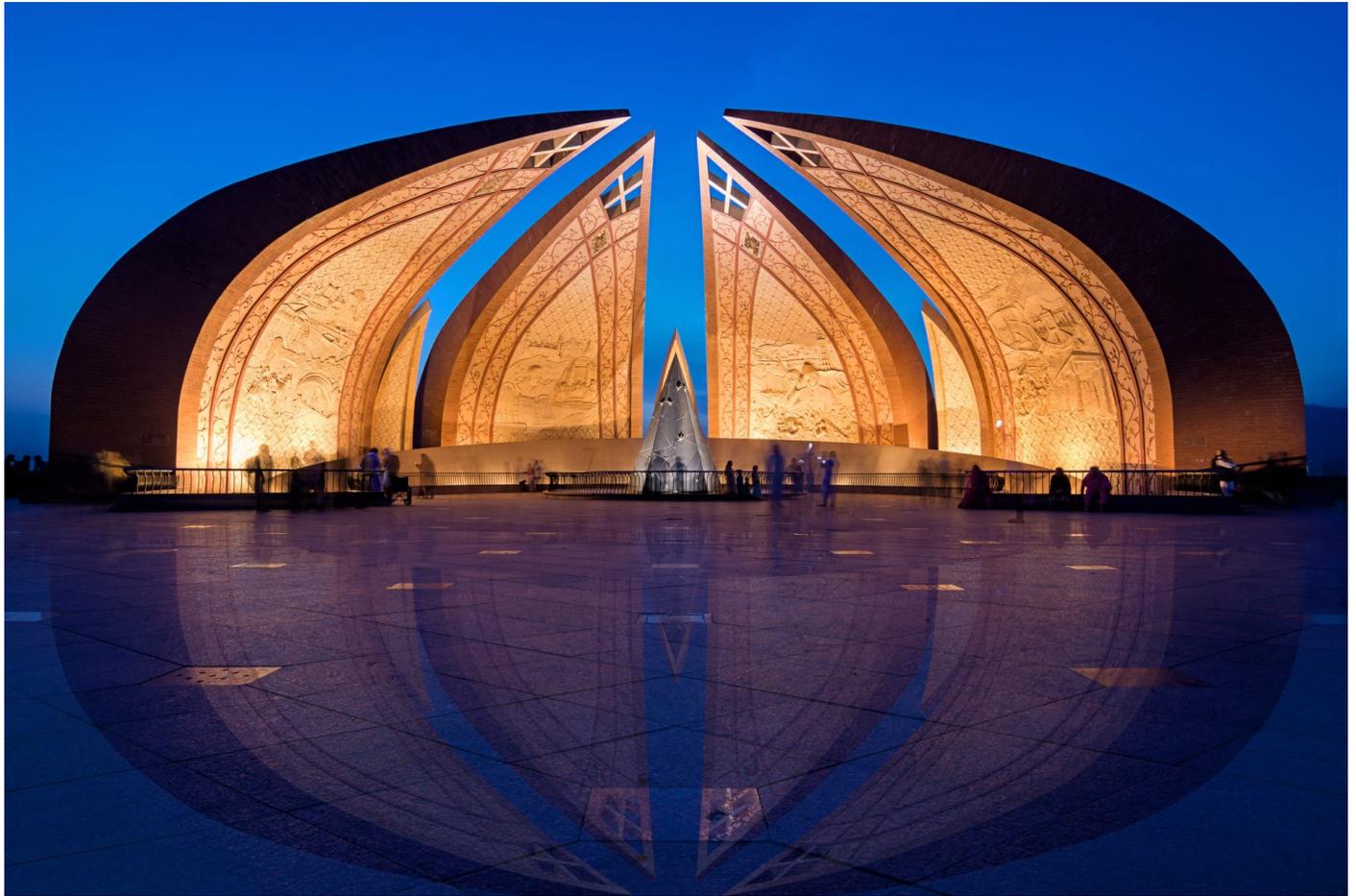


How Pakistan's blasphemy laws trigger violence

Since the passage of Pakistan's blasphemy law in 1987, there have been dozens of extra judicial murders of individuals accused of blasphemy. Perpetrators of this vigilante justice rarely face consequences. Helen Haft and Joelle Fiss examine the repercussions of this law and its impact on free speech.



On September 15, 2019, a mob vandalised a Hindu community in the town of Ghotki, Pakistan, after a student accused his school principal, Notan Lal, of [blasphemy](#): “the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God.” Riots erupted, during which Hindu temples and homes were damaged. Lal was taken into “[protective custody](#)” and an investigation launched. The student then filed a complaint under Article 295-C of Pakistan’s penal code, alleging that Lal insulted the Prophet Muhammed. Article 295-C prescribes a death sentence for “[whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation or by any imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad \(peace be upon him\).](#)”

This incident encapsulates the core issues inherent in Pakistan’s blasphemy law and its

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application, as well as the unnerving power of mob violence in connection with this law.

To be accused of blasphemy in Pakistan is a condemnation to years of harassment at its best—and a death sentence at its worst. The accused is trapped within a Kafkaesque legal system that, in a misguided attempt at keeping them safe, ties them up in its bureaucracy, holding them behind bars to protect them from the mob waiting to carry out vigilante justice upon their release. No prescribed death sentence has yet to be carried out officially by the courts. And yet, ironically, that does not diminish the risk of death for the accused.

Since the law's passage in 1987, there have been over 1500 identifiable cases of individuals charged with [blasphemy](#). Within that same period, there were [dozens of extra-judicial murders](#) of individuals accused of blasphemy, carried out either by mobs or individual extremists. With the rare exception, those who engage in vigilante justice and are emboldened by the law, [do not face any consequences](#).

While Pakistan, officially an Islamic country, has a small community of Christians that are frequently accused of blasphemy, the law is not exclusively applied to Christians. Muslim intellectuals and religious leaders whose views diverge from the state-sponsored doctrine are prime targets too. The law chills free thought and speech within Pakistan's Christian and Muslim communities alike, including among Sufis, Shias, Ahmadi and other religious denominations. Even the authorities are wary of intervening.

[In one case in 2015](#), three Christians by the names of Rhuksana, Rehana and Awais, were torn from their homes. In a medieval display, Awais' head was shaved and all three of their faces painted black before being paraded through the streets of their village on donkeys.

[In another case in 2018](#), a young man, Patras Masih, was accused of blasphemy after sharing a "blasphemous" image via Facebook messenger, depicting someone stepping on a mosque. A mob descended upon his village, forcing the 800 Christians living there to flee. They threatened to burn down the entire village. The police, responding to the mob, arrested Masih. During the interrogation they summoned his cousin, Sajid, who upon arriving at the police station was beaten up for the crime of being related to Masih. In a sickening turn of events, the two cousins were placed in a room and the officers demanded that Sajid perform oral sex on his younger cousin, Patras. Sajid, desperate to escape, jumped from the window in a suicide attempt. [He survived](#), but is [now facing charges](#) of attempted suicide.

What do these disturbing incidents have in common? They illustrate the power of mobs in carrying out their own vision of retribution in the name of "justice" and how the police can at times remain silent or at worst complicit. In the case of Patras Masih, the mob forcing 800 Christians to flee their homes was in large part made up of members of [Tehreek-e-Labbaik](#), an Islamist group that found its origins in the high-profile blasphemy case of Asia Bibi.

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[Asia Bibi](#) was a Christian woman accused of blasphemy after drinking water from the same cup as her Muslim co-workers. She was sentenced to death, but after spending 10 years in jail on death row, was acquitted in 2018. For safety reasons, she remained in custody post-exoneration due to the danger of the mob. Asia Bibi eventually [secured political asylum in Canada](#). Her lawyer was also forced to temporarily [flee the country](#) due to the toxicity of being associated with her and the violent mobs that continued to threaten them. In 2011, prior to her acquittal, the governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer was murdered by his bodyguard after expressing criticism of the harshness of the Asia Bibi trial. His bodyguard, Mumtaz Qadri, was punished for his actions and executed in 2016. Following his execution, the [political party Tehreek-e-Labbaik](#) sprang up in his honour, fired up crowds around his so-called “martyrdom,” and made (to this day) blasphemy a cornerstone of its political agenda. The Christian Pakistani minister Shahbaz Bhatti was also [assassinated](#) after speaking out against the country’s blasphemy laws.

Mere discussion and criticism of Pakistan’s blasphemy law can be enough to trigger accusations and death threats. This applies even to lawyers who defend the accused, and to judges in blasphemy trials. In an ongoing case involving a former Fulbright scholar, [Junaid Hafeez](#), who was accused of blasphemy in 2013, Hafeez’s lawyer, Rasheed Rehman, was shot down in 2014 for defending a “blasphemer.” Lawyers have targets on their backs and in the event of acquittal are themselves often forced into exile.

The [judges in Asia Bibi’s case](#) faced death threats following their decision to exonerate her. Due to this danger, it is only at the level of the Supreme Court that one may be acquitted, as lower-court judges remain too afraid to opine on these questions. Very few lawyers are willing to take on these cases. Most cases lead to automatic convictions and work their way up through the system. In many cases, such as those involving the sharing of an image or text, the rules do not permit the evidence to be shown at trial, as a mere presentation of the images/text would lead to a secondary blasphemous act. This creates for an absurd situation in which individuals are sentenced to death without being able to properly testify. Moreover, there is a sense that, in certain cases, courts purposefully delay trials and drag out convictions in the hopes that the mob will forget about the accused upon their final release. The authorities’ fear of the mob is not unfounded given the murder of the governor of Punjab and the minister Shahbaz Bhatti.

The law itself cannot be discussed or reformed because of the danger of being accused of [blasphemy](#) for simply criticising the law. In the absence of state action, the mob ensures that a “blasphemer” is punished. Facebook groups allow for mobs to form and mobilise online, threatening action in the absence of a police response. [The police play a role that is hard to pin down](#). Some actively further the interest of the mob, while others attempt to protect the accused from the violence of the mob through arrest. One has to wonder whether these mobs themselves take on a performative aspect, with individuals participating for fear of not being viewed as sufficiently outraged by the “blasphemy” at issue.

While the focus of this article is Pakistan, a useful lesson can be drawn from a [case in Afghanistan](#),

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where a woman was stoned and burned to death by a mob after being accused of blasphemy. Surprisingly, it turned out that the woman herself was a theology student and teacher. She had approached a custodian selling religious trinkets in front of a Muslim shrine, reprimanding him for being un-Islamic. The custodian turned the charges back on her, making false accusations that she burned a Quran and riling up a mob that led to her brutal murder: "[A woman burned the Quran. I don't know if this one is sick or mentally disturbed, but what kind of Muslim are you? Go and defend your Quran.](#)" In a situation where accusations of blasphemy are a death sentence, individuals passionately express their outrage at others' acts so as not to be accused of blasphemy themselves.

In Pakistan, the prospect for reform is grim due to the dynamic that has developed around Article 295-C. The degree to which the authorities in Pakistan lack control and are themselves cowed (though there are many in the political class who genuinely are in favour of the blasphemy law and are not feigning support), is evidenced by the fact that imprisonment is sometimes the only way to protect the accused from the mob. Those who courageously speak out have been assassinated or face threats. The Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Kahn, who was initially poised to oppose 295-C, ultimately backtracked, stating "[we are standing with Article 295-C and will defend it.](#)"

In 2018, at the request of Pakistan's authorities, [Twitter notified users abroad](#) that they were in violation of 295-C for posts Pakistan deemed blasphemous. While *Twitter* may be attempting to remain on Pakistan's good side and fear a ban, as [YouTube did for years](#) following the "Innocence of Muslims" video, the fact that *Twitter* is doing Pakistan's bidding and spreading the fear of the law extra-territorially is disturbing. This law leads to a significant amount of self-censorship within Pakistan's borders, and there is an attempt on Pakistan's part to ensure that it wields power beyond. American social media companies should not be complicit in perpetuating this law.

Pakistan's Art. 295-C has compelled a teenager to cut off his own hand as self-punishment for the blasphemous act of inadvertently raising it when a cleric asked "[who among you doesn't believe in the teaching of the Holy Prophet?](#)" In the boy's words, "[When I raised my right hand unwittingly, I realised I had committed blasphemy and needed to atone for this. I came back home and went to the grass-cutting machine, but found the place dark so I took my uncle's phone to point some light at my hand. I placed it under the machine and chopped it off in a single swirl.](#)" The boy is now celebrated as a hero. His demonstrative act likely saved him from death by mob violence, which has been responsible over the past 30 years for, among other things, dozens of murders, decades in custody for the accused, and exiles for those who find themselves in contravention of the law.

Article 295-C chills free thought and speech within Pakistan's Christian and Muslim communities alike. Free speech demands that every idea and issue be subject to scrutiny and that no idea be so revered as to take precedence over an individual's liberty and unencumbered right to speak and think freely. Pakistan's veneration of the sacred deprives Pakistanis of this fundamental right, without which nothing can ultimately change.

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