

Pakistani Christian girl arrested for blasphemy released from jail

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After spending three weeks in Adial Jail Rawalpindi, a Pakistani Christian girl accused of blasphemy against the holy Quran, Muslims' holy book, has been freed on bail on Sept. 8. She was taken from the prison in a helicopter to an unknown location. According to police sources, the girl has shifted to a safe place in another city where she joined her family.

Rimsha Masih, an illiterate and mentally disabled 14-years old Christian girl, was granted bail a day before by the Additional District and Sessions Judge Mohammad Azam Khan in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, against a surety bond of Rs 1 million (\$10,000) in Pakistan's harsh blasphemy law, which was imposed by a military dictator Genral Zia-ul-Haq in 1980s to Islamise the country.

Rimsha, has been suffering from Down's syndrome, which is associated with a delay in cognitive ability and physical growth, and was a resident of Mera Jafar, neighbourhood on Islamabad's outskirts. A medical report, conducted by a medical board on the court orders, disclosed that she was 14 years old but had the mental capability of a seven-year-old.

During the court hearing, according to the *New York Times*, outside the courtroom, a group of children with Down syndrome held a banner that read, "We want to meet Down syndrome girl Rimsha."

The sacrilege of the holy Quran is regarded as a serious crime in Pakistan and can easily spark public violent towards the accused person and one's community, especially against non-Muslims in Pakistan.

For the registration of FIR (First Information Report) and her immediate arrest, Muslim protesters blocked the Kashmir Highway, damaged public and private property and also smashed cars to show their anger. They were dispersed only after the police lodged an FIR against Rimsha and arrested her. Although the police have also registered FIR against 165 Muslim men creating law and order situation, nobody has been arrested yet.

While some protesters wanted to put her house and other Christian houses on fire, fortunately some Muslim men intervened, which saved from any damage. However, following the incident, at least 400 Christians, mainly poor labourers, left their homes because of the fear of their lives and spent days in a nearby jungle. Some Christian families have come back, but are still living under fear of backlash.

The FIR against Rimsha was registered on the compliant of a local Muslim man Syed Muhammad Ummad, who runs a CNG car-fitting shop. Ummad claimed that he had discovered the burning of the Noorani Qaida (a booklet said to learn the basics of Arabic, the language of holy Quran) from Rimsha. She wanted to throw them in garbage after putting it in a plastic bag. However, Ayaz Mir, a Muslim member of the National Assembly writes in a newspaper article that the Nurani Qaida, a helpful primer for mastering the Arabic alphabet, preparatory to reading the Quran...pages not from the Quran.

After the arrest, Rimsha was sent to the Adiala jail Rawalpindi on judicial remand, charged under a blasphemy law Section 295-B of Pakistan Penal Code (PPC). The Section 295-B, Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) of blasphemy laws was introduced in 1982 by General Zia-ul-Haq, a military dictator who rules the country for 10 years. This particular law is against the desecration of the holy Quran, which says, "Whoever wilfully defiles, damages or desecrates a copy of the Holy Quran or of an extract there from or uses it in any derogatory manner or for any unlawful purpose shall be punishable with imprisonment for life."

Interior Minister Rehman Malik told the Senate, upper of the parliament, on Sept. 7, the ashes found in Rimsha's bag were not from paper but from wood.

The police detained Chishti under section 295-B of PPC of the blasphemy law for tampering with the evidence of Rimsha, and was sent to jail on 14-day physical remand. It was the first time during the history of Pakistan that all three Muslim witnesses in a blasphemy case against a Christian gave statements against a Muslim religious leader and police arrested him without any hesitation. Now Chishti might get the same punishment which he wanted for Rimsha. Interestingly, there was no reaction have been seen from Muslim religious leaders against Chishti's arrest. For some, it would be a hopeful sign in the discourse of blasphemy laws throughout the country. Nadeem Anthony, a Christian lawyer from Lahore, disclosed that Christian lawyers would appear before the court against Chishti because he committed blasphemy, and he must be punished in accordance with the existing law.

Interestingly, Chairman All Pakistan Ulema Council Tahir Ashrafi, a Muslim religious leader, forward and demanded for an impartial inquiry of the case. He said during a Television talk show that one of his own sons is suffering from Down Syndrum, so he has known the pain and suffering of a family.

Many Christians and Muslims from Mera Jafar told the media that before the incident the relations between the two communities cooked for months as Chishti complained of the noise coming from the churches in the area during Sunday prayer services, and he wanted to expel Christians from the area. Some others believe that land mafia was behind the whole drama because they wanted to vacate the land to build a housing colony. As Mulana Tahir Ashrafi disclosed that it was an issue of 500 Kanals of land.

The Interior Ministry, Intelligence Bureau and Islamabad Police Special Branch suggested to the police to oppose her bail because it would put Rimsha's live in danger. However, on Sept. 7, after a heated debate between the both sides - the accuser's lawyer and the defence council - the court accepted her bail. "The decision is highly unusual in blasphemy cases. Such is the public hysteria, judges are under intense pressure to refuse bail and find defendants guilty" daily *Telegraph* stated.

Before the final hearing, Rao Abdur Raheem, 32-years-old attorney for the complainant and chairman of Namoos-e-Risalat Lawyers' Forum (protect the dignity of the Prophet (PBUH)), threatened that if Rimsha is not convicted, Muslims could take the law into their own hands, and added that there are many Mumtaz Qadris in the country. Qadri is an assassin who gunned down Governor of Punjab Salman Taseer last year because he voiced for the reform of the blasphemy laws. For Raheem, Qadri, is a hero, and he has hung his poster in his office. Raheem was one of the lawyers who represented Qadri and also represents the accused in the former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's murder case. He believes that charges against Chishti are part of the efforts of the state machinery to grant bail to Rimsha. The News on Sunday reported on Sept. 9, "Some of Rao's colleagues think he is affiliated to a banned sectarian outfit. He has already submitted two different applications with the Islamabad police station for registering a case against the Geo TV under blasphemy law as it aired blasphemous movies like The Message and the Tenth Commandment."

Pakistan has a dark history of intolerance, and its controversial blasphemy laws have often been used as a tool to persecute minorities, particularly Christians and Ahmadis, members of a Muslim sect viewed by most Pakistanis as traitors to Islam because they revere another prophet in addition to Muhammad. Muslims themselves are also frequent victims of abuse of the law, daily *Los Angeles Times* says.

Along with many other human rights organisation, the World Council of Churches (WCC) also showed its concern towards the treatment of minorities in Pakistan. The WCC said on Sept. 5, minority religious communities in Pakistan are living in 'fear and terror' of Islamic fundamentalists amid abductions and forced conversions that the government is helpless to stop.

The case of Rimsha, a minor and mentally ill girl, raises a fundamental issue about the growing intolerance into the Pakistani society. The real problem continues to be the routine discrimination, persecution and violence religious minorities, including Christians, Ahmadis, Hindus and Sikhs under the blasphemy laws.

During a seminar organised by Pak Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS) on Aug. 28, 2012, religious scholars and members of civil society blamed social pressure and lack of education among the masses for the mistrust between Muslims and minority communities, which often results in clashes.

Discussing the issue of blasphemy against the holy Quran, Fauzia Minallah says, sacred Quranic verses are irresponsibly scattered throughout the printed material available in Pakistan. Quranic verses are strewn all over newspapers, especially those in the regional languages. They are on the first page of many ABC books for children. They appear in Urdu, social studies, geography, history and even science books. Thus, they have the potential of becoming death traps for little children and the illiterate. "Next time, we should not be shocked when an even younger child is accused of blasphemy. Her or his 'disrespect' of Holy Scripture will bring even worse treatment than Rimsha's," she writes in *The Friday Times* of Set.7, 2012.

Rimsha's case has also reflected the poor conditions of Christians in Pakistan, who make up two per cent of the total population of the country, and experiencing daily discrimination. Mainly, they have low-level jobs, such as sweepers. Generally, they often live in shantytowns with makeshift churches and practice their religion in a very unassuming manner.

The country's blasphemy laws are regularly being used to persecute religious minorities, especially poor Christians, and settle personal vendettas.

Since 1980s, when General Zia-ul-Haq introduced blasphemy laws, around 4000 cases have been reported and around 1000 of them have been registered. Non-Muslims, who are four per cent of Pakistan's population, are 57 per cent of those charged with blasphemy, the majority of cases are filed in Punjab (around 80 per cent Christians live in this province) where sectarian and militant groups are roaming around without any check because the provincial government of Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz Group) is sympathetic to them.

Since 1990, fifty-two (52) people have been extra-judicially murdered on charges of blasphemy, 25 were Muslims, 15 were Christians, five were Ahmadis, one was Buddhist and one was Hindu, according to the Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), a research group based in Islamabad.

Known blasphemy cases in Pakistan show that from 1953 to July 2012, there were 434 'offenders' in Pakistan, among them 258 were Muslims, 114 Christians, 57 Ahmadis and four Hindus.

Tahir-ul-Qadri, a renowned Islamic scholar, has said that he had many reservations on all

administrative and procedural points of blasphemy law, adding that it needs a lot of reforms and amendments. During an interview with a Danish TV channel (on Sept. 7), Tahir-ul-Qadri said that he had a difference of opinion with the blasphemy law in its existing forms.

A Christian leader Bishop Dr Ijaz Inayat said the basic fault about blasphemy laws is in the Constitution of Pakistan and in the mind-set of the extremists. "It is not only a religious or communal issue but a humanitarian one," he added.

Human rights groups have been demanding for the repeal of these laws. Because the political governments are often weak and the state has been supporting, directly or indirectly, those groups which promote intolerance and violence in the country. Therefore, it seems difficult at this stage that these laws will be repealed easily. However, a less violent reaction in Rimsha's case provided some hope that the present government, though it is very weak, can bring some procedural changes so people should not use these laws for their own interests.

Pakistan has witnessed in the past that the blasphemy allegations have led to mob violence against accused persons. As a result, even Rimsha's release from the court would put her life in danger so her security remains a major issue. Now Rimsha, her family and the Christian community must be saved from mob violence, and the state should review the blasphemy laws those put many innocent people's lives on risk.

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