

Christians Accused of Blasphemy in Pakistan Omitted from Fast Track List

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ICC Note:

Christians accused of blasphemy in Pakistan have been omitted from a list that sets 50 blasphemy cases to be expedited for acquittal in Pakistan's fast track courts. Christians are disproportionately accused of blasphemy in Pakistan and were omitted from the list of fact tracked cases because lawyers were concerned that it would incite religious feelings. Will Christians ever receive equal treatment in Pakistan's courts when accused of blasphemy?

2/17/2015 Pakistan ([Baptist Press](#)) – Pakistan's Punjab province has excluded Christians from a list of people accused of blaspheming Islam whose cases will be expedited for acquittal, according to the Morning Star News service dedicated to persecution issues.

Pointing to several Christians languishing in jail on blasphemy charges, Christian rights and political activists say discrimination against religious minorities was behind the Punjab Prosecution Department's short list of 50 cases of alleged blasphemers who have been victimized by complainants.

"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 Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

Ishaq, who is vying for a senate seat reserved for minorities from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, said the Punjab government should have considered cases involving Christians such as Aasiya Bibi (commonly known as Asia Bibi) others.

The Punjab government is "fully aware of how Christians have been subjected to imprisonment and injustice on fabricated blasphemy charges," Ishaq said, "yet it continues to ignore our people, making us believe that the government holds little value for Christian lives."

Sources said the Punjab government formed a high-powered committee in January headed by Punjab 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.

"We demand that the government also review cases [against Christians] so that our innocent people are not left to rot in jails for a crime they have not committed," Ishaq 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 accused of blasphemy in Multan.

"We know that most of the cases registered under blasphemy laws are fabricated," the official said, "but unfortunately our police and justice system is weak and cannot withstand Islamists' pressure." He acknowledged that several Christians "have fallen victim to the extremist mindset and were killed during or after their trials."

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

"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," the official 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 Punjab Prosecution Department reportedly has selected the 50 cases from a total of 262 in different provincial courts from 2010 to date. The jailed suspects, all Muslims booked under four religion-related sections in the Pakistan Penal Code, 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 also is reportedly trying to get a favorable pronouncement from religious scholars of all schools of thought to avoid Islamist reaction.

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