

Pakistan: Mob burns girls' school in Lahore over alleged blasphemy

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The mob was angered by a supposedly blasphemous note from a teacher. That the burning happened in Lahore, Pakistan's cultural hub, worries analysts.

ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN

A mob attacked a girls' school in the city of Lahore, Pakistan, Wednesday, demanding that teachers hand over the principal and a teacher, after rumors emerged that the teacher had insulted the prophet Muhammad.

Though it is unclear just what the teacher said, more than 200 people ransacked the school, set a nearby car on fire, and graffitied the phrase "school management are blasphemers" on the wall of the Farooqi Girls's High School, which is considered one of the better schools in Lahore.

The police arrested the principal, Asim Farooqi, on blasphemy charges, which carries the death sentence in Pakistan. The accused teacher, Arfa Iftikhar, has reportedly gone into hiding.

Analysts say that the fact that the incident happened in Lahore, the cultural capital of Pakistan, raises serious concerns about the lack of control Pakistani authorities have over extremist elements even in progressive parts of the country.

"The rise of extremism in Pakistan's urban center has been a visible trend since the last one decade," says Raza Rumi, who is from Lahore but currently works for the Jinnah Institute, a think tank based in Islamabad. "Lahore is no exception to this trend and has witnessed the onslaught of extremists' incursions into the public space."

Some say the blasphemy law is increasingly being used by right-wing groups to undermine moderate discourse in Pakistan.

"This has been done to serve some other vested interests, and we have demanded that Chief Minister of Punjab set up a commission to investigate the real reasons behind this," says Adeeb Jadwani, a friend of the school principal, and the president for All Pakistan Private School Management Association in Lahore.

Mr. Rumi says that teachers, students, writers, and intelligentsia in Lahore are often held hostage to "fringe lunatics" who want to impose a particular brand of sharia (Islamic jurisprudence) on Pakistani society.

An example of the increasing power these right wing extremists groups have was seen earlier this year when Pakistan's largest art school's annual publication was banned, and writers and artists were booked under the blasphemy law for publishing art "objectionable" to Islam.

“The tragedy of this situation was that the law enforcement institutions, such as the police and the courts, did nothing to correct this. And instead of providing protection, they asked the artists to submit to the will of bigoted groups,” says Rumi, referring to the case against artists.

Critics of the blasphemy law say that Pakistan’s political leaders and policymakers have ignored the proliferation of religious seminaries and unchecked growth of extremist networks in the major cities.

“Teachers and students are repeatedly being targeted by extremists because they are against the secularism” or nonreligious curriculum taught at schools that aren’t madrassas, says Peter Jacob, who heads a human rights organization in Lahore focusing on the rights of religious minorities. “It is unacceptable to these conservative minds, and since they have ready-made ammunition in the form of the laws, and no restraint from the government, we see them operating freely,” he says.

There have been at least four blasphemy cases against teachers in 2012 alone, points out Mr. Jacob.

“There is a lot of room to misinterpret the law since it is very loosely defined as to what ‘insult’ means.” Adding that because no one has ever been punished for misusing it, it is openly abused by many. He cites the case of Rimsha Masih, a 14-year-old Christian girl who was accused of blasphemy in August, but was later released when it was found that a religious cleric had planted evidence against the girl. “They booked the cleric but as yet there has been no development in punishing him,” Jacob says.

Taha Siddiqui, Correspondent

P.S.

* The Christian Science Monitor Weekly Digital Edition, November 1, 2012:

http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2012/1101/Mob-burns-girls-school-in-Pakistani-city-over-alleged-blasphemy?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+feeds%2Fworld+%28Christian+Science+Monitor+|+World%29&utm_content=FaceBook