

Imam Tampered With Evidence in Teen Blasphemy Case

An unexpected twist in the Rimsha Masih blasphemy case appears to have paved the way for her freedom from apparently false charges of desecrating the Quran.

The imam who supported her accuser was himself arrested and appeared in court on the same charge as the girl, that of desecrating the Quran, which he's alleged to have done in tampering with evidence presented against her.

Rimsha's lawyer, Tahir Naveed Chaudry, said the case against his client had completely collapsed. "There's nothing left in the case ... the prosecution has completely failed."

Naveed said he was quite hopeful that Rimsha would be freed on bail on Sept. 7. "I was hoping for her release, but unfortunately it got delayed again," he said, adding that he will file an application to quash the case against her once she is released.

In the meantime, the case has triggered a debate on how Pakistan's strict **blasphemy** laws are being used to settle personal scores and vendettas.

Before a magistrate in Islamabad on Saturday, deputy mosque leader Hafiz Zubair said he and two others were in the mosque when Rimsha's accuser Malik Ammad came to the imam, Khalid Jadoon Chishti. The accuser brought a plastic bag that he claimed contained the ashes of a book allegedly burnt by Rimsha. (The book was to teach children Arabic so they could read the Quran).

Zubair said the imam then brought some pages of the Quran from inside the mosque and mixed them with the ash. "I asked why he was fabricating the evidence. He said this would ensure a

strong case against the girl and would ultimately help them in evicting the Christians from the locality,” said Zubair, adding that two others present in the mosque had also asked the imam not to place false evidence.

Following Zubair’s testimony, police raided Jadoon’s house and arrested him. They charged him with the same case registered against Rimsha [under a section of Pakistan’s blasphemy law which calls for life imprisonment to any person found guilty of wilful desecration of the Quran].

On Sunday, a local magistrate sent the imam to jail on remand until Sept. 16.

Zubair’s revelation came as a very pleasant surprise to Pakistanis, a majority of whom had been condemning the arrest of a minor girl on blasphemy charges from the start.

On Monday, two more witnesses appeared in court. Their statements were further evidence that Jadoon may have been mainly responsible for the ordeal of the minor Christian girl and the forced migration of several hundred Christians from the capital Islamabad.

A medical board formed to evaluate Rimsha also submitted its report to the court on Monday. The medical board consisted of a physician, surgeon, medico-legal officer, dental surgeon and a gynaecologist.

According to their report, Rimsha is approximately 14 years old but has the mental capability of a younger child.

Talking to Open Doors News, Rimsha’s lawyer said, “I was hoping for her release, but unfortunately it got delayed again. But these delays prove a blessing in disguise for her and all those who have been praying for her. If the court had freed her on bail early, we would not have been able to see what we are seeing today. These witnesses might not have

stepped forward and the truth would have remained hidden. Now everyone has come to know how vested interests entrap innocent people in serious cases such as this one.”

Naveed, a member of the Punjab Provincial Assembly, said the unfortunate incident had become a test case for the people in general and the government in particular. “The case has prompted every one of us to ponder how innocent people are made to suffer by their enemies. The widespread condemnation of Jadoon’s action shows that there is still hope for things to improve in Pakistan,” he said.

Dr. Paul Bhatti, Minister in-charge of National Harmony, told Open Doors News that Rimsha’s case had opened chances to discuss the **blasphemy laws** with Islamic clerics. “The case has enabled us to discuss the misuse of the laws with our Muslim countrymen. I have been talking with various Muslim religious leaders over the past few days to consider how to deal with such cases effectively,” he said.

On revisiting previous blasphemy cases, including that of Aasia Bibi, Bhatti said almost all such cases are in courts now and there’s little the government could do but wait for their verdicts.

“They are in a judicial process so there’s nothing much that can be done at this stage. Most blasphemy cases registered against Muslims and Christians involve very poor people, which shows they are most vulnerable. However, we will try to form a body in cooperation with the Muslim clerics that will probe into all accusations of blasphemy to dig out the truth. This should be a first step towards stopping the misuse of the blasphemy laws,” he said.

On Rimsha’s future once she is freed by the court, Bhatti said there was no proposal under consideration to send Rimsha and her family out of Pakistan. “I don’t think they will want to leave Pakistan. If it’s proved that she is innocent, I don’t

think any Muslim will want to hurt the family because of the false accusation made against her. We will try to relocate them, if at all, and provide a new job for her father so that they can start afresh," he said.

On the future of several Christian families that had migrated from the same locality, fearing violence, Bhatti has asked the Interior Ministry and the police to provide him a complete list of those now housed in various parts of the capital.

"From our investigation, it appears some vested interests are behind the whole episode. The imam also appears to be part of that conspiracy, which is most likely aimed at grabbing the land. Although the Christians don't have the property rights to the land, and are merely tenants of the Muslims, it's becoming quite clear that a land mafia has set its sights on the area, and wanted to evict the Christians to clear their way," he said.

Asked if the Christians willing to return to the area needed police security, he said the situation had resolved and he did not anticipate any violence. "We are however looking at various options to resettle them," he said.

Meanwhile, Maulana Tahir Ashrafi, chairman of the All Pakistan Ulema Council, urged the government to set up a team, including intelligence agents, to investigate and "get to the bottom of the conspiracy and expose the real culprits".

"Our heads bowed in shame for what Jadoon did," he said, but added there are "many others active behind the scene and they should be brought to justice".

Ashrafi said that Jadoon should be given the sternest punishment possible for maligning Islam, and also called for an unbiased approach to stem false accusations. "Pakistan's minorities are as much a part of the country as Muslims. We suspected foul play in the entire situation and at least our

suspensions proved correct. Jadoon and all others involved in this shameless action should be held accountable and set an example for all future false accusers," he said.

Ashrafi said he was willing to talk to all religious leaders, to form an opinion against the misuse of the blasphemy laws. "We will not allow anyone to implicate an innocent person because of personal reasons. Rimsha's case is indeed an eye-opener for all of us and we are truly sorry for all the agony and pain the poor girl has had to suffer because of a person who does not know the true basis of Islam," he said.

Asif Aqeel, director of the Center for Law and Justice, an affiliate of the European Centre for Law and Justice, told Open Doors News that the number of cases filed against Christians looks very small when compared with the full enormity of the fear these cases spread among minority communities.

"The recent experience of a Christian school teacher would suffice to illustrate this impact. On August 27, the teacher (whose identity cannot be disclosed) was present in school morning assembly. (He was appointed to this government school in 2009).

While addressing both students and teachers, a Muslim teacher said that he had read about Rimsha Masih's "**blasphemous** act" in the paper. He said that every non-Muslim was a kafir and these infidels had united themselves against the Ummah [Muslim community] across the world. The Muslim teacher also mentioned the American presence in Afghanistan to support his argument and to stress that the Muslims need to unite against these "forces of evil." The Christian teacher said he was seriously intimidated by his colleague's statement because he was the only Christian teacher in the school and almost all the students were Muslim," Aqeel said.

Aqeel said criminal cases against Christians under the

blasphemy laws are not the appropriate instrument to measure the amount of insecurity and vulnerability that exists.

“In light of the enormity of the threat, the Pakistani Church and Christian NGOs have not yet successfully forged a comprehensive strategy to give a needed response, which is appropriate in this situation. So far, the Church and Christian NGOs provide legal assistance, shelter and food to those accused of blasphemy. There is no united legal front to protect the Christians, and organizations often work on legal cases in isolation,” Aqeel said.

“A coordinated response should include raising the income bracket of Pakistani Christians who are extremely poor and uneducated. The chances of being accused of blasphemy are inversely related to socioeconomic indicators: the higher the income and social position the lower the chances of being accused of blasphemy. There is no case of blasphemy lodged against the Zoroastrians (Parsis) because they are the most educated and well -off community in Pakistan,” Aqueel continued.

“The highest number of cases lodged against any non-Muslim community are against Christians, who are the poorest and least educated when compared with other religious communities. Hence, there is a need to adopt a holistic approach to rising persecution against Christians. This holistic approach should also include how to minimize misuse of the anti-blasphemy laws, rather than looking for an amendment or abolition of these laws.”