding an "unauthentic" Ahmadi translation of the Quran on the Google Play Store; "misleading" search results that returned the Ahmadi leader Mirza Masroor Ahmad's name when the term "Khalifa (caliph) of Islam" was searched; and "deceitful" Wikipedia articles that suggested that the Ahmadi caliph is Muslim.

Officials also demanded that all internet service providers serving Pakistan block content from Ahmadi websites, including TrueIslam.com, the English-language magazine Al Hakam and the international satellite TV network MTA.

Five of Pakistan's top Ahmadi leaders have also had cases filed against them in recent weeks over religious activity on WhatsApp, Khan told Religion News Service.

Earlier in December, Khan told a hearing of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom that extremists in Pakistan were intent on using the country's cyber crime statutes to initiate blasphemy cases against Ahmadis.

But this latest action, Khan told Religion News Service, is "a very slippery slope in terms of what this could mean for other minorities. We're the canaries in the coal mine. This would mean any potential website or digital content that is quote-unquote blasphemous can be the subject of criminal prosecution."

USCIRF Commissioner Johnnie Moore described the takedown notices as "recklessly brazen" and said he expected fierce bipartisan condemnation from both the Trump and Biden administrations.

"Surely, the Pakistani government doesn't intend on threatening American citizens within the United States?" Moore asked. "Surely, Prime Minister Imran Khan doesn't want this controversy, now?"

Three sentenced to death for sharing 'blasphemous material' online

Anti-Terrorism Court sentences fourth accused to 10 years imprisonment and Rs. 100,000 fine.

Newsweek (08.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2LAGyLS> - An Anti-Terrorism Court in Islamabad on Friday sentenced three men to death for sharing blasphemous content on social media, while imprisoning a fourth accused in the same case for 10 years.

The court also issued arrest warrants for the four accused, who are currently absconding in the case.

According to the First Information Report filed by the Federal Investigation Agency, accused Rana Nouman Rafaqat and Abdul Waheed operated fake profiles and disseminated blasphemous material on social media, while Nasir Ahmad uploaded blasphemous videos to a Youtube channel. A fourth individual, Professor Anwaar Ahmed,

was fined Rs. 100,000 in addition to a 10-year prison term for allegedly voicing blasphemous views during a lecture at the Islamabad Model College where he was an Urdu teacher.

All four men were initially arrested in 2017 in connection with the blasphemy case, which was filed by a Hafiz Ehtasham Ahmed. According to the FIR, "There are several unknown people/groups disseminating/spreading blasphemous material through internet using social media i.e. Facebook, Twitter, websites, etc. through alleged profiles/pages/handles/sites etc... and several others willfully defiled and outraged religious feelings, belief by using derogatory words/remarks/graphic designs/images/sketches/visual representations in respect of the sacred names."

It said that such "illegal activities are causing religious disharmony and unrest among different segments of society, inciting hatred and contempt on religious basis to stir up violence and cause internal disturbance and to create a sense of fear, insecurity in the society, which may not only lead to anarchy but it is also threatening the ideology of Islam, Sunnah and Pakistan." The FIR said the case had been lodged under Sections 295-A, 295-B, 295-C, 298, 298-A, 298-B, and 109 of the Pakistan Penal Code.

The four individuals were indicted by the court on Sept. 12, 2017, when they pleaded not guilty to the charges against them. During the proceedings, the prosecution produced 17 witnesses against the accused. However, the witnesses for the defense were not permitted by the court because they were relatives of the accused.

Human rights groups say Pakistan's blasphemy laws are often used to persecute minorities or settle personal vendettas, noting that they are seen as virtual death sentences as they can lead to lynchings or mob violence. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom cited the blasphemy laws among the reasons it designated Pakistan a country of particular concern for religious freedom in its annual report.

US group appeals for Pakistani woman jailed on blasphemy

By Kathy Gannon

AP News (08.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3bvK3hg> - The U.S. religious watchdog appealed Friday for the rights of a Pakistani woman from the country's minority Ahmadis who has been jailed on blasphemy charges, declaring her a prisoner of conscience and urging Prime Minister Imran Khan's government to immediately set her free.

The statement by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom said 55-year-old Ramazan Bibi was jailed last April under Pakistan's draconian blasphemy law that carries the death penalty.

Under the law, anyone accused of insulting Islam can be sentenced to death if found guilty. While authorities have yet to carry out a death sentence for blasphemy, just the accusation of blasphemy can incite mobs in Pakistan.

"The Pakistani government must immediately release Ramzan Bibi, and all others detained for blasphemy," said commission head James W. Carr.

Domestic and international human rights groups say blasphemy allegations have often been used to intimidate religious minorities in Pakistan and to settle personal scores.

"Authorities allowing these laws to be used for personal gain or vendetta are only enabling systematic discrimination based on religious belief," Carr added.

The Ahmadi faith was established on the Indian subcontinent in the 19th century by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, whose followers believe he was the messiah that was promised by the Prophet Muhammad. Pakistan's parliament declared Ahmadis non-Muslims in 1974. Since then, they have repeatedly been targeted by Islamic extremists in the Muslim-majority nation.

Bibi was jailed after a dispute over a donation she tried to make to a non-Ahmadi mosque in her village in Punjab province. The donation was rejected and when she sought an explanation from her non-Ahmadi relatives, a quarrel erupted followed by an assault on Bibi, according to members of her community.

Mainstream Muslim clerics later alleged she was blasphemous and brought out an alleged witness to corroborate their allegations.

"She is facing imprisonment simply because of her Ahmadi faith," said the U.S. commission.

The Pakistani prime minister's special adviser on religious affairs and religious harmony, Maulana Tahir Ashrafi, said he was not aware of the case but would investigate and promised "justice" for the woman.

"No Muslims will be allowed to hurt the sentiments of people belonging to other religions and no non-Muslim should insult Islam," said Ashrafi.

Blasphemy has been a contentious issue in Pakistan. A Punjab governor was killed by his own guard in 2011 after he defended a Christian woman, Aasia Bibi, who was accused of blasphemy. She was acquitted after spending eight years on death row and later left Pakistan for Canada to join her family after receiving threats.

In just the last year, more than 24 Ahmadis, including their senior leadership have been charged with blasphemy and for referring to themselves as Muslims. Scores of Ahmadis are in jail simply for reciting Islamic prayers or greeting others with a traditional Muslim greeting.

Last year, five Ahmadis were killed in targeted killings in Pakistan, according to an Ahmadi official who spoke on condition of anonymity, fearing for his life.

According to a report last month by the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedoms, Pakistan recorded the most cases of blasphemy in the world, even though 84 countries have criminal blasphemy laws.

On Friday, an anti-terrorism court in Islamabad sentenced three people — two Sunni Muslims and an Ahmadi — to death in connection with charges that they shared blasphemous content on social media in 2017. A fourth man, a Shiite Muslim college professor, was sentenced to 10 years in prison for insulting God during a college lecture.

The U.S. commission described the conditions for religious freedoms in Pakistan as continuing to "trend negatively" and urged the government to repeal the blasphemy law.

Pakistan has rejected the commission's assessment.

USCIRF Commissioner James W. Carr adopts Ramzan Bibi in Pakistan through the Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project

USCIRF (07.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/35qDU29> - United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Commissioner James W. Carr today announced his adoption of Ramzan Bibi through the Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project.

On April 30, 2020, Ramzan Bibi, a 55-year-old Ahmadi woman, was detained and accused of making blasphemous remarks during a personal dispute over the return of her charitable donation to a local mosque in Cheleki village in Pakistan's Punjab province. Bibi was charged under Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code, an offence that carries the death penalty. She is currently imprisoned at Central Jail Lahore.

"The Pakistani government must immediately release Ramzan Bibi, and all others detained for blasphemy," said Commissioner Carr. "Authorities allowing these laws to be used for personal gain or vendetta are only enabling systematic discrimination based on religious belief. This is clear in Bibi's case, as she is facing imprisonment simply because of her Ahmadi faith. The Pakistani government needs to repeal blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws and until this is accomplished, enact comprehensive reform."

A village committee formed in Cheleki to investigate the case concluded that there was no evidence to prove the accusations of blasphemy against Bibi. However, hardline Muslim clerics compelled a non-Ahmadi resident of the village, who was not present during the dispute, falsely testify against Bibi resulting in her incarceration.

Bibi's bail application was rejected by the judge on November 18. An appeal has been filed for the mother of six, who has been waiting in jail throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

In its 2020 Annual Report, USCIRF recommended that the U.S. Department of State continue to designate Pakistan as a Country of Particular Concern, a recommendation USCIRF has made since 2002 due to Pakistan's systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief.

In December 2020, USCIRF published a report on Violating Rights: Enforcing the World's Blasphemy Laws, which examines the enforcement of blasphemy laws worldwide. This report found that the country with the most cases of state enforced blasphemy laws was Pakistan, with 184 cases identified between 2014-2018. In June, USCIRF released a Policy Update on Pakistan that outlines the path for reforming and eventually repealing its blasphemy law.

Wadi-e-Hussain: A graveyard for Pakistan's Shia victims

A graveyard in Pakistani city of Karachi where members of Shia community killed in targeted killings lay buried.

By Syeda Sana Batool

Al Jazeera (06.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/39cVjN6> - Miles from the hustle and bustle of the metropolis of Pakistan's largest city, Karachi, lies the Wadi-e-Hussain graveyard with its hundreds of graves. Each is a window into a life that ended all too abruptly.

Protected from the city by large iron gates and tall walls, there is an uneasy calm within its walls where many of the city's Shia Muslims have been laid to rest.

Pakistan is home to 220 million people, almost all of whom are Muslim. It is also home to one of the largest Shia populations in the world, as an estimated 20 percent of Muslims there are Shia.

At Wadi-e-Hussain red flags are planted by the graves of observant Shia Muslims who have died in targeted killings, gun or bomb attacks.

Since 2001, more than 2,600 Shia Muslims have been killed in violent attacks in the South Asian country, according to the South Asia Terrorism Portal research organisation. This year has seen an uptick in targeted killings against Shia accused of blasphemy.

In September, tens of thousands attended a demonstration in Karachi organised by the Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), a Sunni hardline group that is banned under Pakistani law for its ties to the armed Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) group, which has carried out many of the largest bombings and attacks on the community since 1996.

At Wadi-e-Hussain, people paying their respects come and go, as the caretaker customarily sprinkles water on the graves.

"Some bring flowers, some light candles on every Thursday, sometimes a brother or a mother comes with the book of prayer, spends time on the grave," says the caretaker Laal Mohammad.

As the scent of rose petals and incense wafts across the graves this history of violence is writ large across the tombstones. A group of five graves marks a family killed in the Abbas town blast of 2013. A mother's grave sits by her four-year-old's son's, killed in the same blast; the inscription says the woman dropped dead when she saw her young child's lifeless body.

There are more than 300 graves belonging to the those dubbed as "martyrs" in Wadi-e-Hussain. These are their stories.

'My brother did not come back'

A woman sits near a grave, reading verses from a prayer book, crying as she does so.

Tehseen Abidi's younger brother was also killed in the 2013 bombing in Abbas Town, a popular majority-Shia Muslim neighbourhood in Karachi. Kashif Abbas Abidi was at the site of the blast when it went off. Police never found his body.

For 40-year-old Tehseen, Kashif was her whole world. Sitting by his grave, she tells the story of the day she lost her brother in the attack, a sequence of bomb blasts which killed at least 45 people.

"He died in the first blast, he was present at the site of the blast, he promised me that he would come to see me in the evening, my brother did not come back" she says. Abidi owned a general store in the neighbourhood and was at work when the bombs went off.

"It was March 3 and a Sunday," said Tehseen. She only got a few sentences in before she broke down in tears, remembering her "little one".

The government offered financial compensation to the families whose relatives had died that day and in other attacks. But the relatives say the money is of little comfort.

"The government gave 1.5 million rupees [about \$14,300] to his wife, but our loss is so big that nothing can compensate for this loss," said Tehseen.

"Even if our whole life we cry it's not enough. Maybe if we all die crying in this anguish, maybe only then it will be compensated."

'Something died inside me that day'

On June 6, 1963 while preparing for a local ceremony, Ishtiaq Hussain and his fellow mourners heard the news of an attack on the procession in Thehri town, 14 kilometres (8.6 miles) out of Khairpur city in Sindh province. Hussain, now aged 80, is still haunted by his memories of that day.

It was a few days after Ashura, the 10th day of Muharram, the first month in the Islamic calendar. Ashura marks the anniversary of the Karbala mass killing and is commemorated by Shia Muslims in sombre rituals and processions.

"We were around 200 people who ran to save the congregation of Thehri that day," he says. "We didn't know that the news was a trap, and there were thousands of [attackers] waiting for us with axes and swords in their hands, to chop us all into pieces."

Hussain made it out alive but he has no idea how.

"I was among the survivors, but I can't recall how I survived. There were around 10 people who attacked me with the axes, they injured me badly, my neck and shoulder were bleeding, they kicked me in my stomach to the point that I started spitting blood," he says.

"I still survived, but something died inside me that day."

The attack at Thehri was one of the first significant sectarian attacks since Pakistan gained independence from the British in 1947.

More than 118 people were killed on that day. They were to be the first of thousands killed for being Shia.

Silencing the outcry

In August 2020, in the month of Muharram, a fresh wave of sectarian tension rippled across Karachi and the rest of the country. Shia scholars were accused of blasphemy after they gave sermons critical of Islam's early caliphs. Thousands rallied in Karachi under the banner of the ASWJ, calling Pakistan's Shia leaders infidels.

After the protests ended, many Pakistanis denounced the ASWJ supporters' hate speech and said the government had not taken the demonstrators to task.

Journalist Bilal Farooqi was one of the few who spoke out publicly.

A Sunni, Farooqi was arrested in October 2020 on charges of having spread "religious hatred" and "anti-state sentiment". He had tweeted criticisms of the ASWJ march and questioned the authorities over their allowing an organisation that had been designated as "terrorist" to organise the march.

“Most of my posts, on the basis of which [a police case] was filed against me, were about the ASWJ’s involvement in anti-Shia activities,” said Farooqi. Later released from police custody, he is still facing the same court charges.

He has called on Sunni Muslim activists to speak up against police inaction towards groups involved in Shia Muslim attacks.

Running parallel with the ASWJ’s continuing anti-Shia campaign has been the rise of a new far-right religious group in Pakistan, the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), which has made the so-called issue of blasphemy a rallying point.

Since 2017, the TLP and its leading scholars have seen a sharp rise in support for the issue and have pressured the government to penalise those accused of blasphemy.

The movement and its leader Khadim Hussain Rizvi were behind days of protests in 2018 over one of Pakistan’s most high-profile blasphemy cases. It involved the acquittal of a Christian woman, Asia Bibi on blasphemy charges. The TLP also blocked the main highway leading to the capital Islamabad for weeks in 2017 over a change in an electoral oath. It was deemed by them as blasphemous because it eased some restrictions on members of the Ahmadi sect, an offshoot of Sunni Islam that believes in a subordinate prophet and has been declared non-Muslim under Pakistani law.

Farooqi says the TLP has also recently hit out at Shia Muslims for what they say is blasphemy against some of Prophet Muhammad’s companions.

Regional politics, local violence

Following the Islamic revolution in 1979 in Shia-majority Iran, which shares a border with Pakistan, there was an influx of Iranian and Shia Muslim influence into Pakistan, says Hasan Zafar Naqvi, a popular Pakistani Shia leader.

The real problem, he argues, emerged after the United States and Saudi Arabia – which is Sunni-majority and has long viewed Iran as its regional rival – began to look at Iran’s perceived influence in Pakistan as a threat to the region.

Pakistan’s ruler at the time, General Zia ul-Haq, had seized power in a military coup in 1977 and was in the process of establishing a more theocratic state. During Haq’s time in power until 1988, the role of religion in government affairs grew. It also became the basis for US-backed armed action by the ‘mujahideen’ in neighbouring Afghanistan.

Backed by Saudi Arabia, Sunni hardline groups began to counter the perceived threat of Shia in the region. To that purpose, a group called Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP, later to become the ASWJ) was formed in 1985 in central Pakistan.

Founded by Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, the party was against the mainly Shia Muslim landlords of the area and sought to exploit sectarian differences. It called for Shia Muslims to be declared non-Muslim under Pakistani law and organised frequent protests to highlight the issue. The rise of the SSP, and its allied LeJ in the 1990s, saw a sharp rise in incidents of violence against Shia Muslims across the country in the decades to follow, says Naqvi, the scholar.

Repeated attacks

In 2009, Syed Liaquat Hussain Zaidi, an influential Shia activist and leader in Karachi was gunned down by LeJ.

Zaidi's murderer was arrested two years later and confessed to police that he was working for the LeJ and had been given a hit-list of influential Shia Muslims in the city to kill, according to Zaidi's family.

Zaidi was actively involved in charity and welfare work and was the president of Pasban-e-Aza, a Shia welfare organisation, said his sister Rehana Zaidi.

On a winter morning in November, Zaidi took his young son to school but never returned, says Rehana.

Two motorcyclists shot him three times in the head as he stopped at a traffic signal in the city. His niece first reached the scene and found her uncle in a pool of blood, the car surrounded by onlookers. No one attempted to help him, she says.

A year after the murder, Zaidi's killers returned – this time shooting Zaidi's nephew, Rameez Hussain, mere blocks away from the family home.

Miraculously, the nephew survived. The murderer, in his confession, told police he had fled the scene having assumed Hussain had been killed. "God saved him," says Rehana.

Pakistani court orders rebuilding of destroyed Hindu temple

AP News (05.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2Xsh5qB> - Pakistan's Supreme Court ordered authorities Tuesday to rebuild a century-old Hindu temple that was vandalized and set on fire by a mob last week, drawing condemnation from the government and leaders of minority Hindus.

The court ruled after authorities said they arrested more than 100 people for attacking the temple and several police officers were fired for neglecting to protect the structure.

The temple's destruction happened Dec. 30 in Karak, a town in northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Supporters of Pakistan's radical Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam party and residents attacked the building after being incited by a local cleric who was opposed to the temple's planned renovation.

Although Muslims and Hindus generally live peacefully together in Pakistan, there have been other attacks on Hindu temples in recent years. Most of Pakistan's minority Hindus migrated to India in 1947 when India was divided by Britain's government.

Christian lay leader arrested on blasphemy charges in Pakistan

Muslim mob threatens to behead him, burn homes.

Morning Star News (05.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2MPwqbl> - A 25-year-old Christian is in police custody in Lahore, Pakistan after he shared another person's post critical of Islam on his Facebook page, sources said.

Hundreds of Muslims converged on Raja Warris' neighborhood in the Charar area of Lahore on the night of Dec. 26, threatening to behead the outreach lay leader and set

fire to homes unless police arrested him, said the Rev. Ayub Gujjar, vice moderator of the Raiwind Diocese of the Church of Pakistan.

"The incident took place after Warris shared a post on Facebook on Dec. 22, which was deemed blasphemous by local Muslims," Gujjar told Morning Star News.

Warris apologized to the Muslims in person, saying he had shared the post for academic understanding between Christians and Muslims and did not mean to offend any Muslims, and the issue appeared to be resolved – temporarily, Gujjar said.

"On Dec. 26, we were informed by our congregation members in Charar that a huge mob had gathered in the locality on the call of a cleric affiliated with the extremist religio-political outfit, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan [TLP], and were demanding the beheading of the catechist," Gujjar said. "Fearing violence, hundreds of Christian residents fled their homes while around 400 anti-riot policemen were deployed in the area to thwart violence."

When Gujjar and other local church elders reached the Defence-A Police Station to meet with the assistant superintendent of police, a large mob gathered outside the premises and chanted slogans against Christians, he said. Officers insisted that church leaders hand Warris into their custody to cool tempers.

"We sought time for negotiation with the protest leaders, but the police said they could not guarantee the safety of our people if the accused was not presented for arrest," Gujjar said. "We reluctantly agreed to bring Warris but demanded that he be kept at an undisclosed location due to the serious threat to his life."

Police on Dec. 27 registered a First Information Report (No. 1122/20) against Warris under Section 295-A and Section 298-A of Pakistan's blasphemy laws and showed it to the mob leaders, who then called off the siege, Gujjar said.

Section 298-A provides for up to three years in prison for derogatory remarks about a "holy personage," in this case Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, and Section 295-A calls for up to 10 years in prison for "deliberate and malicious acts intended to outreach religious feelings."

Police have relocated Warris, his wife and two children to a safe house for their security, Gujjar said.

Church leaders have engaged with Muslim clergy in attempts to restore calm and extricate Warris from the case, said Bishop of Raiwind Diocese Azad Marshall.

"Warris is an educated youth who loves to serve God," Marshall told Morning Star News. "I was deeply concerned about the situation in Charar, as any wrong action could have resulted in violent riots that could have put the lives of our people at risk. We immediately got in touch with senior government and police officials, which helped in restoring order in the neighborhood, and fortunately no loss of life and property was reported."

Marshall said the incident highlights the need for "responsible use" of social media in Pakistan.

"Christians especially need to be more careful in sharing content, because any faith-based post could be used to instigate violence against the community," he said. "We need to understand that Islamic religious sentiments run high in our country, therefore it's important to carefully analyze the content before posting it online."

Church leaders have sought the intervention of the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Religious Harmony, Allama Tahir Ashrafi. In a country where an increasingly Islamist majority makes free speech and any legitimate critique of religion dangerous, Ashrafi also called for "responsible use" of social media.

"When illiterate persons are accused of blasphemy, we give them the benefit of the doubt, because they have no idea of what they have done, but when some educated person posts something that is religiously offensive, then how can any person justify that action?" Ashrafi told Morning Star News. "Although the post shared by Warris, intentionally or unintentionally, was very offensive, I'd say that the law has still been very lenient on him."

Ashrafi urged church leaders to raise awareness in their congregations about using social media responsibly so that the lives and property of people do not come under threat.

In Pakistan, false accusations of blasphemy are common and often motivated by personal vendettas or religious hatred. Accusations are highly inflammatory and have the potential to spark mob lynchings, vigilante murders and mass protests.

There are 24 Christians imprisoned on blasphemy charges in Pakistan, according to rights activists.

Although successive governments have acknowledged that the blasphemy laws are blatantly misused, little effort has been made to stop the abuses.

On Dec. 7, the U.S. State Department re-designated Pakistan among nine other "Countries of Particular Concern" for severe violations of religious freedom. Previously Pakistan had been added to the list on Nov. 28, 2018.

The other countries on the list are Burma, China, North Korea, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Sudan and Uzbekistan were removed from the department's Special Watch List due to improvements in their religious rights records.

Pakistan ranked fifth on Christian support organization Open Doors 2020 World Watch list of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.

Historical Hindu temple set on fire in northwest Pakistan

The Samadhi of Shri Paramhans Ji Maharaj, the most sacred place for the Advait Mat movement, was destroyed by supporters of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (04.01.2021) – <https://bit.ly/3pTJRfQ> – Advait Mat, or Paramhans Advait Mat, is an important Hindu religious movement functioning as a network of more than 300 ashrams, both in India and internationally. Its most sacred shrine is the Samadhi of Shri Paramhans Ji Maharaj in the village of Teri, in what was once called the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan and now is known as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. There, the founder of the tradition, Sri Paramhans Swami Advaitanand Ji Maraji (1846–1919), died on July 9, 1919. He was not cremated, but buried in Teri.

A shrine was erected around his grave, and became a popular pilgrimage site, which was partially demolished after Partition and finally dismantled in 1997. Later, the area was occupied by a local influential Muslim cleric called Mufti Iftikharuddin.

Long legal battles followed, and finally the Supreme Court of Pakistan decided in 2014 that the land belongs to the Hindu community, and the shrine should be rebuilt. The provincial government only erected boundary walls to delimit the area, and carried out some simple additional work to facilitate the access of pilgrims. In 2015, the Supreme Court stated that this was not the reconstruction it had called for, and ordered that a famous architect, Kamil Khan, should be hired for reconstructing the temple.

Thanks to Khan's efforts, a beautiful temple was inaugurated in 2017, but radical Muslims protested that it came to occupy a larger area than the original 1919 construction.

On December 30, a mob of some 1,500 radical Muslims, allegedly members of the radical religious party Jamiat Ulema-e Islam, attacked the temple and set it on fire. 350 of them were identified by the police, and 30 were arrested on December 31.

The attack was condemned by the chief justice of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, who announced an investigation, and several top Muslim politicians. On January 1, after a formal protest by India, the provincial government stated it will fund the reconstruction of the temple. The leaders of the Hindu minority are, however, skeptical, quoting several precedents, that those responsible for violence against the Hindus will be really brought to justice.
