

Pakistan Court Overturns Blasphemy Conviction, Death Sentence

A Pakistan court Wednesday threw out the 2007 conviction of a Christian man sentenced to death for offending Islam.

Younis Masih is at least the second Christian accused of blasphemy that Pakistan judges have exonerated since the country's Supreme Court threw out a high-profile blasphemy case against a teen-aged girl that drew worldwide attention.

On Wednesday, an appeals court in Lahore announced it had acquitted Masih of the **blasphemy** charge, which arose from an argument during an interfaith meeting in September 2005.

The decision came five weeks after Masih's attorney, civil rights advocate Naeem Shakir, presented evidence during a two-day hearing that the 2007 conviction was based on hearsay.

Though now a free man, Masih, 42, remained in Central Jail Mianwali on Wednesday as his advocates considered how and where to safely return him to his family and to open Pakistani society.

Masih has denied the charges since the night in September 2005 when, according to the Lahore-based Center for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement, he got into an argument with the imam of a local mosque. The imam was leading a Muslim worship service in the home of a neighboring Christian. Fed up with Masih's intrusion, the host ordered him to leave, but Masih – under the influence of drugs at the time – persisted.

The acrimony spilled into the next day, when Masih threw

bricks at the Imam's door and Muslims beat Masih and his wife. The imam lodged a complaint against Masih, alleging he had insulted the Prophet of Islam. The incident sparked violence that damaged several Christian homes and a church, and prompted Christian families to flee to safer areas.

Masih denied the charge against him, but in May 2007 was sentenced to death. Though blasphemy can carry the death penalty in Pakistan, no one has yet been hanged for the crime.

His appeal has been pending since, eventually obtaining the first of several hearings in September, culminating in two days of hearings Feb. 26 and 27 at which Shakir attempted to persuade the appeals judges that the initial conviction was based on faulty evidence and discredited witnesses.

Release International, a ministry that provides aid to Christians, said Wednesday it had been "working with partners" in Pakistan to obtain Masih's freedom. The group claimed he suffered a heart attack in January while in prison.

Masih's release comes nine weeks after a Punjab state trial court tossed out a blasphemy case against a high school custodian, ruling that the charge was a pretext to an attempt to take possession of some property owned by the man's family.

And it comes nearly three months after the Pakistan Supreme Court agreed with a lower court that Rimsha Masih, a teen-aged girl accused of burning Islamic texts, had been framed by a local imam. The case drew worldwide scrutiny of Pakistan's anti-blasphemy laws, which are widely criticized as being abused by Pakistanis trying to settle scores and extort property, but also are popular with ordinary citizens.

The girl is no relation to Younis Masih. The name Masih is common among Christians in Pakistan.

Pakistan is No. 14 on the 2013 World Watch List, an annual ranking of the 50 countries where life as a Christian is most difficult. It is published by Open Doors International, a ministry to Christians living under pressure for their faith. Pakistan's "Christians are caught between Islamic militant organizations, an Islamizing culture and a weak government with a military complicit in fuelling Islamic militants," according to the list.