**Protecting minority groups**

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The misuse of blasphemy laws for personal vengeance has been a longstanding issue in the history of Pakistan. Its judiciary has an important role in minority rights preservation. The courts in the past have taken suo moto actions on minority rights violations. Still, the proportion of minorities accused of blasphemy is much higher than their share in the population. The conditions of minorities in Pakistan are connected with structural and constitutional issues where the judiciary has many limitations. Religious minorities have a disproportionate share of people accused of blasphemy in Pakistan according to the National Commission for Justice and Peace. Most of the cases are based on the intent for vengeance or intolerance towards different faiths. The people projecting non-traditional views about religion are also subject to false accusations. Blasphemy is punishable by a fine to death and even both under Pakistan’s Penal Code. These laws were made more strict under the rule of the military dictator Zia ul Haq between 1980 to 1986. Since then, the reported cases have seen a sharp rise.

[Death toll from Russian missile strike in Ukraine’s Zaporizhzhia rises to 13](https://www.nation.com.pk/06-Mar-2023/death-toll-from-russian-missile-strike-in-ukraine-s-zaporizhzhia-rises-to-13)

The recent landmark judgment was issued by the Anti-Terrorism Court in the case of the Sri Lankan national Priyantha Kumar. The victim was accused of desecrating the posters displaying the name of Prophet Muhammad on the factory walls where he worked as a manager. He was falsely accused of insulting Islam and lynched by a violent mob in December 2021. His body was burned and the perpetrators celebrated the gruesome act. In April 2022, the court passed the death sentence for the six primary criminals and life imprisonment for the 9 others. 72 additional suspects were sentenced to 2 years imprisonment. Furthermore, the case of Asia Bibi was also a subject of scrutiny by the national and international media. Asia Bibi, a Christian woman from Ittanwala, Punjab was a farm labourer and had entered a fiery debate when she was prohibited by the other Muslim women from drinking the water from the same vessel because she was considered impure. She was accused of insulting Islam by passing derogatory remarks against the Prophet of Islam. The case was filed five days after the incident. In 2010 she was arrested under the charges of blasphemy. The trial court and the high court sentenced her to death. Later, the decision was challenged in the Supreme Court. After a trial spanning a decade, she was acquitted based on lack of evidence but had to flee the country. Countrywide, deadly protests ensued and the lives of the three judges were threatened.

[PTI approaches SC for Imran's appearance in courts through video link](https://www.nation.com.pk/06-Mar-2023/pti-approaches-sc-for-imran-s-appearance-in-courts-through-video-link)

Before the court’s final verdict on Asia Bibi’s case, Mumtaz Qadri was also sentenced to death in 2016 for the assassination of Salman Taseer over the victim’s opposition to blasphemy laws in January 2011. He was an elite police commando and Taseer’s bodyguard. Similarly, on 23 November 2016, an anti-terrorism court in Pakistan sentenced five men to death over the killing of a Christian couple in Kasur. Eight more people were sentenced to prison, two years each. Shehzad and Shama Masih were burned in a brick kiln after the villagers were incited by a cleric from the nearby mosque to do so. The deceased was accused of desecrating pages from the Quran while in fact, they were burning the documents of their late father. 103 people had been charged in this case. The blasphemy laws and public sentiments are deeply intertwined in Pakistan. The aforementioned cases against minorities are only a few of the many. It has been estimated that around 70 people accused of blasphemy have been killed since 1990. Throughout the history of Pakistan, none of the people alleged have been executed by the state. The accused are subject to mob lynching or extra-judicial killings. It becomes difficult to live safely after proving their innocence as required by Article 10 of Pakistan’s constitution in the first chapter ‘Fundamental Rights’.

[Veteran TV actor Qavi Khan passes away aged 80](https://www.nation.com.pk/06-Mar-2023/veteran-tv-actor-qavi-khan-passes-away-aged-80)

The murder of Salman Taseer and the events that followed present a striking truth about the misuse of the concept of blasphemy and public support for it. Salman Taseer was brutally murdered in broad daylight with 27 bullets. He was killed despite him being the governor of Punjab, which is the strongest province in Pakistan. People celebrated his murder and hailed Mumtaz Qadri, the assailant, as a hero. Penalizing the culprits can be a source of threat for lawyers and judges. Even the people vindicated by the courts have their lives at high risk. It is why they are forced to seek asylum in foreign states. Pakistan is an Islamic state with a Muslim majority. The political leadership within Pakistan often misuses the demographic composition of the country for motives that are repugnant to basic human rights. There is no proper mechanism to ensure that those who falsely accuse others of blasphemy are penalized harshly. It incentivizes the majority to endanger the lives and liberties of minorities that are already at high risk. Even if the judiciary passes just verdicts, it is bound to do so under the laws that are made by the populist leaders in the parliament. This limits the role of the judiciary. Pakistan needs structural reforms to promote inclusivity and inhibit the role of institutions that foster hatred and exclusionary legislation.