

# Pakistan: Justice, but 18 years late

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**What is the price of 18 years of one's life spent on death row, despite being innocent of the crime that put one there? On Wednesday, the Supreme Court acquitted Wajih-ul-Hassan of blasphemy for which he had been sentenced to capital punishment in 2002. The court ruled that the prosecution was unable to prove the letters, which constituted the basis for the case, had actually been written by the condemned man. A lack of direct witnesses and the prosecution's reliance on what is considered weak evidence, ie an 'extra-judicial confession' and the handwriting expert's report, was instrumental in Mr Hassan being exonerated.**

This is but the latest example of how the country's dysfunctional justice system fails the people. In November 2016, the Supreme Court acquitted Mazhar Farooq of murder; by then, he had spent 20 years on death row. However, the nature of a blasphemy accusation is such that even those found innocent are dogged by it for the rest of their lives, forever looking over their shoulder lest vigilante 'justice' catch up with them — and with good reason. There have been several instances of individuals acquitted of the crime having been hunted down and killed later. So far-reaching is the violence that even lawyers defending people accused of blasphemy and judges who find them innocent, do so at the risk of their lives. And their adversaries, consumed by self-righteous hatred, do not forget. In 1995, an adult and a teenage boy were acquitted of blasphemy by a Lahore High Court judge — two years later, he was shot dead in his chambers. In 2014, advocate Rashid Rehman was murdered in Multan. His crime? He was the defence lawyer for Junaid Hafeez, a university lecturer accused of blasphemy. Incidentally, Mr Hafeez has been languishing in a high-security prison ward for over six years. His case has passed through the hands of nine judges; no one, it appears, wants to be the one to bring it to a close. The most well-known case of course is that of Aasia Bibi who spent eight years on death row upon her conviction for blasphemy. Even after being acquitted by the apex court — an event that triggered violent protests across Pakistan — she had to take asylum abroad, a normal existence in her home country now impossible. Surely, one must question the quality of such 'justice' where being proved innocent can be the prelude to even more peril.

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