

Murder of Governor in Pakistan Darkens 'Blasphemy' Case

The case of Asia Noreen, the first Christian woman sentenced to death in Pakistan on blasphemy charges, suffered a major setback when her most vocal supporter, the governor of Punjab Province, was gunned down by one of his police bodyguards yesterday (Jan. 4) in Islamabad.

The lives of Noreen and Gov. Salman Taseer were at risk since the day he, his wife and daughter visited her in the Sheikhpura District Jail on Nov. 22, after news of her conviction appeared in the media.

Taseer had openly criticized the blasphemy statutes and vowed to try to repeal the "black laws" in parliament. He also promised Noreen (also called Asia Bibi) that he would recommend a presidential pardon for her.

The governor's assurance and his support for Noreen gave new hope to the impoverished mother of two children and step-mother to three others – and drew violent condemnation from Islamist forces, sparking countrywide protests.

"The governor's visit gave us hope that all was not lost," Sohail Johnson of Sharing Life Ministries Pakistan, which has pursued Noreen's case from the onset, told Compass. "We believed that God had sent the governor to help us ... his words of support boosted Noreen's morale, and she was actually quite optimistic about the outcome of her appeal in the high court."

He said the murder of Taseer in broad daylight had shocked all those opposing the blasphemy laws, and that "there is little hope of these laws ever being repealed."

Johnson confirmed that Noreen's life was at high risk ever since the governor had highlighted her case.

"The local Islamist forces believed that President [Asif Ali] Zardari would pardon Noreen on Taseer's recommendation, and this was unacceptable to them," said Johnson, confirming that intelligence agencies had determined that Islamists had plotted to kill Noreen inside jail to make an example of her. "Noreen was earlier allowed two hours in the morning and two in the evening to go outside her cell to relax. After the intelligence information, the jail authorities restricted her movement, and now she is kept in the cell at all times. A security guard has also been deployed with her."

He added that news of the assassination of the governor would surely panic the Christian woman.

Johnson said Noreen's appeal of her conviction had yet to be taken up for hearing by the Lahore High Court, but that the murder would definitely affect the course of justice. "The governor's brutal murder has diminished our hopes for justice for Noreen," he said.

Her family, he said, has been in hiding since Islamist parties started protests in favor of the blasphemy laws.

"Even I am keeping a low profile these days," Johnson said.

Taseer and Noreen were declared "Wajibul Qatil" (liable to be killed) by radical Islamic clerics. A cleric in Peshawar and a local politician in Multan offered a combined sum of 50 million rupees (US\$579,300) for anyone who killed Taseer and Noreen.

Protests, shut-down strikes and general uproar pressured Pakistan's federal government to announce that the blasphemy laws would not be repealed.

Taseer, however, continued to publicly vent his opposition –

even using Twitter – to the blasphemy laws, which effectively mandate death for anyone convicted of insulting Muhammad, the prophet of Islam. Although courts typically overturn convictions, and no executions have been carried out, rights activists say the laws are used to settle rivalries and persecute religious minorities.

On Friday (Dec. 31), Taseer had tweeted “I was under huge pressure 2 cow down b4 rightest pressure on blasphemy. Refused. Even if I’m the last man standing.”

The assassination is significant not simply because of the person targeted and the reason behind it, but because of the broader societal implications.

“[It points to] the presence of radical elements inside the Pakistani state apparatus,” said columnist Cyril Almeida.

He said that the fact that Taseer’s own bodyguard shot him is not just worrying because it indicates a failure of the vetting process but because it points to “the extent to which this poison has affected the Pakistani state. The investment in jihad has come home to roost.”

In the hours immediately following the killing, television anchors hosted several shows in which guests, while stopping short of openly supporting the murder of Taseer, did speak out in support of killing those deemed to have blasphemed. Some Pakistanis have reported that they received text messages on their mobile phones praising the assassination.

Pakistan Interior Minister Rehman Malik has said the guard, Malik Mumtaz Hussein Qadri, told police that he killed Taseer because of the governor’s opposition to Pakistan’s blasphemy laws. Qadri had escorted the governor from Rawalpindi to Islamabad on Tuesday (Jan. 4).

A 26-year-old policeman from Barakhao on the outskirts of Islamabad, Qadri had reportedly transferred to the Elite Force

after commando training in 2008. Thus far, he has not been identified as a member of any violent Muslim extremist groups but is considered devout in his faith.

Noreen was convicted under Section 295-C of the defamation statutes for alleged derogatory comments about Muhammad, which is punishable by death, though life imprisonment is also possible. Section 295-B makes willful desecration of the Quran or a use of its extract in a derogatory manner punishable with life imprisonment. Section 295-A of the defamation law prohibits injuring or defiling places of worship and "acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class of citizens." It is punishable by life imprisonment, which in Pakistan is 25 years.