

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Asia > Pakistan > Human Rights & religious violence (Pakistan) > **Female MP Sherry Rehman facing blasphemy trial vows to continue her fight (...)**

# Female MP Sherry Rehman facing blasphemy trial vows to continue her fight for reform

Wednesday 19 January 2011, by [ELLIOTT Francis](#), [HUSSAIN Zahid](#) (Date first published: 18 January 2011).

**“It’s like a witch hunt from the Middle Ages” says Sherry Rehman, Pakistan’s courageous secular politician.**

A FEMALE MP trying to change Pakistan’s blasphemy laws has herself been accused of blasphemy by hardline clerics.

Sherry Rehman, a leading liberal voice in the divided country, says that she is receiving two death threats an hour and that she has been advised by Pakistan’s Interior Minister to leave the country in the wake of the assassination of Salman Taseer.

Like the former governor of Punjab, Ms Rehman has attracted the ire of religious extremists because of her efforts to change the blasphemy laws.

Speaking to The Times from her fortified home in Karachi, the former Cabinet minister and senior member of the ruling Pakistan People’s Party, said that she no longer dared to open her e-mails. A summons filed in a court in Multan, Punjab, alleges that she insulted the Prophet Muhammad in a television interview, a charge that she denies. She said that it was the latest tactic by religious political parties to intimidate her. “I am restricted to the house ... The noise you are hearing is that they are putting in shatter-proof glass.”

Ms Rehman, who was a close friend of Benazir Bhutto, the assassinated former Prime Minister and late wife of President Asif Ali Zardari, has refused to withdraw a proposed Bill that would criminalise those who make false accusations of blasphemy - a crime that carries a death penalty.

She knows that she will be a target for assassination even after the controversy dies down. “Those who seek to target continue with their mission, as we saw with Benazir Bhutto’s death, but I don’t want to be hounded out of my country,” she said.

“The space for progressive forces has suddenly seemed to have shrunk and I think we need to take that back. It’s intrinsic to the soul of modern Pakistan if it is to carry on.”

Her stance contrasts with the position taken by leading members of President Zardari’s administration, who have failed to condemn Mr Taseer’s murder.

Vocal street demonstrations in support of the murderer, Mr Taseer’s bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri, have helped to silence Pakistan’s secular politicians and moderate clerics. One even demanded that a newspaper retract a statement of condolence reportedly made by him to Mr Taseer’s family.

Rehman Malik, the Interior Minister, has promised to prevent any attempt to amend the blasphemy laws and praised the religious parties for their “maturity”.

The failure of the Government to crack down on the extremists is seen by many as further evidence of its weakness. Facing US demands to mount an offensive against Taliban strongholds, as well as a gathering economic crisis, the governing coalition of mostly secular parties has chosen to abandon any efforts to take on the religious Right.

The controversial blasphemy legislation has been in the spotlight since Asia Bibi, a Christian mother of five, was sentenced to death for allegedly insulting Islam last year. Ms Bibi's family and lawyer have been forced into hiding.

The Pope has repeatedly called for Ms Bibi's release but Ms Rehman said that the intervention was damaging the cause. "However well-meaning, it's just not helpful. We get accused of being agents of foreign powers," she said.

Although careful not to criticise her own party directly, Ms Rehman is disappointed by the absence of support for her former colleague and friend Mr Taseer. "They've gone on TV and they've said he had it coming. There is an air of impunity and the fear is very strong. It's like a witch hunt from the Middle Ages," she said.

**by Francis Elliott and Zahid Hussain**

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