

## One Step Forward, Two Step Back in Pakistan

*In The Shadow of the Acquittal of Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel, We See Blasphemy Charges Imposed on a Young Child*



**In July 2021, human rights activists and organizations were pleased to hear of the acquittal of Pakistani Christian couple Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel after they had spent 7 years in prison.** The couple was falsely accused by a local Muslim cleric of sending blasphemous text messages in English to his phone; in spite of the fact that both Shagufta and Shafqat are illiterate their own native language Urdu, let alone English, and would therefore be unable to send the messages they were accused of, the couple was arrested and charged with “insulting the Qur’an” and “insulting the Prophet”. Throughout the case, numerous factors shed more doubt on the situation: six months prior to the allegations, the couple had been in a verbal confrontation with their accuser, who is believed to have raised the case as a form of revenge; Shafqat claimed that during his interrogation, he was tortured into making a false confession; finally, during the trial itself, prosecutors cited Quranic references to the judge and urged the death sentence. Pursuant to the societal pressure to levy the most stringent punishment, the judge of a sessions court in Toba Tek Singh officially sentenced the couple to death. Only after years of advocacy by the international community and by the couple’s lawyer Saif-ul Malook, and 13 postponed appeal hearings due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other arbitrary reasons, the couple was acquitted of their charges in June 2021 and released from prison the following month.

**Only one month following the wonderful news regarding the acquittal of Shagufta and Shafqat, the world was shocked to hear of the arrest of an 8-year-old Hindu boy on blasphemy charges in Punjab Province.** The boy, whose name is known but withheld for protection, allegedly intentionally urinated in a madrassa library where religious texts were stored. Despite that the family stressed that “he is not even aware of such blasphemy issues and he has been falsely indulged in these matters [and] still doesn’t understand what his crime was and why he was kept in jail for a week”, the boy was officially charged with blasphemy. Upon the boy’s release on bail last week, a mob of radical Muslims attacked and desecrated a local Hindu temple, and the boy and his family were forced to go into hiding for safety. In response to the charges, myriad human rights activists have pointed out that blasphemy charges are in violation of international human rights, and that charging and detaining a minor

is unacceptable:



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*“I demand charges against the boy are immediately dropped, and urge the government to provide security for the family and those forced to flee. Attacks on Hindu temples have increased in the last few years showing an escalating level of extremism and fanaticism. The recent attacks seem to be a new wave of persecution of Hindus.”*

– Kapil Dev, Human Rights Activist

*“Pakistan’s blasphemy laws have long been abused to target minority groups, but this case marks a shocking and extreme departure. As well as ensuring that these ludicrous charges are dropped, Pakistan’s authorities must immediately provide adequate protection for the boy, his family, and the wider Hindu community. Those responsible for the ensuing mob violence must also be held accountable. In the week that marks National Minorities Day in Pakistan, we urge the authorities to urgently repeal this pernicious legislation. Pakistan’s minorities are under sustained attack – little can demonstrate the persecution they face better than an eight-year-old boy being subject to a charge that can carry a mandatory death sentence.”*

– Rimmel Mohyidin, South Asia Campaigner, [Amnesty International](#)

**Today, 12 August 2021, it was announced that the Pakistani police had officially dropped the charges against the boy, and that the police officers themselves had been arrested for their actions against a child.** Moreover, the temple which was attacked by radical Muslims has since been repaired and reopened via ceremony; those individuals caught on camera vandalizing the temple have been arrested. While Jubilee Campaign warmly welcomes the decision to drop the charges against the boy, we echo Amnesty International’s calls upon Pakistan to repeal blasphemy laws which continue to oppress religious minorities.

The boy and his family continue to remain in hiding, and likely for the best, as radical Muslim mobs have been known to exact revenge on those they believe have been let off easy for their alleged blasphemous actions. USCIRF in its 2020 report [Violating Rights: Enforcing the World’s Blasphemy Laws](#) highlighted that “mob activity, threats, and/or violence around blasphemy allegations occur both at times when the state enforces the law as well as when the state does not act”, and that “mobs can provoke violence, property destruction, injuries and death.” In 2015, three Pakistani Christians accused of blasphemy were dragged out of their homes and severely beaten by a radical mob; in 2018, a mob called for the death of and attempted to set fire to the village of Christian Patras Masih who was accused of sharing a blasphemous Facebook post.

Individuals who are acquitted of their sentences related to blasphemy or have charges dropped against them are also not necessarily exempt from attempts to reconsider the case. On [12 August 2021](#), it was reported that a Pakistani prosecutor is attempting to appeal the acquittal of Shagufta and Shafqat and call for the death sentence. Fortunately, the couple has already fled Pakistan and have successfully sought security in a European nation. Director of HVC Foundation, Jan Dirk van Nifterik, explained, “we are happy and grateful that the family

was able to leave Pakistan before they were arrested again. If they had to wait for the appeal, it could take years.”

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