

Blasphemy law and violence in Pakistan

In 2009, Aasia Bibi, a Christian Pakistani woman was accused of blasphemy. The governor who called for a review of her case was killed two years later, writes Ayyaz Mallick.



In June 2009, Aasia Bibi, a Christian woman and mother-of-five from a village in the Sheikhpura district in Pakistan, got into an argument with fellow villagers who accused her of polluting the water in a well by touching it as a non-Muslim. Afterwards, Aasia Bibi was accused by Qari Salam, a local cleric, of using derogatory words against the Prophet Muhammad and was arrested under section 295-C of Pakistan's penal code, commonly known as the blasphemy law. On 8 November 2010, she was [found guilty](#) of blasphemy and sentenced to death by the Sheikhpura city court. Her husband, Ashiq Masi, a labourer, [declared](#) that Aasia Bibi's conviction was based on "false accusations" and challenged the decision in the Lahore high court.

Though introduced during the British Raj, the blasphemy law in Pakistan was [amended](#) to its present form in 1986 during the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq. Since then, a number of persons, usually from minority religious groups, have been accused under the amended law. Although no execution has ever taken place, some 32 individuals, charged under the blasphemy law, have been [killed](#) extra-judicially and at least two judges have been murdered after acquitting

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accused individuals.

In Asia Bibi's case, international outrage and calls from human rights groups initiated a series of symbolic, sympathetic statements and actions from Punjab province governor Salman Taseer, who [called for](#) a review of the case and reform of the law. Taseer was the subject of much criticism within the country for siding with an accused Christian woman and interfering with the due course of law. On 3 January 2011, he was shot dead by one of his own guards in broad daylight in Pakistan's capital Islamabad. The guard, Mumtaz Qadri, confessed to the murder and was sentenced to death by an anti-terrorism court, but there were [protests in his support](#) by sympathetic groups and religio-political parties. The judge who passed the guilty sentence on Mumtaz Qadri has [fled](#) Pakistan for Saudi Arabia, fearing for his life. On 1 March 2011, Shahbaz Bhatti, federal minister for religious minorities, a vocal advocate of reform of the blasphemy law and a prominent minority rights activist, was [killed](#) in Islamabad in an attack by gunmen on his car. In early 2012, the culprits of Bhatti's killing had yet to be found and Asia Bibi still awaited a decision from the Lahore high court on her appeal.

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