

Popular TV Show the Latest Victim of Pakistan's Blasphemy Law

With several Christians on trial awaiting potential death sentences for allegedly committing blasphemy, tensions are increasingly high across the nation with a record-breaking amount of blasphemy charges being waged against both non-Muslims and Muslims alike.

Commonly known as the blasphemy law, Pakistan's Penal Code Section 295C's death penalty went into effect in 1986 for the "use of derogatory remarks in respect of the [Islam's] Holy Prophet." In 1990, the Federal Shari'ah Court ruled that the penalty should be a mandatory death sentence, with no right to a pardon.

May is especially unique with regards to this law, because never before has it caused so much upheaval as has been witnessed this month.

On Saturday, May 17, three cases of blasphemy were registered in different parts of the country. The first was against a small group of Jehovah's Witnesses arrested for handing out their organization Watchtower leaflets; the second was against a 20-year-old Muslim youth for allegedly setting the Quran—Islam's sacred book—on fire; the third was against Pakistan's biggest media tycoon, Mir Shakeel-ur-Rehman, a morning show host, a film actress and the actress' husband for allegedly airing a show with blasphemous content on the nation's Geo TV morning show titled *Utho Jago Pakistan* (*Get up, Wake up, Pakistan*).

The four Jehovah Witnesses—Javed Younus, his wife, Nazia Javed, Sri Lankan national Carol David and Rose Marry—were arrested for distributing Watchtower outreach leaflets in a

Christian colony in Mirpurkhas.

Talking to World Watch Monitor, Jam Zaffar, the senior superintendent of Police of Pakistan Railways in Mirpurkhas, said the distribution of Watchtower leaflets was noticed by a member of Ahle Sunnat wa-al Jamaat (ASWJ), considered one of the most violent organizations carrying out terrorist activities inside Pakistan, who responded by alerting other ASWJ activists to the scene which resulted in the group of four being surrounded by hundreds of protestors.

Zaffar said the protesters were especially angry, so there was fear of violence and bloodshed.

Francis Khokhar, who is legally representing the group, told World Watch Monitor, "As soon as I came to know that the police have taken them in custody without formally registering a complaint, I filed a [motion for] habeas corpus."

Pastor Samson Shukardin also spoke to World Watch Monitor, saying, "After the police had registered the case, they were unsure about Jehovah's Witnesses because they knew only about Protestant and Catholic branches of Christianity."

The three women were released on bail, but Younus was sent to jail.

Zaffar said that during the process ASWJ had surrounded the police station. "They seemed to have planned to halt the city and descent to violence," he said.

Jehovah's Witnesses are a sect established in 1870, in Pennsylvania. The Watchtower Society was started by Charles Taze Russell. Jehovah's Witnesses refer to themselves as Christians, but their beliefs differ from those of orthodox Christians, who do not consider them to be Christian, since there are many inconsistencies in their beliefs alongside fundamental teachings of the faith.

On the same day, but 900 kilometers northeast of Mirpurkhas, a 20-year-old Muslim youth allegedly set the Quran ablaze.

In a fit of anger, Nazir Ahmed set the book on fire in Arifwala. His mother was furious and cried out for help; neighbors gathered and started to beat him. He was reported to have been beaten so severely he was close to death, but police intervened and took Ahmed into custody.

Elsewhere in Pakistan, on the same day, the media tycoon Mir Shakeel-ur-Rehman, the morning show host Shaista Lodhi, film actress Veena Malik, and her husband Assad Khattak Khan, were charged with allegedly airing a blasphemous show on Geo TV.

Three days before, Geo TV channel's morning show had aired the re-enactment of the actress Malik and her husband's marriage. During this re-enactment, a Sufi song was sung that captures marriage between Ali, the fourth caliph of Islam, and the Islamic Prophet Muhammad's daughter Fatima.

Presenting Malik as a bride while the religious song was played infuriated many Pakistanis. Other private TV channels repeatedly telecast the program, further fueling anger toward Geo TV, which receives nearly half of Pakistan's viewership and is often dubbed as foreign-funded and called 'Jew' TV rather than 'Geo' TV.

The Margala Police Station registered a case against them under the blasphemy and anti-terrorism laws. The Sunni Ittehad Council, an organization that represents 160 million Pakistani Sunni Muslims, separately started a petition on Saturday against the TV show presenters in the Supreme Court.

Muslim attorneys are no longer safe

The country does have some natives who are trying to fight the abuse of blasphemy prosecution, at the risk of their own lives.

On May 7, a prominent human rights lawyer, Rashid Rehman, representing a teacher accused of blasphemy in Multan, about 550 kilometres southwest of Islamabad, was murdered.

Rehman is the first lawyer to be killed for taking on a blasphemy case.

Rehman was shot by gunmen posing as clients in his office for representing Junaid Hafeez, an English professor arrested in March 2013 after being accused by his students for insulting the Prophet Muhammad on Facebook.

Hafeez had been in prison for nearly a year before Rehman agreed to represent him; his case became one of Rehman's 228 blasphemy cases, including Sherry Rehman, who was Pakistan's ambassador to the United States when charged with defaming Islam.

Rehman joins a list of Pakistanis killed while opposing the country's widely popular anti-blasphemy laws. Two elected officials, Salmaan Taseer and Shahbaz Bhatti, were killed while trying to pass an amendment in the Penal Code to end abuse of the laws.

The U.S. State Department and the Human Rights Watch have urged the Pakistani government to investigate Rehman's killing.

In a separate incident on May 14, a criminal case of blasphemy was lodged against 68 Muslim lawyers. The lawyers were arrested for arranging a protest against a police officer who had illegally detained one of the group's colleagues.

The penalty for blasphemy in Pakistan is death, though no one convicted under the law has been executed. Most are freed on appeal, often to face mob justice. Several people are thought to have been murdered while on trial, and more than 50 have been murdered in extrajudicial killings.

The original blasphemy law dates back Britain's colonial rule over India, prior to the 1947 partition that created Pakistan. It was intended to prevent Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs from using provocative religious language against each other.

However, under Pakistani President Zia-ul-Haq, in power from 1987-1988, the law was changed to protect only the Sunni version of Islam. It has since increasingly become a pretext to pressure Pakistan's religious minorities.