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# Pakistan, Junaid Hafeez: outrage over death sentence for 'blasphemous' lecturer

Sunday 29 December 2019, by [BALOCH Shah Meer](#), [ELLIS-PETERSEN Hannah](#) (Date first published: 21 December 2019).

## **Amnesty calls verdict in Junaid Hafeez's trial a 'vile and gross miscarriage of justice'**

A Pakistani university lecturer has been sentenced to death for blasphemy in a case that his family and human rights groups have decried as a gross miscarriage of justice.

Junaid Hafeez, a lecturer at the Bahauddin Zakariya University (BZU) in the central Pakistani city of Multan, had been accused of running a secret Facebook group and having insulted the prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an in 2013.

He was also accused of hosting Qaisra Shahraz, a famous British novelist of Pakistani origin, as a guest speaker and sharing blasphemous remarks against Islam during a lecture .

Hafeez was a US Fulbright scholar in 2009 and holds a masters from Jackson State University where he majored in US literature, photography and theatre. A US religious freedom commission placed his name on its list of global victims in December.

The blasphemy trial had been one of the most contentious in Pakistan, running for more than six years with various delays and seven different judges brought in. Hafeez's former lawyer, Rashid Rehman, who had been threatened in court by religious leaders and other lawyers for taking on the case, was shot and killed in his office in 2014. Hafeez has since been kept in solitary confinement and the trial was held behind closed doors in a high-security prison in Multan.

"The prosecution, the witnesses and trial could not prove any of the allegations," said Hafeez's lawyer. "Hafeez was so happy when I met him on Wednesday night and everyone was sure that he would be acquitted."

He alleged that during the trial that the prosecutor had not presented concrete evidence against Hafeez but had instead warned the judge that he was "against Islam" and that in Pakistan the case was "sensitive". "It was the point I realised they were just using the religious card, which was immoral and unethical precedent in the court," he said.

In a statement released by Hafeez's family, they said the murder of his previous lawyer in 2014 and the failure to bring anyone to justice for the killing meant that "the prospect of Hafeez getting a fair trial came into question".

They accused the courts of ignoring the lack of evidence and instead succumbing to outside threats in the verdict. "The failure to apprehend those who shot his lawyer Rehman dead signalled impunity for other would-be vigilantes," said the family. "Could any judge in such circumstances take the risk of doing justice? Those who could were transferred from the district or brought under pressure by

groups of lawyers operating as a mafia.”

Hafeez’s younger brother, Jawad, said the family “were not expecting this verdict as the case was an open case where nothing was proved against my brother. The judge has given this decision under fear while ignoring all arguments and facts”.

Activists, politicians and journalists are often fearful of talking about the inflammatory issue of blasphemy in Pakistan, where even unproven accusations of insulting Islam can spark lynchings and assassination attempts, but there has been widespread anger at the verdict.

IA Rehman, a prominent human rights activist and former general secretary of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), said: “The verdict is brutal and unjust. He has been in prison for six years for no reason. It is an open fact that trial courts in Pakistan rarely acquit accused in blasphemy cases.

“It is very deadly to comment on blasphemy related cases even in Pakistan. His lawyer was killed for following up the case. This has multiplied the fear in the country over such cases.”

Rabia Mehmood, a South Asia researcher at Amnesty International tweeted: “This is a vile and gross miscarriage of justice.”

A senior official who requested anonymity, said that before the verdict Hafeez’s lawyer was asked not to come to the prison because officials feared a mob attack if he was acquitted. They had also devised plans for Hafeez’s safe removal if any tense situation arose.

“Everyone was confident that he will be released today. This unfortunately did not happen,” he said.

Pakistan’s blasphemy laws came under global scrutiny last year after the supreme court acquitted Asia Bibi [1], a Christian woman accused of blasphemy and held on death row for eight years. It was a landmark ruling that vindicated rights groups’ concerns about the conduct of blasphemy cases.

According to the Centre for Social Justice, a Pakistani advocacy group, at least 1,472 people were charged under blasphemy provisions between 1987 and 2016 [2]. There have been no executions, but at least 17 people convicted of blasphemy are on death row [3], and many others are serving life sentences for related offences.

## **Shah Meer Baloch and Hannah Ellis-Petersen**

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### **P.S.**

• The Guardian. The Observer. Sat 21 Dec 2019 16.33 GMT Last modified on Sat 21 Dec 2019 19.02 GMT:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/21/death-sentence-for-pakistani-lecturer-junaid-hafeez-in-blasphemy-case-prompts-outcry>

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## Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/29/asia-bibi-pakistans-top-court-upholds-blasphemy-acquittal>

[2] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46465247>

[3] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/18/pakistan-text-message-can-lead-death-sentence>