

Christians face persecution, charges of blasphemy in Muslim Pakistan_50304

April 30, 2004

Posted: 5/03/04

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Religion News Service

LAHORE, Pakistan-A market vendor sold Christian brothers Saleem and Rasheed Masih ice cream, then told them they had to pay for the bowls because he couldn't again serve a Muslim from the now-defiled utensils.

The brothers refused. Days later, the vendor accused the brothers of verbally insulting the Prophet Mohammed. Under Pakistani law, Section 295-C, that's blasphemy, which can be punishable by life in prison, a stiff fine or death.

The Masihis were sentenced to 35 years. They spent four years in Sahiwal Central Jail before a Lahore High Court judge acquitted them in April 2003.

But the case received wide press coverage. Fundamentalist Muslims who refused to believe their innocence immediately began pursuing them. The brothers left the jail in one car and switched to a different one as they fled into hiding. They shaved their beards and have lived in three cities since

their release from prison to protect themselves from violent mobs.

A year after their acquittal the brothers, who are Roman Catholic, remain in hiding as they seek asylum in the West.

“We can't go home to our village. In Islamabad, people are looking for us. Our lives are in danger,” Rasheed Masih said. “In Pakistan, there isn't any safe place (for us).”

The Masihis are among a growing number of Pakistanis, both Christian and Muslim, whose lives have been thrown into turmoil because of allegations of blasphemy. According to prominent Karachi-based Christian attorney M.L. Shahani, from 1948 until 1986, only 14 blasphemy cases were registered. But from 1987 until 1999, 44 stood accused of blasphemy, and in 2000 alone, 52 cases were registered—43 against Muslims and nine against Christians.

Pakistan's Christian community claims to be some 4 million strong in a country of 150 million.

“Anybody can go to a police station and register a case under Section 295-C against any person,” Shahani writes in an undated report titled “Sharia and State.” “The police would immediately register a case and arrest the accused without checking the veracity of the facts.”

An accusation by a single person is all that's needed to put the alleged blasphemer behind bars, where he must prove his innocence, said Elizabeth Kendal, the World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberty Commission's main researcher and writer. The charge of blasphemy itself inflames Muslim sensibilities so much that even before an arrest is made, irreparable and fatal damage has been done.

“The amount of suffering a charge of blasphemy produces is so great that the blasphemy law must be considered a serious problem,” she said. “The

accusation virtually turns the victim into a 'dead man walking.'"

During colonial rule, the British enacted the blasphemy law to protect the religious sentiments of minority Muslims against majority Hindus. The law should have been abolished after Pakistan's creation as a state for Muslims, Shahani said.

Joseph Francis, director of the Lahore-based Christian organization Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement, or CLAAS, said that lower courts punish all blasphemy cases "but higher courts acquit them after investigations." CLAAS lawyers defended the Masih brothers.

But simply abolishing that law today isn't so easy. In the early 1990s, the Supreme Court upheld its constitutionality. Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf, who came to power in a 1999 coup, sought to repeal it, but a violent public outcry and general strike forced an end to his efforts. The presence of militant mobs can pressure judges to rule against defendants in even the most absurd of accusations. Fundamentalists often threaten courts that find accused blasphemers innocent.

In response to the rising numbers of blasphemy cases, CLAAS has joined Christian lawyers and political leaders in preparing a bill that will criminalize filing false blasphemy charges. Christian lawmaker Akram Gill aims to introduce the bill in the current session of Parliament.

Because the blasphemy law is used more against Muslims than those of minority faiths, Muslim opposition to the law is rising. "But it will take time," Francis said. After the new bill is drawn up, lawmakers will need at least six months to process it. And it, too, may be met by extremist violence.

Meanwhile, as Saleem and Rasheed Masih feel pressed to leave Pakistan and begin new lives in a safer place, Saleem said that his faith sustains him in the interim. "We are optimistic that God has plans for us," he said. "We

are witnesses of God, and he will help us preach the gospel.”

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