

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

“Blasphemy Laws and the Violation of International Religious Freedom”

Hearing -- Washington, D.C.

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Testimony of Shaan Taseer

The purpose of a law, ANY LAW should be to promote justice in society. A law that promotes injustice should lose its moral legitimacy and hence its rationale for existing.

In 2011 my father, then the Governor of Punjab, publicly supported a poor Christian woman who was accused of blasphemy. In order to silence him, religious parties accused him of blasphemy and he was gunned down by his bodyguard after a systematic campaign by religious parties, calling for someone to take his life.

Being accused of blasphemy in Pakistan is in-itself a death sentence. No judge, no jury but straight to the executioner. We have heard much today about the defects in the law of blasphemy, but those who are tried under the blasphemy law are in fact the luckier ones. Increasingly people are beaten to death, shot, gunned down on the spot over a MERE accusation of blasphemy, in market places, in universities, wherever people have scores to settle, or an advantage to be gained.

In the case of my father, it was not a trial by the law that took his life, indeed the courts found him posthumously innocent of the accusation of blasphemy, what took his life was the MERE accusation followed by public calls for vigilante murder. The law has left the court room and has entered the public domain to be adjudicated on and for punishment to be executed by the mob. A mob that is a state within a state that the state itself fears and bends its knee to; and comprises political parties that galvanize their support base through blasphemy accusations, and blasphemy law.

I too have been accused of blasphemy for showing solidarity with the victims of this law and carry a fatwa (i.e. a death proclamation) on my head. It was no court that convicted me; it was a mob. A mob that guarantees a ticket to heaven for anyone who takes my life.

The very existence of this law in our statute books, has itself radicalized society. It has signalled to a religious majority that the sanctity of their religion is under catastrophic threat, and that they must take extreme measures to defend it. Quick on the heels of any blasphemy accusation is a public call for murder to avenge the perceived slight.

Any law that seeks to inflame religious passions can not be used in the service of justice. It is redundant to speak of the abuse of the Blasphemy Law. Such a law can only and only be used for the miscarriage of justice, as an instrument of persecution.

Of Pakistan's prisoners under the blasphemy law, roughly half are from minority communities, despite the fact that such communities make up less than 5% of the population. All are from the

most economically disadvantaged sections of Pakistani society. These include the elderly, the infirm, underaged children, the mentally and physically handicapped. Most of them, illiterate, All of them poor. Farm workers, petty shop-keepers, peasants, sweepers, labourers, sewerage and gutter cleaners. It is a law that preys on the weakest.

I work closely with Pakistan's prisoners under the blasphemy law, and I can testify that I have never seen a case of blasphemy that is not preceded by a pre-existing argument. Where it would not have been in the economic or political interest of the accuser to level this charge.

I can also testify that I have never seen an instance where the accused gets due process, whether it is my father who was accused of blasphemy and gunned down, simply for proposing a change to the law, or Junaid Hafeez a promising young professor, a Fulbright scholar who has spent the last 8 years in jail without the presumption of innocence, the right to a fair trial, the right to an impartial tribunal, the right to a legal defense, the right to bail, the right to humane treatment under detention, the right to a trial in reasonable time, Judges continually rotated, hearings adjourned for no reason, and in the case of Junaid Hafeez his lawyer was murdered in broad daylight.

How can we expect justice under a law that plays on religious sentiments and signals for mob violence. How can there be justice when judges, lawyers and the police all become potential targets of an enraged mob if they so much as give the accused a fair hearing?

You all may have heard of Aasia Bibi. Thanks to my fathers sacrifice, she was Pakistan's most famous prisoner under the Blasphemy law. She is a free woman today. There are 200 more Aasia Bibi's in Jail in Pakistan today, without their right to due process. These are Pakistan's prisoners of conscience, prisoners without trial with no Governor Salmaan Taseer to speak for them. It is in their name that I speak to you today, not as members of the United States Congress, but as human beings. This is our fight and we will fight it. Be our friends in this fight. Help us consign these pernicious laws to the dustbin of history, where they belong.

Always remember Aasia bibi, but do not forget Junaid Hafeez, and the 200 others who suffer under the blasphemy law. We owe them justice. That is what my father's legacy asks of us.