

Pakistan works to stop Asia Bibi leaving after blasphemy protests

Saturday 3 November 2018, by [BARKER Memphis](#), [KHULDUNE SHAHID Kunwar](#) (Date first published: 3 November 2018).

Administration accused of signing Bibi's 'death warrant' in deal with hardliners.

Pakistan's government has been accused of signing the "death warrant" of Asia Bibi after it said it would begin the process of preventing her leaving the country.

Bibi, a Christian farm labourer, was acquitted of blasphemy on Wednesday. She had spent eight years on death row after she drank from the same cup as a Muslim, prompting false allegations that she insulted the prophet Muhammad.

Bibi's lawyer, Saif-ul-Mulook, has reportedly since fled the country amid fears for his life, telling AFP: "I need to stay alive as I still have to fight the legal battle for Asia Bibi."

The ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) administration signed an agreement with the anti-blasphemy group Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) on Friday night, giving in to many of its demands in the face of massive, countrywide protests calling for Bibi to be put to death.

In a document signed by the PTI's religious affairs minister and the TLP's second-in-command, Pir Afzal Qadri, the government promised not to oppose a court petition to reverse Bibi's release. It also pledged to work in the meantime to put her name on the exit control list (ECL) which would prevent her leaving the country.

"Placing Asia Bibi on the ECL is like signing her death warrant," said Wilson Chowdhry of the British Pakistani Christian Association. Bibi, a mother of five, remains in the same prison where last month two men tried to kill her, although she has been shifted out of her windowless cell.

The agreement was a "historic capitulation", tweeted analyst Mosharraf Zaidi. On Wednesday night, the prime minister and leader of the PTI, Imran Khan, defended the verdict acquitting Bibi and suggested the government would clamp down on protesters it termed "enemies of the state".

The TLP has agreed to call off its protests, which saw thousands of Islamists blockade the country's major motorways, burning cars and lorries and chanting that they were ready to die to protect the honour of the prophet.

Meanwhile, the government has promised to free any TLP workers arrested during the three-day protest. The group has only apologised for the damage it caused, the cost of which one government official estimated at \$1.2bn (£900m).

Afzal Qadri told the Guardian "the government has almost accepted our maximum demands" and that if it backtracked "we can come [out on the streets] again".

Islamists poured on to the streets after Friday prayers in a show of force that briefly unified extremist groups from the majority Bareilvi sect, which the TLP springs from, and the more traditionally hardline Deobandis. Terrorist-linked outfits including Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat held rallies in Islamabad, alleging that the EU had pressurised the government into releasing Bibi.

While the protests were ongoing, unknown assailants stabbed Sami ul Haq – the leader of the Haqqania madrasa known as the “father of the Taliban” – to death in his own home.

The spokesperson for Pakistan’s army, Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor, said that the military’s chief condemned the assassination and expressed “grief and condolences” for the ul Haq family. Earlier in the day, Ghafoor released a statement about the protests which avoided criticising the TLP, despite its leaders calling for soldiers to mutiny.

Memphis Barker in Islamabad

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/02/outrage-as-pakistani-government-vows-to-stop-asia-bibi-leaving>
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The release of Asia Bibi is a small step towards a more open Pakistan

Her acquittal could signal a relaxation of strict blasphemy laws and create a better country in the process

On Tuesday, Pakistan’s supreme court acquitted Asia Bibi in an historic verdict, overturning the death sentence meted out to her over charges of blasphemy.

The court established that Bibi, a Christian, was falsely accused by Muslim women picking fruit with her on 14 June, 2009. The allegation stemmed from a quarrel over the fact that she had taken a sip of water from a cup she had fetched for them, which in the eyes of her accusers she wasn’t allowed to touch.

Bibi’s acquittal generates hope that non-Muslim minorities will one day have the same rights as their Muslim compatriots – whether to drink water, to worship as they please or to speak their minds. Today, we can more easily imagine a tolerant and progressive Pakistan of the future.

The radical Islamists, to whom religious pluralism is an anathema, are hellbent on ensuring that this change does not happen. Spearheaded by the Tehreek-e Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), violent mobs are threatening to lock down the entire country [1], while calling for the heads of the judges who announced the verdict and demanding the government be dissolved.

TLP was formed as a pressure group [2] to prevent the judicial execution of Mumtaz Qadri, who was hanged in 2016 for the murder of former Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer. Qadri had accused Taseer of blasphemy for the latter’s defence of Bibi and his criticism of the blasphemy law.

Today, Taseer’s position on Bibi’s innocence has been vindicated. Now his call for reform of the blasphemy law should also be heeded.

Of course that reform remains a daunting task when the TLP is no longer a fringe movement, but one that can choke the capital for weeks [3], force the government to withdraw the appointment of a member of Pakistan's economic advisory council for his Ahmadi Muslim faith (considered heretical by some Islamists) [4], and dictate foreign policy [5].

It is also a party that won over two million votes in this year's general elections. Similarly, the popularity of Qadri – whose face adorns TLP's campaign posters despite his having been executed as a terrorist by the state – can be gauged by the attendance at his funeral [6] or the shrine in the capital in his name [7], which are visited by many, including government officials [8].

Pakistan's blasphemy law has been used to relentlessly persecute religious minorities [9] since the Islamist-inspired Article 295c was added to the penal code, mandating the death penalty for blasphemy against Islam. Blasphemy allegations have increased massively since the introduction of the Islam-specific clause in 1987, reaching 1,335 by 2015 (between 1927 and 1986 there were only seven accusations of blasphemy).

Personal scores are often settled under the guise of piety – something that was clearly established by the supreme court in Asia Bibi's case. And Islamist mobs undertake vigilante justice in protest that no one has yet been executed under the blasphemy law. As a result, there are concerns that Bibi's release could inspire further mob violence.

The long-term solution is of course to reform – if not repeal – the blasphemy law. Any law that seeks to punish a victimless thought crime is a direct breach of freedom of religion and conscience in a civilised society [10].

While Pakistan might be a long way from embracing free speech that encompasses critiques of Islam, the verdict in Bibi's favour has edged it closer to the removal of capital punishment in such cases. Incorporating reformist interpretations of Islam might make this possible [11].

A reformed blasphemy law would not only reduce the number of accusations – in turn reducing mob violence – it could pave the way for secular legislation. This would not only safeguard religious minorities, but also give Pakistan a much-needed national identity that isn't limited to Islam or anti-Indianism [12].

Furthermore, after successfully reducing terror attacks by countering the militant threat, Pakistan has an opportunity to firmly uproot jihadism by defeating it ideologically.

This would require resolve on the part of the government and state institutions – especially the all-powerful military establishment that has historically utilised Islamist groups to serve its domestic and regional interests [13]. The task is a huge one, but Asia Bibi's freedom might well help unshackle Pakistan from the darker aspects of its religious inheritance.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/01/release-asia-bibi-pakistan-blasphemy-laws>
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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.dawn.com/live-blog/>

[2] <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/tft/if-i-curse-in-anger-it-is-justified/>

[3] <http://www.atimes.com/article/ahmadis-fear-persecution-pakistani-government-capitulates-tly/>

[4] <http://www.atimes.com/article/pakistani-govt-backtracks-on-top-economist-after-islamist-backlash/>

[5] <http://www.atimes.com/article/pakistan-claims-credit-for-cancellation-of-dutch-cartoon-contest/>

[6] <https://www.dawn.com/news/1427356>

[7] <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/02/pakistan-shrine-murder-blasphemy-170206103344830.html>

[8] <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2018/01/18/for-sharif-son-in-law-safdar-mumtaz-qadri-remains-a-hero>

- [9] ESSF (article 46728), [Pakistan's blasphemy law is a relentless guillotine for minorities – The paradox of blasphemy](#).
- [10] <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/pakistan-issues-first-death-sentence-for-digital-blasphemy/>
- [11] <https://www.dawn.com/news/1215304>
- [12] <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/india-pakistan-partition-violence-islam-hinduism-mutual-destruction-70-years-a7889606.html>
- [13] <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/the-mullah-military-takeover-of-pakistan/>