

Pakistan's government bows to Islamist right, victimises anew woman in blasphemy case

Sampath Perera
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Bowing to the demands of the Islamist right, Pakistan's three-month-old Tehrik-e-Insaaf (PTI) government has ordered the country's Supreme Court to review its decision vacating the blasphemy conviction and death sentence imposed on Asia Bibi, an impoverished Catholic woman.

The government has also ordered that Bibi, who languished on death row for eight years, not be allowed to leave the country.

On Wednesday, Pakistani and international media claimed that Bibi had been allowed to go into exile. But Foreign Office spokesperson Dr. Mohammad Faisal has denounced these reports. "There is no truth in reports of her leaving the country—it is fake news," Faisal told Dawn News Television. It subsequently emerged that the authorities had merely released Bibi from a Multan jail and flown her to Islamabad where she remains closely guarded for her own protection.

Pakistan's highest court struck down Bibi's 2010 blasphemy conviction and ordered her immediately freed in an October 31 ruling. While the Supreme Court framed its ruling within a defence of the legitimacy of Pakistan's reactionary blasphemy laws, it said there was insufficient evidence against Bibi, including inconsistencies in the testimony of her accusers.

The Islamist right—which has long been cultivated by Pakistan's ruling elite, especially the military-intelligence apparatus, as a bulwark against the working class and a weapon in its strategic rivalry with India—responded to the court's verdict with calls for immediate mass protests.

From Wednesday, October 31, through Friday, November 2, Pakistan was rocked by violent protests led by the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). In Karachi, Peshawar, Lahore and other cities, TLP supporters clashed with the police and set fire to vehicles and other property.

TLP co-founder Muhammad Fatal Badri told a Lahore rally that the three-judge bench of the Supreme Court led by the chief justice "deserve to be killed." "Either their security, their driver, or their cook should kill them," he declared. Badri also publicly urged Pakistani army officers to mutiny against the chief of the military, General Qamar

Javed Bajwa.

Such threats by Islamists in Pakistan are not empty rhetoric. In 2011, Salman Taseer—Punjab's provincial governor and an influential leader in the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Pakistan's then ruling party—was killed by his bodyguard after he advocated for Bibi's release. Shahbaz Bhatti, the federal minister for Minorities Affairs and a Christian, was assassinated two months later, after declaring his opposition to Bibi's incarceration and threatened execution. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claimed responsibility for the latter killing.

The TLP's founding in 2015 and subsequent expansion was connected to the Pakistani state's conviction and hanging of Taseer's assassin. Sectarian attacks—especially those by suicide bombers linked to the TTP—have frequently targeted minorities in recent years, killing hundreds of men, women and children.

The rise of the TTP was itself a product of the Pakistani state's decades-long promotion of Islamic fundamentalism and US-sponsored alliance with the Afghan mujahedin, on the one hand; and the brutal methods it has used—including carpet bombing and colonial-style collective punishments—in militarily suppressing support for the Taliban within Pakistan's tribal areas since 2001.

In a televised speech on the evening of October 31, Prime Minister Imran Khan supported the Supreme Court's ruling, admonished the protest leaders for their remarks against the judges and the military, and decried the violence and blocking of roads. He warned the protesters against pushing "the state to a point where it has no option but to take action." However, two days later, as the Islamist rampage continued and the highway connecting Islamabad with Lahore remained blocked, the government pulled back from its harsh rhetoric and bowed to most of the TLP's demands.

In addition to ordering the Supreme Court to review its decision, and placing Bibi under an arbitrary travel ban so as to prevent her from leaving the country, the government agreed to the immediate release of all TLP supporters arrested since the protests began.

In response, the TLP issued a token apology, mainly to appease the military.

A year ago this month, the TLP waged a campaign against the former Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) government's attempts to amend the religious oath taken by election candidates, denouncing the government's action as tantamount to blasphemy. This campaign, which brought the TLP to prominence, was tacitly supported by Pakistan's military. The protests crippled Islamabad and involved a demand for the resignation of the minister for law and justice, Zahid Hamid, which the government carried out after the military announced it was "neutral" and would not disperse the protests.

The threat of the Supreme Court reversing its decision, turning Bibi, who is in her early 50s and a mother of five, back to the hangman's noose, remains real. Her whole family also faces the threat of assassination or mob attack. Such attacks, resulting from blasphemy allegations, have caused the deaths of at least 65 people since 1990. Since 2010, Bibi's husband has been living in hiding. Their two mentally and physically disabled daughters have had to live apart from him out of fear for their safety.

Bibi's lawyer, Saiful Mulook, left the country last Saturday. "In the current scenario, it's not possible for me to live in Pakistan," he told the AFP. "I need to stay alive as I still have to fight the legal battle for Asia Bibi."

The origins of Pakistan's blasphemy laws lie in the British Raj, which promoted communalism as a key element in its colonial "divide-and-rule" strategy. They have been upheld and dramatically expanded under a succession of governments led by the military and all factions of the political elite, including the PPP, which once claimed to be an "Islamic socialist" party and today passes itself as the votary of Pakistani liberalism.

The blasphemy laws have served to intimidate critics of the government and religious obscurantism and to harass and terrorise minorities like the country's Christians, who make up 2 percent of the population and are largely drawn from groups historically discriminated against as low-caste and "untouchable." No one has yet been executed by the state after being convicted of blasphemy, but 1,472 people were charged under the laws between 1987 and 2016, according to the Lahore-based Centre for Social Justice.

The charges against Bibi, an impoverished farm labourer, emerged out of a 2009 dispute in a rural Punjab field. While harvesting falsa berries, she was asked to fetch water to share with the rest of the farmhands. After drinking from a cup next to the well, she was accosted by a Muslim neighbor of hers. The woman and the other farmhands refused to drink from the same well, claiming that being a Christian she had tainted it. As a result of the ensuing argument, Bibi was

accused of insulting the Prophet Muhammad and arrested.

The backsliding of the Khan government is not a surprise. Khan has long courted the Islamist right, including by championing the blasphemy laws and supporting the disenfranchisement of the several-million-strong Ahmadi religious minority.

In September, Khan revoked the appointment of economist Atif Mian to his Economic Advisory Council when the TLP threatened protests against the inclusion of a member of the Ahmadi sect, which Islamic fundamentalists view as comprised of apostates. "The government wants to move forward with the religious leaders and all segments of society," declared Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry in justifying Khan's decision.

US imperialism has played a major role in the growth of the Islamic right in Pakistan. It staunchly supported the military regime led by General Zia ul-Haq (1977-1988), whose "Islamicisation" campaign spearheaded a political-ideological offensive against the working class and the left, and made Pakistan's military-intelligence apparatus the linchpin of the CIA operation to organise and arm the mujahedin to wage war on Afghanistan's Soviet-backed government.

It was under Zia that the punishment for blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad was raised to "death, or imprisonment for life."

While the government appeases the Islamist right and bows before its threats of violence, Pakistan's military with the support of the PTI and complicity of the rest of the political establishment uses the threat of terrorist attacks and disorder to extend its power and reach.

This has included using the anti-terrorism laws against striking workers and to arrest leftists, and subjecting the press and social media to ever more severe censorship. Last week, the editors of the *Dawn* lamented that while the government had responded to the violent threats of the TLP leaders with talks, "Editors have been threatened; the distribution of newspapers disrupted; news channels taken off air or consigned to anonymous slots" for doing their "job and reporting events, facts and information."



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