

Pakistani lawyer Rashid Rehman murdered after taking on blasphemy case

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He knew the risks he was taking. He knew too, that many others had declined to take on the case.

But Rashid Rehman believed that every defendant deserved a lawyer, even - or perhaps especially - someone facing perhaps the most serious allegation that can be levelled at you in Pakistan.

At around 8.30pm on Wednesday evening, Mr Rehman, a well-known advocate and a regional coordinator for the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), was shot dead by two gunmen who entered his office in the city of Multan, apparently posing as prospective clients. The attack came just weeks after he agreed to defend a college lecturer accused of blasphemy and had reportedly received death threats from other lawyers for doing so.

“He was a dedicated activist from the very beginning. All his life he was helping the downtrodden,” senior HRCP official Zaman Khan told The Independent. “He was fearless and never gave any time to the threats. He said he would live for the struggle and die for the struggle.”

Earlier this year, Mr Rehman, who was 53 and married, agreed to take on the case of Junaid Hafeez, a lecturer at Multan’s Bahauddin Zakariya University who had been accused of defaming the prophet Mohammed on social media last year. Reports said the accusations were levelled by hardline university students who had pushed for him to be charged.

The HRCP said no one was willing to take on Mr Hafeez’s defence until Mr Rehman stepped forward. After the first hearing inside a prison in March, when he was allegedly threatened, the HRCP issued a statement which said: “During the hearing the lawyers of the complainant told Rehman that he wouldn’t be present at the next hearing as he would not be alive.”

Pakistan’s blasphemy laws, introduced under British rule and then tightened during the years of military dictator Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, have become increasingly controversial and ever more deadly. Campaigners say that the laws, which carry the death penalty, are routinely used to settle personal scores and grudges that have nothing to do with Islam.

While no-one has ever been executed for blasphemy, many accused have been attacked and killed and lawyers and judges have been threatened. A recent report by a US government advisory panel said there were 14 people on death row in Pakistan and 19 others serving life sentences for insulting Islam.

Among those on death row is a 70-year-old British citizen, Muhammad Asghar, from Edinburgh, who was sentenced in January after being convicted of claiming he was a prophet. His lawyers and family said he has been suffering from mental health issues for several years.

Efforts to reform the laws by Pakistan’s previous government were scrapped in the aftermath of the murder in January 2011 of Salmaan Taseer, the governor of Punjab province, where Multan is located, who had spoken about the misuse of the laws and the need to reform them. A second politician, the then-minorities minister, Shahbaz Bhatti, who also supported reforming the laws, was

murdered two months later.

“This is only a symptom of a deeper malaise [in Pakistan],” said Asma Jahangir, a celebrated advocate who was among those who attended Mr Rehman’s funeral service in Multan. “It is becoming more and more difficult for people who have liberal views to stay alive in this country. And the state sits by like a spectator.”

Today, in an indication of such threats referred to by Ms Jahangir, it was reported that in Multan leaflets had been distributed which claimed Mr Rehman had met his “rightful end”.

“We warn all lawyers to be afraid of god and think twice before engaging in such acts,” the pamphlets said, according to the Reuters news agency.

As Mr Rehman was buried, lawyers in Multan protested over the killing of their colleague. “Every time someone without means approached him for help, he would take his case without considering how mighty the opponent could be,” said Mr Rehman’s junior colleague, Allah Daad. “He was also very fond of reading, but he spent most of his time helping the needy,”

Mr Daad said that after the prosecuting lawyer involved in the blasphemy case had made the threatening comment, Mr Rehman informed the District Bar Association and sought protection from the local police. Yet he said that Mr Rehman received no response from officers. The police in Multan were unavailable for comment.

Mr Rehman was reportedly struck by five bullets. Two other people in his office at the time were badly wounded and taken to hospital.

The lawyer and activist had no children but he lived in an extended family. His nephew, 24-year-old Atir, and his niece, Hareem, who is 25, said he had been like a father to them. The family now has no source of income. Mr Rehman’s traumatised widow, Robina, has been sedated.

“He never used to tell us anything about the work he was doing but still we came to know about the kind of threats he received,” said Mr Rehman’s niece. “He was a man of devotion and spent his entire life working for the poor.”

She added: “I would ask him to do something for me using his contacts but he said he would always use his contacts for the poor.”

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P.S.

* The Independent. Thursday 08 May 2014:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/incoming/pakistani-lawyer-rashid-rehman-murdered-after-taking-on-blasphe-my-case-9341021.html>