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Woman charged with desecrating Quran in Pakistan wins bail

[Christian Daily](#) (17.01.2025) - A Christian woman in Pakistan wrongly charged with blasphemy by a mosque leader won bail on Thursday (Jan. 16), her lawyer said.

Gojra Additional Sessions Judge Waseem Mubarik granted the bail to Shazia Younis, a 50-year-old Catholic mother of three children, in [the case](#) registered under Section 295-B of Pakistan's controversial blasphemy statutes relating to desecration of the Quran, punishable by life in prison, said attorney Javed Sahotra.

"The judge accepted my arguments that the woman had been falsely accused of blasphemy by the complainant – the First Information Report [FIR] shows that there was no ill intent behind her act," Sahotra told Christian Daily International-Morning Star News.

Sahotra said police had wrongly charged Younis because Section 295-B clearly requires a suspect to have "deliberately or intentionally" desecrated the Quran; intent must be shown for a blasphemy conviction.

"In this case, the complainant has admitted that Younis had unknowingly burned the holy pages along with waste paper," he said. "Therefore, her act does not constitute a case under Section 295-B."

The complainant did not witness the alleged incident, nor had police recovered any incriminating material from the woman's possession, he added.

Sahotra said the judge ordered the release of Younis against surety bonds of 50,000 rupees (\$180 USD).

"Younis will be released from prison in a couple of days, after we get the court's written verdict," he said, adding that soon he would file an application for dismissal of the case against her.

Gojra Saddar police in Toba Tek Singh District, Punjab Province, arrested Younis on Dec. 21 on the complaint of Atta Ul Mustafa, prayer leader of a mosque in her village, Chak No. 180-GB Mongi Bangla.

Mustafa stated in the FIR that he was in a market on Dec. 21 when two local Muslims, Muhammad Imran and Rab Nawaz, informed him that the woman had set fire to books outside her doorstep.

“The material set ablaze included a book of *Islamiyat*, which contained Islamic scripture,” Mustafa stated in the FIR, claiming also that Younis had admitted desecrating the pages to him. “Shazia has hurt the religious sentiments of Muslims, and she should therefore be punished as per the relevant law.”

UNHRC Urges Amending Laws

Expressing alarm over an increase in false blasphemy accusations in Pakistan, the U.N. Human Rights Committee on Nov. 7 urged repeal or amending of the country’s harsh blasphemy laws.

The committee noted that false blasphemy accusations led to Islamist mob violence and recommended amending the laws in accordance with requirements of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

In its concluding observations of the committee’s second periodic report on Pakistan, it stated concern over sections 295 and 298 of the Pakistan Penal Code, which carry severe penalties, including the death penalty, and have a disproportionate impact on religious minorities.

“It is also concerned about the increasing number of persons incarcerated under blasphemy charges, the high number of blasphemy cases based on false accusations, violence against those accused of blasphemy, fostering vigilante justice, and allegations of entrapment of persons, in particular young persons, on accusations of on-line blasphemy under cybercrime laws,” the committee stated.

It emphasized ending use of cybercrime laws, such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016, to prosecute and detain those accused of breaching blasphemy laws online. The committee also urged the government to investigate allegations of massive abuse of blasphemy laws in connection with cybercrime laws and publish the results of the inquiries.

“[The committee] is also concerned about the chilling effect that criminal defamation laws, blasphemy, sedition and counter-terrorism laws, and other recently passed legislation have on the exercise of freedom of expression by journalists, activists, human rights defenders and members of ethnic and religious minorities,” it stated.

Urging Pakistan to take all necessary measures to guarantee prompt and fair trials for all persons charged with blasphemy or other offenses against religion, the committee highlighted jail conditions, stating that it was “also concerned about reports of abuse of women prisoners, including sexual violence, and that individuals accused of blasphemy are often placed in solitary confinement for extended periods of time. It remains concerned about the widespread recourse to prolonged pretrial detention.”

Pakistan ranked eighth on Open Doors’ 2024 World Watch List of the most difficult places to be a Christian.

Two MEPs appeal to EU human rights envoy on behalf of persecuted Christians

An initiative of MEPs Bert-Jan Ruissen and Miriam Lexmann, co-chairs of the European Parliament's intergroup on religious freedom

[Nederlandse versie](#)

[SGP](#) (23.01.2025) - MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen (SGP) has urged the EU human rights envoy, Mr. Olov Skoog, to call particular attention to the difficult position of the Christian minority in the country during his visit to Pakistan. The EU envoy is visiting Pakistan later this month. Ruissen is making this appeal together with Slovak MEP Miriam Lexmann, in their capacity as co-chairs of the European Parliament's intergroup on religious freedom.

Ruissen: "The situation of Christians in the country is quite troublesome. I think, for example, of the very sad case of Shagufta Kiran, a Christian and mother of four children. She was sentenced to death under Pakistan's blasphemy laws. It is imperative that the EU envoy press for her, and others, to be released."

Christians are fiercely persecuted in predominantly Muslim Pakistan. The country ranks high on Open Doors' 2024 Christian persecution ranking. Alleged blasphemy is punishable by death. Moreover, many incidents are known in which angry crowds attack or even kill Christians and other religious minorities. Ruissen: "Keep in mind that Pakistan receives around 100 million euros a year in development aid from the European Union, in addition to contributions from individual member states.

There is no need for the EU to be cautious. The EU envoy can and should exert considerable pressure to protect Christians." The SGP MEP continued: "Less well known is that in Pakistan many Christian girls are kidnapped, forced to convert to Islam and then sold and married off to older men. Pakistani authorities rarely act against this, but the suffering is immense. The EU must not turn a blind eye on this."

In addition to development aid, the European Union has allocated about 100 to 150 million euros for Pakistani schools and teaching materials in recent years. Research shows that these EU-funded teaching materials actually encourage discrimination against Christians and other minorities. Ruissen and Lexmann also urge a review of these teaching materials.

The European Union has long supported global education initiatives overseas, including in Pakistan

EU funding for education in Pakistan sparks concerns over religious indoctrination

By Joseph Janssen

[EU TODAY](#) (08.01.2025) - In 2022, the EU allocated €10 million to Sindh province to strengthen provincial education policies, as part of broader funding under the EU Multi-Annual Indicative Programme 2021–2027.

While this financial assistance is aimed at improving educational standards and accessibility, recent concerns have emerged over the potential misuse of these funds, raising questions about transparency and accountability.

EU Funding for education in Pakistan and its Intent

The EU's financial support to Pakistan's education sector seeks to address critical challenges, including improving access to quality education and promoting equitable learning opportunities. The funding is part of the EU's broader commitment to supporting sustainable development goals, particularly those related to education. Sindh, one of Pakistan's most populous provinces, has historically struggled with low literacy rates, outdated infrastructure, and poor teacher training.

The €10 million allocated to Sindh was intended to strengthen the implementation of provincial education policies.

However, concerns have surfaced about how these funds are being utilized. Critics argue there is insufficient oversight to ensure that EU taxpayers' money is spent on improving secular education rather than supporting institutions that promote religious indoctrination.

Concerns Over Curriculum and Religious Content

Reports suggest that Pakistan's single national curriculum, applied in state and private schools, includes significant Islamic religious content across subjects such as Urdu, English, civic education, and history. This curriculum is mandatory even in schools attended by non-Muslim children, raising concerns about the potential for religious indoctrination.

The inclusion of religious content in subjects unrelated to theology poses a particular challenge for non-Muslim students, who may be compelled to learn material that conflicts with their personal beliefs. This issue has sparked broader concerns about religious freedom and inclusivity within Pakistan's education system.

Moreover, there is no guarantee that EU funds are not being used to support Islamic madrassas, which are often criticized for focusing heavily on religious instruction at the expense of broader academic subjects.

While madrassas play an important role in providing education to underserved communities, they have also faced allegations of promoting sectarian ideologies.

According to the [New York Times \(Jan 3rd 2025\)](#) the madrassas represent a potential threat. The institutions have long been accused of contributing to violence and radicalization, supplying recruits for the Taliban, Al Qaeda and other militant groups.

Previously, in 2021, the NYT reported that "[Darul Uloom Haqqania madrassa](#), one of Pakistan's largest and oldest seminaries, has educated more Taliban leaders than any school in the world."

Questions to the European Commission

In light of these concerns, [Bert-Jan Ruissen](#), a member of the [European Conservatives and Reformists](#) (ECR) group in the European Parliament, [has submitted questions to the European Commission](#). He seeks clarity on the mechanisms in place to monitor the use of EU funds and ensure that they are not contributing to religious indoctrination.

Specifically, Ruissen has asked the Commission to outline any measures it employs to identify Islamic religious content that permeates general subjects in state schools. He has also inquired about restrictive measures or sanctions that the EU could impose in cases where breaches of funding agreements are identified.

Additionally, Ruissen has called on the Commission to commit to transparency by making public any violations of agreements with Pakistan. This would aim to safeguard the rights of non-Muslim children and ensure that education funded by the EU aligns with its principles of inclusivity and respect for diversity.

The Broader Implications

The concerns surrounding EU funding for education in Pakistan highlight the complexities of international development aid. While financial assistance can play a critical role in addressing systemic challenges, ensuring that funds are used appropriately is equally important.

The case also underscores the broader challenges of promoting religious freedom and pluralism in countries with deeply ingrained religious influences in education. The EU must strike a delicate balance between supporting Pakistan's development goals and upholding its own values of human rights and religious tolerance.

Moving Forward

The European Commission's response to Ruissen's questions will likely set the tone for future funding agreements with Pakistan and other countries facing similar challenges.

Enhanced monitoring mechanisms, stricter accountability measures, and greater transparency will be essential to ensure that EU funds achieve their intended goals without inadvertently supporting activities that undermine the principles of equality and inclusivity.

As the EU continues to support education initiatives worldwide, the situation in Pakistan serves as a reminder of the importance of vigilance, oversight, and a steadfast commitment to upholding the values that underpin international aid.

A long fight to keep a closer eye on madrasas unravels in Pakistan

In a deal with Islamist parties, Pakistan is abandoning a requirement that religious seminaries, long seen by Western officials as a potential threat, register with the government.

By Zia ur-Rehman

[New York Times](#) (03.01.2025) - They draw millions of poor Pakistani children with the simple promise of free education, meals and housing. For devout families, they offer Islamic learning rooted in ancient tradition.

But to the Pakistani government and Western counterterrorism officials, the religious seminaries known as madrasas also represent a potential threat. The institutions have long been accused of contributing to violence and radicalization, supplying recruits for the Taliban, Al Qaeda and other militant groups.

Now, Pakistan's Islamic schools are at the center of an intense political clash — one that jeopardizes years of hard-won progress toward bringing the seminaries under the government's regulatory umbrella.

The conflict goes back to 2019, when the government enacted a sweeping overhaul requiring madrasas to register with the Ministry of Education. The effort, meant to increase accountability for institutions that have historically operated with minimal state oversight, was strongly backed by Pakistan's military but faced vehement resistance from Islamist political parties.

In October 2024, the largest of those parties, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, secured a deal with the government to end the registration requirement. Under the agreement, madrasas would be registered as they had been before 2019, under a colonial-era law governing charitable, scientific and educational groups. That law provides little oversight of curriculums, activities or funding.

In exchange, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam agreed to support unrelated constitutional amendments on judicial appointments that had set off a firestorm of controversy.

Maulana Abdul Wasay, senator and leader of the Islamist party Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, addressing students at a graduation ceremony in Chaman, Pakistan, on Wednesday. Akhter Gulfam/EPA, via Shutterstock

As the end of the year approached, however, the government had still not implemented the change. It cited concerns that reverting to the older system could undermine counterterrorism efforts, weaken oversight and breach international commitments to combat money laundering and terrorism financing.

The delay triggered threats of anti-government protests in Islamabad, the capital, adding to the government's challenges amid frequent marches by supporters of Imran Khan, the ousted prime minister.

"We are firm on the agreed madrasa registration terms and will ensure they are upheld," Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the chief of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, warned in Parliament last month. "If the government deviates, the decision won't be made in Parliament, but on the streets."

Late last week, the government finally approved the new registration provision, allowing madrasas to choose between modern oversight and the colonial-era framework. The move, in effect, discards the 2019 efforts to reform religious schools in favor of short-term political stability.

When Pakistan was created 77 years ago, madrasas numbered in the dozens. They gained prominence and grew significantly in the 1980s, when U.S. and Arab funding transformed them into recruitment hubs for Islamic volunteers to fight Soviet forces in neighboring Afghanistan. Today, there are about 30,000 madrasas in Pakistan.

Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the chief of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, center, during a news conference in Dera Ismail Khan District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, last month. Saood Rehman/EPA, via Shutterstock

Many future Taliban leaders were educated in these institutions, where some teachers endorsed the anti-U.S. ideology of Al Qaeda.

Pakistan came under increased pressure to regulate the religious schools after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, said Abdur Rehman Shah, a madrasa affairs expert affiliated with Tongji University in Shanghai.

"The post-9/11 war on terror and events like the 2005 London bombings raised global concerns about the lack of effective madrasa monitoring," Mr. Shah said.

After militants attacked a military-run school in northwestern Pakistan in 2014, killing more than 145 people — mostly children — observation of madrasas became central to counterterrorism efforts. Security agencies used GPS to map the schools and carried out raids and interrogations targeting seminaries suspected of militant links, Mr. Shah said.

In 2019, the government established the new regulatory framework to curb Islamist parties' influence over the seminary boards that govern madrasas. More than 17,500 madrasas enrolling 2.2 million students were registered with the Ministry of Education, according to official data.

Registration streamlined visa processing for international students, as madrasas attracted increasing interest not only from the Pakistani diaspora but also from students in African and Southeast Asian countries.

However, many seminaries, particularly those aligned with Islamist parties, including the country's largest and most prominent ones, resisted integration into the formal system, citing fear of government interference in religious education.

After the government agreed last October to end the requirement for registration with the Ministry of Education, officials hesitated to move forward in part because of

intensified scrutiny from the Financial Action Task Force, a global watchdog based in Paris.

At the graduation ceremony in Chaman on Wednesday. Akhter Gulfam/EPA, via Shutterstock

The task force had placed Pakistan on its "gray list" from deficiencies in combating money laundering and terrorism financing — a 2018 to 2022 for designation that often leads to reduced foreign investment and heightened financial oversight.

"F.A.T.F.'s main demand was a crackdown on terrorism financing, particularly targeting U.N.-designated individuals and entities, including their madrasas," said Sanaa Ahmed, an assistant professor of law at the University of Calgary who researches illicit financial flows and terrorism financing.

To comply with the task force's requirements, Pakistan in 2019 seized control of several madrasas linked to banned militant groups such as Jaish-e-Muhammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba.

But after more than two decades of increased examination of madrasas, education experts argue that the efforts overlook a deeper crisis: the country's struggling public education system, which fails to meet the needs of millions of children, particularly from low-income families.

Pakistan has the second-highest number of out-of-school children globally, with 22.8 million ages 5 to 16 not attending school — 44 percent of this age group, according to UNICEF.

Madrasas, supported by private donations, partly fill the gaps in the public system. For many poor families, they are the only viable option.

A boy studying the Quran in Balakot in 2019. Saiyna Bashir for The New York Times

One recent day, in a modest building in a low-income neighborhood in southern Pakistan, the air was filled with young voices reciting verses from the Quran.

Inside, hundreds of young men — some barely in their teens — sat cross-legged on woven mats. Their heads, covered with cotton-knit caps, were bowed over Islamic books, fingers tracing the Arabic script. Some were memorizing the holy verses.

Madrasas emphasize Islamic theology, often with sectarian leanings, and Arabic, a language not widely spoken in Pakistan. While not all of the schools are linked to militancy, many promote a narrow interpretation of Islam, emphasizing doctrinal purity and the defense of Islam against other faiths.

Critical thinking and open dialogue are not primary focuses. Madrasas' resistance to incorporating subjects like computer science or mathematics leaves graduates ill-equipped for the contemporary job market.

For many families, it is not poverty, but religious conviction, that drives them to enroll children in madrasas.

"I could send my children to private schools to study computers and science, but I'm sending them to a madrasa because I want them to study Islamic education," said Abdul Wahab, a real estate dealer in Karachi, in southern Pakistan.

A religious school student getting ready to mark the birth anniversary of the Prophet Muhammad in Karachi in 2021. Akhtar Soomro/Reuters

Like many devout people in Pakistan, Mr. Wahab believes that a child who memorizes the Quran will bring blessings to the family, including the promise of taking 10 others to paradise in the afterlife.

Despite concerns over radicalization, madrasa administrators say they are unfairly blamed for militancy. "There are many people who go to liberal schools and are radicalized," said Qari Shahid Gul, a teacher at a madrasa in Karachi.

He cited Saad Aziz, a graduate of a prestigious business school who was sentenced to death after confessing to involvement in several terrorist activities, including the killing of 45 members of the Ismaili sect of Shiite Islam.

"Terrorism must be curbed, but scapegoating madrasas is not the solution," Mr. Gul said.

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