



Pakistan

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Pakistani Muslim leaders support Christian girl accused of blasphemy

Unprecedented move comes after 11-year-old thought to have Down's syndrome charged with desecrating the Qur'an

Saeed Shah in Islamabad

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Islamic leaders in **Pakistan** on Monday came 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 hard-line 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 also demanded that those making false allegations be punished.

Tahir Ashrafi, the chairman of the council, 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, was charged earlier this month with desecrating the Qur'an. The issue has shocked the country's Christian population. Rimsha's own community, who were living in a mixed poor Christian-Muslim enclave in Islamabad, were driven out of their homes by a rampaging crowd.

Rimsha's fate should become clearer on Tuesday when, following a medical examination, a report is due to be presented in court on her mental condition and her age. She is being held in a maximum security jail, where her lawyer says she is deeply traumatised and begging to be released. Her parents have also been taken into protective custody. "We see the Rimsha as a test case for Pakistan's Muslims, Pakistan's minorities and for the government," Ashrafi said. "We don't want to see injustice done with anyone. We will work to end this climate of fear."

Ashrafi is also part of the leadership of the radical Defence of Pakistan Council, a coalition of Islamic organisations which includes some thinly disguised banned militant groups. The outfit campaigns against western influence and to stop Nato supplies passing through the country to Afghanistan.

Among the other unlikely Islamist groups rallying round Rimsha is Khatm-e-Nubuwwat, which has been accused of being behind violence against another minority, the Ahmedis, an offshoot of Islam.

"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."

Another now-destitute Christian, Shaukat Masih, added: "The fear of Gojra is in our hearts."

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