

Asia Bibi free to leave after Pakistan court upholds blasphemy acquittal

From the [Telegraph](#)

Pakistan's top court on Tuesday morning dismissed a petition against Asia Bibi's acquittal last year, apparently leaving her free to leave the country and seek asylum abroad. She has since been in protective custody but has been offered asylum in Canada and is expected to fly out of Pakistan within hours to join her children there.

The decision by a three-man bench headed by Chief Justice Asif Saeed Khosa ends a 10-year-ordeal. . . At the climax of a case of that has gripped and divided Pakistan, the court ruled there was no cause to reverse her acquittal in October,

The country is braced for fresh protests, however, with religious conservatives vowing to bring it to a standstill to stop her leaving.

...her acquittal sparked three days of protests by the hardline religious Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) party. As roads were blocked, schools closed and commerce disrupted, the government reached a deal saying it would allow a petition to review the decision and keep Mrs Bibi in the country. Following the protests police arrested radical clerics Khadim Hussain Rizvi and Mohammad Afzal Qadri, both leaders of the Tehreekk-e-Labbaik Party and they remain in custody. The TLP said on Monday it would not accept the release of Mrs Bibi and told supporters to prepare for more protests, but the detention of its leaders may rein in the anger.

Today's verdict will be a relief for Imran Khan, the prime

minister, who has been accused of betrayal by both sides in recent weeks, but can now point to the judicial process being allowed to run its course.

“Today is a momentous day for all who raised their voice against the blasphemy law and religious oppression,” Joseph Nadeem, a family friend, told *The Times* after the verdict. “It was a long battle of both nerves and emotions. The most difficult part was her children asking their father when their mum will return. I applaud the bravery of the judges who declared Asia innocent.”

Ms Bibi’s children have already fled Pakistan for Canada, while her husband, Ashiq Masih, has remained with her in Islamabad. Her eventual destination remained a closely guarded secret for weeks because western governments feared their diplomats in Pakistan could be targeted by extremists.

Wilson Chowdhry, Chairman of the British Pakistani Christian Association, said: “Today is a day of rejoicing, come what may in the aftermath of this decision. Asia Bibi has always been innocent and it is a blight on Pakistan that it took almost ten years to come to this decision to free her.”