

Pakistani Christian Loses Appeal Against 'Blasphemy' Death Sentence

A Pakistani court upheld the death penalty on Thursday against a Christian woman accused of blasphemy, her lawyer said, in a case that drew global headlines after two prominent politicians who tried to help her were assassinated.

In 2010, Asia Bibi, a mother of four, became the first woman to be sentenced to death under Pakistan's controversial blasphemy law.

She is alleged to have made derogatory remarks about Islam after neighbors objected to her drinking water from their glass because she was not Muslim.

Bibi's lawyer, Naeem Shakir, said his client had been involved in a dispute with her neighbors and that her accusers had contradicted themselves.

Two witnesses allegedly involved in the incident did not appear in court, he said. A prayer leader did appear, saying he did not witness the original altercation, but that Bibi had confessed in front of him.

"I was expecting the opposite decision," Shakir said. "We will file an appeal to the Supreme Court of Pakistan in a few days."

But Gulam Mustafa, the lawyer for the complainant, said the court's decision was correct.

"Asia's lawyer tried to prove that the case was registered on a personal enmity but he failed to prove that," he said.

After Bibi's arrest in 2010, two top Pakistani politicians who

sought to intervene on her behalf were gunned down, one by his own bodyguard.

Lawyers showered the killer with rose petals when he appeared in court, and the judge who convicted him of murder had to flee the country.

Rights groups say the blasphemy law is increasingly exploited by religious extremists as well as ordinary Pakistanis to settle personal scores. The law does not define blasphemy, and evidence might not be reproduced in court for fear of committing a fresh offense. There are no penalties for false accusations.

Those accused are sometimes lynched on the spot. If they are arrested, police and the courts often allow trials to drag on for years, afraid of being attacked if they release anyone accused of blasphemy.

The penalty for blasphemy is death, although only one person has been executed since Pakistan imposed a de facto moratorium on executions in 2008.

This year has seen a record number of blasphemy cases as well as increasing violence against the accused. Blasphemy cases have also been registered against those who have publicly discussed reforming the law.

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