

Pakistani death sentences show blasphemy laws' threat

Date : 10th November 2017



WASHINGTON (BP) -- The October death sentences for three Pakistani men demonstrate the threat of blasphemy laws in many countries to the life and liberty of Christians and other religious minorities.

The judgments for the Pakistanis -- all members of the Ahmadi Muslim sect -- came two months after the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) issued a report that showed more than one-third of the world's countries have blasphemy laws. Most of the blasphemy laws in those 71 countries not only transgress international human rights standards but fail to fully protect freedom of expression and impose unduly severe punishments on violators, according to the report.

Arrested in 2014, the three Ahmadis -- Mubasher Ahmad, Ghulam Ahmed and Ehsan Ahmed -- received the death penalty Oct. 11 in a court in the Punjab Province of eastern Pakistan. They were charged with violating the country's law against deliberately insulting Islam by tearing down a religious poster, according to a report by Voice of America (VOA). An Ahmadi spokesman said the poster was anti-Ahmadi, VOA reported.

While Ahmadis describe themselves as Muslims, Pakistan -- with Islam as its state religion -- does not recognize them as such and prohibits some of their practices. Ahmadis differ from other Muslims in that they believe the Messiah has already come.

Southern Baptist religious freedom advocate Russell Moore said the sentencing "is yet another reminder how imperiled religious liberty is throughout the world."

"Conscience freedom is the most fundamental human right of all," said Moore, president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, "but for millions of people across the globe, including many of our brothers and sisters in Christ, such freedom is consistently and violently attacked."



In written comments for Baptist Press, Moore said he prays the United States "will continue to take the lead in global advocacy for religious liberty. Most importantly, I pray that we as Christians would work and pray for conscience freedom for everyone and everywhere."

USCIRF Chairman Daniel Mark said in a written statement, "In short, Ahmadis are required to renounce their faith in order to avail themselves of important civil rights in Pakistan."

USCIRF -- a bipartisan panel selected by the president and congressional leaders -- "has consistently called on Pakistan to repeal such laws. They violate human rights standards and make the government the ultimate arbiter of religious doctrines or truths. This is quite simply wrong," Mark said.

The situation for minority faith groups is growing worse, an expert on blasphemy laws told BP.

"There is an escalation of pressure and charges of blasphemy against religious minorities in many Muslim-majority countries, both in terms of formal legal charges by the government and also in private accusations by radicals, vigilantes and terrorists," said Paul Marshall, Wilson professor of religious freedom at Baylor University.

Accusations are more dangerous than government charges, he said in an email interview.

"For example, nobody has been executed for blasphemy under Pakistan's current laws, which date from the 1980s, but dozens, perhaps hundreds, have been murdered after they had been accused of blasphemy or quasi-blasphemy laws," said Marshall, who co-wrote a 2011 book on blasphemy codes.

Blasphemy accusations are increasing not only in Pakistan but in Egypt, Algeria, Bangladesh and Indonesia, he said.

When USCIRF released its report Aug. 16, Mark pointed to this double-edged menace.

"Blasphemy laws are wrong in principle, and they often invite abuse and lead to assaults, murders and mob attacks," he said in a written statement.

As an example, a Pakistani Christian man and his wife were falsely accused of tossing pages of the Koran into the garbage and were thrown into the furnace of a brick kiln in 2014, according to Morning Star News.

In its report, USCIRF defined blasphemy as "the act of expressing contempt or a lack of reverence for God or sacred things." In the study, blasphemy laws include sections "that sanction insulting or defaming religion and seek to punish individuals for allegedly offending, insulting, or denigrating religious doctrines, deities, symbols or 'the sacred,' or for wounding or insulting religious feelings."

The USCIRF report showed the five countries with the worst scores in its survey -- Iran, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Qatar in order -- all use blasphemy laws to guard the state religion of Islam, violating the rights of other religious groups in the process.

While many of the 71 countries with blasphemy laws hold Islam as the government religion, many others



do not. Some countries with blasphemy laws seem surprising, such as Canada, New Zealand and several European countries, including Austria, Germany and Switzerland. Some of those governments do not enforce their laws, according to the USCIRF report.

USCIRF calls "upon those countries to set an example for the others and repeal their blasphemy laws," Mark said. "And we call upon all countries to repeal any such laws and to free those detained or convicted for blasphemy."

USCIRF found 86 percent of the countries with blasphemy laws call for prison sentences for violators.

The United States has the ability to help combat blasphemy laws round the world, Marshall said.

"The U.S. should point out that empirical research shows that restrictions on religious freedom, including blasphemy laws, actually increase religious tension, hostility and violence and push to limit and ultimately abolish blasphemy laws and restrictions wherever they occur," he told BP. "We should also resist so-called 'hate-speech' laws in the West, since many of these function as blasphemy laws."

In addition to the three Ahmadis sentenced to death in Pakistan, other individuals charged, sentenced or imprisoned under blasphemy laws in recent months include:

-- Slimane Bouhafis, an Algerian Christian who had his request for parole rejected in early October despite his poor health while serving a prison sentence for a social media post saying the light of Jesus overcomes the "lie" of Islam and its prophet, according to World Watch Monitor.

-- Nadeem James, a Roman Catholic father of two who has been sentenced to death for blaspheming Mohammad, Islam's prophet, in a phone text despite the fact he is illiterate, Morning Star News reported Sept. 18.

-- Shahzad Masih, a 17-year-old Roman Catholic in Pakistan who was arrested July 14 after being accused by a Muslim co-worker of blasphemy following an argument, according to Morning Star News.

-- Ishfaq Masih, a Christian father who was arrested June 16 in Pakistan after being accused of blasphemy by a Muslim client following a disagreement over a repair bill, Morning Star News reported.

-- Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, a Christian ousted as governor of Jakarta, Indonesia, who began serving a two-year prison sentence for blasphemy in May for comments he made during a 2016 re-election campaign, BP reported.

The USCIRF report -- "Respecting Rights? Measuring the World's Blasphemy Laws" -- is available online at <http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Blasphemy%20Laws%20Report.pdf>.

In September, USCIRF issued a follow-up compilation titled "Selected Blasphemy Cases," which provides information on many individuals imprisoned for violating blasphemy laws. The report is available at <http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Selected%20Blasphemy%20Cases%20--%20September%202017.pdf>.



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