

# Pastor Framed, Thrown Behind Bars for Conspicuous Text Messages

A 51-year-old Christian man has been sentenced to life imprisonment for allegedly sending out blasphemous texts in Pakistan.

Christian NGO's up and down the country are galled by the decision to prosecute Zafar Bhatti under section 295c of Pakistan's Penal Code, a decision they say is due to an Islamic bias that has consumed the nation, according to the British Pakistani Christian Association.

Campaigners say there is no solid evidence that allows for the Lahore High Court's determination of May 3, 2017. Bhatti, who was a Christian pastor until his arrest, was accused of sending blasphemous text messages from his phone, yet several reports prove that the SIM was not registered to Bhatti and was registered to a completely different Computerized National Identity card holder (CNIC).

Zafar Bhatti was a co-accused defendant under blasphemy charges with Ghazala Khan, whose CNIC card was registered against the phone SIM card. Ghazala was arrested on November 11, 2012 and, being a woman, was shown some leniency. Bail for her charges was granted almost immediately.

BPCA says that "in an extremely bizarre trial," Justice Khalid Mehmood of the Lahore High Court refused to pass judgement against Ghazala on April 8, 2013. He tried to convince the petitioner, Ibrar Ahmed, Secretary for Ahle Sunnat Pakistan, to forgive Ghazala, stating that Muhammed forgave many people. (Ahle Sunnat Pakistan, is a Muslim religious organization in Pakistan that represents the Barelvi movement, which follows the Sunni Hanafi school of jurisprudence, originating in

Bareilly with over 200 million followers in South Asia).

Pakistani media groups labelled his compassion as a delaying tactic. At the time, Ghazala asked for the court to make a just decision of the crime and to exonerate her. However, Ghazala insisted she did not want to be forgiven by the petitioner as she felt that escape from her blasphemy charges in this manner would indicate original guilt. She argued that because she was innocent of a crime that she should be freed by the court on merit.

Ghazala Khan (39) passed away in November 2016 after losing a battle with Hepatitis C, thus surviving the ignominy of being sentenced for blasphemy charges.

Due to the security reasons Bhatti's case proceedings were conducted on the premises of Central Jail Adiala, Rawalpindi, where Zafar Bhatti has been imprisoned since July, 2012. Bhatti has faced several attempts on his life at the prison, including an incident of poisoning on March 31, 2103, which left him bleeding from his nose and mouth and in critical condition for days.

On Sept. 25, 2014 Bhatti narrowly escaped assassination after a rogue prison officer shot 71-year-old British Muslim, Muhammed Asghar, in a cell adjacent to Bhatti's. Asghar was taken to a private hospital and later fully recovered from critical condition in a private hospital despite being shot in the chest.

Jail guard Muhammad Yousaf wanted to kill all inmates accused of blasphemy against Islam, but was knocked to the ground and captured after other prison guards intervened on hearing the shooting. He was inspired to kill blasphemers after being encouraged by Mumtaz Qadri who was also being held at Adiala Prison for his role in assassinating Muslim Governor of Punjab Salman Taseer, who called for abrogation of the draconian blasphemy laws of Pakistan. Muhammed Yousaf was from the same

Barelvi cult as Mumtaz Qadri within the Hanafi School of Islamic Jurisprudence. He was able to enter the prison with a gun concealed in his shoe as only a light frisk was performed on prison staff at the time. Since the attack, prison security measures are said to have been tightened. During interrogation, Yousaf claimed a divine presence entered his dreams at night telling him he must kill all blasphemers.

Shamim Masih, BPCA reporter said: "The blasphemy law is continuously misused to settle personal scores, but also by Islamic zealots intent on annihilating Christians from Pakistan, who now make up 15 percent of all allegations, a percentage that is increasing.

"When people lay false charges against Christians who are later exonerated no action is taken by the government of Pakistan to intervene on behalf of the victims by prosecuting those who laid false allegations. This impunity has exacerbated the situation."

On Saturday May 6, Shamim Masih met the wife of Zafar Bhatti, Nawab Bibi (65) and took her out for a meal to discuss the blasphemy victim's case. Mrs Bhatti explained about the daily torture he faces in prison. She said: "There have been numerous attempts to kill my husband—he is bullied every day and he is not safe from inmates and prison staff alike. Every day I worry that I will receive word that he is dead, (and) this worry is making me very age quickly."

Mrs. Bhatti said: "I pray for him every day, and when we meet, we cry together and pray seeking God's intervention. I know God will free him one day, but ask for Christians across the world to pray for him and to challenge their governments to help him."

Mrs. Bhatti continued: "My husband was a good man, he was a committed Christian, and a Pastor to many. Many Muslim people hated how quickly his church was growing (so) they have taken

this action to undermine his work. Yet despite their actions the church grows.

She concluded: "I wish our persecutors would see that Christians are not evil creatures. We are human beings created by God—the same God that created them, although they do not know this yet."

Wilson Chowdhry, Chairman of the British Pakistani Christian Association, said: "Zafar Bhatti has now been incarcerated for nearly five years for a crime he ostensibly did not commit. He is being convicted for a text message on a phone that was not his, in a crime that for all intents and purposes, was fabricated to remove him from his role as a pastor.

"That unjust draconian laws can be used in this fashion to wreak havoc on the lives of Christians and other minorities in Pakistan is a disgrace for the nation of Pakistan."

Chowdhry added: "When even judges 'wash their hands' of the law as was enacted in the case of Ghazala Khan a co-defendant in this awful trial, it clearly expresses the dubious nature on these man-made laws that have no place in protecting a divine faith."

BPCA said Mrs. Nawab Bibi is seeking help towards her daily living costs. Since the arrest of her husband, who was the main breadwinner, Mrs. Bibi has struggled to make ends meet and has been forced to have her children live with her grandparents, as she cannot afford to keep them.

Nawab Bibi is required to remain at a home near her husband so she can continue to meet with him and challenge for his freedom. Her eldest daughters were placed into arranged marriages at very young ages to relieve the family of their expenses. {eoa}