

Life Sentences for 'Blasphemy' in Pakistan Overturned

A court acquitted a Christian couple of "blasphemy" charges yesterday, overturning their life sentences, their lawyer said.

Chaudhry Naeem Shakir told Compass that Justice Mazhar Ali Akbar Naqvi of the Lahore High Court accepted the couple's appeal because prosecutors failed to prove allegations that 32-year-old Munir Masih and his wife Ruqayya defiled the Quran or insulted Muhammad on Dec. 8, 2008.

The allegations by Muhammad Nawaz in Mustafabad, Kasur district, came under sections 295-B and 295-C respectively of Pakistan's blasphemy laws, which are routinely employed to exact revenge on Christians over personal disputes; in this case, the Christian couple's children had fought with the family of Muhammad Yousaf, who directed his driver, Nawaz, to file the **blasphemy** charges.

Shakir said that the First Information Report (FIR) indicated Nawaz initially accused Ruqayya Masih of using the Quran for exorcism. He accused her of touching the Quran without ablution and said that her husband was equally culpable since he remained a silent spectator. The complainant also claimed that the couple insulted Muhammad.

A trial court had exonerated them from charges of blasphemy against Muhammad in 2010 but sentenced them to life imprisonment (25 years in Pakistan) for allegedly defiling the Quran. The couple then filed an appeal in the Lahore High Court pleading not guilty.

"During the trial, not a single witness spoke against the

couple regarding the allegations of blasphemy,” Shakir said. “Therefore, [Kasur Additional Session] Judge Muhammad Ajmal Hussain on March 2, 2010 acquitted the couple in 295-C but awarded them life imprisonment under Section 295-B.”

During the course of hearings, Shakir asserted that Yousaf, along with his brother Muhammad Ilyas, implicated the couple through their driver, Nawaz, who filed the FIR against the couple. Shakir told the court that the motive behind this move was a fight between the children of the Christian couple and Yousaf’s family.

When the prosecutor argued that no one could touch the Quran without ablution, Shakir said, “Justice Naqvi told the prosecutor that no one bothers to do that before reading the Quran or the Bible in libraries around the world.”

He said that the Lahore High Court had released Munir Masih on bail because the charges against him were weak.

“Witnesses had claimed that Munir was sitting outside his home when Ruqayya was allegedly defiling the Quran,” he said, adding that the Christian woman has been languishing in Sahiwal Jail and will not be freed until Monday (May 21). The couple has four daughters and two sons.

Shakir said that Mustafabad police had named eight witnesses in the FIR, of whom three were named as eyewitnesses, while the others were classified as “recovery witnesses” – those supposedly present when police recovered the Quran from the couple’s house.

“Of the five ‘recovery witnesses,’ two completely denied being at the alleged crime scene,” Shakir said. “One told the court that he had reached the place after the police had made the recovery, while the other said that he had testified under duress, making the case quite clear.”

The couple’s attorney said that Ruqayya Masih had admitted

keeping the Quran in her house.

“She told me that the Quran was given to her by a Muslim neighbor named Muhammad Faisal, and she had kept it safely with her, although she did not say why,” he said, adding that police had informed the court that they had found the Quran wrapped in a piece of cloth and placed in a cupboard.