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Pakistan revamps education at the point of a gun

By Dr. James M. Dorsey

ModernDiplomacy (29.12.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3zplNaF> - Javed Ahmad Ghamidi is a rare clerical voice in Pakistan.

A prominent religious scholar and former member of the state-appointed Council of Islamic Ideology that ensures that legislation conforms with Islamic law, Mr. Ghamidi calls a spade in a country in which that can have dire consequences.

To be sure, Mr. Ghamidi can do so because he is no longer resident in Pakistan and therefore less vulnerable. Exile may deprive him of an in-country pulpit but makes his analysis and views no less relevant.

Most recently, Mr. Ghamidi did not shy away from [holding responsible just about everyone in Pakistan — the military, the legislature, the clergy, the government, and the intelligentsia](#) – for the [brutal torture, lynching, and mutilation by a mob](#) in the eastern city of Sialkot of a 48-year old Sri Lankan textile factory manager, Priyantha Kumara, accused of blasphemy.

The government condemned the killing and arrested alleged perpetrators but appears oblivious to the underlying structures and policies that enable religious vigilantism.

“All those politicians, leaders, and intellectuals are liable for this crime who...do not unflinchingly condemn those happenings,” Mr. Ghamidi said.

He noted that politicians, clerics, and others had attended funerals and commemorations of people who had committed similar crimes.

“[Extremism has been mainstreamed](#) and normalised. Until this mindset changes, there will inevitably be more Priyantha Kumaras,” warned Dawn, Pakistan’s foremost English-language newspaper.

A [recent survey of university students](#) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the north-western Pakistani province that borders Afghanistan, who participated in five workshops organized by the Islamabad-based Pak Institute for Peace Studies Pvt Ltd (PIPS), concluded that “there is a deep suspicion and mistrust of diversity... The young generation, trained in exclusionary ideologies, usually hold militaristic views of nationhood and parrot the traditional narrative of Pakistan being the fortress of Muslim faith. They have little appetite for the fact that their country is home to diverse religions, faiths, and ethnic groups... What is even worse is that religious radicalism is growing in Pakistan, which is further eroding whatever degree of acceptance for diversity there is.”

The study noted that “very few among the youths at the workshops knew that the Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Ahmadis, etc., had rendered services for Pakistan’s defense and development. This mass ignorance is mainly because any positive mention of the non-Muslim citizens has either been disallowed or simply removed from the textbooks which are taught to millions of students across the country. In addition, the Pakistani mass media have similarly overlooked the contributions of the non-Muslim communities for the country.”

Little surprise that the study went on to say that a “majority of the Pakistani youth lack basic critical thinking and reasoning skills even at higher studies levels such as universities. Many lacked the ability to apply basic reasoning while processing given information. There was a tendency amongst them to fall for pre-established narratives and overused and obsolete conspiracy theories.”

There is little indication that the government is doing anything but strengthening an education system that potentially constitutes a breeding ground for ultra-conservatism and radicalism in a region adjacent to Afghanistan where the Taliban appear bent on returning the country to a system that propagates similar values.

The government recently said it was introducing a singular national curriculum (SNC) that critics charge is likely to further Islamicise Pakistani education by making religion classes mandatory, even at the university level. Prime Minister Imran Khan has also recently established a body to monitor the curriculum, syllabi, and social media for “blasphemous” content.

The government insists the curriculum will raise education levels and ensure that graduates from public schools and madrassas or religious seminaries have equal opportunity.

Comparing Pakistan to Medina in the time of the Prophet Mohammed, Mr. Khan recalled that the Prophet had unleashed the potential of the people “who were nothing before” because of “materialism (and) these false Gods of power” that keep them shackled.

“I believe Pakistan is in the same situation... In this country, (our) system does not allow them. Elite capture, whether education quality, [education is only for a small number](#) may be one or 1.5 per cent and the rest do not have access to it,” Mr. Khan told Hamza Yusuf, an American Muslim religious scholar, in a softball interview.

The PIPS report took a more sober view of Mr. Khan’s approach. “The SNC is reportedly premised on the idea that more teaching of religion would produce better citizens, even though this policy created extremism in the past, and there is no evidence to suggest the result would be any different this time over,” the report said.

A high court in Lahore, in a bid [to police Islamization](#), ordered judges in lower courts and authorities in Punjab to establish whether the Qur’an was being taught in separate classes across the province in line with the new curriculum.

In response, the School Education Department of the Punjab Government issued a [directive](#) that reiterated the need to check all schools for their teaching of reading and recitation of the Qur’an. The directive said the school inspections should be carried out jointly by the head of the district education authority and a district and sessions judge.

In the meantime, the department advised the court that it was [hiring 60,000 Arabic language teachers](#) to offer Quranic teaching in government school.

Nevertheless, for some, implementation of the court order is proving to be a traumatic experience.

“Preliminary reports suggest province-wide confusion and chaos and a state of fear among children, teachers, and school principals. [Magistrates accompanied by rifle-bearing policemen are pouncing upon schools](#), interrogating seven- to 12-year-old children. Their teachers are ordered out of the classroom or asked to stand silently in the corner,” said nuclear scientist, human rights activist, and education critic Pervez Hoodbhoy.

“What drove the Lahore High Court to issue its orders so speedily?” Mr. Hoodbhoy asked. He is quick to provide an answer: “Ideologues in government have seized the reins of power. As in Afghanistan, the population is now at their mercy.”

Photo : moderndiplomacy.eu

The EU, Pakistan and the GSP+

What is the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan extremist political party?

Bitter Winter (10.12 – 21.12.2021) - On November 7, 2021, the government of Pakistan capitulated to the protests of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, a radical Islamic fundamentalist political party that had been banned on April 14. The ban was lifted, and the government promised to release from prison the party's leader, Saad Hussain Rizvi.

Ironically, the decision came on the third anniversary of the release from jail of Asia Bibi, a Pakistani Christian woman who had been sentenced to death by hanging for blasphemy but had been acquitted by the Supreme Court, overturning the lower courts' verdicts. Upon her release on November 7, 2018, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan gained international notoriety by organizing anti-Bibi riots throughout the country, insisting she should be executed.

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan. 1. The Roots of an Extremist Movement

The rise of a violent political party, now a key actor in Pakistani politics, among the supposedly peaceful Sufi Barelvi movement caught experts by surprise.

by Massimo Introvigne

Article 1 of 7.

After *Bitter Winter* [published an article](#) last month on the problems the Pakistani government encountered when it tried to ban Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a party which was at the center of some of the most violent riots in the country's recent history, several readers wrote asking where this group, which did not seem typical of "Islamic fundamentalism," come from, yet is a force the authorities have been unable to stop. TLP is such an important player in contemporary Pakistani politics, and in the violent persecution of religious minorities, that we decided to devote a series to its history.

It is not an easy task, because the growth and prominence of TLP, which originated within the Sufi Barelvi movement, runs counter a received wisdom that dates back to the British colonial scholars of Indian Islam. TLP proves that two common assumptions about political Islam in general, and its activities in Pakistan in particular, are wrong. The first is that Sufi movements are invariably peaceful, and do not generate violent politicized groups. It is certainly true that many Sufis focus on mysticism and personal devotion, are less interested in politics than other Muslims, and reject violence. But this is not a rule without exceptions. Obviously, Sufis feel strongly about the cause of Islam and the Prophet and when they feel Islam is threatened or the Prophet is offended, they may react violently.

Second, British colonial administrators and scholars traditionally believed that it was unlikely that the Barelvi movement in what is today Pakistan might generate viable political movements, one reason being its focus on Sufi mysticism and another its factionalism and conflicts over leadership.

[READ MORE](#)

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan. 2. Rejecting Terrorism, Supporting Jihadism

After 9/11, Barelvi condemned terrorist organizations they regarded as Wahhabi-inspired and suicide attacks, but supported jihad against the U.S. and India.

by Massimo Introvigne

Article 2 of 7. Read [article 1](#).

As discussed in the previous article, in the late 20th century the Barelvi, a movement gathering members of several Sufi orders, became increasingly radicalized in Pakistan, contrary to the expectations of those who believed that Sufism was unlikely to produce radical political groups. There were both contingent and ideological reasons for this development.

One reason was that Barelvi had been physically attacked by rival movements opposed to popular Sufism, such as the Deobandi and the Ahl-i-Hadith, who occupied their mosques and killed dozens of their leaders. A second reason was the marginalization of the less politically active Barelvi by Pakistani's political elite, which exasperated a community that, despite representing the majority of Pakistani Muslims, was excluded from the main political appointments.

An ideological reason of the radicalization, however, was that the Barelvi movement, precisely because it conferred a quasi-divine status to Prophet Muhammad (which was the reason why the rival movements Deobandi and the Ahl-i-Hadith, influenced by the Saudi Wahhabi, accused them of heresy and of compromising the uniqueness of God), believed that civil and political rights should be denied in a Muslim state to those they regarded as being disrespectful to the Prophet.

[READ MORE](#)

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan. 3. Asia Bibi and Salman Taseer' Assassination

The movement supporting the Barelvi assassin of the Punjab governor who had defended the Christian woman accused of blasphemy generated the Tehreek party.

by Massimo Introvigne

Article 3 of 7. Read [article 1](#) and [article 2](#).

In the previous articles, we discussed how the supposedly peaceful Barelvi movement, whose members came from Pakistani Sufi orders, became politically militant in the late 20th century, and its ambiguous reaction to the post-9/11 developments.

Two additional factors should be considered. The first is the role of the Pir, or Sufi masters. While nobody dispute their spiritual authority in the Barelvi movement, it is less clear whether they should also guide the community in political matters. The assassinated leader of Sunni Tehreek, Saleem Qadri, was not a theologian but a rickshaw driver, although he had been a devout missionary for the Barelvi organization Daawat-e-Islami. Some Pir believed that they had ultimate authority also on political matters, but other Barelvi disagreed. This became the root of internecine struggles within the Barelvi movement.

The second factor influencing the evolution of Barelvi politics was the role of the Pakistani state. While traditionally privileging the anti-Sufi Deobandi, all Pakistani governments

were aware that Sufis represented the majority of local Muslims. They tried to sanitize Sufism by promoting an official version of it, which bracketed or eliminated the popular devotional aspects that were most objectionable to Deobandi, who denounced them as superstition or idolatry.

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Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan. 4. Taking to the Streets

In 2016 and 2017, TLYRA and the political party it created proved their ability to paralyze the country through mass protests with an anti-minorities agenda.

by Massimo Introvigne

Article 4 of 7. Read [article 1](#), [article 2](#), and [article 3](#).

In the previous article, we identified the movement to prevent the execution of Mumtaz Qadri, the Barelvi who assassinated Punjab governor Salman Taseer because of the latter's support for Asia Bibi, a Christian woman sentenced to death for blasphemy, as the origin of the party Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, which was formed as the political arm of the Barelvi pro-Qadri organization Tehreek-e-Labbaik-ya-Rasool-Allah (TLYRA), founded in 2013.

After Qadri was executed on February 29, 2016, his supporters observed the traditional forty days of mourning. They also claimed that February 29 had been chosen by the government as the execution date to prevent a yearly celebration of the anniversary.

The forty days of mourning end with the *chelum*, the fortieth day, in which a ceremony commemorates the deceased. The *chelum* of Mumtaz Qadri was celebrated by a rally organized by TLYRA in Rawalpindi. It was attended by some 25,000 Barelvi, 10,000 of whom marched to Islamabad, entered the red zone where protests are forbidden, torched a station and destroyed cars in the process, and started a sit-in before the Parliament.

[READ MORE](#)

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan. 5. A Sufi Extremist Ideology

The ideas of Rizvi's party are not traditional Islamic fundamentalism. Yet they are extremist and violent.

by Massimo Introvigne

Article 5 of 7. Read [article 1](#), [article 2](#), [article 3](#), and [article 4](#).

Before continuing our history of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, we should pause and ask the question what ideology this party born within the Barelvi Sufi movement propagates.

Foreign observers often classify its ideas as part of "Islamic fundamentalism," but this may be more or less accurate depending on how the notion is defined. If "fundamentalism" is an idealtype including all ideologies where political action is derived from theology without mediations, then we can call Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan a "fundamentalist" Islamic party, indeed the largest such party in Pakistan based on the results of the 2018 elections.

However, scholars of Islam normally use "Islamic fundamentalism" in a narrow sense, to identify a movement that proceeds from Wahhabi roots in the Arabian peninsula, adds modern political theory to conservative theology, and organizes itself through mass movements and political parties in the 20th century. The ideology of fundamentalism

mythologizes early Islam, and rejects what it sees as the innovations of subsequent centuries. Although there have been fundamentalist leaders with a Sufi background, their Wahhabi roots lead many fundamentalists to look with suspicion at the practices of popular Sufism.

[READ MORE](#)

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan. 6. Crimes and Punishments

After new riots against Asia Bibi, the Pakistani judiciary tried to put an end to the party's violence. It did not succeed.

by Massimo Introvigne

Article 6 of 7. [Read article 1](#), [article 2](#), [article 3](#), [article 4](#), and [article 5](#).

The three years between 2018 and 2020 were crucial for Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan. It looked like events were unfolding so rapidly that nobody really knew how to deal with them.

As mentioned in earlier articles, the party was founded to try, unsuccessfully, to avoid that the assassin of the Punjab governor Salman Taseer, Mumtaz Qadri, would be executed. Qadri had killed Taseer for his support of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman that a first-degree court had sentenced to death for blasphemy.

On October 31, 2018, Asia Bibi was acquitted by the Supreme Court. All religious parties participated in the protests that followed, but the lead was quickly taken by Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, which had successfully experimented with urban guerrilla and highway blocks in 2016 and 2017, in both cases compelling the government to negotiate, and in 2017 achieving his main aim, the resignation of the then Justice Minister Zahid Ahmad, regarded as "soft" on the [Ahmadis](#).

[READ MORE](#)

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan. 7. "I Am Not Charlie"

Anti-French riots after the Charlie Hebdo incidents led to new attempts to ban the party. They failed, once again, and TLP is now stronger than ever.

by Massimo Introvigne

Article 7 of 7. Read [article 1](#), [article 2](#), [article 3](#), [article 4](#), [article 5](#), and [article 6](#).

Charlie Hebdo is a French satirical magazine. It has repeatedly published caricatures of Prophet Muhammad that many (including the author of this article) found beyond the limits of good taste. Obviously, this can never justify violence and murder, which happened in 2015 when on January 7 armed terrorists killed 12 people and injured 11 in an attack against the magazine's office in Paris. Thousands in the world protested against the attacks with the hashtag "Je suis Charlie," "I am Charlie."

Although mentioned in its literature, the *Charlie Hebdo* 2015 issue did not become a major theme for Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, which was busy with domestic Pakistani matters. However, the situation changed in 2020, when on September 1, *Charlie Hebdo* republished the cartoons on the day the trial of the assassins of 2015 started.

On September 25, two men were injured in a stabbing outside what were by then the former headquarters of *Charlie Hebdo*. Five Pakistanis were arrested for the attack. Some tried to connect them with Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan although evidence was inconclusive.

[READ MORE](#)

US Commission calls for release of Christian accused of blasphemy

Nadeem Samson has been in prison since 2017. A new hearing on his possible release is scheduled for tomorrow. The Christian's accusers fabricated a fake Facebook profile to bring charges against him.

By Shafique Khokhar

AsiaNews (13.12.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3IXo47G> - Tomorrow Pakistan's Supreme Court could decide to release on bail Christian Nadeem Samson, a herbalist accused of blasphemy in 2017 and in prison since then. Anurima Bhargava, of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (Uscirf), called on the Pakistani government to grant his unconditional release.

Sanson was unjustly accused of blasphemy and then imprisoned after a dispute over the payment of a rental deposit: according to the agreements, Nadeem would have paid the owner of the house, Sakhawat Dogar, 4 thousand dollars (over 3,500 euros) to stay a year and a half in a house in the Match Factory area of Shahdara, near Lahore. When the Christian gave notice in 2017 and asked for the money back, Dogar refused to return the bail as agreed and accused Sanson of blasphemy.

To make the charges credible, the Muslim contacted Nadeem's cousin, Abdul Huq, who works as a police informant and who had managed to stage a fake kidnapping case to get Samson jailed a first time 18 years ago.

Abdul Huq created a fake *Facebook* account using his cousin's phone number retrieved from his herbalist's website. At that point, posing as Nadeem, Abdul Huq wrote a series of messages insulting Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. Police later raided Nadeem's home, handcuffed him, and linked the fake *Facebook* account to his cell phone and laptop. They then tortured him to make him confess that he wrote the blasphemous messages on social media. A few days later, in cahoots with the police, Sakhawat Dogar and a group of local Muslims burned Nadeem's belongings, including his rental agreement documents and proof of payment.

The Christian was jailed on November 29, 2017, four days after an initial information report was filed against him. He was repeatedly beaten and tortured during the time frame, to the point that he was in critical condition when he entered prison.

In anticipation of the Christmas season, Nadeem's family members hope that by tomorrow's hearing he will be released. For fear of retaliation and threats, Christian relatives are hiding or have moved to other countries.

HRWF Database of 28 Christian behind bars in Pakistan on alleged blasphemy charges. See details [here](#) on HRWF website

Muhammad ASGHAR (Pretrial detention)
Noman ASGHAR (Death penalty)
Malik ASHRAF (Death penalty)
Amoon AYUB (Death penalty)
Qaisar AYUB (Death penalty)
Zafar BHATTI (Life in prison)
Hajaj BIN (6 years)
Humayun FAISAL (Pretrial detention)
Pastor Aftab GILL (6 years and 6 months)
Malik MOHAMMAD FAROOQ (Life in prison)
Soofi ISHAQ (Death sentence)
Nadeem JAMES (Death penalty)
Abdul KAREEM (Life in prison)
Anwar KENNETH (Death sentence)
Shafeeq LATIF (Death penalty)
Anwar MASIH (Pretrial detention)
Imran MASIH (Life in prison)
Ishfaq MASIH (Pretrial detention)
Sohail MASIH (Pretrial detention)
Patras MASIH (Pretrial detention)
Sajjad MASIH (Death penalty)
Shahbaz MASIH (Pretrial detention)
Shehzad MASIH (Pretrial detention)
Stephen MASIH (Pretrial detention)
Yaqoob Bashir MASIH (Death penalty)
Sunny MUSHTAQ (Pretrial detention)
Asif PERVAIZ (Pretrial detention)
Nadeem SAMSON (Pretrial detention)

Photo : asianews.it

Foreign Minister Qureshi visiting Brussels

The Brussels-based Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) urged the interlocutors of FM Mureshi in Brussels to raise the Ahmadi issue with him and to ask for the release of 15 Ahmadi prisoners accused of blasphemy (See list below)

HRWF (07.12.2021) – On Monday 7 December, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (HRWF) called upon the interlocutors of FM Qureshi in Brussels

- EU High Representative and Vice President Josep Borrell
- NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg
- Sophie Wilmès, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Belgium
- Members of the European Parliament

to submit the [HRWF list of Ahmadi prisoners](#) who are currently behind bars in Pakistan (3 sentenced to the death penalty and 12 in pretrial detention for years) on the basis of the controversial blasphemy laws:

AHMAD Ehsan (s/o Khalil Ahmad)
AHMAD Ghulam (s/o Ghulam Nabbi)
AHMAD Malik Usman (s/o Malik Munawar Javaid)
AHMAD Malik Zaheer
AHMAD Mubasher (s/o Ghulam Rasool)
AHMAD Naveed (s/o Muhammad Rafique)
AHMAD Rohan (s/o Abdul Manan)
AHMAD Shiraz (s/o Basharat Ahmad Qamar)
HASHIMI Muhammad Mahmood Iqbal
KALAR Ashgar (s/o Muhammad Shareef)
MAJEED Abdul (s/o Abdul Waheed)
SHEHZAD Tariq (s/o Sultan Ahmad)
TAHIR Mansoor Ahmad (s/o Iqbal Ahmad)
WAQAR Ahmad
WARAICH Shaheed Ahmad

Detailed information about each of them can be found in [HRWF Database](#).

At the invitation of Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Belgium Sophie Wilmes, Foreign Minister Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi was visiting Brussels from 6-8 December 2021.

As a key component of the visit, the Foreign Minister co-chaired the 6th round of Pakistan-EU Strategic Dialogue with EU High Representative and Vice President Josep Borrell.

The European Union is one of the largest trade and investment partners of Pakistan and the current volume of bilateral trade stands at US \$ 10.883 billion. Pakistan's relations with the EU are manifest in frequent and close engagements through structured dialogues. The two sides signed the Pakistan-EU Strategic Engagement Plan (SEP) in June 2019, which provides a solid framework and blueprint for future Pakistan-EU cooperation. This would be the first in-person session of the Strategic Dialogue since the signing of the landmark SEP.

It was preceded by the 7th round of Pakistan-EU Political Dialogue, co-chaired by Foreign Secretary Sohail Mahmood and Deputy Secretary-General Enrique Mora and held online on 3 December 2021.

During his stay in Brussels, the Foreign Minister met NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg. The two sides have remained closely engaged on Afghanistan as well as undertaken joint training and capacity-building programs for military and civilian personnel.

The Foreign Minister had an exchange of views with Belgian MPs and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Source: Associated Press of Pakistan

Photo : Foreign Minister Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi – APP

EEAS PRESS RELEASES

<https://bit.ly/31JOOp1>

<https://bit.ly/3DGxf2o>

Sacrilegious attack against Sikhs in Sindh

The holy book Guru Granth Sahib was desecrated, and money was stolen.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (02.12.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3Ekyipv> - An attack against a Sikh place of worship took place on November 27 at Gurdwara Shri Guru Harkrishen Sahib situated at Village Kot Meer Badan Khan Bajarani in Kashmore district's Karampur tehsil.

Attackers targeted the holy book Guru Granth Sahib, tore its pages, and threw them on the ground. For Sikhs, the Guru Granth Sahib is more than sacred scripture. When their last guru, Gobind Singh Ji, passed away in 1708, he told his followers that their next and perpetual guru will not be a human being but the Guru Granth Sahib. The book is approached by Sikhs with great reverence, and desecrating it has the same sacrilegious meaning of attacking the Quran for Muslims.

Money was also stolen from the *golak*, which is the collection book placed in front of the Guru Granth Sahib.

Local Sikhs complained that the police did not seem to take an interest in the attack, and did not even register a FIR (first information report) as it should be usual in these cases.

The incident confirms the precarious situation of Sikhs in Pakistan who, not less than Christians and Hindus, are exposed to sectarian violence.

Photo : The attack on the holy book. From Twitter.

MEPs on official visit in Islamabad: Interview of MEP Tomáš Zdechovský

HRWF (17.11.2021) - On 10 February 2021, MEP Peter Van Dalen, a Dutch member of the European Parliament and co-chair of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief addressed a written question to Josep Borrell about the privileged GSP+ status granted to Pakistan and still in force despite its egregious human rights violations.

On 29 April, the European Parliament adopted a resolution to express its deep concern about the overuse of blasphemy laws and the security religious minorities in Pakistan.

In the last few months, a number of NGOs in Brussels have organized events to share their concerns about serious violations of human rights in Pakistan: the abuse of the blasphemy laws, the non-prosecution of perpetrators of false statements of blasphemy, the non-respect of the presumption of innocence in case of blasphemy charges and the abuse of the pretrial detention, the lack of security for religious and ethnic minorities, the kidnappings of Christian girls and forced conversions and the death penalty.

On 3-4 November, the European Parliament's Delegation for Relations with South Asia paid an official visit to Islamabad. The European delegation was comprised of the Chair Mr Nicola PROCACCINI (Italy, ECR), Ms Heidi HAUTALA (Finland, Greens, Vice-President of the European Parliament), Mr Luis GARICANO (Spain, Renew) and Mr Tomáš ZDECHOVSKÝ (Czechia, EPP).

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) interviewed Mr Tomáš ZDECHOVSKÝ about his visit to Pakistan:

HRWF: From your discussions with a wide range of Pakistani authorities, do you feel that there is a genuine political will to fight against a number of violations of human rights concerning the blasphemy laws, the security of religious and ethnic minorities, the kidnappings of Christian girls and forced conversions, the forced conversions of minors or the death penalty.

MEP Tomas Zdechovsky: The problems come from the extremists of radical Islam. This is a powerful group that unfortunately still has significant influence and puts pressure on institutions, especially the courts, to impose the harshest possible penalties for accusations of blasphemy.

The truth is, however, that the current government of Prime Minister Imran Khan has taken some partial steps to improve religious freedom and is making efforts to improve the position of minority groups. The good news is, for example, the success in the world-famous case of a Christian woman called Asia Bibi. She was originally sentenced to death but eventually her release was secured. She and her family were allowed to travel to Canada.

Following her release, an inter-ministerial committee on religious tolerance was also set up. It is precisely on the issue of the position of Christians and other religious minorities in Pakistani society that I see huge space for improvement.

HRWF: What is the state of play of the parliamentary work in Pakistan to improve the legislation on some of these issues? What are the obstacles? Who is opposed to such progress in the Pakistani parliament?

MEP Tomas Zdechovsky: As I indicated in my previous reply, the current ruling political party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Pakistan Movement for Justice) has taken some partial steps to improve the status of religious minorities and the overall human rights situation in the country. These efforts are also facing opposition at the parliamentary level from radical Islamists. In the Pakistani Parliament, this is particularly the case with the relatively small Islamist party Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, notorious for, among other things, trying to prevent the release of the aforementioned Christian woman named Asia Bibi.

HRWF: Mob violence against religious minorities is a real source of concern. Have this issue and the extremism issue been discussed during your meetings? What is your assessment of the situation of the situation?

MEP Tomas Zdechovsky: Yes, the issue of violence against religious minorities was also discussed during our mission. I will continue to support all efforts in areas where more concrete action is needed, such as human rights - in particular, blasphemy laws and the rights of religious minorities. The persecution of Christians in Pakistan is an issue I have been dealing with for a long time.

HRWF: After this visit in Pakistan, what will you propose to your political group concerning the GSP+ status of Pakistan?

MEP Tomas Zdechovsky: First of all, it should be remembered that Pakistan is one of the important players in the international arena that certainly cannot be ignored. The EU wishes to remain a reliable partner for Pakistan, not only in the economic sphere. At the same time, however, it expects that this will not be done without the adoption of conventions addressing the conditions of children, workers and minorities, which is a necessary condition for inclusion in the GSP+ system allowing easier access to the European market.

Pakistan, too, is well aware of the importance of relations with the EU and has shown its willingness to take steps to improve these matters. During the visit, we were informed, among other things, that Pakistan has committed itself to the six conventions that are linked to the GSP+ system, which I obviously welcome. If Pakistan continues its efforts, it certainly deserves support for the continuation of GSP+. The European Commission already has a proposal on the table for a GSP+ conference after 2023.

Photo Credit: The News

Delegation of the European Parliament led by MEP Mr Nicola PROCACCINI pays first official visit to Pakistan

European Parliament (04.11.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3DrLOri> - The European Parliament's Delegation for Relations with South Asia, which covers relations with Pakistan, and other 5 countries in the region (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives and Sri Lanka), paid an official visit to Islamabad on 3rd and 4th November 2021, on the occasion of the 12th inter-parliamentary meeting between the European Parliament and the National Assembly of Pakistan. The European delegation was comprised of the Chair Mr Nicola PROCACCINI (Italy, ECR), Ms Heidi HAUTALA (Finland, Greens, Vice-President of the European Parliament), Mr Luis GARICANO (Spain, Renew) and Mr Tomáš ZDECHOVSKÝ (Czechia, EPP). The last official visit (Islamabad and Karachi) took place in November 2018.

The purpose of this visit is to provide Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and Members of both Chambers of the Parliament of Pakistan the opportunity to review together the state of relations between the European Union and Pakistan. The signature of the EU-Pakistan Strategic Engagement Plan in 2019 is a further milestone in relations between the EU and Pakistan, and as bilateral relations grow, it is essential that Parliamentarians on both sides assess progress and provide parliamentary scrutiny and guidance.

This visit takes place after two very difficult years due to the global Covid-19 pandemic, with an enormous impact on our economies and our societies. While the pandemic is not over yet, it is time to increase our efforts and examine together how our societies and economies can overcome this human tragedy and can recover in a mutually beneficial

way. MEPs recalled that the EU had allocated EUR 150 million in 2020 to support Pakistan's strategy in the fight against the covid crisis.

MEPs met with the Speaker of the National Assembly, the Deputy Chairman of the Senate, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister for Law and Justice, the Prime Minister's Advisor on Commerce, the Attorney General of Pakistan, the Governor of Punjab, with prominent Members of Parliament, with civil society organisations and with representatives of the media.

The meetings focused on issues of common interest, such as the state of EU-Pakistan cooperation in a number of fields, bilateral trade and GSP+, climate change, regional issues, good governance and the rule of law, freedom of religion, freedom of the press and the situation of minorities.

Earlier this year, the European Parliament adopted a resolution expressing concern about the human rights situation in Pakistan. This visit offered the opportunity to assess the situation together with Pakistani interlocutors from the Parliament, Government and civil society and to gather first-hand information. MEPs were encouraged to learn about relevant human rights-related legislation introduced in Parliament but expressed concern over the issue of blasphemy laws and rights of religious minorities. MEPs underline the importance of guaranteeing freedom of expression and expressed concern about the shrinking space for media. Freedom of the press is a pillar of any democratic system. Censorship and harassment of journalists are not acceptable. MEPs also reiterated their strong opposition to the death penalty in all circumstances and took note of the de facto moratorium that has been applied over the past three years.

The European delegation took note of Pakistan's relevant role as regards developments in Afghanistan. The close historic and cultural ties with Afghanistan and the privileged contacts with the Taliban are an important tool in trying to address the risk of a humanitarian disaster in Afghanistan. While recalling the EU's benchmarks for engagement with Kabul, MEPs expressed their appreciation for the role of Pakistan in helping channel humanitarian aid and in facilitating the relocation of vulnerable Afghans to numerous countries of the international community. MEPs also recognised the efforts Pakistan has made to give shelter to over 3 million registered refugees over decades.

Pakistan has benefitted from the European Union's Generalised System of Preferences (GSP+) scheme since 2014. MEPs noted with satisfaction the progress made so far, such as adoption of relevant legislation, but cautioned that there were still some areas of concern, and that GSP+ should not be taken for granted. As the EU prepares new GSP legislation, likely to include more global conventions on human rights and rule of law, more concrete steps are needed in these areas to ensure that Pakistan can continue benefitting from that favourable trade scheme, if it decides to re-apply under the new legislation.

MEPs underlined that the EU wishes to remain a reliable partner of Pakistan and will continue to support all efforts towards the improvement of human rights, freedom of expression, the rule of law and strengthening democratic institutions. MEPs underlined that the active participation and contribution of civil society organisations is considered vital in that process, and that the space for their activities must be guaranteed.

For more information, please contact the Secretariat: Walter Masur (walter.masur@ep.europa.eu)

Photo: File photo. Georges Gobet—AFP

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan: Government lifts ban on violent Islamist party

The organization advocated for the execution of Asia Bibi and celebrated the beheading of French teacher Samuel Paty.

By Daniela Bovolenta

Bitter Winter (11.11.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3opTlAn> - On November 7, 2021, the government of Pakistan capitulated to the protests of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, a radical Islamic fundamentalist political party that had been banned on April 14. The ban was lifted, and the government promised to release from prison the party's leader, Saad Hussain Rizvi.

Ironically, the decision came on the third anniversary of the release from jail of Asia Bibi, a Pakistani Christian woman who had been sentenced to death by hanging for blasphemy but had been acquitted by the Supreme Court, overturning the lower courts' verdicts. Upon her release on November 7, 2018, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan gained international notoriety by organizing anti-Bibi riots throughout the country, insisting she should be executed.

In fact, the riots had started before, when the Supreme Court's decision had been announced on October 8, 2018. Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan had also stated that the three Supreme Court judges who had acquitted Bibi were themselves guilty of blasphemy and should be killed. The party used its favorite tactic of blocking the main Pakistani highways, creating disruption and chaos in the national transportation system. The block continued until the government signed an agreement with Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, and agreed that it will prevent Bibi, although she had been acquitted, from leaving the country. Only in 2019, after a new decision by the Supreme Court, Bibi was allowed to move to Canada, which generated new Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan riots.

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan is not a small group. In the 2018 general elections, it gathered more than two million votes, or 4.2%. although this was not enough to gain any seat. The party was founded in 2015 by Khadim Hussain Rizvi, who died in 2020 and was the father of the current leader Saad Hussain Rizvi. Most of its members come from the large Sufi-oriented but conservative Barelvi movement.

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan is a single-issue party. It mobilized against attempts, prompted by international pressures, to eliminate or soften Pakistani laws punishing blasphemy with the death penalty. It was involved in riots [against the religious minority of the Ahmadis](#), and successfully campaigned in 2018 to have the world-famous economist Atif Mian, a professor at Princeton University, removed from the Prime Minister of Pakistan's Economic Advisory Council because of his Ahmadi faith.

After the Asia Bibi case, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan mobilized in favor of Abdoullakh Abouyedovich Anzorov, the Chechen terrorist who beheaded the French schoolteacher Samuel Paty on October 16, 2020, after Paty had shown his students the

controversial *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons of Prophet Mohammad during a classroom discussion on the limits of freedom of expression. Anzorov was then killed in a shooting with the French police.

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan called for the public recognition of Anzorov as a martyr, and asked Pakistan to close the French Embassy in Islamabad and expel the French Ambassador. Pro-Anzorov riots started in October 2020 and continued until this month, with Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan activists marching towards the capital Islamabad and blocking the highways.

The agreement of November 7 confirms that the government in Pakistan prefers to compromise with violent, radical parties supporting the persecution of Christians, Ahmadis, and other religious minorities, rather than crack down on violence and guarantee the security of the highways.

Photo : *The funerals of the founder of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, Khadim Hussain Rizvi, Lahore, November 18, 2020.* [Credits](#).

Pakistan lifts ban on radical Islamist party

The far-right Tehreek-e-Labbaik party has called off a march on the capital, and the government has said allowing the party back into the political mainstream is in the "national interest."

DW News (08.11.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2YxBVch> - Pakistan ended its prohibition of the radical Islamist Tehreek-e-Labbaik (TLP) on Sunday, one year after violent protests led to a government crackdown against the party.

The lifting of the ban followed an agreement reached between the party and Prime Minister Imran Khan's government that TLP would call off its proposed march to the capital, Islamabad.

The government defended its decision by saying it was in the "larger national interest" as a means to prevent future violence from the extremist group.

Why was Tehreek-e-Labbaik banned in the first place?

The initial ban followed violent protests led by the TLP in response to the republication of caricatures of the Muslim Prophet Muhammad in the satirical French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*.

French President Emmanuel Macron's defense of the images triggered widespread anger throughout the Muslim world.

The TLP called for the expulsion of the French envoy, which Islamabad agreed to but ultimately did not carry out.

The leader of the hard-line conservative party, Saad Rizvi, was arrested and charged under the anti-terrorism act in the wake of the protests.

The TLP gained prominence in Pakistan's 2018 election when it vowed to defend the country's blasphemy law, which calls for the death penalty for anyone who insults Islam.

What is the current state of relations between Pakistan and the TLP?

The government's agreement to lift the ban — and to release Rizvi — came as the TLP piled up the pressure.

Thousands of supporters clashed with police in late October as they [began their "Long March" from Lahore to Islamabad](#), nearly 300 kilometers (186 miles) away. The violence left at least [two police officers and two demonstrators dead](#).

In line with the agreement, the TLP is supposed to formally call off its march. But many supporters planned to maintain a sit-in until the government follows through on its promise to release Rizvi. Last week, Pakistani authorities released over 1,000 detained members of the party.

Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed said that a proposal to expel France's envoy would be discussed in parliament. However, he has also stated that Pakistan cannot afford to damage its relations with the EU by carrying out such an act, news agency EFE reported.

Photo : Tehreek-e-Labbaik have not yet officially called off their 'Long March' on Islamabad – Rana Sajid Hussain/picture alliance/Pacific Press

Setting minimum age for marriage not against Islam : Federal Shariat Court

By Nasir Iqbal



A file view of the Federal Shariat Court building in Islamabad. — Photo courtesy Radio Pakistan

Dawn (29.10.2021) - The Federal Shariat Court (FSC) held on Thursday that setting the minimum age limit at 16 years for a girl's marriage under the Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA) 1929 would help girls get at least a basic education.

The observation came while the FSC dismissed a petition and categorically declared that setting any minimum age limit for girls' marriage by an Islamic state was not against Islam.

A three-judge FSC bench, headed by Chief Justice Mohammad Noor Meskanzai, had taken up the petition moved by Farooq Omar Bhoja challenging Sections 4, 5, 6 of the CMRA.

"After examining the petition, we are of the considerate view that the petition is misconceived, hence, it is dismissed in limine," ruled the judgement authored by Justice Dr Syed Mohammad Anwer.

In the 10-page verdict, the FSC held that the sections in which the minimum age limit was prescribed by the act for both girls and boys for marriage was not un-Islamic.

The section 4 of the CMRA prescribes punishment for marrying a child to a simple imprisonment which may extend to six months and a fine of Rs50,000. Whereas Section 5 and 6 explain the punishment for solemnising nikkah of a child and permitting or promoting child marriage.

The judgement explains that the importance of education is self-explanatory and the need for education is equally important for everybody irrespective of gender. That is why Islam has made the acquisition of education mandatory for every Muslim as mentioned in a Hadith stating "Acquisition of knowledge is mandatory upon every Muslim", the verdict says.

"The use of such language by the Holy Prophet (PBUH) accentuates the *farziat* of education in a Muslim society and for every Muslim in all and any circumstances. Hence education is one of the fundamental factors for personality development of every and any human person," the verdict explains.

For a healthy marriage, it says, not only physical health and economic stability etc are necessary factors but mental health and intellectual development are also equally important, which are achievable through education.

Education is fundamental for women empowerment as it is the key for development of an individual and consequently for the future generation of any nation, it says. One of the purposes of marriage in Islam is protection and promotion of genealogy and generation of a person, the verdict observes, adding that this concept comes under the topic of Hifz-un-Nasal, which is one of the goals of Shariat according to the concept of Maqasid-us-Shariah as narrated by Ibrahim Bin Musa Bin Mohammad Shatbi.

At a personal level, the judgment explains, for a girl or for anybody irrespective of gender, the factor of getting education comes under the concept of Hifz-ul-Aql i.e. protection and promotion of intellect, also one of the basic goals of Shariat.

According to the teaching of Islam, giving best education to a girl child or a daughter is one of the best deeds a person can do and it guarantees Jannat.

Due to its importance, Imam Bukhari created an entire chapter of his famous Hadith book, Jamia Al-Bukhari Sharif, on the importance of education of girls almost in the beginning of his book, the judgment says.

There are many Islamic countries where such type of law exists wherein minimum age for marriage for male and female is fixed, like in Jordan, Malaysia, Egypt and Tunisia, etc, the verdict points out.

However, in those countries according to their laws if in a specific or special case there is an unavoidable circumstance or situation to solemnise a marriage before the age as set by the law then the family of that girl and boy must approach a specific authority appointed by the government to allow or disallowing such permission, it says.

Christian divorce in Pakistan

The absence of a cohesive personal law system leaves Pakistan's minorities vulnerable and without adequate legal relief

Kamran Chaudhry



Image: Pixabay

Father Anthony Arbaz was prohibited from attending consultations on Christian marriage and divorce law in Karachi Archdiocese.

"The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Pakistan isn't satisfied about sanctioning Christian divorce directly through civil courts. Many priests are not happy about such separations. The faithful should turn to canon law. Our priority at parish level is to keep the serenity of the marriage bond. It is not our job to separate couples," he told UCA News.

On Oct. 27, the parish priest of St. Thomas Church prepared proceedings of a divorce case for referral to [Archbishop Benny Travas](#) of [Karachi](#), the lone canonist in the southern archdiocese.

"It's the second case in two years in my parish. The divorce rate is higher among the English-speaking Goan community than in the Punjabi community. We also involve community elders for reconciliation between couples," Father Arbaz said.

Christian personal laws are a thorny issue that has created a divide between human rights groups and the Catholic Church. Activists advocate amendments to the Christian Marriage Act of 1872 and Christian Divorce Act of 1869 which legalize marriages between 16-year-old boys and 13-year-old girls, thus conflicting with regional customs.

Two of Pakistan's five provinces — Sindh and Punjab — have passed laws prohibiting child marriage, although Punjab allows girls to be married at 16, while Sindh has a minimum age of 18. Section 10 of the Christian Divorce Act allows husbands to prove adultery as the only reason for dissolution of a Christian marriage.

An inability to attain legal proof and documentation on marital and personal status provides difficulties for several religious minorities, especially their women

However, the Christian wife could petition for divorce if her husband changes religion, marries another woman, becomes guilty of incestuous adultery, or rape, sodomy or bestiality, or deserts without reasonable excuse, for two years or upwards. Furthermore, a non-Muslim marriage can be invalidated if one of the two parties converts to Islam.

Both government and church committees have been negotiating for decades to update the laws relating to Christian conjugal conflicts. In February, Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari announced that [the draft of a new bill](#) to address laws governing marriage and divorce had been finalized.

The draft law was completed after 150 rounds of consultations conducted by the Ministry of Human Rights with various churches and Christian leaders. It has been with the Ministry of Law and Justice for more than two years. In July, the National Lobbying Delegation of minority activists urged government to submit it to parliament for consideration and adoption.

The absence of a cohesive, codified personal law system for minorities in Pakistan leaves members of these communities vulnerable and without adequate legal relief for many family and marriage-related matters, claims the Karachi-based Legal Aid Society.

"An inability to attain legal proof and documentation on marital and personal status provides difficulties for several religious minorities, especially their women, who face serious challenges in remarrying, divorcing, separating, adopting or even traveling abroad," stated the Legal Needs Assessment Survey published last week.

"There is also ambivalence regarding the divorce and dissolution laws, with many women from non-Muslim communities explaining how men from their community are afforded more rights through this colonial-era legislation than they are.

"Women must overcome all these legal and institutional disadvantages and obstacles to seek the legal recourse they need for domestic issues so that they can receive sufficient alimony to simply survive in an economy that does not value divorced women, much less divorced women from non-Muslim communities."

On Oct. 26, [Archbishop Joseph Arshad](#) blessed the new Ecclesiastical Tribunal (for Nullity of Marriage Cases) in [Islamabad-Rawalpindi Diocese](#). A team of five priests, three of them canonists, took oaths as the tribunal's personnel.

"This is the first time we have had an office and a proper set-up in the diocese, which is celebrating its platinum jubilee. Many cases were delayed and people used other tactics, such as converting to Islam, creating a negative impression of the Church. Our aim is to save family life, which is a gift of God, and facilitate people," said Father Kamran Younas, the tribunal's notary.

"Christians should give priority to the laws of the Bible. Using them for personal benefits results in disaster. Even in cases of adultery, we prefer bringing them back to goodness. Our office is still a new concept. We plan to educate catechists and priests about how to file the petitions and get quick information."

It is a matter of justice and law above theological interpretations. Different interpretations can't cultivate a consensus

Marriage tribunals existed in six dioceses and the apostolic vicariate before the recent shortage of experts on canon law. [Multan Diocese](#) lost its last canonist in 2020.

Father Arbaz appreciated the initiative. "Such an office is still lacking in Karachi, the largest city of Pakistan. Archbishop Travas deals with such cases alone or delegates other priests. We prefer the term separation," he said.

Peter Jacob, the Catholic director of the Centre for Social Justice, urged other dioceses to set up tribunals.

"It's a welcome step and a good beginning. Competent people, including at least one lay competent lawyer, should be part of the tribunals to avoid unnecessary delays and complications in civil courts. It will also clear the road on reconciliation more than the ordinary courts can do," he said.

"The draft law on Christian personal laws should have large ownership. It is a matter of justice and law above theological interpretations. Different interpretations can't cultivate a consensus. It should be done in accordance with universal principles of justice."



Archbishop Joseph Arshad (center) with personnel of the Ecclesiastical Tribunal (for Nullity of Marriage Cases) in Islamabad-Rawalpindi Diocese. (Photo supplied)

Pakistan told to release Christian charged with blasphemy

UN experts seek an urgent review of Stephen Masih's case

UCA News (23.10.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3nuDbFi> - UN human rights experts have appealed to Pakistan to immediately release Stephen Masih, a Christian from Sialkot district detained for over two years awaiting trial for allegedly committing blasphemy.

"We are seriously concerned by the persecution and ongoing detention of Mr. Masih on blasphemy grounds, and by his treatment at the hands of the judicial and prison authorities who are aware of his psychosocial disability and health condition," the experts said in a statement on Oct. 21.

They called on authorities in Pakistan to urgently review Masih's case, release and drop all charges against him, and ensure protection for him and his family.

The UN experts said they were concerned by the continued persecution and acts of violence perpetrated by state and non-state actors in Pakistan, fueled by claims of apostasy and blasphemy, often targeting religious or belief minorities.

Masih was attacked by a mob accusing him of committing blasphemy following an argument with one of his neighbors in Imran Pura Badian village in March 2019. His family home was also set on fire.

Local police registered a complaint and arrested him on March 15, 2019, but he was informed about the blasphemy charges only after three months.

"We urge the government of Pakistan to comply with its international human rights obligations, including with regard to freedom of expression, religion or belief"

"It is deeply alarming that a mere disagreement between neighbors could lead to the judicial harassment of an individual, based on his religious or other beliefs, and by the use of anti-blasphemy laws which may carry the death penalty," the experts said.

According to information received by the UN experts, the prosecution did not disclose publicly any evidence against Masih and no witness testimonies were ever recorded.

The UN experts also said they were concerned by the lack of medical care given to Masih in Sialkot district jail. Medical reviews to assess his mental health and fitness to stand trial have been repeatedly delayed, they said.

The experts added that Masih's reported detention in a cell with prisoners of the Muslim faith put him in danger and was a matter of concern.

"We urge the government of Pakistan to comply with its international human rights obligations, including with regard to freedom of expression, religion or belief, as well as with regard to the rights of persons who belong to minorities, to repeal all its anti-blasphemy and anti-apostasy legislation and to take measures to combat advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination and violence," the experts said.

The experts have been in contact with Pakistan's government to try to resolve the matter.

Photo : Islamist students throw footwear toward effigies representing Asia Bibi, a Pakistani Christian woman who was released after spending eight years on death row for blasphemy, in Karachi on Nov. 21, 2018. (Photo: AFP)

Christian on blasphemy charges must be freed – experts

UN OHCHR (21.10.2021) – <https://bit.ly/3pOLEWQ> - UN human rights experts* today urgently appealed to Pakistan to release Stephen Masih, a Pakistani Christian from Sialkot District, who has been detained for over two years awaiting trial for allegedly committing blasphemy.

"We are seriously concerned by the persecution and ongoing detention of Mr. Masih on blasphemy grounds, and by his treatment at the hands of the judicial and prison authorities who are aware of his psychosocial disability and health condition," the experts said.

"We call on the authorities to urgently review Mr. Masih's case, and to release and drop all charges against him, and to ensure protection for him and his family."

The UN experts said they were concerned by the continued persecution and acts of violence perpetrated by State and non-state actors in Pakistan, fueled by claims of apostasy and blasphemy, often targeting religious or belief minorities.

In March 2019, following an argument with one of his neighbours in Imran Pura Badian village, Mr. Masih was attacked by a group of people accusing him of committing blasphemy. His family home was also set on fire. Local police filed a First Information

Report (FIR) against him and arrested him on 15 March 2019. He was informed about the blasphemy charges only three months later.

"It is deeply alarming that a mere disagreement between neighbours could lead to the judicial harassment of an individual, based on his religious or other beliefs, and by the use of anti-blasphemy laws which may carry the death penalty," the experts said.

The Session Court in Sialkot denied a bail request on 5 August 2021. According to information received by the UN experts, the prosecution did not disclose publicly any evidence against Mr. Masih, and their witness testimonies were not recorded. Lahore High Court will hear an appeal on his bail application on 22 October.

The UN experts also said they were concerned by the lack of medical care given to Mr. Masih in Sialkot District Jail. Medical reviews to assess his mental health and fitness to stand trial have been repeatedly delayed, they said.

The experts added that Mr. Masih's reported detention in a cell with prisoners of the Muslim faith put him in danger and was a matter of concern.

"We urge the Government of Pakistan to comply with its international human rights obligations, including with regard to freedom of expression, religion or belief, as well as with regard to the rights of persons who belong to minorities, to repeal all its anti-blasphemy and anti-apostasy legislation and to take measures to combat advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination and violence," the experts said.

The experts have been in contact with the Government of Pakistan on the matter.

(*) *The experts: **Ahmed Shaheed**, [Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief](#); **Irene Khan**, [Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression](#); **Fernand de Varennes**, [Special Rapporteur on minority issues](#); **Tlaleng Mofokeng**, [Special Rapporteur on the right to physical and mental health](#)*

The Special Rapporteurs, Independent Experts and Working Groups are part of what is known as the [Special Procedures](#) of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the Council's independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. Special Procedures experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent from any government or organization and serve in their individual capacity.

Forced conversion law rejected in Pakistan: democracy's bitter winter

The statute would have put a halt to the practice of kidnapping, converting to Islam, and marrying to Muslim men young Hindu and Christian girls.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (20.10.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3E0cv63> - When we decided to call our magazine "Bitter Winter," we alluded to the fact that China is experiencing a permanent harsh winter where human rights and religious liberty are frozen. But there is a bitter winter of freedom of religion and human rights in Pakistan as well.

Last week, a parliamentary committee in Pakistan rejected a draft law that would have made forced religious conversions a crime, punishable with a 5- to 10-years jail penalty. Such draconian remedy was seen by religious minorities as the only way to stop the epidemics of abductions, conversions to Islam, and marriages to Muslims of young Hindu and Christian girls, many of them minors, something *Bitter Winter* has repeatedly denounced.

We acknowledged that, among thousands of cases, there may be some when young girls from the religious minorities really fall in love with older Muslim men, creating a Romeo-and-Juliet situation. There are many other cases where conversion and marriage are clearly the result of violence. Even if courts are well-intentioned, which in Pakistan is not always the case, discerning is difficult. Laws forbidding religious conversions of minors, except when their parents also convert to a different religion, and submitting religious conversion to tests to reasonably exclude it has been forced, are the only way of preventing violence and protecting minorities.

That the law would be rejected became clear in August, when the Ministry of Religious Affairs interviewed under the aegis of the Council of Islamic Ideology, [clerics from different Islamic schools](#), who claimed that “there are no forced conversions in Pakistan.” Minority human rights activists noted that some of the clerics who testified as experts were involved in cases of forced conversions themselves.

The Minister of Religious Affairs, Sahibzada Noorul Haq Qadri, was indeed the main force behind the rejection of the draft bill. He claimed that problems exist only in three districts of Sindh, and that girls convert to Islam because they fall in love with Muslim men or, more frequently, because they are poor and want to marry richer Muslims.

Senator Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar, chair of the committee who rejected the draft bill, [commented that](#), “Ninety eight per cent of forced conversion cases take place with underprivileged girls, who run away from their homes. There’s seldom been any case like such for women who are doctors and engineers, or just higher up the social class.” Other members of the committee played the nationalist card, and called the draft law a fruit of the West’s attempt to interfere in the internal affairs of Pakistan.

This is an egregious way of blaming the victims. If Christians or Hindu girls are poor, and are not “doctors or engineers,” it seems that they should be happy to be “taken” by richer Muslim men, no matter what their age and their culture is.

The rejection of the draft law makes it abundantly clear that Pakistan is not prepared to deal seriously with the discrimination and violence against religious minorities. The international community should take notice.

Photo : Pakistan’s Minister of Religious Affairs, Sahibzada Noorul Haq Qadri (right), defending the rejection of the forced conversion draft law in journalist Shahzeb Khanzada’s (left)TV program. From Twitter.

New religious body draws ire from rights activists

Pakistan is setting up a new religious body as part of efforts to push for an "Islamic welfare state." But activists warn that the new authority could jeopardize the lives of women and religious minorities.

DW (15.10.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3vqruTQ> - The Pakistani government has signed an ordinance for the establishment of the Rehmatul-lil-Alameen Authority (RAA) religious body, triggering fears that it could further empower the country's influential clerics and undermine [the rights of women](#) and religious minorities.

President Arif Alvi on Thursday issued the ordinance on the establishment of the RAA. The body will be composed of a chairman and six members, with Prime Minister Imran Khan as the patron-in-chief of the committee.

Khan had announced the government's decision earlier this week, stating that the purpose of the authority was to teach the life of Prophet Muhammad to adults and children.

Khan said the body would monitor the curriculum and watch out for any "blasphemous" content being shared in the media, [in school syllabi](#) and on social media platforms. The prime minister also said a cartoon series reflecting Islamic traditions would be launched.

Muhammad Iqbal Khan Afridi, a parliamentarian from the ruling party, welcomed the move, saying such a religious authority should have been set up long time ago. "Imran Khan did a great service to religion by establishing this authority," he said. "This is an Islamic country, and we want our syllabus, media, social media and laws to reflect the aspect of our religion."

Awami Workers Party leader Shazia Khan told DW that the RAA might not only result in an uptick in extremists in Pakistan, but also put women and religious minorities under threat.

"If a woman expresses an unconventional view on any issue, she could instantly be declared a heretic by these clerics, jeopardizing her life," Khan said.

Pakistan's religious minorities under threat

Peter Jacob, a Lahore-based Christian rights activist, told DW that the creation of the RAA could also further repress Pakistan's religious minorities.

"Minorities are already reluctant to express their views openly on social media because of the immense social influence of Pakistani clerics," Jacob said. "Now this authority will further institutionalize their powers," he added.

"Currently it is individual clerics who could point out any material on social media, dubbing it un-Islamic or blasphemous, but now the members of an authority might do it,

creating an existential threat to not only minorities but also secular and liberal Pakistanis," he said.

What other measures has Pakistan taken to reinforce religious bodies?

Pakistan already has a number of Islamic bodies with extended [support from the government](#).

The Council of Islamic Ideology advises the government on whether it considers proposed laws Islamic or un-Islamic. The council is made up of Islamic clerics and scholars who advise Pakistani legislators.

In 2016, a chairman of the council told reporters that husbands can "lightly beat" their wives.

"If you want her to mend her ways, you should first advise her. ... If she refuses, stop talking to her ... stop sharing a bed with her, and, if things do not change, get a bit strict," Muhammad Khan Sherani said, according to Pakistan's *Express Tribune* newspaper.

If all else fails, he said, "hit her with light things like handkerchief, a hat or a turban, but do not hit her on the face or private parts."

The council also stated that it was "un-Islamic" for women to leave abusive relationships and seek refuge in shelters.

A Shariah court has also been in existence for several years in Pakistan.

PM Khan is 'pushing Pakistan on his own'

Prominent activist Pervez Hoodbhoy told DW that Khan is the prime minister Pakistan's clerics have always dreamed of.

"They don't need to push him," Hoodbhoy said. "He is pushing Pakistan on his own." Hoodbhoy said Khan had set up the religious body to [revamp his public image](#) and to be remembered as a protector of Islam like the historical figure Saladin.

Creating the RAA is a gimmick meant to burnish Khan's populist credentials, Hoodbhoy said.

Khan has also announced that Pakistan would set up a TV channel in collaboration with Turkey and other Islamic countries to counter Islamophobia. In May, he laid the foundation stone of the spiritual Al-Qadir University in Sohawa in Jhelum district.

Khan's wife, Bushra Bibi, inaugurated an e-library dedicated to research on Sufis, saints and mystics in Lahore. The Punjab government launched scholarships for national and international students to carry out research on religious subjects.

Undermining socioeconomic development

Lahore-based lawyer Abida Chaudhry said that, as religious bodies gain power throughout Pakistan, social and economic development are being undermined.

"This new authority would also be stuffed with conservative clerics," Chaudhry said. "On the one hand, the government is drastically slashing budgets for health, education and

social security, and, on the other, religious bodies that have no justification in the 21st century are being formed."

She said the government should address inflation, increase its [budget for education](#), improve the health system and provide shelter for the homeless.

"And please do not drag religion into state affairs," Chaudhry said. "Let it be a matter of an individual and focus on social securities."

Photo : Asif Hassan/AFP

Parliamentary panel rejects anti-forced conversion bill amid protests by minorities' lawmakers



The Parliamentary Committee to Protect Minorities from Forced Conversions rejected the Anti-Forced Conversion Bill on Wednesday. — AFP/File

By Nadeer Guramani

Dawn (13.10.2021) - A parliamentary committee on Wednesday rejected the anti-forced conversion bill after the Ministry of Religious Affairs opposed the proposed law while lawmakers from minority communities protested the decision.

The bill came under discussion during a meeting of the Parliamentary Committee to Protect Minorities from Forced Conversions, where Religious Affairs Minister Noorul Haq Qadri said the "environment is unfavourable" for formulating a law against forced conversions.

He warned that forming a law on forced conversions would deteriorate peace in the country and "create further problems for minorities". "They (the minorities) will be made more vulnerable," the minister said.

Stating that the provincial governments, the National Assembly speaker and the Prime Minister's Office may take other measures to end forced conversions, he reiterated that legislation on the matter could lead to a melee.

Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs Ali Muhammad Khan said the issue of forced conversions had already been raised before the prime minister, who had formed a special parliamentary committee on the matter.

"We are serious about [addressing] the problem of forced conversions," he said. He added that the law on the subject, however, was to be formed to address the issue "and not for getting appreciation from an international organisation or a non-governmental organisation".

He further stated that legislation on the subject was being opposed as setting an age limit with regards to forced conversions "goes against Islam and the Constitution of Pakistan".

The minister informed the committee that Law Minister Farogh Naseem had called him to his office and cautioned him against legislating on the matter, terming the move "dangerous".

"He (Naseem) said to me that [being given] ministries is of little value as they come and go, but we should not go against Islam," Khan added.

Jamaat-i-Islami Senator Mushtaq Ahmed also opposed the bill, denying that the problem of forced conversions existed in Pakistan. "This bill is anti-Islam," he remarked.

Criticising the government for proposing the law in the first place, the senator said, "It is due to the incumbent government's wrong policies and neglect that not just Pakistan, but the entire Muslim world and minorities are also facing difficulties."

The opposition to the bill irked PTI MNA Lal Chand Malhi, who said the remarks by the ministers who had spoken earlier gave the impression that forced conversions were not a problem in Pakistan.

"You are cornering minorities and such decisions [rejecting the bill] will make life a living hell for minorities in this country," he said.

Malhi claimed that the bill had not been rejected by the Ministry of Religious Affairs or the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) but had been dismissed on the instructions of Mian Mithu. Mithu, the pir of Bharchundi Sharif, has been blamed for the alleged forced conversions of Hindu girls in rural Sindh.

In response to allegations by Malhi, Khan accused him of making false and political statements.

An angry Senator Ahmed added, "No matter what happens, we will not allow anyone to go against Islam."

Another committee member, Maulvi Faiz Ahmed, also said the bill was against Islam and Shariah. "And we will not allow any legislation in this country that is against Islam," he added.

This led to a protest by members from minority communities, who decried that young people from their communities were being kidnapped in broad daylight and forcibly converted to Islam, while also lamenting the fact that Muslim members had taken the stance that forced conversion was not a problem in Pakistan.

PTI lawmaker Ramesh Kumar said that while they were not opposing willful conversions, many Hindus were promised money and marriages in order to lure them into converting to Islam.

"And when they are not given what they are promised, they return home. This means that they did not convert of their own free will," he added.

He went on to say that opposing legislation against forced conversion indicated that the "government is worried about [the reaction by] elements involved" in the problem.

Clerics had **expressed reservations** over the bill in August, calling it a conspiracy and suggesting that the government should not fall into the trap of the West by taking it to parliament.

At a meeting, chaired by Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) Chairperson Dr Qibla Ayaz, they had reviewed the draft bill and objected to several clauses, including the minimum age of conversion.

Draft bill

A copy of the draft bill, which is available with *Dawn*, shows that any non-Muslim, who is not a child, and is able and willing to convert to another religion will apply for a conversion certificate from an additional sessions judge of the area where he or she is residing.

The draft law highlights that the application will have to include the name of a non-Muslim who is willing to change the religion, age and gender, CNIC number, details of parents, siblings, children and spouse (if any), current religion and the reason to convert to the new religion.

The draft law states that the additional sessions judge will set a date for interview within seven days of receipt of an application for conversion, and on the date the judge will ensure that the conversion is not under any duress and not due to any deceit or fraudulent misrepresentation.

The proposed law states that the "Judge may award a time period of 90 days to the non-Muslim to undertake a comparative study of the religions and return to the office of the Additional Sessions Judge."

After satisfaction, the judge will issue the certificate of change of religion.

The proposed law also awards punishment between five to 10 years and a fine from Rs100,000 to Rs200,000 to any person who uses criminal force to convert a person to another religion.

While any person who is an abettor to a forced conversion will be liable to imprisonment from three to five years and a fine of Rs100,000.

It has been highlighted that the age of the person willing to convert his/her religion will be determined by either the child's birth certificate, or school enrolment certificate, or Nadra B-Form.

"Only in the absence of such forms the child's age may be determined on the basis of a medical examination," the draft added.

The proposed law also states that the case of forced conversion will have to be disposed of within 90 days by the court, while appeal against a conviction or acquittal of an offence under this Act can be presented before the respective high court within ten days from the date on which copy of the order passed by the Court of Session is supplied to the appellant.

No new law against Islamic guidelines in my rule: PM Imran Khan

The News (29.09.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3AcfpIQ> - Prime Minister Imran Khan has assured the ulema that no law repugnant to Islamic teachings will be made during his rule.

The prime minister said that the contentious government bills -- including one apparently addressing the issue of domestic violence and another drafted to check forced conversions -- will not be enacted as they have provisions which are 'in direct conflict with the teachings of Islam.'

According to sources, during his meeting with Islamic scholars in Karachi on Monday, the prime minister also expressed his concerns about how to protect the family system and the socio-religious values of Pakistani society.

The prime minister said that some non-governmental organisations are working hard to get such laws and policies legislated that promote westernisation and seriously hurt our family system and socio-religious values.

The prime minister once again pointed out that the spread of indecency and obscenity through the social media seriously threatens our family system which must be protected. He sought the ulema's views on how to save our society's values, including the family system.

The sources said that most of the religious scholars identified obscenity, which they said is being spread specially by the social media, as the major threat to our family system. The prime minister was told by some of the ulema that it is the state's responsibility to regulate the media to ensure that whether these are television channels or any other form of social media including Youtube channels, they operate within the parameters set by the Constitution and the law and they should not be allowed to spread obscenity and indecency.

During his interaction with the ulema, the prime minister also talked about the Turkish drama Ertugrul Ghazi and said that he got it to run on PTV and it became instantly popular and broke all records. The premier said earlier he was being told that producing indecent and vulgar dramas and films was the only choice to make them sell and earn money. He, however, said that the Turkish drama, which shows Islamic history and has no indecent and vulgar parts, has negated this excuse of depending on vulgarity for successful productions.

The premier as well as the religious scholars also urged the need for introducing a comprehensive system for the character-building of society for which the government, religious scholars, educational institutions, and media should play an important role.

The prime minister's attention was drawn towards certain government bills and draft laws, including the Domestic Violence Bill and Anti Forced Conversion Bill, which, according to the ulema, are against the teachings of Islam. The religious scholars explained how these draft laws violate the teachings of our religion.

Prime Minister Imran Khan assured the religious scholars that no such law would be enacted during his rule. The premier requested the ulema to keep him informed about any such act so that he could intervene in time and ensure that no policy or law which conflicts with Islam is made.

The prime minister sought the religious scholars' help in educating people about the teachings of Islam to make a better society for all. A few among the scholars who attended the meeting told The News that the prime minister impressed the ulema with his talk.

Photo: The News International

'No minimum age for conversion in Islam', Lahore High Court says

By Ahmed Saeed

VoicePK (27.09.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3idzjXq> - The Lahore High Court (LHC) has rejected a petition filed by a Christian man, Gulzar Masih, seeking recovery and custody of his reportedly underage daughter, Chashmaan Masih, who was allegedly forcibly converted to Islam and then married to an older Muslim man.

Justice Tariq Nadeem, while dismissing the petition, observed that there is no minimum age of conversion in Islam and that Hazrat Ali embraced Islam at the age of 10. The court also observed that Chashmaan is 17 years old and therefore legally eligible to change her religion. Furthermore, she also recorded a statement under section 164 of the Criminal Procedure Code (Cr.P.C.) before a magistrate in Faisalabad that she had converted out of her free will.

However, Masih's lawyer apprised the LHC that the Faisalabad court recorded her statement without sending summons to the girl's father.

"The high court cannot undertake factual inquiry while exercising jurisdiction under Article 199 of the Constitution. In as much as the question as to whether a conversion is tainted or otherwise cannot be determined without recording the evidence," the order said.

Chashmaan's father has repeatedly claimed that she is just 13 years and nine months old, and has produced legal documents including her birth certificate and NADRA's (National Database and Registration Authority) B-form to ascertain his claims.

To determine the age of the girl, the court relied only on the FIR (First Information Report) which mentioned the age of the victim as 17 years. According to Masih, he is illiterate and his FIR application was written by a police official who deliberately mentioned the wrong age of the girl.

The court also ignored the fact that Gulzar Masih had moved many applications before senior police officials to rectify the age of his daughter in police records including the FIR.

Background

According to details of the case, Chashmaan was kidnapped from her school by unidentified individuals on July 27, 2021. When Gulzar lodged an FIR with the police, he was forwarded a video of Chashmaan "converting" to Islam and a snap of a nikkahnama with a Muslim man who went by the name of Usman on his WhatsApp number.

Chashman's age on the marriage certificate is 19 years, whereas per the child marriage restraint act the minimum marriageable age in Punjab is 16 years for girls and 18 years for boys.

Masih is a rickshaw driver and has no means to fight legal battles in courts. However, he said that he will challenge the LHC's decision in the apex court and will try to get his daughter back home.

"Chashmaan's mother is mentally unstable and her condition has deteriorated since she knew about the incident. She goes into fits, tossing pans and tearing her clothes. She keeps begging me to bring back Chashmaan," he told *Voicepk.net*.

Govt warned against criminalising forced conversions

Incidents of forced conversion of Hindu and Christian girls in Pakistan have increased in recent years. To address this, the Ministry of Human Rights recently presented a draft bill criminalizing forced conversions and setting a minimum age for conversion.

However, the bill has been rejected by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) for not being in line with Shariah.

The CII has warned the government against passing any such laws as it will result in chaos and anarchy in the country.

According to Qibla Ayaz, Chair of the CII, such incidents have nothing to do with religion rather they stem from social factors, and that girls tend to convert to Islam in order to marry of their choice.

In this regard, Christian activist Lala Robin says that forced conversion is sadly a reality, and that it is not possible to solve a problem without acknowledging it exists first.

Statistics about victims of blasphemy laws (1987-2021)

Presentation by lawyer Akmal Bhatti, director of the Minorities Association of Pakistan (MAP)

To the press conference "Is Suspension Of Pakistan's GSP+ Status Overdue?" at the Press Club Brussels, hosted by Human Rights Without Frontiers Brussels, 9 September 2021

By Akmal Bhatti

HRWF (21.09.2021) - Since 1987 to August 2021, 1,865 people have been charged under the blasphemy laws, with a significant spike in 2020, when 200 cases were registered. Punjab, the province where most Christians of Pakistan live, is leading with 76% cases and 337 people in prison for blasphemy. The largest number of inmates is in the Lahore District Jail (60). Also, at least 128 people have been killed by mobs, outside any judiciary process, after being signalled as having committed blasphemy or apostasy, without any chance to have access to an investigation, and nobody has been arrested for their murder.

The increasing trend of the misuse of the Blasphemy Law intensifies communal hatred, religious intolerance and persecution against religious minorities in Pakistan. The law is often used as a tool to settle personal scores, false witnesses are bought, and the burden of proof lies with the accused. These incidents have fostered a climate of religiously motivated violence and persecution that is mounting day by day.

Even more discrimination is imposed upon minorities with the Single National curriculum (SNC), in force since mid-August 2021. The SNC is a means of indoctrination already conservative society. In the first phase, which started from March 2021, the government is making it mandatory for students from class one to five to be acquainted with *deeniyat* (religious books on Islam). In the Urdu textbook for Grade 2, children are being instructed to recite the *naat* (poem in praise of Prophet Muhammad), and additionally, a chapter on the life and history of Prophet Muhammad is to be introduced for eighth, ninth and tenth classes.

Pakistani government for the vision of unified educational system for all, the children of minority communities do not seem to have any space. Worse, the definition of "who is a Pakistani?" in the first years books totally excludes non-Muslims, and disparages other faiths. Holy Quran in Arabic and Islamic Studies are being made mandatory.

In such a case, students from minority communities may not have any other option but to follow the curriculum imposed on them. SNC militates against Article 22, 25 & 36 of the Pakistan Constitution, which safeguards the rights of minorities. It states that "no person attending any educational institution shall be required to receive religious instruction ... if such instruction relates to a religion other than his/her own."

The SNC calls for summoning an army of madrassah-educated holy men – hafiz's and qaris – as paid teachers inside schools. This will surely affect the general ambiance and the safety of students. It has also been observed that "the backdoor entry" of seminary teachers into mainstream educational institutions is a nightmare for minority students.

Minorities Alliance Pakistan staged a protest on Minorities' Day, August 11, 2021 from the National Press club to the Parliament Square in Islamabad. We demanded the

government to enact practical and solid steps to stop the misuse of Blasphemy Laws and forced conversion, rape, abduction and sexual enslavement of girls and women. We urged P.M. Imran Khan to implement electoral reforms and to start the development of projects for Christians living in the slums of the capital Islamabad.

On August 31st, 2021, we met with the newly assigned Muslim Cleric Allama Tahir Ashrafi, he is advisor to the Prime Minister for National Harmony, we explained our ordeals and concerns about these laws and discussed many cases. What I observed during the dialogue with him is that the religious and political leaders of the present government think that Christians commit blasphemy just by merely requesting asylum in other countries. They do not acknowledge discrimination or abuses in spite of the evidence.

Minorities Alliance Pakistan urges the Government of Pakistan to take realistic and solid steps to stop the abuses of the Blasphemy Law, which are causing massive human rights violations. We demanded that the Government constitutes a competent Inquiry Commission, to look into the cases pending in the courts, to secure fair and expedite justice.

Photo : [claas.org](https://www.claas.org)

EU urged to act over 'continued rights abuses' by Pakistan

Eureporter.co (17.09.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3tTAG2h> - **Coalition spokesman Andy Vermaut : *The EU institutions have been urged to act urgently in the case of Pakistan's alleged continued human rights abuses. A coalition of respected human rights NGOs, coming together under the umbrella of Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF), delivered a letter to the EU's High Representative Josep Borrell, calling for the suspension of Pakistan's GSP+ status, which gives the country preferential trading rights with the EU, on the basis of "continued human rights abuses"*** .

In the letter, delivered by hand to the Brussels offices of Borrell, a former Spanish MEP, on Wednesday, the NGOs particularly highlighted the abuses of Pakistan's blasphemy laws. This has recently seen an eight year old child charged with blasphemy "against the prophet" an offence carrying a mandatory death sentence. The letter follows a recent conference on the matter, also hosted by the Press Club in Brussels, which was addressed by former European Commissioner Jan Figel, MEP Peter van Dalen and others.

A UK parliamentary group has since declared its support for the campaign, headed by HRWF. One of the organisers of the letter told this site that there is particular concern about Pakistan's current country's blasphemy laws, and the lack of respect for the presumption of innocence. The letter handed to Borrell, the EU's foreign affairs chief, cites article 12 of a European parliament Joint Motion For A Resolution, dated April 28 and passed by 681 votes. This pledges "to immediately review Pakistan's eligibility for GSP+ status in the light of current events and whether there is sufficient reason to initiate a procedure for the temporary withdrawal of this status and the benefits that come with it, and to report to the European Parliament on this matter as soon as possible".

The recent conference heard that of the benefits given as a result of the current agreement with Pakistan, around 20% only accrued to the EU, causing, in the opinion of the conference, no significant potential detrimental economic impact on the EU or the member states. The imposition of the mandatory death sentence for those found guilty of blasphemy against the prophet, particularly in the context of such charges having recently been levelled at an eight year old child, makes, in the opinion of the conference, the current GSP+ status enjoyed by Pakistan "morally and politically untenable."

During the conference, the names were read out of 47 prisoners who are currently held on blasphemy charges in Pakistan. They are: Mubashir Ahmed; Gulab Ahmed; Ahtesham Ahmed; Zahid Ahmed; Ahmed Waqar; Anwar; Islam; Mailik Ashraf; Anwar Ashgar; Ahmed Ashgar; Noor Ashgar; Malik Ashraf; Kausar Ayub; Amud Ayub; Taimur; Siya; Raza; Zafar Bati; Md. Safi; Md. Shehzad; Rehmat Ali; Asif; Md. Aslam; Arif Mehdi; Junaid; Hafeez; Abdul Hamid; Md. Faruq; Hayai Bin; Malik; Md. Humayan Faysal; Aftab Mastargil; Nadeem James; Arif Massih; Saudi Issaq; Abdul Karim; Imran Massih; Yakub; Ishfaq Massih; Saba Massih; Bashir; Mastan Mushtaq; Shamsuddin; Md. Yussaf; Inayat Rasool; Iqbal and Md. Aslam.

The list comprises Ahmediyyas, Shias, Hindus, and Christians. Sixteen of these have been handed a death sentence. The letter sent to Borrell on Wednesday states that "Accordingly, we wish to ask the High Representative - who has previously stated that suspension of Pakistan's GSP+ status is a measure of last measures - what his current position is in this regard?" The letter, seen by this site goes on to say that "given that Pakistan's behaviour clearly contravenes the requirement for GSP+ beneficiaries to ratify 27 international conventions, numerous it is clearly in breach of, we respectfully ask how the High Representative can justify the continuation of Pakistan's GSP+ status?" No one from the EEAS was immediately available for comment to this website on Wednesday (15 September).

Photo: Andy Vermaut – eureporter.co

Human Rights: European Commission VP Josep Borrell pressed to review Pakistan's GSP+ status

On 15 September, a spokesperson of over 20 European human rights organizations personally handed over a memorandum to VP Josep Borrell through the EEAS

Memorandum

To: Josep Borrell Fontelles, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Vice-President of the European Commission

Signatories:

Alliance Internationale des Droits et des Libertés (AIDL):

<http://www.aidl.eu/fr/quisommesnous.html>

All Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief in UK

(APPG): <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org>

ARCHumankind: <https://archumankind.com> – Paulo Casaca - paulo@sadf.eu

Baloch Human Rights Council: <https://balochhumanrightscouncil.com> Naseer Dashti

dr.naseerdashti@gmail.com

Bitter Winter: <https://bitterwinter.org>

British Pakistani Christians Ltd: <https://www.britishpakistanichristians.org>
CAP Liberté de Conscience: <https://freedomofconscience.eu>
Center for Freedom of Religion or Belief and Conscience: <https://lirec.net>
European Association for The Defense of Minorities (EADM): <https://bit.ly/3zc4mbV>
Forum for Religious Freedom Europe (FOREF): <http://foref-europe.org>
Free Nadeem Samson Campaign: <https://gofund.me/9faf6008>
Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF): <https://hrwf.eu>
International Council for Diplomacy and Dialogue: <https://www.icdd.info>
International Human Rights Committee: <https://www.hrcommittee.org>
International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF): <https://www.iirf.eu>
Minority Concern: <https://minorityconcern.wixsite.com/mcpakistan>
Noodt Foundation: <https://gerardnoodtfoundation.org>
International Organisation to Preserve Human Rights: <https://preservehumanrights.org>
PostVersa Fundamental Rights Chapter: <https://postversa.weebly.com/>
Set My People Free: <http://freedom2worship.org> - huldafahmi@jubileecampaign.org
fahmi@swissmail.org (Hulda Fahmi)
Soteria International: <http://www.soteriainternational.org> - Lukas Swenninger –
l.c.swenninger@gmail.com

Date: September 15th, 2021

Subject: Human Rights: NGOs press VP Josep Borrell to review Pakistan's GSP+ status

A conference at the Press Club, Brussels, on September 9th, held under the auspices of **Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF)**, called for the EU institutions to act in the case of Pakistan's continued human rights abuses, in particular in regards to the country's blasphemy laws, and the lack of respect for the presumption of innocence.

Specifically, and in regard to article 12 of the Joint Motion For A Resolution (RC-B9-0254/2021) of April 28th 2021, passed by 681 votes, ***"to immediately review Pakistan's eligibility for GSP+ status in the light of current events and whether there is sufficient reason to initiate a procedure for the temporary withdrawal of this status and the benefits that come with it, and to report to the European Parliament on this matter as soon as possible;"***

The conference heard that of the benefits given as a result of the current agreement with Pakistan, around 20% only accrued to the EU, causing, in the opinion of the conference, no significant potential detrimental economic impact on the EU or the member states.

The imposition of the mandatory death sentence for those found guilty of blasphemy against the prophet, particularly in the context of such charges having recently been levelled at an eight year old child, makes, in the opinion of the conference, the current GSP+ status enjoyed by Pakistan morally and politically untenable.

During the conference, the names of 48 prisoners currently held on blasphemy charges: Mubashir Ahmed; Gulab Ahmed; Ahtesham Ahmed; Zahid Ahmed; Ahmed Waqar; Anwar; Islam; Mailik Ashraf; Anwar Ashgar; Ahmed Ashgar; Noor Ashgar; Malik Ashraf; Kausar Ayub; Amud Ayub; Taimur; Siya; Raza; Zafar Bati; Md. Safi; Md. Shehzad; Rehmat Ali; Asif; Md. Aslam; Arif Mehdi; Junaid; Hafeez; Abdul Hamid; Md. Faruq; Hayai Bin; Malik; Md. Humayan Faysal; Aftab Mastargil; Nadeem James; Arif Masih; Stephen Masih; Saudi Issaq; Abdul Karim; Imran Massih; Yakub; Ishfaq Massih; Saba Massih; Bashir; Mastan Mushtaq; Shamsuddin; Md. Yussaf; Inayat Rasool; Iqbal and Md. Aslam. The list comprises Ahmediyyas, Shias, Hindus, and Christians.

Sixteen of the above have been handed a death sentence.

Accordingly, we wish to ask the High Representative - who has previously stated that suspension of Pakistan's GSP+ status is a measure of last measures - **"what his current position is in this regard."**

Also, given that Pakistan's behaviour clearly contravenes the requirement for GSP+ beneficiaries to ratify 27 international conventions, numerous it is clearly in breach of, we respectfully ask **"how the High Representative can justify the continuation of Pakistan's GSP+ status?"**

We look forward to receiving your response, at the address of: **Human Rights Without Frontiers, Avenue d'Auderghem 61, Box 16, 1040 Brussels, Belgium**

Telephone: +32-478202069

international.secretariat.brussels@hrwf.org

Yours respectfully,

We the above signatories.

Photo : Andy Vermaut delivering the letter in the name of the 20 signatories

Taliban-linked threat in Pakistan: churches increase security

By John Pontifex

Aid to the Church in Need (03.09.2021)- <https://bit.ly/3tzJVVh> - Churches across Pakistan have stepped up security in response to the threat of terrorist attacks following the Taliban's return to power in neighboring Afghanistan. At a meeting of Catholic and Protestant leaders, senior clergy agreed to tighten surveillance and beef up armed protection, especially at Sunday services. The move comes amid concerns that the Taliban's take-over of Afghanistan will trigger extremist incidents aimed at Christian and other minority faith communities.

Pakistan human rights activist Sajid Christopher, chief executive of the Human Friends Organization, said there were fears raised that the Taliban-associated group Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other militant organizations in Pakistan would capitalize on events in Afghanistan and target religious minorities including Christians.

Speaking to Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), Mr. Christopher said: "When the Taliban were in power before, there were a lot of terrorist attacks in Pakistan. There were terrorist organizations attacking churches and other Christian institutes. They clearly became targets. Now that the Taliban are back, it will strengthen the TTP and other Islamist groups and so there could be attacks."

Building on security protocols already in place, tightened protection measures include increased action to check the identity of people entering church compounds by car, metal

detectors used as people go in for services, and a beefed-up armed presence at church entrances.

Mr. Christopher warned that the security outlook for more moderate Muslims was also of concern, saying: "Among peaceful and progressive [Muslim] communities there will also be fear but those with a militant mind-set are happy that the Taliban are back in power again."

His comments come at a time of fear for the safety of what remains of Afghanistan's Christian community, those unable to be part of last week's mass evacuation of the most at-risk people, mainly non-indigenous groups.

Taliban fighters have allegedly gone house-to-house to track down Christians and other minorities and there were reports of people being ordered to hand over their phones with the threat of being killed on the spot if their devices were found to contain Bible verses or devotional material.

Former US international religious freedom ambassador Sam Brownback warned of genocide against Christians and other minorities in Afghanistan. He said: "It's a deadly and catastrophic situation and could easily lead to genocide."

Photo : churchinneed.org

Conference "Is suspension of Pakistan's GSP+ status overdue?"

See on YouTube the conference organized by Human Rights Without Frontiers at the Press Club in Brussels on 9 September:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9gj9vdx9Wo&t=36s>

Moderator: Willy Fautré (HRWF)

Speakers:

- Jan Figel, former EU Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief
- Peter Van Dalen, MEP and co-chair of the EP Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief
- Andy Vermaut, Alliance internationale pour les droits et libertés
- Akmal Bhatti, lawyer in Pakistan
- Tabassum Yousaf, lawyer in Pakistan
- Dr Shahid Mobeen, Professor of Philosophy Dr. Shahid Mobeen from the Pontifical Urban University in the Vatican City.
- Hans Noot, chair of Noodt Foundation

Conference "Is Suspension of Pakistan's GSP+ Status Overdue?"

This conference organized by HRWF will take place in-person at the Press Club, Brussels, at 11:00 – 12:00 (CET), Rue Froissart 95, 1000 Brussels

Thursday September 9th

The conference will also be live-streamed

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFWBDOEIrmVotVrnIsI5fw?view_as=subscriber

Topics to be addressed:

- The legal basis of the Blasphemy Laws, and the way in which they are abused.
- Pakistan's continued contravention of a number of the 27 international conventions that beneficiaries of GSP+ status are required to ratify.
- This will be placed in the context of Pakistan's continued support for the Taliban - with evidence of this [to be presented](#) - and the current tragic events in Afghanistan. [A recent article \(25th August\) published by the Council on Foreign Relations](#) will form the centre of this particular part of the debate.
- Towards EU's sanctions including suspension of the status?
- What message does the European Commission's failure to suspend Pakistan's GSP+ status send out to other developing nations, or to rogue states?

Following the event, letters outlining the conclusions and recommendations of the conference will be hand-delivered to High Representative Josep Borrell at the European Council, and to the office of President David Sassoli at the European Parliament.

Provisional Agenda

Moderator

Willy Fautre, Director, Human Rights Without Frontiers. Former chargé de mission at the Cabinet of the Belgian Ministry of Education and at the Belgian Parliament. Member of the International Consortium on Law and Religious Studies.

Keynote Speakers

Ján Figel, First EU Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union (2016-2019); he was instrumental in the release of Asia Bibi.

Peter Van Dalen, Member of the European Parliament, Co-chair of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Association pour La Défense de la Liberté Religieuse (AIDLR)

Aid to the Church in Need: Testimonies

Dr Zsuzsa-Anna Ferenczy, Former political advisor, European Parliament (Foreign Affairs, Human Rights) from 2008 to 2020. She is a Ph.D. Research fellow at the European Union Centre in Taiwan at National Taiwan University, Taipei. Author of "Europe, China, and the Limits of Normative Power" (Edward Elgar Publishing)

Q&A

Another Christian woman accused of blasphemy for forwarding a text

Claas (23.08.2021) -- <http://www.claas.org.uk> - A Christian woman, Shagufta Kiran from Islamabad, Pakistan has been accused of blasphemy for simply forwarding a message.

Shagufta was arrested on July 29 by the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and she is still in their custody under investigation.

Shagufta's husband Rafique Maish told the Pak Christian News (PCN) that armed police raided their home and arrested his wife and two sons accusing them of violating Pakistan's blasphemy law by forwarding a WhatsApp post which included blasphemous content.

He said: "They harassed my family and took possession of our telephones, computer and other valuable items. The police were armed with firearms instructed us not to move and to keep our hands up. They arrested Shagufta and my two sons without prior information or an arrest warrant.

"They took my wife and sons to the police station, charged Shagufta under 295-A and 295-B of Pakistan's blasphemy but later on freed my sons."

He kept on saying they have fled Islamabad because of fear and threats and have moved somewhere they feel safer.

Rafique further said that Shagufta was arrested because she was a member of a WhatsApp group where someone allegedly shared a blasphemous message, which Shagufta forwarded to other persons without reading and knowing the consequences.

"Shagufta knew nothing about the post, she was not even the author of the post in question but was accused of passing it on," Rafique explained.

Nasir Saeed, Director of the CLAAS-UK expressed his concern over the ongoing misuse and abused of the blasphemy law against poor and illiterate members of the religious minorities.

He said: "This is not the first time that someone has been charged for sharing a post on the social media, but there are several examples like Patras and Sajid and a young boy Nabeel who has been recently granted bail but the case is ongoing against him and he has to prove himself innocent. While police have failed to find and arrest the authors of such posts.

He said that Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar have recently been released after seven years of blasphemy charges and have safely reached the Netherlands.

Their case was another which broadly followed the pattern of the case of Asia Bibi, who was acquitted by Supreme Court in 2018 but not everyone is lucky like them. There are several languishing in prison for years but nobody speaks about them.

Mr Saeed said: "I don't know how many years it will take for Shagufta Kiran to prove herself innocent."

The European Union parliament has adopted a resolution in April for Shagufta and Shafqat Emmanuel, demanding that Pakistan allow space for religious freedom and urged the EU authorities to review the GSP Plus status for Pakistan.

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

T: 02081506763 W: 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.

The Catholic Commission of Justice and Peace and Blasphemy Laws

Aug. 22 is the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief—the case of Pakistan

Aid to the Church in Need (18.08.2021) – <https://bit.ly/2WICZ1u> - - *To mark the third annual UN Day to remember the victims of religiously motivated violence, Aid to the Church in Need puts the spotlight on the victims convicted under the blasphemy laws in Pakistan and spoke on this topic with Father Emmanuel Yousaf, project partner of ACN and director of the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP). The CCJP is currently handling 12 cases of blasphemy defendants. Of the 12 cases, 11 victims are Christian, and one is Hindu:*

Could you explain the consequences of false accusations?

When a person is accused falsely, the impact is not limited to the victim itself, or the family, but the whole locality and neighborhood gets affected. Even their houses and churches are attacked and burned. For example, in Shanti Nagar, a Christian village in Khanewal city, the whole village was attacked because of one falsely accused person, Baba Raji. Similarly, seven people were burned alive in Gojra, a town close to Faisalabad, and Joseph Colony, a village on the outskirts of Lahore city, was attacked by a large mob, setting fire to more than 150 houses, including that of Sawan Masih, a falsely accused sanitation worker. Plus, a falsely accused victim, even after being acquitted, would not be able to return to her or his neighborhood or even her or his hometown. The lives of these victims are threatened forever, and many have been killed even after being acquitted.

Last April, the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning blasphemy laws in Pakistan. How important is this resolution for religious minorities in the country?

This resolution is of great importance for the rights of religious minorities in Pakistan, especially the Christian community. As the data show, blasphemy is the charge in 52 percent of the cases affecting religious minorities and in 14.5 percent of cases of

Christians specifically. However, the Christian community represents only 1.27 percent of the population.

The resolution noted an alarming increase in blasphemy accusations over the last year in Pakistan, online and offline.

Yes, based on our experience of documented data on blasphemy cases since 1987, we have witnessed an alarming increase in blasphemy accusations in the past few years, especially following the growth in the use of social media forums such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp.

What are the causes of this increase?

During the pandemic we have seen an increase in these cases, taking advantage of the fact that the pandemic has caused hurdles in fact-findings and judicial investigations and the court proceedings were delayed. And, in the past, most of the cases used to be in rural areas, as someone would accuse another person of blasphemy to settle a personal score or obtain land or property. However, we are now witnessing an increase in urban areas, where cases are being registered against educated sectors of society such as students, nurses, doctors, and many other professionals. This is a cause for concern as it indicates that religious radicalization is on the rise and, therefore, there is a greater determination on the part of the majority to force others to convert or subscribe to their ideology—and when they refuse to do so, they are falsely accused of blasphemy.

Pakistan's Foreign Office spokesperson Zahid Chaudhri stated in reaction to the EU resolution for Pakistan's minorities: ""The discourse in the European Parliament reflects a lack of understanding in the context of blasphemy laws." What does he mean?

Pakistan, being a Muslim majority country, holds a perception that these laws are not man-made but divine. So, they cannot be changed and even repealing them cannot be considered. In the last decade or so society at large has become religiously radicalized, and it has become nearly impossible to demand the repeal of the law.

Therefore, the CCJP has always been asking the government to stop people from misusing this law and has also provided recommendations. Furthermore, CCJP does not demand repeal of the law but procedural amendments to the law. In his statement, Mr. Chaudhri speaks from the context of the belief of the majority community about the Holy Book, the oneness of Allah, the finality of Prophet Muhammad, and Islam being the superior religion above all. Over the years, due to a biased educational system, these beliefs have created an ideology that there is only room for Islam in this country.

Do the judicial and administrative mechanisms offer minorities the same opportunities and possibilities as they do the majority, as prescribed by the Constitution?

The CCJP commission has been committed to the defense of the rights of minorities since 1987. In Pakistan, the rights of religious minorities are not protected. For example, Article 41 of the constitution states that the president must be a Muslim citizen of Pakistan. Although this concerns only one of the highest positions in the country, its influence is seen in every prestigious and strategic position in every department. As a result, rarely would a minority member be appointed to such positions of power, be it in the judiciary, the armed forces and even, to some extent, in Pakistan's administration.

What are you expecting from the international community and the EU?

The EU resolution is important, and we ask the international community to engage with the Pakistan's government and put pressure on it to safeguard and ensure the protection of religious minorities. Furthermore, we would urge the international community to help Pakistan in promoting tolerance through education, building capacity through judicial and police training, and reforms for stable economic conditions—thus to help create an economically empowered society in which everyone is treated equally.

—Maria Lozano

Eight-year-old becomes youngest person charged with blasphemy

Hindu boy faces possible death penalty after being accused of intentionally urinating in a madrassa library

By Haroon Janjua

The Guardian (09.08.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3CyJMFL> - An eight-year-old Hindu boy is being held in protective police custody in east [Pakistan](#) after becoming the youngest person ever to be charged with blasphemy in the country.

The boy's family is in hiding and many of the Hindu community in the conservative district of Rahim Yar Khan, in Punjab, have fled their homes after a Muslim crowd [attacked a Hindu temple](#) after the boy's release on bail last week. Troops were deployed to the area to quell any further unrest.

On Saturday, 20 people were arrested in connection with the temple attack.

The boy is accused of intentionally urinating on a carpet in the library of a madrassa, where religious books were kept, last month. Blasphemy charges can carry the death penalty.

The Guardian knows the name of the boy and family members, but has chosen to protect their identities for their safety.

Speaking from an undisclosed location, a member of the boy's family told the Guardian: "He [the boy] is not even aware of such blasphemy issues and he has been falsely indulged in these matters. He still doesn't understand what his crime was and why he was kept in jail for a week.

"We have left our shops and work, the entire community is scared and we fear backlash. We don't want to return to this area. We don't see any concrete and meaningful action will be taken against the culprits or to safeguard the minorities living here."

Blasphemy charges filed against a child have shocked legal experts, who say the move is unprecedented. No one this young has ever been charged with blasphemy before in Pakistan.

Blasphemy laws have been disproportionately used in the past against religious minorities in Pakistan. Although no blasphemy executions have been carried out in the

country since the death penalty was introduced for the crime in 1986, suspects are often attacked and sometimes killed by mobs.

Ramesh Kumar, a lawmaker and head of the Pakistan Hindu Council, said: "The attack on the temple and blasphemy allegations against the eight-year-old minor boy has really shocked me. More than a hundred homes of the Hindu community have been emptied due to fear of attack."

Kapil Dev, a human rights activist, said: "I demand charges against the boy are immediately dropped, and urge the government to provide security for the family and those forced to flee."

He added: "Attacks on Hindu temples have increased in the last few years showing an escalating level of extremism and fanaticism. The recent attacks seem to be a new wave of persecution of Hindus."

Footage circulating on [social media](#) appears to show an angry mob attacking and vandalising the temple with iron bars and sticks last week.

Ahmad Nawaz, a spokesperson for the Rahim Yar Khan district police, said: "Police are hunting the attackers and police teams are conducting raids to arrest the culprits but there has been no arrest made yet."

Pakistan's prime minister, Imran Khan, [condemned the mob attack](#) on Twitter and said he has ordered the provincial police chief to take action against anyone involved, including negligent police officers. He promised the government would restore the temple.

In New Delhi, India's external affairs ministry summoned a Pakistani diplomat to protest the attack and demand the safety of Hindu families living in Muslim-majority Pakistan.

In December last year, a large violent mob of conservative Muslims [demolished a century old Hindu temple](#) in the north-western province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

According to a [report](#) by the US Commission on International Religious Freedoms, published last year, Pakistan reported the highest number of incidents of mob activity, mob violence, and/or threats of mob violence as a result of alleged blasphemous acts.

Four countries account for nearly 80% of all reported incidents of mob activity, mob violence, and/or threats of mob violence as a result of alleged blasphemous acts in countries with criminal blasphemy laws between 2014 and 2018.

Photo: People gather outside a Hindu temple that was set on fire by a mob after reports that a Hindu boy had urinated in the library of an Islamic seminary, in Bhong, Pakistan 4 August 2021. Photograph: Obtained By Reuters/Reuters

Mob attacks temple in Pakistan's Punjab, damages idols

By M Zulqernain

Yahoo.news – PTI (05.08.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2VEJPI6> - A Muslim mob attacked a Hindu temple in Punjab province of Pakistan, burning down parts of it and damaging idols.

After the failure of police, the Pakistan Rangers have been called to control the situation.

Police said the mob attacked the Hindu temple on Wednesday at Bhong city of Rahim Yar Khan district, some 590 kms from Lahore, in reaction to alleged desecration of a Muslim seminary.

An eight-year-old Hindu boy last week had allegedly urinated at a library of the seminary in the area that caused tensions in Bhong, where Muslims and Hindus have been living peacefully for decades.

On Wednesday, ruling Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf parliamentarian Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani posted videos of the temple attack on his Twitter wall, requesting law enforcement agencies to rush to the spot to stop its 'burning and vandalising'.

In a series of tweets, he said, 'Attack on Hindu temple at Bhong City District Rahimyar Khan Punjab. Situation was tense since yesterday. Negligence by local police is very shameful. Chief Justice is requested to take action.' Dr Vankwani further said, 'Strict action must be taken against those who attacked Hindu temple at Bhong. In contact with higher authorities. Situation is very critical right now.' 'Chief Justice is requested to take action, please. Interfaith harmony is need of time,' he said.

According to District Police Officer (DPO) Rahim Yar Khan Asad Sarfraz, the law enforcement agencies have controlled the situation and managed to disperse the mob. 'Rangers have been called and deployed around the Hindu temple,' he said.

The DPO further said that some 100 Hindu families are living in the area and police have been deployed there to thwart any untoward incident.

He said no arrest has been made so far.

'Our first priority is to restore law and order and provide protection to the minority community,' Sarfraz said.

Another police official said the temple has been damaged badly.

'The attackers were carrying sticks, stones and bricks. They smashed the deities while raising religious slogans,' he said, adding a part of the temple was burnt down, which Dr Vankwani also confirmed.

The police officer said the minor Hindu boy who allegedly desecrated the library of the seminar in Bhong Sharif was arrested last week and booked under the blasphemy laws but subsequently released on bail for being a minor.

On Wednesday, he said after a social media post inciting people of Bhong to take revenge of desecration, the mob started gathering outside the temple and attacked it.

'We will arrest those miscreants who incited people to attack the temple,' DPO Sarfraz said.

Faisalabad: another Christian girl kidnapped and converted to Islam

The case came to light only thanks to a human rights activist. The girl's father had gone to pick her up at school, but did not find her. Shortly afterwards, the kidnappers sent the family a video and documents claiming that the 14-year-old had converted to Islam of her own free will.

By Shafique Khokhar

AsiaNews (05.08.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3s8Zzq1> - Another Christian girl has been kidnapped and converted to Islam in Pakistan.

Speaking to *AsiaNews*, Chashman's father, Gulzar Masih, said that on 28 July, he had gone to her school to pick her up; not finding her, he had immediately gone to the police to report the disappearance of the 14-year-old.

A few days later, the kidnappers sent the family a video and documents in which the girl claims to have converted of her own free will.

Gulzar, a rickshaw driver by profession, went back to the police station to get some answers, to no avail.

The story came to light only after Lala Robin Daniel, a Faisalabad-based human rights activist, got involved. "Punjab authorities should do their job to free girls who are kidnapped," he said.

Daniel called for legal action against the kidnappers. "As long as kidnappings continue undisturbed, girls and their families will feel unsafe."

Muhammad Ijaz Qadri, district president of the Sunni Tehreek organisation, released a letter certifying Chashman's conversion to Islam, whose "Islamic name from now on will be Aisha Bibi".

Sunni Tehreek is part of the Barelvi revivalist movement, which aims to preserve Islam in the Indian subcontinent and to which 60 per cent of Pakistani Muslims adhere.

Next week, on 11 August, Pakistan will celebrate Minority Day. For that occasion, Daniel will organise a protest against Chashman's abduction and other outrages, as well as against anti-Christian prejudice.

"We will not remain silent," the activist said. "We shall ask the government to guarantee the freedom and security of religious minorities."

Conference told Pakistan blasphemy laws 'equated to ethnic cleansing'

EU Reporter (29.07.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3lb6Hk1> - A conference on Pakistan's controversial blasphemy laws was told that the legislation has been equated to ethnic cleansing. The blasphemy laws, while purporting to protect Islam and the religious sensitivities of the Muslim majority of Pakistan, are "vaguely formulated and arbitrarily enforced by the police and the judiciary". As such they permit, even invite, abuse and the harassment and persecution of minorities in Pakistan, the event at Brussels press club was told.

But, despite such concerns, the European Union is "failing to help" victims and pressure must be put on Pakistan to repeal its laws. The conference on Pakistan's highly controversial and widely condemned blasphemy laws, took place under the auspices of the Alliance internationale pour la défense des droits et des libertés.

The legal basis of the blasphemy law, the use of the laws to justify ethnic cleansing and the particular effects on females were all discussed. Opening the debate, Paulo Casada, a former MEP, founder and executive director of the South Asia Democratic Forum, said: "This is a very important topic and one we have been dealing with for a long time. People are being accused of blasphemy without any foundation at all. This results from attacks on lawyers and the quite fanatical and absurd atmosphere in the country.

"The EU needs to do more to highlight this issue which has got worse, not better."

Jürgen Klute, former MEP and a Christian theologian, said: "I think Christianity and Islam have a lot in common: the belief that you have to appear in front of divine judgement at the end of your time so we must strongly argue against these blasphemy laws. How can a human being decide or estimate what a blasphemy is? You have to leave such decisions to your God. We can argue against these laws on human rights grounds and also religious grounds."

Manel Msalmi, international affairs Advisor of MEPs of the European Peoples' Party in the European Parliament, said: "The parliament and significantly the commission and council have each condemned persecution in Pakistan. Hundreds have been charged under these laws which seek to limit speech which could be seen as offensive. These laws have always been a problem but the situation has got worse. It is important to note that such laws are being used against religious minorities in states like Pakistan. Such attacks are also common online particularly against journalists. Pakistan has even called for the introduction of such laws in other Muslim countries with a boycott of states where blasphemy happens. This practice goes hand in hand with targeting religious groups. Human rights are being abused in Pakistan."

Another keynote speaker, Willy Fautré, director, Human Rights Without Frontiers, thanked the organizers for highlighting the issue. He focused be on the case of a Christian couple imprisoned since 2013 on blasphemy charges before being declared innocent by the Supreme Court of Pakistan and released a few months ago. Despite a resolution of the European Parliament in April focusing on their case, no EU country is ready to grant them political asylum.

He said that in the HRWF database of FORB prisoners, "we have documented 47 cases of believers of all faiths in Pakistan who are in jail on the basis of the blasphemy laws." These include 26 Christians, 15 Sunni Muslims, 5 Ahmadis and 1 Shia Muslim. Fautre added: "There are certainly more."

Some 16 have been sentenced to death, 16 have been sentenced to life imprisonment, 10 have been in prison for years and are still waiting for trial and in four cases the status of the prisoner is unknown. The case of Asia Bibi who was sentenced to death by hanging in 2010 and was finally acquitted for lack of evidence by the Supreme Court of Pakistan after spending many years on the death row is well known. When she was released, she went into hiding to avoid being killed by extremist groups.

She tried to apply for asylum in France and to other EU member states but to no avail. She was finally welcome in Canada. Fautre said: "I would like here to focus on this point."

On 29 April 2021, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on blasphemy laws in Pakistan, in particular the case of Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel, saying in its very first point: "Whereas Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel, a Christian couple, were imprisoned in 2013 and sentenced to death in 2014 for blasphemy; whereas they have been accused of sending "blasphemous" text messages to a mosque cleric insulting the Prophet Muhammad, using a sim card registered in Shagufta's name; whereas both the accused have consistently denied all allegations and believe that her National identity card was purposely misused."

The European Parliament said it "strongly condemns the imprisonment and sentencing of Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel, as well as the continued delay of their appeal hearing; calls on the Pakistani authorities to immediately and unconditionally release them, and to provide them and their lawyer adequate security now and upon release; calls on the Lahore High Court to hold the appeal hearing without delay and to strike down the verdict in accordance with human rights".

Some 681 MEPs voted in favour of the resolution and only three MEPs opposed it. Fautre added: "The Christian couple was finally released after spending 8 years in prison. They live in hiding for their security. They would now like to find a safe haven in an EU member state but they have not received any proposal from them and their applications for a visa through various European embassies have mostly remained unanswered or have been turned down because they are in hiding for their safety, they have no job and no proof of income. The diplomatic missions have not proposed them an alternative process to get asylum."

He told the conference: "Up to now, Germany was the only embassy to officially answer Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel but they said they could not be of any assistance. This possibility is narrowly limited to exceptional cases that are of particular exemplary political significance, for example, persons who have been active in human rights or opposition work in a particularly outstanding and long-standing manner and are thus directly exposed to a massive threat to their physical integrity and can sustainably avoid such a threat solely by being admitted to Germany."

"The only way to ask for political asylum would be to illegally cross several borders and arrive in an EU country where they could apply for asylum. They do not envisage such a dangerous solution."

"Again, in this case, EU member states are failing to concretely help persecuted Christians looking for a safe haven and turn a deaf ear to their requests. They are neither proactive nor reactive. Their obstacle race which started in 2013 in Pakistan is far from over.

"General Pervez Musharraf succeeded Zia with the support of the US and its allies. Musharraf not only failed to bring change in the country's blasphemy laws, he also allowed extremist groups to continue working under new names."

Photo : eureporter.co

It is time for the EU to question the GSP+ status granted to Pakistan

Moreover, EU member states fail to provide a safe haven to a Christian couple arrested in 2013, sentenced to death in 2014 and acquitted for lack of evidence in June 2021

By Willy Fautré, director of *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (28.07.2021) - The blasphemy laws in Pakistan are used and abused by extremist Islamic groups to persecute members of non-Muslim minorities and whoever tries to combat this religiously motivated instrumentalization is at risk of losing his life, a panel of experts said at a zoom conference organized by AIDLR (Alliance Internationale pour la Défense de la Liberté Religieuse) at the Press Club in Brussels on 27 July.

"The blasphemy laws of Pakistan, while purporting to protect Islam and the religious sensitivities of the Muslim majority, are vaguely formulated and arbitrarily enforced by the police and the judiciary; as such they permit abuse, harassment and persecution of minorities in Pakistan," declared AIDLR's representative and organizer Andy Vermaut in his introduction. "Muslim human rights activists, lawyers and judges in Pakistan have also been killed by the hand of Islamic extremists," he added.

The panelists were

Paulo Casada, former MEP, Founder and executive director of the "South Asia Democratic Forum".

Jürgen Klute, former MEP, Christian theologian.

Willy Fautré, Director, Human Rights Without Frontiers.

Manel Msalmi, International affairs Advisor of MEPs of the European Peoples' Party at the European Parliament.

Presentation of HRWF's director: EU member states deaf to calls for asylum from Christians in Pakistan

HRWF has a database of thousands of documented cases of FORB prisoners in the world, including 47 cases of believers of all faiths in Pakistan who are currently in jail on blasphemy charges often misused as personal settlements of scores: 26 Christians - 15 Sunni Muslims - 5 Ahmadis and 1 Shia Muslim.

16 have been sentenced to death
16 have been sentenced to life imprisonment
10 have been in prison for years and are still waiting for trial
1 case: a 6-year prison sentence
4 cases: the status of the prisoner is unknown.

The case of Asia Bibi who was sentenced to death by hanging in 2010 and was finally acquitted for lack of evidence by the Supreme Court of Pakistan after spending many years on the death row is well known.

When she was released, she went into hiding to avoid being killed by extremist groups.

She tried to apply for asylum in France and other EU member states but to no avail. She was finally welcome in Canada.

Another recent case of biased judgment in Pakistan denounced by EU institutions presents some similarities with Asia Bibi's experience.

Parliamentary Question

On 10 February 2021, three members of the EP Intergroup on FORB – Peter van Dalen (EPP), Bert-Jan Ruissen (ECR), Joachim Kuhs (ID) - filed a written [parliamentary question](#) addressed to Josep Borrell, High Representative/ Vice President of the Commission, in which they raised the issue of a Christian couple, Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar, sentenced to death and being arbitrarily denied an appeal since 2014.

On 15 April 2021, the Vice-president of the Commission answered:

The Head of the EU Delegation in Pakistan and the EU Special Representative on Human Rights have already raised the case of Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar with Pakistani authorities at the highest levels.

EP Resolution

On 29 April 2021, the European Parliament adopted a [Resolution on Blasphemy Laws in Pakistan](#), in particular the case of Shagufta Kausar, a caretaker in a Christian school, and her husband Shafqat Emmanuel, partly paralyzed, saying in its very first point:

"whereas Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel, a Christian couple, were imprisoned in 2013 and sentenced to death in 2014 for blasphemy; whereas they have been accused of sending "blasphemous" text messages to a mosque cleric insulting the Prophet Muhammad, using a sim card registered in Shagufta's name; whereas both the accused have consistently denied all allegations and believe that her National Identity Card was purposely misused;

the European Parliament

*Strongly condemns the imprisonment and sentencing of Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel, as well as the continued delay of their appeal hearing;
calls on the Pakistani authorities to immediately and unconditionally release them, and to provide them and their lawyer adequate security now and upon release;*

calls on the Lahore High Court to hold the appeal hearing without delay and to strike down the verdict in accordance with human rights;"

681 members of the European Parliament voted in favor of the resolution: only three MEPs opposed it.

It seems that the pressure exerted by the EU institutions was finally successful as the Christian couple who had spent eight years in prison was released a month and a half later, **on 3 June 2021**. They now live in hiding for their security as Asia Bibi had to do.

Looking for a safe haven in Europe

As Asia Bibi, they thought that the EP Resolutions highlighting their plight would facilitate their request for a visa to an EU member state as they urgently needed a safe haven for their own security. But the Christian couple have not received any proposal from them and their applications for a visa through various European embassies have mostly remained unanswered or have been turned down because they are in hiding, they have no job and no proof of income. The diplomatic missions could have proposed them an alternative process to get asylum but they did not.

As of the end July, the German embassy is the only one to have officially answered Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel but they said they could not be of any assistance:

"This possibility is narrowly limited to exceptional cases ("singular individual fates") that are of particular exemplary political significance, e.g. persons who have been active in human rights or opposition work in a particularly outstanding and long-standing manner and are thus directly exposed to a massive threat to their physical integrity and can sustainably avoid such a threat solely by being admitted to Germany."

The only way to ask for political asylum would be to illegally cross several borders and arrive in an EU country where they could apply for asylum but they do not envisage such a dangerous solution.

Again, in this case, EU member states are failing to concretely help persecuted Christians looking for a safe haven and turn a deaf ear to their requests. They are neither proactive nor reactive while what is required is action and not talk.

The GSP+ is at stake: Values first and Business second

Up to now Pakistan has ignored the repeated appeals of the UN, the EU institutions, the USA, the UK and other countries to ensure the necessary safeguards are in place to prevent the abuse of the blasphemy laws.

In 2014, Pakistan entered the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) granting a number of commercial privileges, such as the access to the EU market without import duties if... human rights are respected.

Despite continuing violations of human rights, including religious freedom, the European Commission certifies that Pakistan remains eligible for the scheme.

In the 10 February 2021 [written parliamentary question](#) mentioned before, the three MEPs asked Josep Borrell, among other things, if the VP/HR was "considering ending the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus preferences for Pakistan? If not, why not?"

Borrell first answered :

"the High Representative/Vice-President brought up the implementation of the 27 international conventions covered by the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) in the fifth EU-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue with Foreign Minister Qureshi on 3 November 2020.

This included explicit concerns regarding the death penalty and misuse of blasphemy legislation. Most recently, the EU reiterated its messages in this regard to Pakistan, on 2 March 2021, in the Sub Group on Trade of the EU-Pakistan Joint Commission."

He then put the emphasis on alleged progress in other human rights areas that are highly questionable as the extent of the related violations has not decreased since 2019:

"The 2018-2019 Report on the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) shows that Pakistan is making progress over time in areas such as the elimination of honour killings, the protection of transgender persons, and the protection of women's and children's rights.

However, a number of shortcomings still remain. The report includes reducing the scope for the death penalty as one of the priority areas for action. The EU will continue to closely monitor, address and encourage further progress on these issues."

and he concluded:

"A temporary withdrawal of GSP preferences would be a measure of last resort when all other actions fail."

Concretely, it means that the suspension of the GSP+ is not on the agenda of the European Commission although numerous reports prove that the implementation of human rights in Pakistan has not made any substantial progress and has even regressed on a number of issues. In addition, the understanding and the interpretation of "when all actions fail" in Borrell's answer can be easily abused for years to keep the GSP+ in place.

However, it would be an unfortunate missed opportunity for the EU to fail to show its teeth and to be at the spearhead of a robust initiative right now.

Indeed, on 2 December last, the State Department [redesignated](#) Pakistan as a CPC (Country of Particular Concern) under IRFA (International Religious Freedom Act) , but **again issued a waiver on any related sanctions, "as required, in the 'important national interest of the United States.'"**

Pakistan can sleep on both ears if the EU fails to put its words and values into action. Business first should be replaced on its agenda by Values first and Business second.

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.

Court acquits Christian couple on death row for seven 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 C¹

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';

(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

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

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 moves to withdraw Pakistan's GSP+ status over abuse of Blasphemy Laws

by [Guest Contributor](#)



The European Parliament has criticised Pakistan's controversial Blasphemy Laws and called for a review of the status quo, writes Philippe Jeune.

EU Political Report (03.05.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3i9WWAS> - Pakistan is a major beneficiary of the trading opportunities offered by the EU Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP).

From January 1st 2014 Pakistan has benefited from generous tariff preferences (mostly zero duties on two thirds of all product categories) under the so-called GSP+ arrangement aiming to support sustainable development and good governance.

In order to maintain GSP+ status Pakistan is obliged to ratify and effectively implement 27 core international conventions on human and labour rights, environmental protection and good governance.

However, this status is now under threat as global condemnation of Pakistan's controversial Blasphemy Laws grows, with the European Parliament calling into question the status quo.

Abuse of the laws is a major concern, and cases widely reported.

On April 24th of this year, in a Joint Motion for a Resolution, supported by all major political groups, MEPs called for an immediate review of Pakistan's eligibility for GSP+ status, and considered appropriate, the withdrawal of that status.

Such a move, which apparently enjoys the support of the majority of the house, would be highly damaging for Pakistan's economy: from 2010 to 2020, EU27 imports from Pakistan have almost doubled, with much of the growth coming in the aftermath of the award of GSP+ in 2014.

According to figures released by the European Commission, The EU is now Pakistan's second most important trading partner, accounting for 14.3% of Pakistan's total trade in 2020 and absorbing 28% of Pakistan's total exports.

Parliamentarians alleged that the blasphemy laws are used to "incite harassment, violence and murder against those being accused, causing people who are accused of blasphemy have to fear for their lives regardless of the outcome of judicial procedures."

They further stated that "it is widely known that Pakistan's blasphemy laws are often abused by making false accusations that serve the personal interests of the accuser."

The Author, Philippe Jeune, is a Brussels based freelance journalist, and regular contributor to EU Political Report.

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

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

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>.

⁴ Ibid.

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'.

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'.

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

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

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 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

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.uscifr.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.

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.

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.

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>.

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 "sacriligious 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/2MPwgbl> - 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.
