

Pakistan court upholds death penalty for Christian woman convicted of blasphemy
by [Saba Imtiaz](#) in the [November 12, 2014](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) A Pakistani high court has upheld the death sentence given to Asia Bibi, a jailed Christian woman convicted of blasphemy in 2010, whose case at the time played into an atmosphere of recrimination and spawned the murders of several prominent human rights and political figures.

Bibi's lawyers had asked the Lahore High Court to overturn the death sentence, which was handed down after she had a row with Muslim women neighbors at a village well in Pakistan's Punjab Province.

Bibi's name and case have since become nearly synonymous with a sensitive national debate over blasphemy laws, which are not clearly defined and were further criminalized under the military dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s. The laws can carry the death penalty, though in Pakistan there has been an unofficial moratorium on the death sentence since 2008 and only one person has been executed.

The Lahore death sentence came during a period of extreme attacks on Christians and minorities. In 2010 the governor of Punjab, Salmaan Taseer, visited Bibi in jail and shortly after was shot dead in Islamabad by his guard, who assumed that Taseer opposed the blasphemy law and supported Bibi.

In March 2011, the federal minister for minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti—who questioned the laws and was photographed with Bibi's husband—was also assassinated in Islamabad.

Contrary to some frenzied headlines, it is doubtful that Bibi faces execution anytime soon, if ever. Yet powerful extremist forces are still evident. This May human rights lawyer Rashid Rehman, who was defending a university lecturer accused of blasphemy, was shot dead in the city of Multan. And onetime assumptions that high courts would be more willing to overturn blasphemy judgments passed by lower courts are no longer held.

Zohra Yusuf, chair of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, told the *Monitor* that the “judiciary is under an atmosphere of fear when it comes to blasphemy cases. In this particular instance [October 17’s ruling on Bibi] the court was crowded with . . . [blasphemy] supporters [who] celebrated the verdict. It is very difficult to get a fair judgment, and it is very difficult to defend [blasphemy]. . . . Once they’re accused, their entire future is over.”

Joseph Francis, director of a prominent legal assistance group, says that courts have recently denied appeals to overturn death sentences.

“The court’s bent has changed,” he said. “In the past, Christians would expect that there would be some relief from the high court. . . . But there was a lot of pressure from clerics, and there were at least ten to 12 lawyers from the Khatm-e-Nabuwat movement [a hard-line right-wing pressure group] present in the court” on October 16.

Bibi herself, described in accounts as a laborer, remains behind bars. With the newest legal blow, her options are limited. But it is likely the justice system will move slowly. Her lawyers are expected to appeal to the Supreme Court of Pakistan. If her death sentence is upheld there, the next option is a mercy appeal to the president, Francis said.

Yusuf points out that Bibi’s safety in jail is of concern. Several prisoners accused or convicted of blasphemy have been attacked in jail, most recently in September, when a police officer shot and injured a man convicted of blasphemy and held at the Adiala jail in Rawalpindi.

“There have been no executions in Pakistan in cases of blasphemy, but quite a few [accused of] blasphemy . . . have been attacked in prison and some have been killed,” Yusuf said. “It’s not just a question of the law taking its course but a question of the atmosphere that is created around each case.”

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