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Pakistan's conservative mullahs question blasphemy law

Saeed Shah ("The Kansas City Star," August 27, 2012)

Islamabad, Pakistan - A group of Islamic leaders in Pakistan lent strong support Monday to a mentally disabled Christian girl accused of blasphemy in an unprecedented public move that was the first denunciation by hard-line mullahs of the country's controversial blasphemy law.

The All Pakistan Ulema Council, an umbrella group of Muslim clerics and scholars that includes representatives from fundamentalist groups, joined hands with the Pakistan Interfaith League - which includes Christians, Sikhs and practitioners of other religions - to call for understanding for the girl, who's been identified only as Rimsha. They also demanded that those making false allegations of blasphemy be punished.

Tahir Ashrafi, the chairman of the Ulema Council, warned that it was the "law of the jungle" when angry mobs routinely pressured police to file blasphemy charges, as happened in the case of Rimsha, who her family says is 11 years old and suffering from Down syndrome.

Rimsha was charged earlier this month with desecrating the Quran. The issue has terrorized the country's Christian population after a rampaging crowd drove Rimsha's family members, who were living in a mixed Christian-Muslim enclave in Islamabad, and their Christian neighbors from their homes.

The Vatican has expressed its concern, saying that Rimsha - who cannot read and made a living by collecting garbage - had simply picked up scraps of paper that turned out to have religious text on them.

Rimsha's fate should become clearer Tuesday, when, after a medical examination, a report on her mental condition and her age is due in court. She's being held in a maximum-security jail, where her lawyer says she's deeply traumatized. 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," Ashrafi told a news conference in Islamabad. "We don't want to see injustice done with anyone. We will work to end this climate of fear. The accusers should be proceeded against with full force, so that no one would dare make spurious allegations."

Ashrafi is also part of the leadership of the radical Defense of Pakistan Council, a coalition of Islamic organizations that includes some thinly guised banned militant groups. The council campaigns against Western influence and has advocated not allowing NATO supplies to pass through the country to Afghanistan.

Among the other unlikely Islamist groups rallying round Rimsha is Khatam-e-Naboowat, 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 Muslim community and scholars have stood up for non-Muslims," said Sajid Ishaq, the chairman of the Pakistan Interfaith League. "We are together, demanding justice, demanding an unbiased investigation."

About 300 Christian families who lived near Rimsha are now living away from their homes, either crammed in with relatives or in makeshift shelters elsewhere in Islamabad. They are appealing for government land, to build new homes. In Pakistan, Christians - who make up less than 2 percent of the population - tend to be among society's poorest.

"We'll never go back. We have young children. How can we go back? They won't even let us say our prayers there," said Zahid Pervez, whose house has been looted of its few valuable possessions. "We will sit on the roads, for however long it takes, until we are given somewhere else to live."

Another now-destitute Christian, Shaukat Masih, added: "The fear of Gojra is in our hearts," a reference to a town where, after rumors in 2009 of the desecration of the Quran, an angry mob attacked Christians, burning at least eight alive.

It's risky in Pakistan even to discuss blasphemy, which carries the death penalty. The law frequently is used to make false allegations in order to settle scores, with lurid tales of burning or desecrating the Quran not only leveled against religious minorities but also against fellow Muslims. The police and the courts are usually too afraid to investigate the validity of the claims, leading to convictions on hearsay.

In January 2011, a leading politician from the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party, Salman Taseer, was gunned down by one of his own bodyguards after he described the statute on blasphemy as a "black law" and called for the release of a Christian woman, Asia Bibi, who'd been convicted under it. Many in Pakistan condoned or even celebrated Taseer's murder. The judge who eventually convicted Taseer's confessed killer had to flee the country.

Asia Bibi remains behind bars. Pakistan's minister for minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti, also was assassinated last year after he questioned the law.

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