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The never-ending ordeal of Pakistan's minorities

By **Rabia Mehmood, South Asia Researcher**

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As the world awaits the Supreme Court’s verdict on Aasia Bibi’s unjust conviction and death sentence in a blasphemy case, hardliners have started agitating both online and offline, increasing pressure on the authorities to uphold the sentence. A not-so-cryptic tweet by Rizvi Media of Tehreek-e-Labbaik (TLYR) reads: “Think carefully before making any decision.”

The fate of those unjustly accused of blasphemy hinges on this emblematic case, which has created an environment of fear and hostility for Pakistanis especially those who adhere to religions other than Sunni Islam.

Since Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer’s killing in 2010, I have interviewed and spoken to hundreds of Pakistani minorities. The impact of Taseer’s death, for taking a stand against Aasia Bibi’s arrest on blasphemy charges, came up a lot in the conversations. Many spoke about how unsafe minorities felt in Pakistan. If a governor could not be protected, then what of religious minorities, who are at a higher risk?

Eight years on, the situation seems to be getting worse. Prosecutions on blasphemy charges have expanded to the internet and people have been accused even for social media posts.

In February this year, a video of an injured young man, Sajid Masih, went viral on social media. Sajid alleged that he was tortured by an officer belonging to the Federal Investigation Agency who ordered him to have sex with his cousin, Patras. Unable to bear the humiliation, Sajid jumped off from the fourth floor of the FIA building.

Patras Indreyas Masih, Sajid’s cousin, was charged with committing blasphemy – taken into police custody on February 19 after being accused of posting a blasphemous message on Facebook. The case, which was filed by a TLYR supporter, went to trial on April 30.

Patras Masih's lawyer and family insist that he was a minor at the time of the alleged offence. However, the authorities have prosecuted and tried Patras as an adult. His family says that, despite allegations in the media that his National ID card showed he was 21, his age on his CNIC was changed for him to be able to get a job and provide for his low-income family.

His birth certificate clearly shows he was born in 2001, proving he was 17 at the time of the post. Pakistan is party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, according to which each child has the rights to freedom of religion and expression.

Accusing and prosecuting children for blasphemy is not new to Pakistan. Many other minors who were arrested on blasphemy charges include Salamat Masih (11) of Gujranwala, Rimsha Masih (13) of Islamabad, Nabil Chohan (16) of Kasur, Ryan Stenton (16) of Karachi and Aqib Saleem (15), an Ahmadi of Gujranwala. Nabil Chohan has been in jail for two years without access to a lawyer of his choice.

In addition to minors, the list of Pakistanis condemned under blasphemy charges include women, older people, persons with mental disabilities, teachers, school and university students and many others. In 2009, a blasphemy case against a Muslim woman living with schizophrenia, Zaibunnisa, was quashed by the Lahore High Court after she had spent nine years in jail and five in a mental health facility.

Even the faintest suspicion of a blasphemy allegation is enough to put the accused and, in case of religious minorities, their entire community in danger. In 2012, I had reported on an Ahmadi man who was acquitted in a blasphemy case after spending years in prison sharing a barrack with militants. Despite being proven innocent, he ended up living in hiding, unable to step out the town his family was living in. He eventually had to flee Pakistan for a safer place for him and his family.

Christians and Ahmadis have been displaced within Pakistan and others have had to either flee the country or seek asylum elsewhere due to the lack of protections and the constant threat of blasphemy laws pending over them.

The impunity and free pass given to those who use blasphemy laws to threaten and attack minorities is not a mystery. So far, there has been no accountability for those who have justified and advocated hatred and discrimination against the most marginalised sectors of society.

Despite decades of activism by civil-society organisations, journalists and legislators to amend the blasphemy laws to protect the rights to freedom of religion and expression for all, Pakistani authorities seem reluctant to bring laws in line with international law and have preferred to stay in the past. In the meantime, the list of victims who fall prey to blasphemy allegations keeps growing.

The question is: will Naya Pakistan take a stand against the religious discrimination that has hounded minorities for decades in Purana Pakistan?

Today, Patras Masih's parents remain displaced from their home due to threats they have received since their son was accused. It is time for the justice system to ensure that blasphemy allegations are no longer used to silence and violate the human rights of any Pakistani.

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