

Muslim Cleric in Rimsha Case Acquitted Due to 'Insufficient Evidence'

The Muslim cleric suspected of framing Pakistani Christian girl Rimsha Masih has been acquitted.

The district court found there was insufficient evidence to convict Imam Khalid Jadoon Chishti, who was suspected of planting the burnt pages of some Islamic texts into the teenager's bag.

Rimsha was arrested at the age of 14 in August last year and jailed after angry crowds threatened to burn Christian homes in the sector of Islamabad where her family lived.

Her case was dismissed in January 2013 after police were informed that Chishti had planted the burned pages on her.

The witnesses who testified against Chishti later withdrew their statements, claiming they were coerced by police.

Tahir Ashrafi, an Islamic cleric who heads the Pakistan Ulema Council, told World Watch Monitor he was disappointed at the court's decision and that he had hoped Chishti's case would serve as a warning for those who abuse Pakistan's anti-blasphemy laws.

"We had hoped that exemplary punishment would be given to those who framed a minor girl in a blasphemy case for vested interests, but Jadoon's acquittal has disappointed many," he said.

Ashrafi said the state had failed to provide sufficient protection to the witnesses, which is why they retracted their statements.

Rimsha and her family were granted asylum in Canada earlier this year. Her detention sparked international outcry about the application of the anti-blasphemy laws, and prompted former Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari to order an investigation of the case. She faced the prospect of being tried as an adult until the court ruled that she is a minor.

Last October, in response to its Universal Periodic Review at the UN, the Pakistani government cited the arrest of Chishti as progress, when confronted with multiple criticisms relating to the blasphemy laws, reports Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

It was described as sending “a strong message to all those trying to misuse” the laws, and a “turning point in the history of Pakistan.”

Now, one year after the highly charged episode began, the court’s dismissal of the charges against Chishti leaves no one standing before authorities to be held to account.

Chishti has made no secret of his distaste for Christians, reported the Guardian, even appearing on national television to bemoan the noisiness of church services that he said had disturbed Muslim residents.

He also welcomed the panicked departure of most of the Christians from the area. “We are not upset the Christians have left and we will be pleased if they don’t come back,” Chishti told the *Guardian*.