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Islamic groups in Pakistan support Christian girl on blasphemy charge

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ISLAMABAD: Islamic leaders in Pakistan have come out in support of a Christian girl with learning difficulties who is being held in prison, in an unprecedented public denunciation of the blasphemy law by hardline mullahs.

The All Pakistan Ulema Council, an umbrella group of Muslim clerics and scholars, which includes representatives from fundamentalist groups, joined hands with the Pakistan Interfaith League, which includes Christians, Sikhs and other religions, to call for justice for the girl, Rimsha, who is accused of blasphemy. They demanded that those making false allegations be punished.



A family rides past the locked house of Rimsha Masih, a Pakistani Christian girl accused of blasphemy, on the outskirts of Islamabad. REUTERS/FAISAL MAHMOOD

The chairman of the Ulema Council, Tahir Ashrafi, warned that the "law of the jungle" was gripping Pakistan, with police routinely pressured by baying mobs to register blasphemy charges, as happened in the case of Rimsha, which has made headlines around the world.

Rimsha, 11, whose family says she has Down syndrome, was charged this month with desecrating the Koran. The case has shocked the country's Christian population. Rimsha's own community, who were living in a poor Christian-Muslim enclave in Islamabad, were driven out of their homes by a crowd.

Rimsha has been held in a maximum security jail, where her lawyer says she is deeply traumatised and begging to be released. Her parents have been taken into protective custody.

"We see Rimsha as a test case for Pakistan's Muslims, Pakistan's minorities and for the government," Mr Ashrafi said. "We don't want to see injustice done with anyone. We will work to end this climate of fear."

"This is the first time in the history of Pakistan that the Muslim community and scholars have stood up for non-Muslims," said Sajid Ishaq, chairman of the Pakistan Interfaith League. "We are together, demanding justice, demanding an unbiased investigation. And those abusing this law should be taken care of."

It is dangerous in Pakistan even to discuss blasphemy, which carries the death penalty. The law is frequently used to level false allegations in order to settle scores. The police and the courts are usually too afraid to investigate the validity of the claims, leading to convictions on hearsay.

All of Rimsha's community, about 300 Christian families, are now living with relatives or in shelters elsewhere in Islamabad.

Guardian News & Media



Tahir Naveed Chaudhry, the lawyer of a Christian girl accused of blasphemy. AFP