

Pakistan: Aasia's cry for justice

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Many Christian girls are abducted and forced to convert to Islam. Sometimes local mobs are incited by imams to attack Christians. Now that Pakistan gets more "Islamized" with every passing day, Christians have become more vulnerable to malicious accusations under blasphemy laws.

Yet again, a Christian woman, Aasia Noreen, has been sentenced to death on November 8, 2010 under Pakistan's much debated blasphemy laws, which were introduced by Pakistan's third military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq as his attempt to Islamize the country. Nasreen Bibi from Kabirwala, Punjab province, was the first Christian women in the history of Pakistan who was sentenced by a lower court in insulting Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in 1997. She was later acquitted by the Supreme Court of Pakistan.

Aasia Noreen, 45-years old and a resident of Ittawali village in Nankana district, Punjab province of Pakistan, was sentenced to death by District and Session Judge Nankana Judge Naveed Iqbal after the court found her guilty of making blasphemous statements against Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). She was charged under Section 295 C, Pakistan Panel Code (PPC), of blasphemy laws; it is a crime punishable by death to blaspheme the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The judge also imposed a fine of Rs. 300,000 on her. Aasia said that she has not met any lawyer in jail and even on the day of her verdict she was not accompanied by any lawyer.

Aasia, a farm worker, was married with Ashiq Masih, 51, and is mother of five, two boys and three girls; Sidra, 18, Esha, 12 (who is disabled), and Eshum 10. Ashiq's family was one of the two Christian households in the village and have been living among 7,000 Muslim families for so long. The village is about 75 kilometres (47 miles) west of the country's cultural capital of Lahore.

Last year in June, she was taken into custody by police. According to Aasia's account, she was working in the field, picking fruit in an orchard, on June 14, 2009, when she used the same container for fetching water which was also used by other Muslim women workers. A group of Muslim women labourers, including Aafia and Asma, objected, and used abusive language saying that her touch had made the water 'unclean'. "I asked them if Christians were not human... why the discrimination? This annoyed them," says Aasia. A heated argument started between her and the two other women; Aafia and Asma, the main witnesses in the case. Both women say that the allegation against Aasia was true.

Police say the Muslim women reported the incident to Qari Muhammad Salim, an imam of a mosque, who later filed the police report. Aasia's husband Ashiq says five days later, an angry mob led by Qari Muhammad Saalim, complainant in the case, burst upon her. "They dragged my mother out of the house and ripped her clothes," one of her daughter said. They blamed her that she had blasphemed. Although Aasia swore on the Bible that she had not committed blasphemy and apologized if any word she may have said which may have hurt anyone's feeling, nobody was ready to listen to her. Ashiq claimed that the charged mob threatened the police to register an FIR under 295-C, Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) for using 'abusive and insulting language against their Prophet

Muhammad (PBUH).'

The National Commission on the Status of Women has expressed its shock at the death sentence. Many Christian leaders as well as Muslim scholars and local human rights organisations have slammed the court's decision. Even Pope Benedict XVI has called for her release and said Christians in Pakistan were "often victims of violence and discrimination."

But many Muslim residents of the village showed their satisfaction on the outcome of the case. However, Christian leaders said the proceedings of the case took place under intense pressure. In addition, the Federal Minister for Minorities' Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti, who is himself a Christian, expressed that the allegations are baseless and victimization of a weaker person. "My own investigation proves that it was a personal dispute and she did not commit blasphemy," said the Minister.

A section of Urdu media has been publishing stories that the government is going to free Aasia and sending her to America. Islamic religious parties show their strong resentment against these 'moves.' Aalmi Majlas-e-Tahuffuz-e-Khatm-e-Nabuat (AMTKN) has warned the government of launching a countrywide protest movement if the blasphemy convict is shown any clemency by the presidency and any move to amend the blasphemy. Many other religious parties show the same concerns on the issue. The Muslim religious leaders say the law is to protect the honour of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the death sentenced for this crime is justified.

On the other hand, Aasia's sentence sparked concern among the national and international human rights organisations about the continuous misuse of blasphemy laws in Pakistan.

Anger at those laws grows so in many cities Christian organisations are having protest demonstrations against these laws and for the release of Aasia. Campaigners are demanding the total repeal of the laws.

Shahbaz Bhatti, Federal Minister of Minorities Affairs, said the government would not repeal the controversial laws but may amend it to prevent abuse. During the new debate on the laws, Pakistan Muslim League of Mian Nawaz Shaif's stand is unclear. MQM and ANP are also silent. Conversely, PML-Q President Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain strongly opposed the government's proposal to amend the law. He said that it would cause a chaos in the country. However, there are few Muslim women members of the parliament who show courage to rise voice against the misuse of these laws. They have been demanding for the early review of the law.

Aasia has filed an appeal at the Lahore High Court on November 19, 2010 by her lawyer SK Shahid. "Obviously, there is to be an appeal against the sentence. But it is not just the legal process that raises questions," senior journalist Ghazi Salahuddin writes in one of his columns.

Governor of Punjab Salman Taseer, who visited Aasia on November 20, 2010 in jail, said she had steadfastly denied any instance of blasphemy. She told the media that the case stemmed from personal disputes that led to a false accusation. She added that she cannot even think of committing blasphemy against Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). "I have small children. For God's sake, please set me free", Aasia had pleaded before being handed over to police and put on trial for blasphemy. Aasia was raped at the hands of her accusers. This is what she told the Governor of Punjab. Through the Governor she had appealed for clemency to the president. However, the presidential spokesperson said it would be premature to say if the president would accept any such plea. President Asif Ali Zardari has the power to overturn any punishment handed down by the courts. Even if Aasia is granted pardon, the controversial blasphemy laws in the country are to remain in place because it will not be easy to overturn these laws.

Ironically, a fundamentalist Islamic party issued apostasy decree issued against Governor Taseer but the Pakistan People's Party rejected this decree and condemned the move against the governor.

Muslim religious groups are strongly condemning pardon of Aasia. They are organising protest rallies in front of the Governor House, Lahore. Jamaat e Islami Ameer Syed Munawar Hasan said besides some foreign powers, the secular lobby and the foreign funded NGOs having an anti-Islam and anti-Pakistan agenda are pressurising the Pakistan government for the release of the convicted woman, in a blatant interference in the country's judicial system and its internal affairs.

During the Mughal era, blasphemy charges were often leveled against Muslim Sufi mystics e.g Sarmad Shaheed and others. But situation was not so perilous. To control the sectarian clashes, British rulers introduce blasphemy law in 1860 Section 295 and then in 1927 Section 295-A into India Penal Code. The purpose of those laws was to protect the respect of all religion. The debated blasphemy laws which protect only one religion, Islam, were introduced in the 1980s by General Zia ul Haq. Through the introduction of those laws, he wanted to please Islamic parties who supported his illegitimate Martial Law government. Most controversial among those laws are Section 295-B and C of Pakistan Penal Code (PPC). The Section 295-B, PPC was introduced in 1982 which is against the insult of Holy Quran and the crime is punishable with life imprisonment. The Section 295-C, PPC which was added by an act of parliament in 1986, made it a criminal offence to use derogatory remarks against Holy Prophet (PBUH) and made the crime punishable with death. According to one estimate, over the past 30 years, about 4,000 cases were registered and about 700 of them led to convictions.

Ali Dayan Hasan, senior South Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch (HRW) said, "The injustice and fear that the blasphemy law spawns will only cease when this heinous law is repealed." In a statement issued on November 23, HRW stated, "The Punjab provincial government is either in denial about threats to minorities or is following a policy of wilful discrimination. Provincial law enforcement authorities need to put aside their prejudices and protect religious minorities who are clearly in serious danger from both the Taliban and sectarian militant groups historically supported by the state."

If the President grants her the pardon, Asia Bibi will be discharged but her life will be in extreme danger. Radical Islamic leaders state that if someone who is guilty of blasphemy has been released, they will deliver their own justice. Christian sources said that her family has gone into hiding because of death threats.

Pakistani Christians have been enduring discrimination in many areas of life; socially, culturally, economically and politically. Many Christian girls are abducted and forced to convert to Islam. Sometimes local mobs are incited by imams to attack Christians. Pakistan is an Islamic country where Christians make up less than two per cent of the total population of the country. Now that the country gets more "Islamized" with every passing day, Christians have become more vulnerable to malicious accusations under blasphemy laws.

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P.S.

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