

Pakistani Christian Accused of 'Blasphemy' after Billiards Dispute

Police in Pakistan have charged a young Christian man with "blasphemy" after he had an argument with Muslims over a billiards game in Punjab Province's Sheikhpura district, his cousin said.

Farooqabad Police arrested Sajid Inayat, 20, on May 18 and charged him with desecrating the Quran under the country's controversial blasphemy laws after area young men accused him of setting on fire "holy pages" placed in a box on an electricity pole, Irfan Manzoor said.

Inayat was charged under Section 295-B, which makes willful desecration of the Quran or use of an extract in a derogatory manner punishable with life imprisonment.

Manzoor told Compass by telephone that his cousin had been falsely accused because he had had an argument with some local Muslim boys over a billiards game just two days before the alleged incident.

"Sajid was heading to his shop [of construction material and scrap] on Friday morning when he came across the Muslim boys with whom he had a squabble the other day," Manzoor said. "The boys accused Sajid of setting fire to a box fixed on a nearby pole ... He asked them why he would do such a thing, but on their constant prodding, he dared them to do whatever they wanted and walked away."

As soon as Inayat left, the boys raised a clamor, and a mob gathered at the scene, Manzoor said.

"Panic among Christians spread, and several people left their

houses anticipating violence,” he said.

Family members informed local Muslim leaders about the conflict between Inayat and the Muslims, and the leaders said they would consider the matter that evening, Manzoor said. But at about 5 p.m., police took Inayat into custody, registering a case against him (First Information Report No. 297/12) on a complaint from Muhammad Sharullah Zaman, Manzoor said.

“The situation was tense on Friday and Saturday, and several people had moved to other places, but now the chief of a local Islamist organization, Karwaan-e-Islam, has assured us that no Christian would be harmed,” he said, adding that around 20-25 Christian families lived in the area.

There are no witnesses to the charges made against Inayat, he said.

“The allegation leveled against him is baseless and stems from a personal grudge,” he said.

Sheikhpura District Police Officer Haider Ashraf said that authorities had sent Inayat to jail on judicial remand.

Ashraf said the matter was serious and that police were investigating from all angles.

“An inquiry is being conducted by a Superintendent of Police-rank official, and justice would be administered on merit,” he added.

Ashraf said that tensions were high the day of the incident, “but now things are under control, and there is no imminent threat to Christian families settled there.”