

Christian Woman in Pakistan Freed After 'Blasphemy' Accusation

In a rare triumph of rule of law over mob mentality in Pakistan, police last week resisted intense pressure from violent Muslim protestors and released without charges a Christian woman falsely accused of desecrating the Quran.

Muslim teachers at City Foundation School in Roranwala village, in the suburbs of Lahore, accused the school principal, Saira Khokhar, of desecrating a quranic scripture booklet on Feb. 22.

Sources told Compass that police refused to bow to pressure from Islamists clamoring outside the school for registration of a case against Khokhar under Section 295-B of Pakistan's widely condemned "blasphemy" laws. In most such accusations against Christians in Pakistan, they said, police file charges without proper investigation to quell pressure from accusers.

After police rescued the principal from the mob, sustaining injuries from irate **Islamists** in the effort, Superintendent of Police Imtiaz Sarwar told Compass that after a thorough investigation he had concluded that school staff members had falsely accused her.

"The minute I interviewed the staff members, I knew that the charge against Saira was completely fabricated," he said.

He commended his officers for putting their lives at risk while rescuing Saira from the mob that was demanding she be handed over to them for "swift justice."

"Such an attitude cannot be allowed under any circumstances," Sarwar said. "No one should dare take the law into their

hands. All suspects are innocent until proven guilty.”

He acknowledged that in most blasphemy cases, not all suspects were as fortunate as Khokhar.

“Such cases are extremely sensitive,” he said. “The police had to face the severe reaction by the majority and at the same time secure the suspect. It’s regretful that in most cases officials have not been able to face the pressure.”

A school cleaner alleged that Khokhar had deliberately thrown a “Surrah-e-Yaseen” booklet into a dustbin while clearing the cupboards of her office. Upon hearing this accusation, the teachers rushed up to the principal and demanded an apology.

“I told my teachers that I didn’t even know that the booklet was there, as the maid was helping me clean the cupboards,” Khokhar told sources at the police station. “She should have brought the booklet to my notice right then, but she deliberately took the dustbin to the staff room and instigated the teachers.”

The Muslim teachers went home after she told them that she was unaware of the booklet’s presence amid the trash and was sorry for the inadvertent incident.

“The next day [Feb. 23], as soon as I reached the school and sat in my office, a teacher named Asma rushed into the village and started shouting that I, ‘a Christian,’ had desecrated the Quran yesterday,” Khokhar told Compass sources. “Within minutes, a large mob gathered outside the school and started shouting slogans against me.”

Police later arrived at the school and, led by Barki Deputy Superintendent of Police Malik Ijaz, began trying to rescue Khokhar as the Muslim mob pelted them with stones. Officers responded with a baton charge and managed to whisk her away despite several policemen, including Ijaz, receiving head and body injuries, sources said.

Police rushed Khokhar to the office of Superintendent Sarwar, who in the meantime had reached the village and had begun investigating.

Khokhar told sources that when she joined the school in 2009 as the only Christian amid a 14-member faculty, one teacher resigned in protest, further predisposing other teachers against her. The only other Christian employee of the school is a security guard.

“The **Muslim** teachers made a mountain out of a molehill just because of my faith,” she told Compass sources. “A teacher had resigned in protest the same day I joined the school, so there was an element of prejudice present in the staff.”

Three years passed without any trouble, however, and she was able to maintain a good working relationship with her staff, she said.

A senior government official has taken measures to ensure that the principal remains safe following her release. Unconfirmed reports indicated Muslims have protested against police after Friday prayers for releasing Khokhar.