

Pakistanis Mete Out Sharia 'Justice' to 'Blasphemers'

by Hugh Fitzgerald



We are all familiar with the blasphemy charges that, in Pakistan as in some other Muslim states, can lead to a death sentence. Such charges are often brought by those who have a private score to settle, or for some other reason want to punish the entirely innocent person they've accused. Or sometimes, just because that's what Christians deserve.

Let's remember the ghastly case of Asia Bibi, the Christian woman in Pakistan who picked berries along with Muslim coworkers. Asia was asked at one point to fetch water from a nearby well for the Muslims; she complied, but stopped to take a drink with an old metal cup she had found lying next to the well. A neighbor of Asia, one Musarat, who had been involved in a running feud with Asia Bibi's family about some property damage, saw her and told her that it was forbidden for a Christian to drink water from the same utensil from which

Muslims drink, and that some of the other workers considered her to be unclean because she was a Christian. Asia recounted that when those workers made derogatory statements about Christianity and demanded that she convert to Islam, she said that "I believe in my religion and in Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for the sins of mankind. What did your Prophet Mohammed ever do to save mankind? And why should it be me that converts instead of you?" An argument ensued.

After that, a mob came to her house to see justice done, beating her and members of her family, before the police took her away and while she was in jail, "investigated" the case and charged her with blasphemy.

In an interview with CNN, a local police officer, Muhammad Ilyas, said that her Muslim co-workers claimed she said "the Quran is fake and your prophet remained in bed for one month before his death because he had worms in his ears and mouth. He married Khadija [his first wife] just for money and after looting her kicked her out of the house." The village imam, Qari Muhammad Salim, to whom Asia Bibi's coworkers first reported the alleged blasphemy, claimed that she confessed to him and apologized. She, of course, denied the preposterous story.

She was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death by hanging.

Asia Bibi spent nine years in solitary confinement, in a Pakistani prison where conditions are scarcely believable, all the while waiting for her death sentence to be carried out. Ultimately she was acquitted by Pakistan's Supreme Court, but had to remain in prison a while longer, because mobs of maddened Muslims were determined to kill her, until she could be spirited out and flown to Canada. Now she and her family must live with the constant anxiety that someday a Muslim will recognize her, and then attempt to mete out the punishment that according to the Sharia she so richly deserves.

Another such blasphemy case in Pakistan has just been reported [here](#), and previously at Jihad Watch [here](#), as well as in 2013 [here](#).

A Pakistani court on Tuesday, September 7 sentenced a Christian man to death on blasphemy charges.

Asif Pervaiz, a garment factory worker, had been accused by his supervisor of sending derogatory remarks about the Muslim Prophet Muhammad to him in a text message.

Insulting the prophet carries a mandatory death penalty in Pakistan, a predominantly Muslim country.

Pervaiz was convicted after a trial in Lahore that ran since 2013. His lawyer Saif-ul-Malook told Reuters he would appeal the sentence.

The court order, seen by Reuters, said Pervaiz would first serve a three-year prison term for “misusing” his phone to send the derogatory text message. Then “he shall be hanged by his neck till his death.”

He was also fined 50,000 Pakistani rupees (\$300), the order said.

His trial has apparently lasted seven years. That means Asif Pervaiz has already been in a Pakistani prison – whatever you imagine it to be like, in reality it’s even worse – four years longer than what his final sentence mandated. But he’ll no doubt try to be allowed to serve out those three years, as well, given that the alternative is immediate death by hanging. And lest we forget, there’s also that \$300 fine, an account he must settle up before his hanging. It sounds like a Monty Python routine. Always look on the bright side of life. But it’s real.

Asif Pervaiz told the court his supervisor made the accusation only after he had refused to convert to Islam,

Saif-ul-Malook said. The complainant's lawyer, Murtaza Chaudhry, denied this was the case.

Doesn't this seem to be a reasonable explanation for the supervisor's accusation? Don't Muslims have a long – 1,400 year – history of trying to convert, through persuasion or force, non-Muslims to the One True Faith? Surely Pervaiz' version of events is entirely plausible.

By contrast, how very implausible is the supervisor's story that this Christian employee, knowing perfectly well what happens to someone in Pakistan charged with blasphemy, would have sent text messages to his Muslim supervisor, full of derogatory remarks about the Prophet. Pervaiz would have had to have been suicidal or insane to send such messages. The supervisor's version not only sounds absurd, it is absurd.

Except it was not absurd to the Pakistani court that has just sentenced Asif Pervaiz to death for the supposed "blasphemy."

Human rights groups say blasphemy laws are often misused to persecute minorities or even against Muslims to settle personal rivalries. Islamist extremism has been on the rise in Pakistan and such accusations can end up in lynchings or street vigilantism.

In fact, it is the mobs, or individual self-appointed executioners, "defenders of the Prophet," and not the state, that carries out these death sentences. No judicial killings for blasphemy have been carried out by the authorities since 1990. They didn't have to – the sentences have been carried out by willing executioners – vigilantes defending the honor of the Prophet. And the killings don't stop with those who have been charged with blasphemy. Other victims have included those officials who defended someone charged with blasphemy, or urged a change in the blasphemy laws. Nearly a dozen lawyers of those accused of blasphemy since 1990 have been

murdered. So have judges who dared to acquit the accused. In the case of Asia Bibi, Shahbaz Bhatti, a Roman Catholic and Pakistan's Minister for Minority Affairs, was murdered for wanting to amend the blasphemy laws. Punjab Governor Salman Taseer was shot dead by his own security guard for supporting Asia. Even in prison, those convicted of blasphemy, and awaiting their death sentence, may be killed by fellow prisoners hoping to win favor, in this life and the next, for avenging the honor of the Prophet. Sometimes, as these "blasphemers" are being transported from one prison to another, mobs have managed to overcome the security detail and murder them.

And the murderers of these supposed "blasphemers" are seldom adequately punished. No one was ever arrested for the murder of Shahbaz Bhatti. Unusually, Salman Taseer's murderer was executed, but on the street, tens of thousands of Pakistanis declared him a "hero." Recently, Tahir Naseem, a U.S. citizen of Pakistani origin and an Ahmadi Muslim, was lured back to Pakistan where he was put on trial for blasphemy. But before the trial had hardly begun, he was shot dead by a teenager, who told bystanders he killed him for insulting the Prophet Muhammad.

Since his arrest, the murderer of Tahir Naseem has been glorified as a "holy warrior" by supporters in Pakistan, including clerics, and thousands of Islamists have rallied to demand his release.

Will Asif Pervaiz be executed by the state? Probably not: the Pakistani state need not do it when there are maddened mobs and vigilantes eager to see justice done by doing the deed themselves. They'll find a way to shoot him in court – the trial court or perhaps the court of appeals – or perhaps when he is being moved from a prison van to another prison. His chances of survival are not good. Since 1990, at least 77 people charged with blasphemy have been murdered; none were executed by the state.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan likes to present himself as a modern man, who graduated from Keble College, Oxford, then became an international cricket star, living a playboy's life in London, famous for dancing away nights at Annabelle's and similar nightclubs, before returning to Pakistan, where he made a U-turn from playboy to puritan, and entered politics. Khan sounds ever less like a pro-democracy liberal and ever more like those he has been cozying up to in the conservative Islamist parties. The Prime Minister's courting of religious conservatives, and his fear of crossing them, is what prevents the Pakistani state from cracking down on clerics who whip up mobs and individual vigilantes to murder those accused, or convicted, of blasphemy, and also to murder the lawyers who defend the accused, and the judges who sometimes acquit them.

There is another possible explanation for Imran Khan's eagerness to placate the conservative clerics. In 2014, his net worth was \$200,000. A year later, his net worth was \$8.2 million, on which he managed to pay a ludicrous tax of only \$460. No one has offered an explanation for such a change in his fortunes in only one year. Could Saudi Arabia have been behind this spectacular increase in his net worth? Does that explain his unwillingness to take up the issue of false charges of blasphemy, and the innocents who have been murdered because of those charges? When running for Prime Minister in 2018, Imran Khan and his political allies not only defended the blasphemy laws, but also denigrated the Ahmadiyya community, whose members have long been subject to charges of "blasphemy." He said at the time to a gathering of Muslim leaders in Islamabad: "We are standing with Article 295c and will defend it," referring to the clause of the constitution that mandates the death penalty for any "imputation, insinuation or innuendo" against Muhammad.

His remarks infuriated Pakistan's secular liberals.

Shahbaz Taseer, the son of Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab who had been murdered by his security guard for

defending Asia Bibi, told the *Guardian*: “My father was a hero and a champion for change. He wanted amendments in this barbaric law. Imran Khan is a coward; he is supporting murderers and mob violence. This law is persecuting people, it is not respecting our prophet.”

Since 2018, when he took office as Prime Minister, Imran Khan has been talking about reviving a proposal at the UN for a campaign for global blasphemy laws. He shows no sign of dismounting from this particular hobbyhorse that is so dangerous for the Western ideal of freedom of speech.

And we in the West, who have been fooled into thinking of Imran Khan as a modern man and secular liberal, because he went to Oxford, partied at Annabelle's, lived for a long while in London, married one English heiress (Jemima Goldsmith) and impregnated another (Sita White), played championship cricket, and wrote about the sport for the English papers, should see beyond that to what Imran Khan now is: the Defender of the Faith, and the Scourge of the Blasphemers. He will not raise a finger to change Article 295c, nor do a thing to save the life of Asif Pervaiz, the latest poor wretch to be sentenced to death for blasphemy in Pakistan, based on accusations as ludicrous as those made against Asia Bibi and Tahir Naseem. Pakistan will have to wait for another leader, better and braver, than Imran Khan, someone willing to defy the conservative clergy, end the death penalty for “blasphemy,” and create a special police unit to investigate, with great and justified skepticism, any accusations of blasphemy that are made. There is no such leader on the immediate horizon.

But looking ahead, there is one potential candidate who comes to mind, though for now he expresses no interest in politics. This is Shahbaz Taseer, 37 years old, the son of the Punjab governor Salman Taseer, who was murdered for defending Asia Bibi. Taseer has shown a willingness to speak out against the blasphemy laws, praising his father as “a hero and a champion for change. He wanted amendments in this barbaric law,” and

calling Imran Khan “a coward; he is supporting murderers and mob violence.” Taseer has also shown his physical bravery: he was kidnapped in 2011 by members of an Uzbek Islamic group and held for four years. His captors pulled out all his fingernails, repeatedly lashed him with whips, cut open the flesh on his back with knives and let his wounds bleed, sewed his mouth shut so that for a week he could not eat, and continually found new ways to torment him. If Pakistan is to have a future, it will have to have leaders unlike Imran Khan and very like Shahbaz Taseer. He is someone to watch. Cometh the hour, cometh the man.

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