

Pakistani Christian couple acquitted of blasphemy

June 4, 2021

A court in Pakistan on June 3 overturned the death sentence handed down to a Christian couple convicted of blasphemy in 2014.

The Lahore High Court acquitted Shafqat Emmanuel and his wife Shagufta Kausar, who were jailed separately after being convicted of allegedly violating the nation's blasphemy laws, [International Christian Concern reported](#).

"We here at International Christian Concern are happy to see Shafqat and Shagufta finally acquitted. ... It is great to see such a prolonged blasphemy case justly resolved," said William Stark, regional manager for the organization, which focuses on the persecution of Christians.

Accused of sending texts in language they don't know

The case against the couple was based on testimony by Muhammad Hussain, a Muslim cleric at a mosque in Gojra, who said he received text messages insulting the Prophet Muhammad from a phone number allegedly registered to Shagufta Kausar on June 18, 2013.

Hussain reportedly showed the text messages to his lawyer, who claimed he later received further blasphemous messages in English—a language neither Shagufta Kausar nor Shafqat Emmanuel speak.

The couple was arrested three days later and charged with blasphemy.

Shafqat Emmanuel asserted the Gojra Police tortured him in the presence of his wife and children to extract a false confession.

The Christian couple insisted the accusations against them stemmed from a minor quarrel between their children and their neighbors six months before the charges were brought.

Human rights and religious liberty organizations note false accusations of blasphemy often are motivated by personal grudges or prejudice.

Shagufta Kausar asserted Hussain conspired with a friend to steal her national identity card and use it to purchase a SIM card in her name and then text the blasphemous messages using that SIM card.

When police investigated, they were unable to recover the SIM card or the phone allegedly used.

Even so, the Sessions Court of Toba Tek Singh on April 4, 2014, sentenced both the husband and wife to death. Since then, Shagufta Kausar has been in Multan Jail, and Shafqat Emmanuel was in Faisalabad District Jail, where he was denied medical treatment for a spinal injury he had sustained in 2004.

‘Tool in the hands of extremists’

“Today’s decision puts an end to the seven-year long ordeal of a couple who should not have been convicted nor faced a death sentence in the first place,” said Dinushika Dissanayake, South Asia deputy director for Amnesty International.

“Blasphemy cases are often premised on flimsy evidence in environments that make fair trials impossible, underscoring the significance of this verdict. The authorities must now immediately provide Shafqat, Shagufta, their family and their lawyer Saiful Malook with adequate security.

“This case is sadly emblematic of the harassment, intimidation and attacks that those accused of ‘blasphemy’ routinely face and highlights the urgent need to repeal the law. We hope that the next step will be to swiftly repeal the country’s blasphemy laws that for too long have been used to target Pakistan’s already beleaguered minorities.”

Stark noted his organization also remains “deeply concerned for the safety of the Christian couple and their family.”

“Extremists in Pakistan are known to target individuals accused of religious crimes, like blasphemy, even after they have been acquitted,” he said. “The abuse of Pakistan’s blasphemy laws must be curbed, and false allegations must be rooted out and punished.

“Too often these laws have been a tool in the hands of extremists seeking to stir up religiously motivated violence against minorities. Without reform, religious minorities will continue to face false blasphemy accusations and the violence that often accompanies these accusations.”

Both the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate passed [resolutions](#) last December calling for the repeal of blasphemy and apostasy laws around the world.

The [Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty](#) was part of a coalition of more than six dozen organizations calling for an international ban on blasphemy laws.