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Christians Excluded from Pakistan's 'Blasphemy' Cases Fast-Track for Acquittal

Officials fear 'violent reaction' if they examine cases of non-Muslims.

February 13, 2015 By Our Pakistan Correspondent - [Leave a Comment](#)

LAHORE, Pakistan (Morning Star News) – Punjab Province has excluded Christians from a list of people accused without basis of blaspheming Islam who will have their cases expedited for acquittal, sources said.

Pointing to several Christians languishing in jail on trumped-up blasphemy charges, Christian rights and political activists say discrimination against religious minorities was behind the selection by the Punjab Prosecution Department. The department short-listed 50 cases of alleged blasphemers in Punjab Province that the government says have been victimized by complainants.



Accusation against Sawan Masih triggered Muslim throng to attack Joseph Colony, Lahore in March 2013. (Morning Star News, M. Ali)

“We are not opposed to the government’s support to Muslims wrongly accused of blasphemy, but all citizens of the state should be treated equally and without any prejudice,” said Sajid Ishaq, chairman of the Pakistan Interfaith League (PIL) and central president of the Minorities Wing of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, which rules Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province.

Ishaq, who is vying for a Senate seat reserved for minorities from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, said that the Punjab government also should have considered cases involving Christians such as Aasiya Bibi (commonly known as Asia Bibi), Sawan Masih and others because the government knew how these persons had fallen victim to persecution at the hands of Muslims.

“The Punjab government knows why Joseph Colony in Lahore was burned down and under which circumstances Sawan Masih was handed the death sentence,” Ishaq said. “It is also fully aware of how Christians have been subjected to imprisonment and injustice on fabricated blasphemy charges, yet it continues to ignore our people, making us believe that the government holds little value for Christian lives.”

Sources said the Punjab government last month formed a high-powered committee headed by Prosecution Department Secretary Rana Maqbool to discuss ways to fast-track blasphemy cases against Muslims. They discussed consulting representatives of all religious schools of thought in order to avoid repercussions following the release of suspected blasphemers.

Ishaq said his advocacy group would meet with the government committee to urge it to scrutinize Christians’ cases as well.

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"We demand that the government also review cases of Christian blasphemy accused, so that our innocent people are not left to rot in jails for a crime they have not committed," he said.

A Punjab Prosecution Department official told Morning Star News on condition of anonymity that the government decided to set up the committee after the recent murder of lawyer and human rights activist Rashid Rehman, who was representing a Muslim blasphemy accused in Multan.

"We know that most of the cases registered under blasphemy laws are fabricated, but unfortunately our police and justice system is weak and cannot withstand Islamists' pressure," he said. "Innocent people do end up in jails, and there have been several others who have fallen victim to the extremist mindset and were killed during or after their trials."

The official said that, blasphemy being "a very sensitive subject," the government feared a violent reaction if it were to examine cases involving non-Muslims.

"Consider these 50 cases as a litmus test, and hopefully if things work out smoothly, we might just be able to bail out more people suffering in jails," he said. "As for now, there is nothing being considered for non-Muslims charged with blasphemy, as it may jeopardize the work being done for the other accused."

The Prosecution Department has reportedly selected the 50 cases from a total of 262 in different courts of the province from 2010 to date. The suspects, all Muslims booked under four sections of Chapter XV of offences relating to religion of the Pakistan Penal Code, are languishing in jails and are not being convicted because of lack of evidence, poor evidence and non-availability of defense counsels.

According to sources privy to details of the meetings of the committee headed by Maqbool, the provincial government has decided to defend the Muslim suspects because they are unable to convince a lawyer to defend them in court due to societal pressures and threats.

They added that some of the accused might also be medically examined to determine their mental health.

The committee is also reportedly trying to get a favorable *Fatwa* (edict) from religious scholars of all schools of thought to avoid Islamist reaction.

Christian rights activist Napoleon Qayyum also demanded that the Punjab government summon details of Christians accused of blasphemy from the Prosecution Department and scrutinize their cases on merit.

"This should be done regardless of the accused person's faith," he said. "It's a common fact that Pakistan's blasphemy laws are used to settle personal scores and vendettas, and all people could be targeted with these laws. A large number of Muslims are languishing in jails on false charges, but so are Christians, so we urge the government to treat all such cases on parity."

Disabled Christian on Death Row

While the government is considering pursuing cases of Muslim blasphemy accused, the Lahore High Court on March 5 is scheduled to take up an appeal filed by a disabled Christian handed the death sentence in August last year for alleged blasphemy; he seeks bail due to deteriorating health.

Shafqat Emmanuel Masih and his wife Shagufta Kausar were arrested on July 20, 2013 after being accused of sending [blasphemous text messages](#) to a local cleric in Gojra. The couple was given the death sentence on April 4, 2014.

In his plea for bail, Masih has submitted that his health is worsening and he might die before the High Court takes up the couple's appeal against the conviction. Masih, who is restricted to a wheelchair, stated that he has bed sores and other ailments, and that there is no possibility of proper treatment at the jail hospital. He requested the court suspend his punishment till the final decision on their appeal, adding that there are serious

* = required field

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contradictions in witness accounts against him which should make a strong basis for his acquittal.

The couple's lawyer was unavailable for comment.

Shoaib Salim, advocate of the Lahore High Court, said the court might take a lenient view of the appellant and grant him bail on medical grounds.

"But any person accused of blasphemy is vulnerable to extremist attacks once they leave the prison, and the judge may take this into consideration when deciding the appeal," he told Morning Star News.

Masih, 43, and his wife Shagufta, 40, are Catholics and were residents of St. John's School in Gojra, where Shagufta worked as a maid while her husband worked temporarily as a night watchman. The couple has four children, the oldest 15 and the youngest 7.

Masih's backbone was fractured in an accident in 2004. Since then he has been restricted to a wheelchair due to the paralysis of his lower body. He is also fitted with a catheter.

Complainant Muhammad Hussain alleged that he had received blasphemous text messages on July 18, 2013, from Masih from a number registered in the name of Shagufta. Gojra City police registered a case under Section 295-C of Pakistan's widely condemned blasphemy laws for allegedly defaming Islam's prophet, Muhammad. Conviction is punishable by death or life in prison, which is 25 years in Pakistan.

Masih has denied sending the text messages, saying police had coerced him into recording a false admission of guilt. In her statement to police, his wife told police that her cell phone had been lost for a month, and that she did not know who might have sent the alleged messages.

Nevertheless, the Gojra City Police detained the couple, along with their four children, and pressured them to name someone who could have sent the messages. The police then charged the couple with blasphemy in order to ward off pressure from Islamist groups that wanted to lay their hands on them.

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