

## An Update on Pakistan's Notorious Blasphemy Laws and Related Cases

This week, [Human Rights Without Frontiers](#) (HRWF) released a [groundbreaking report](#) that sheds light on the Pakistani government's unjust use of blasphemy laws to fabricate cases against and imprison religious minorities, most notably Christians. One of the most memorable cases is that of Pakistani Christian woman [Asia Bibi](#) who spent nearly a decade on death row after being falsely accused of insulting the Prophet Muhammad by her coworkers in 2009 and being swiftly sentenced to death for blasphemy. Fortunately, and with the advocacy efforts of human rights organizations around the world, Asia Bibi's charges were dropped and she was released in 2018. However, in the midst of the world's celebration for her newfound freedom, we have had to face the tens of other blasphemy cases that have arisen in Pakistan in the years since. According to HRWF, between 1987 and 2021 there have been 1,865 people in Pakistan charged under Penal Code 295-C for alleged blasphemy; 2020 alone saw a significant rise in the number of cases, at 200. Meanwhile, "at least 128 people have been killed by mobs, outside any judiciary process, after being signalled as having committed blasphemy or apostasy, without any chance to have access to an investigation, and nobody has been arrested for their murder[s]."

(Below) Photograph of Tahir Naseem

For example, just last year in July 2020, American citizen Tahir Naseem was shot by a gunman while he was on trial for committing blasphemy in Pakistan. Two years prior, upon his arrival to Pakistan, authorities arbitrarily arrested Naseem for formerly identifying as an Ahmadiyya Muslim, one of the most targeted minority faith groups in the country. In an [interview with NPR](#), Naseem's daughter Mashal expressed that not only does she want her father's killer to be sentenced to life in prison, but she also wants "blasphemy laws abolished because they're completely inhumane. They persecute minorities there and target them. And he didn't even get a fair trial to begin with. Before the law even gave him, you know, a sentence, someone decided to take it into their own hands, which is completely absurd."



In [August 2021](#), an 8-year-old boy became the youngest person ever to be detained on blasphemy charges in Pakistan; he was accused earlier in the month of urinating in a library of a Muslim school. Fortunately, authorities swiftly [dropped the charges](#) and released the boy on bail following pressure from the government and media; the officers who had originally detained the boy were arrested themselves for their ludicrous and unlawful actions. However, the boy and his family still remain in danger, as radical Muslim mobs have responded to the boy's release with anger by attacking a local Hindu temple. This goes to show that, even when blasphemy sentences are not followed through, accused individuals bear a target on their back that makes them vulnerable for retaliation.



(Above) Photograph of Stephen Masih



(Above) Photograph of Nadeem Samson

In March 2019, authorities arrested disabled Pakistani Christian man **Stephen Masih** after a radical Muslim neighbor accused him of committing blasphemy while he was engaged in a verbal disagreement. Despite that accuser gathered a mob of radical Muslims to encroach upon Masih's home and physically assault him, the authorities targeted Masih for arrest instead. For months, Masih's family has pushed for officials to release Masih on the basis that he suffers from mental disorders, but he continues to remain in detention. In March 2020, a medical board was convened to review Masih's mental health, and after a year of withholding the medical examination's results, the Punjab Institute of Mental Health finally in July 2021 disclosed the report concluding that Masih suffers from Bipolar Affective Disorder which impairs his behavior, judgement, and cognition, and that he is "unfit to stand trial at the moment". Authorities have stated that they will continue to keep Masih in custody and provide him proper medication until he is fit to stand trial. However, it is utterly reprehensible that they will be trying Masih for the 'crime' of blasphemy when (1) blasphemy laws are inconsistent with human rights; (2) witnesses report he made no blasphemous remarks; and (3) he clearly was mentally unstable at the time of the incident.

In June 2021, the Supreme Court denied the bail request for Pakistani Christian **Nadeem Samson**. A few years earlier, in November 2017, Samson was detained after two men accused him of posting blasphemous remarks to his Facebook page. Samson has repeatedly asserted his innocence and has stated that he believes the blasphemy allegations were an act of revenge, as he had previously had a financial dispute with one of his accusers. While in detention, Samson was tortured in order to extract a false confession. Samson remains in Lahore District Jail and is denied proper medical care for his kidney stones and deteriorating mental health.



(Above) Shafqat Emmanuel (left) and Shagufta Kausar (right) before their arrest



(Above) Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar following their acquittal and release in 2021

Jubilee Campaign received *some* good news, however, when Justice Syed Shehbaz Rizvi and Justice Anwar-ul-Haq of the Lahore High Court acquitted Pakistani Christian couple **Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel** of their blasphemy charges. The couple had spent seven years on death row after they were charged with blasphemy in 2014; a local Muslim leader had alleged that the couple sent him blasphemous text messages in English. The courts sentenced Kausar and Emmanuel to death despite the numerous dubious issues surrounding the case, including that the phone which allegedly

blasphemous messages were sent from was never recovered, that the couple cannot speak or write English, and that the couple had had a prior argument with their accuser. Jubilee Campaign welcomed Kausar's and Emmanuel's acquittal, and we were honored to have facilitated their evacuation; we are pleased to inform that the couple has safely resettled in a third country in Europe.

Regardless of the tremendous progress on Shagufta Kausar's and Shafqat Emmanuel's case, all of the blasphemy cases that have risen since have been a prime example of the phrase 'one step forward, two steps back'. In addition to the cases listed above, there are the cases of **Shagufta Kiran**, who was accused of blasphemy for forwarded a text message; **Zafar Bhatti**, whose life sentence for blasphemy was recently upheld; two Christian nurses **Mariyum Lal and Newsh Arooj**; Adventist Scientist **Sajjad Masih Gill**; and more. Meanwhile, radical Islamists have **attacked Christian communities**; kidnapped, married, and **forcibly converted** young minority girls to Islam; and **desecrated** minority houses of worship.

And yet, despite its egregious, well-documented human rights and religious freedom violations, Pakistan is anticipated to request a **two-year extension** on its Generalized Preferential System Plus (GSP+) status with the European Union. **GSP+ status** rewards countries who have ratified 27 core international human rights conventions and have practiced good governance with preferential trade status and reduced tariffs. How ironic. And so we echo the question posed by HRWF and multiple other organizations in a **letter** to EU High Representative Josep Borrell:

*"Given that Pakistan's behaviour clearly contravenes the requirement for GSP+ beneficiaries to ratify 27 international conventions, numerous it is clearly in breach of, we respectfully ask how the High Representative can justify the continuation of Pakistan's GSP+ status?"*

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