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No execution under blasphemy law in Pakistan so far

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By Waseem Abbasi | November 01, 2018



ISLAMABAD: With the Supreme Court's decision to acquit Asia Bibi, a Christian woman condemned to death on blasphemy charges, Pakistan maintained the record of not executing anyone under the blasphemy law ever since its introduction in 1986.

Although about 1,500 people have been charged across Pakistan under the blasphemy laws and several has been sentenced to death so far, not a single execution took place in the country.

The country's the blasphemy law is an extension of offences relating to religion that were first codified by British rulers of the Subcontinent in 1860. The current blasphemy laws were introduced through Sections 295-B and 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code during the regime of General Ziaul Haq.

Ten blasphemy cases were reportedly heard in court in the 58 years between 1927 and 1985, but

since 1986, more than 4,000 cases have been handled according to data collected by different NGOs working on the issue. The blasphemy laws include a death penalty for the defamation of the Holy Prophet (SAW) and life imprisonment for the desecration of the Holy Quran.

The statistics collected by the Lahore-based Center for Social Justice show at least 1,472 people were charged under the blasphemy laws between 1987 and 2016. Interestingly, majority of the accused (730) were Muslims while 501 were Ahmadis 205 were Christians and 26 were Hindus. But the country has yet to execute anyone for blasphemy. Most of those given the death penalty have their sentences overturned or commuted on appeal. A study by the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) on the implementation of blasphemy laws in Pakistan found that more than 80 percent of convictions by trial courts are overturned on appeal. The study found that in most cases the appellate courts find evidence and complaints fabricated based on “personal or political vendettas”.

However despite zero execution under the blasphemy laws at least 75 people have been killed in Pakistan by angry mobs and individuals on the accusation of blasphemy during last three decades according to a report by Center for Social Justice to Fides New Agency.

According to the Centre, majority of such cases originates from Punjab and Lahore district according to Center for Social Justice. It noted that 74 percent of all such cases are recorded in Punjab while in Lahore 173 cases have been verified.

Out of 75 people killed in relation to blasphemy until January 2018, 14 murders took place in Lahore, including the murder of retired judge Arif Iqbal Bhatti. According to the non-profit group, more than 11 percent of all blasphemy cases in the country originate from Lahore.

The report noted that property worth billions of rupees was destroyed by an angry mob on the Lahore Mall Road in 2006 and Joseph Colony in 2013. According to recent studies by Amnesty International, "the blasphemy law is widely abused to perpetrate hate

crimes based on religion, regulate personal vendettas and perpetrate economic injustice", says the Center.

In relation to blasphemy cases, at least four murders took place during police custody or in prison, the report added. “Hundreds of people have been tortured, jailed, and imprisoned. Property worth billions of rupees was destroyed by an angry mob on the Lahore Mall Road in 2006 and at Joseph Colony in 2013,” the Center reported, but “the economic loss is only the tip of the iceberg compared to the social, political and cultural consequences in Lahore”.

Religious hostility, vulnerability of minorities and erosion of cultural ethos, according to the report, are in stark contrast to the known cultural openness, hospitality and intellectual wealth of the metropolis.

Given that the Lahore district is home to many groups promoting a narrative based on religious intolerance, it is not difficult to understand why Lahore has become an epicenter of the abuse

of blasphemy laws, the NGO has highlighted.

The Center recalls the recent case of Patras Masih, accused of blasphemy in the suburb of Shahdara, Lahore, is the story that involved his cousin Sajid Masih, and both were subjected to torture and attempted sexual abuse.

The report has concluded that the circumstances involving these cases deserve a deeper thought from a legal standpoint.

The country witnessed several high profile murders linked to Blasphemy law including Punjab former governor Punjab Salman Taseer and former minister for minorities Shahbaz Bhatti. Taseer was killed in a hail of bullets by his bodyguard in 2011 for vocally seeking to amend the law and appealing for clemency for Asia Bibi. A month after Salman Taseer was killed, religious minorities minister Shahbaz Bhatti, a Christian who spoke out against the laws, was shot dead in Islamabad.

In 2012, a mentally unstable man was torched alive for alleged blasphemy near Bahawalpur in July. The mob took the man from a

police station where he was under custody on blasphemy charges after burning pages from the Holy Quran.

In March 2013, a mob attacked houses in Joseph Colony in Badami Bagh police precincts in the provincial capital following allegations of blasphemy against a Christian man. The mob torched dozens of houses located in a Christian-dominated neighbourhood of Lahore.

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