Protests mount against Pakistan's blasphemy laws

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Pakistan's draconian "blasphemy" laws have come under renewed criticism since several Christians were killed this summer by a mob of Muslim fundamentalists in a pogrom-style attack. Demands have risen for the abolition of these laws, which were introduced in the 1980s by the US-backed dictator General Zia-ul Haq as part of an "Islamization" drive. They have often been used to persecute Christians and members of other religious minorities.

The violence occurred in the town of Gojra in eastern Punjab, when a banned Islamist group falsely accused local Christians of desecrating the Qur'an. A large crowd of Muslim fundamentalists set fire to several homes, leaving their occupants to be burned to death. Seven people were killed, all believed to be Christians.

Over 100 people were arrested in connection with the massacre, which according to Pakistani officials, was ordered by Sipah-e-Sahaba, a Sunni Islamist group that has frequently been involved in sectarian violence against the country's Shia minority.

Attacks against Pakistani Christians usually go unpunished. But because of the outcry from Pakistani Christians, civil rights groups, sections of the press, and international Christian groups, Pakistan president and People's Party of Pakistan (PPP) head Asif Ali Zardari may be compelled to deliver at least a modicum of justice.

President Zardari and Punjab's provincial government have offered paltry compensation to the victims' survivors, amounting to just a few thousand dollars per family.

There were several other incidents of violence perpetrated against Christians in Pakistan in the months leading up to the Gojra atrocity. Last March, a Christian woman was killed when a church was attacked in Gujranwala. On June 30, dozens of Christian homes were attacked when Muslims plundered a village in the Kasur district.

Islamic militants and bigoted clerics have been able to foster animosity between Muslims and Christians by exploiting the disgust generated by the crimes of US imperialism in Afghanistan and Iraq and in Pakistan itself. The Bush administration funded and armed the dictator General Pervez Musharraf, who was only forced out as president in August 2008, and under Obama the US has declared Pakistan an integral part of the Afghan counter-insurgency war, mounted regular drone missile attacks inside Pakistan and prevailed upon the government to bloodily suppress Taliban-allied militia in the country's northwest.

Notwithstanding the outcry over the Gojra massacre, attacks on Christians are continuing. On September 12, the Pakistani English-language daily *Dawn* reported that a church was set ablaze by Muslim communalists after another dubious allegation of desecration of the Qur'an. Bishop Samuel Pervaiz subsequently accused the government of failing to protect minorities.

In a particularly disturbing incident, 20-year-old Robert Fanish Masi, who had been arrested on blasphemy charges, was found dead September 15 in his jail cell in the Sialkot district. While police claim Masi's death was a suicide, his body was reported to bear clear signs of torture, indicating that he may have been murdered while in custody. The *Daily Times* cites the Punjab Minister for Minority Affairs Kamran Michael as saying, "I have seen the body and there were torture marks on it."

Masi is by no means the first person accused of blasphemy to be found dead in their cell under mysterious circumstances.

Local authorities denied Masi's family permission to bury him in his native village, some 20 kilometers from Sailkot, and police attacked his funeral procession in Sailkot with tear-gas after it transformed into a protest demanding repeal of the blasphemy laws and a public inquiry into his death.

The recent anti-Christian communal attacks have sparked protests involving Christians, human rights activists, and other working people in cities across Pakistan. According to Joseph Francis, the chairman of the Christian National Party, people are saying "We hate Pakistan and we want to leave. It's truly a terrible thing for community relations."

The protestors are outraged not only by the violence, but by police indifference to, and outright collusion, in the attacks.

To cite but one example, on September 16 *The News* reported that police in Karachi severely beat up several members of a Christian family, the Lawrence's, after a family-member, a 60 year-old diabetic patient, allegedly urinated on the roof of a neighbor's house where there was said to be some religious literature.

According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, "There was a hue and cry and local clerics gathered and attacked Lawrence's house. An HRCP team is investigating this case." Yousuf Ashiq of the Muthahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), the political party that leads Karachi's municipal government, said, "Although there is no eyewitness to the incident, the Christian family has decided to pay compensation in accordance with Islamic laws and an announcement has been made in this regard at the local mosque."

Pakistan's approximately three million Christians make up less than two percent of the country's total population. Most of the Christians are descendents of untouchables who converted to Christianity during the second half of the 19th Century and early 20th Century. The conversions were at least in part an effort to improve their socio-economic status and escape caste oppression. Today they are the largest non-Muslim minority group in Pakistan.

Although only Brahamanical Hinduism gives religious sanction to untouchability, in colonial India better-off Muslims, as well as Hindus, enforced caste divisions. Today Pakistan's Christian must deal with both class and caste-based prejudice. They are often taunted as "cleaners" referring to the menial tasks performed by their ancestors—tasks which dire poverty compel many of them to continue to perform today.

Bigotry and religious sectarianism are the inevitable products of the betrayal of the mass anti-imperialist movement that convulsed British India during the first half of the 20th Century by the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League and the creation in 1947, under the tutelage of the British of imperialism, of twin independent bourgeois

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states—an expressly Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India. The immediate result of partition was an orgy of communal violence in which up to two million people died and more than 12 million were uprooted from their homes.

Virtually all Hindus and Sikhs fled the western half of the bifurcated Pakistani state, while millions of Muslims from north India sought refuge in Pakistan.

Christians, by contrast, did not leave Pakistan in large numbers, and thus subsequently became the country's largest religious minority. There are several reasons for this. Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the "founder of Pakistan," courted the tiny Christian elite. Even as he was inciting communalism and violence with cries of Islam in danger and by insisting that Islam and Hinduism were incompatible ways of life, Jinnah claimed that the Christians would have equal rights in Pakistan. Being amongst the poorest of the poor, Pakistan's Christians lacked the connections, transportable skills, and financial resources to migrate in 1947-48.

In Pakistan, as in post-independence India, the bourgeoisie has used communalism as a means of diverting and derailing the social discontent born of its inability to ensure the basic needs of masses and as a means of mobilizing popular support for the geo-political struggle against the rival state created in 1947.

Under the dictatorship of Zia-ul Haq, Pakistani politics and society underwent a further communalization, with disastrous consequences for the Pakistani people. Zia openly promoted Islamic parties and the Muslim clergy as a bulwark against the working class. At the behest of the United States and their Saudi allies, the Pakistani state armed the mujahedeen in Afghanistan and made Islamicist militias an integral part of the Pakistani bourgeoisie's geo-political strategy. Zia also promoted religious schools and social services as an alternative to state funding for education and health.

It was under Zia that Pakistan developed its draconian blasphemy laws. In 1982, Section 295-B was added to the Penal Code. It states, "Whoever willfully defiles, damages or desecrates a copy of the Holy Quran or of an extract therefrom, or uses it in any derogatory manner or for any unlawful purpose shall be punishable with imprisonment for life." In 1990, the Federal Shariat Court, which was authorized by Zia, made death the only punishment for blasphemy.

Section 298 of the Penal Code is particularly discriminatory. It was enacted for the sole purpose of preventing members of the Ahmadiyya community from freely practicing their religion. Ahmadiyya is a religious movement which venerates Mirza Ghulam Ahmad who claimed to be the Mahdi, a messiah-like figure awaited by Muslims. Although Ahmadis consider themselves to be Muslims, they are considered heretics by the state. There is a direct correlation over the years between the enactment of anti-Ahmadiyya laws and violence committed against Ahmadis by Sunni extremists. In 2008, two Ahmadis were murdered after a TV news anchor justified attacks on the community saying Ahmadis should be killed.

The blasphemy laws are only one of the means by which Pakistani state infringes on the freedoms of religious minorities and non-believers.

Article 2 of the Pakistani Constitution declares Islam the state religion. Non-Muslims cannot aspire to the highest offices in the government. Pakistani passports stipulate the faith of the passport holder and minorities must vote in communal electorates for their own parliamentary representatives, instead of with the general population, thereby making clear that they are to be viewed as apart from and inferior to the Muslim majority.

While religious fundamentalism contributes to massacres like Gojra, accusations of blasphemy usually occur over property and other financial disputes. Nearly every accusation ends up being proved baseless. It is a clear case of landowners and clerics capitalizing on poverty and unemployment to assert their own financial interests.

In the face of the recent protests against the communal attacks on the country's Christian minority, Pakistan's government has merely promised to "review" the blasphemy laws.

Meanwhile sections of the establishment are sponsoring a movement in favor of keeping the laws intact. Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain, president of the Pakistan Muslim League (Q), told a commercial television channel that his party would oppose any measure to abolish the blasphemy laws, cynically adding that it was the duty of every Muslim to protect minorities. The PML (Q) was the party created by former President Pervez Musharraf and his supporters, many of whom had defected from the Nawaz Sharif-led PML (N). Many Islamist parties have also come out in opposition to abolishing the laws.

Communal violence is symptomatic of the general crisis confronting Pakistani society. The country's economy has been hit hard by the world financial meltdown. The IMF recently allocated an additional $3.2 billion to Pakistan, in exchange for government promises to eliminate fuel price subsidies, raise more tax revenue and lower the budget deficit. The austerity measures imposed by the IMF will continue to wreak havoc on the living standards of the Pakistani working class. The majority of Pakistanis live on less than $2 per day. The lack of access to public education and health services will inevitably lead to the continuation of wretched living conditions for the vast majority of the population.

A client-state of the US virtually since its establishment, Pakistan and its bourgeois elites remain heavily dependent on foreign powers, especially Washington.

Now the Pakistani government has obediently declared war on a large segment of its own population in the interest of US imperialism. The collaboration with the US has only intensified under the leadership of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP)—a party that in the past has postured as socialist and epitomizes the craven and venal character of Pakistani liberalism.

The blasphemy laws are but one example of the anti-democratic character of the Pakistani state. Political power in Pakistan remains largely in the hands of the US-backed military, while the various politicians engage in reactionary religious, nationalist, and ethno-linguistic appeals. And the politicians and army are equally committed to upholding the present grossly unequal socio-economic order.

The struggle to complete basic democratic tasks such as the separation of mosque and state and the eradication of landlordism is bound up with larger struggle against capitalism itself. Pakistani workers and their counterparts across South Asia must unite across religious and ethnic lines to fight for socialism in Pakistan and throughout the region.

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