

Blasphemy and persecution of Christians dominated news in 2010 in Pakistan

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The well-publicized case of a Christian woman Aasia Noreen who was tried and convicted for blasphemy under Islamic law was one of the major national stories in Pakistan during 2010. According to monthly Newline's polls, Noreen's case was 4th major story of the year while Aafia Siddiqui's, a Pakistani woman convicted in the U.S. on terrorism charges, story stood in 6th place. Pakistani fundamentalist groups and political parties, especially MQM, have been demanding Siddiqui's release from an American jail.

On Nov. 8, 2010, Noreen, 45-years old and a resident of the Muslim village of Ittawali in the Punjab province of Pakistan was sentenced to death by a Pakistani court for allegedly defaming Muhammad, the founder of Islam. Her case once again brought back to light the black laws of blasphemy.

Pakistan has among strictest Islamic blasphemy laws in the world. The main purpose of those laws is to protect Islamic authority. The laws are part of a system that gives preference to Muslims over non-Muslims. According to human rights groups, these laws have been widely misused against Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, Shiites and liberal Muslims since the 1980s. Christians have been demanding for the repeal of blasphemy laws, while Islamists have been organizing protest rallies in favor of the laws.

Not even one political party is ready to oppose the laws. Afrasiab Khattak, a leader of ANP, a secular party, has said they can support amendments to the law, rather than repeal. Interestingly, Khattak was once chairman of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) and advocated the total repeal of the laws.

Pasban, an Islamic group, demanded the release of Dr Aafia Siddiqui during celebrations on December 26 of the birthdate of the founder of Pakistan Muhammad Ali Jinnah. This was followed by a complete shutdown of merchants' shops across the country on New Year's Eve as religious parties held rallies to protests against any alleged move by the government to amend the blasphemy laws. The Tehreek Tahaffuz-e-Namoos-e-Risalat (TTNR) had called on Muslims to observe the so-called shutter-down.

In political terms there is little representation of religious parties in parliament and the public has never been voted for these parties since its independence. Despite the government's firm assurances that the law would remain unchanged, leaders of the religious parties just wanted to show their strength once again. The TTNR asked the government to dismiss Punjab Governor Salman Taseer and ask Sherry Rehman, both of whom belong to the ruling party (PPP), to resign from the National Assembly since they have taken positions against the blasphemy laws. On the same day, the opposition parties in the Punjab Assembly staged a token walkout during the session to express solidarity with the religious parties. "I call it a natural result of religious extremism that is on the rise in Pakistani society," said Mehdi Hasan, the chairman of the independent HRCP. Some call these parties as "Zia's children" because it was General Zia-ul-Haq who introduced these draconian laws in 1980s.

Since 1986, more than 40 persons accused of blasphemy have been murdered. Of these, 16 were Christians, 14 Muslims, five Ahmadis and two Hindus. These killings have never been pursued by the victims' families out of fear of further persecution. On Nov. 11, 2010, Imran Latif, a Muslim, 22, of Pir Makki in Lahore, was killed by two armed men. He was on bail against charges of burning the pages of Holy Quran. It was another case of extra judicial murder in blasphemy cases.

The blasphemy cases were on the rise during last year. Majority of cases were registered in the Punjab province where 80 per cent Christians have been living. There are 130 people (64 were convicted and 52 are on trial - 8 are Christians) in provincial prisons. Second largest cases were registered in the Sindh province where 32 cases were registered (five in Karachi, six in the Hyderabad and 21 in the Sukkur region).

Unidentified persons set fire to the home of Rahil Masood Wasti, Zafar Iqbal and Samreen Masood on Dec. 26, 2010. Allegations had been leveled at the Muslim family for allegedly desecrating the Koran. Fearing persecution, they fled Karachi, the capital of Sindh province.

The Green Town police in Lahore, the capital of Punjab, on Dec. 17, 2010 arrested a Muslim youth Ahsan Akram for allegedly setting a copy of the Koran on fire.

On Dec. 11, 2010, an Agha Khani Muslim doctor Naushad Valiyani was arrested in Hyderabad, Sindh province, for allegedly committing blasphemy against Mohammed. He was released later following the intervention of local Muslim political and religious leaders.

At least 5 cases were registered in September and October 2010 across the country. Muslim inmates at a prison in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province on Oct. 29, 2010 stoned a Christian boy named Imran Masih, 19, who was convicted under blasphemy law. According to CDN, he was working at a barbershop in July 2009 when the owner, Nadeem Haider, accused him of stealing 5,000 rupees (US\$60). Actually, Haider had been pressuring Masih to convert to Islam. Station House Officer Junaid Mirza of Hazro said that Haider paid police to torture Masih. On Aug. 3, 2010 Masih was sentenced to 10 years of prison.

Oct. 03, 2010, three Muslim men - Shaheed Hassan Butt, Sheikh Shahid and Nawazish - in Lahore were accused for insulting the Koran.

On Sept. 25, 2010 timely intervention of police protected a Christian, Walayat Masih, who had been accused of blasphemy in Tehsil Jamky Cheema, Sialkot district.

A group of 40 Muslim men on Sept. 23, 2010 shot at and beat dozens of Christians on alleged "blasphemy" charges in the Gujrat district of Punjab, CDN reports. The assailants stripped a woman and dragged her nude through the streets. Her son, Tariq Gill, was also one of those assaulted that day.

In the mid-September, Tasawar Masih, a Christian youth from Sargodha, Punjab province, was accused by Muslims of blasphemy and was forced to leave the area along with his family.

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