

Court Acquits Men Convicted of Killing Christian Couple in Pakistan

LAHORE, Pakistan (Christian Daily International–Morning Star News) – Pakistan’s Supreme Court last week overturned the death sentences of the remaining three men convicted in the 2014 lynching of a Christian couple burned alive after being falsely accused of blasphemy, sources said.

Christian attorney Basharat Masih, who attended the hearing at the Supreme Court’s principal seat in Islamabad on Thursday (July 9), said a three-member bench headed by Justice Malik Shahzad Ahmad Khan acquitted the three men after concluding that the prosecution had failed to prove its case beyond a reasonable doubt due to inconsistencies in witness testimony and weaknesses in the evidence. Also on the bench were Justice Jamal Khan Mandokhail and Justice Aqeel Ahmed Abbasi.

The court also dismissed the Punjab Province government’s appeal against the Lahore High Court’s earlier acquittal of 102 other defendants. The Supreme Court has yet to issue its detailed judgment, Masih said.

On Nov. 4, 2014, Shahzad Masih and his pregnant wife, Shama Bibi, parents of three young children, were brutally beaten by a Muslim mob before being thrown into a brick kiln and burned alive in Kot Radha Kishan, in Punjab Province’s Kasur District, following allegations that they had desecrated pages of the Quran.

Police initially registered a case against 660 named and unidentified suspects. In November 2016, an anti-terrorism court sentenced five men to death and eight others to two years in prison. On appeal, the Lahore High Court acquitted two of the five death-row inmates while upholding the death

sentences of Muhammad Irfan, Mehdi Khan and Muhammad Riaz Kumbh.

Masih said the Supreme Court bench began the proceedings by expressing sympathy to the victims' family.

"The judges told the victims' heirs that they deeply regretted the tragedy and stood in solidarity with them, but emphasized that the court was bound to decide the case strictly on its legal merits," he said.



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The bench identified several critical deficiencies in the prosecution's case, Masih said.

"The court noted that police records, witness statements and the testimony of the victims' relatives contained significant inconsistencies," he told Christian Daily International-Morning Star News. "Although the heirs had identified the three accused, they had not clearly described each defendant's alleged role in the attack."

Masih said Muhammad Irfan's name did not appear in the First Information Report (FIR) and surfaced only later in the testimony of a police officer. During trial proceedings, the victims' relatives denied having named Irfan in the FIR.

"The prosecution alleged that Irfan was the person who pushed Shahzad and Shama into the kiln," Masih said. "However, his name was absent not only from the FIR but also from the supplementary statements recorded by the victims' heirs, creating a major weakness in the prosecution's case."

He said similar contradictions emerged regarding Riaz Kumbh, whom prosecutors alleged had incited the mob through inflammatory speeches and participated in assaulting the couple alongside Mehdi Khan.

"The court found inconsistencies between the police account and the testimony of the victims' heirs regarding these allegations as well," Masih said.

The bench also highlighted contradictions involving brick kiln owner Yousaf Gujjar. Although the victims' family named him in the FIR, they later acknowledged during cross-examination that he was not present when the attack occurred.

"These admissions during cross-examination significantly undermined the prosecution's case," Masih said.

A law officer representing the Attorney General's Office argued that the fact the couple had been burned alive was undisputed and urged the court to uphold the convictions despite conflicting witness statements because the case involved terrorism-related offenses, he said.

"The bench responded by asking how convictions could be sustained in the absence of reliable and concrete evidence linking the accused to the crime," Masih said.

While describing the acquittals as painful for the victims' family as well as Pakistan's Christian community, Masih said the outcome reflected shortcomings in the prosecution's handling of the case.

"It is heartbreaking to see the remaining accused acquitted," he said. "At the same time, the prosecution failed to present a legally sustainable case, and those deficiencies ultimately benefited the accused."

Senior Christian criminal lawyer Lazar Allah Rakha said the ruling underscored longstanding weaknesses in Pakistan's criminal justice system.

"This verdict should prompt serious reflection on how the prosecution was conducted," Rakha told Christian Daily International-Morning Star News. "In a case involving such an

egregious crime, meticulous trial preparation, effective examination and cross-examination of witnesses, and a comprehensive legal strategy were essential. Deficiencies in these areas inevitably weakened the prosecution and contributed to the acquittals.”

In a joint statement issued on July 14, Bishop Samson Shukardin, president of the Pakistan Catholic Bishops’ Conference and chairperson of the National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP), and the Bernard Emmanuel, the NCJP’s national director, said the ruling reflected a recurring pattern of impunity in cases involving violence against religious minorities.

The church leaders cited several previous incidents in which suspects were ultimately acquitted, including the 2009 Gojra attacks, in which at least 10 Christians were killed, and the 2013 Joseph Colony attack in Lahore, where all 115 accused were acquitted due to insufficient evidence. They also referred to the June 2024 mob killing of Nazir Masih Gill in Sargodha following blasphemy allegations, noting that many of those initially arrested were later released after being declared innocent.

The NCJP urged the government to strengthen protections for religious minorities and called for accountability for police officials responsible for weak investigations and prosecutions in cases involving mob violence and attacks on minority communities.

Pakistan’s blasphemy laws have long drawn criticism from human rights organizations and legal experts, who say they are frequently misused to settle personal disputes, seize property and target religious minorities. Although no one has been executed by the state under the country’s blasphemy statutes, accusations have repeatedly sparked mob violence, extrajudicial killings and prolonged pretrial detention for those accused.

International advocacy organizations continue to raise concerns about the treatment of religious minorities in Pakistan. In its 2026 World Watch List, Open Doors ranked Pakistan eighth among the 50 countries where Christians face the most severe persecution and discrimination.

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