

Wrongfully Persecuted Christian Released From Pakistan Prison After 10 Years

International Christian Concern (ICC) has learned that the Lahore High Court has acquitted Imran Ghafur Masih, a Christian sentenced to life in prison under Pakistan's blasphemy laws. According to Imran's family, they have moved into hiding following the acquittal due to potential threats from extremists.

On Dec. 15, the Lahore High Court acquitted Imran after he spent more than 10 years in prison for allegedly committing blasphemy. The development came as a shock to Imran's family.

"It is a day of resurrection for us," Naveed Masih, Imran's brother, told ICC. "God has heard our cry, and we are very thankful to Him. It's a Christmas gift for us."

On July 1, 2009, Imran was cleaning his family's bookshop in Hajweri town, located in Faisalabad. He was about to burn some trash he collected, which included some old books and papers, when he came across a textbook with Arabic writing. Concerned that the book contained religious writings, Imran consulted Hajji Liaquat Ali, his Muslim neighbor.

Ali told Imran to burn the book, so Imran threw it into the fire and walked away. When the book was partially burned, Ali returned and pulled it out of the fire. Ali used this partially burned book to falsely accuse Imran of burning a Quran. According to Imran's family, Ali wanted the storefront leased to the family's bookshop to expand his building materials business located next door.

News of the incident soon spread to local mosques, which made announcements over their PA systems. A mob of approximately 400 enraged Muslims gathered at Imran's home. The mob beat Imran, along with his brother, Naveed, and father, Ghafur, before dousing the Christians with paraffin in an attempt to burn them alive.

Local police intervened, arrested Imran and took him to the police station. A mob of 1,000 reportedly gathered outside of the police station and demanded Imran be handed to them. The mob chanted, "Hang him who disgraces the Holy Quran ... Christians are dogs. Imran is a dog." Police soon registered a blasphemy case against Imran and copies of the charges were distributed to the mob.

On Jan. 11, 2010, the Sessions Court of Faisalabad sentenced Imran to life in prison and a fine of 100,000 rupees under Sections 295-A and 295-B of Pakistan's blasphemy laws. Imran's case was appealed to the Lahore High Court, but was postponed nearly 70 times over the course of the next 10 years. According to Imran's lawyer, the appeal passed through the offices of at least 10 justices.

"We went through a very painful time during Imran's imprisonment," Naveed told ICC. "Imran lost his parents and was not allowed to attend the funeral. We lost our business and jobs which has affected our children's education and future. We have not seen any happiness during these years."

In Pakistan, false accusations of blasphemy are common and often motivated by personal vendettas or religious hatred. Accusations are highly inflammatory and have the potential to spark mob lynchings, vigilante murders and mass protests. Currently, 24 Christians are imprisoned on blasphemy charges in Pakistan. These 24 Christians are defendants in 21 blasphemy cases represented at various levels of the judicial process in Pakistan.

ICC's Regional Manager for South Asia, William Stark, said, "We here at International Christian Concern are happy to see Imran Masih finally acquitted and released after more than 10 years in prison. It is great to see such a prolonged blasphemy case justly resolved at the high court level in Pakistan. However, we remain deeply concerned for the safety of Imran and his family. Extremists in Pakistan are known to target individuals accused of religious crimes, like blasphemy, even after they have been acquitted. The abuse of Pakistan's blasphemy laws must be curbed and false allegations must be rooted out and punished. Too often these laws have been a tool in the hands of extremists seeking to stir up religiously motivated violence against minorities. Without reform, religious minorities will continue to face false blasphemy accusations and the violence that often accompanies these accusations." {eo}

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