

= Asia Bibi blasphemy case =

Aasiya Noreen ( Urdu : اسیا نوریہ ALA @-@ LC ?siyaah Naur?n IPA : [ ???si?? n???ri?n ] better known as Asia Bibi , Urdu : آسیہ بی بی ALA @-@ LC ?siyah B? B? IPA : [ ???si?? bi? bi? ] , born c . 1971 ) is a Pakistani Christian woman who was convicted of blasphemy by a Pakistani court , receiving a sentence of death by hanging . In June 2009 , Noreen was involved in an argument with a group of Muslim women with whom she had been harvesting berries after the other women grew angry with her for drinking the same water as them . She was subsequently accused of insulting the Islamic prophet Muhammad , a charge she denies , and was arrested and imprisoned . In November 2010 , a Sheikhupura judge sentenced her to death . If executed , Noreen would be the first woman in Pakistan to be lawfully killed for blasphemy .

The verdict , which was reached in a district court and would need to be upheld by a superior court , has received worldwide attention . Various petitions , including one that received 400 @,@ 000 signatures , were organized to protest Noreen 's imprisonment , and Pope Benedict XVI publicly called for the charges against her to be dismissed . She received less sympathy from her neighbors and Islamic religious leaders in the country , some of whom adamantly called for her to be executed . Christian minorities minister Shahbaz Bhatti and Pakistani politician Salmaan Taseer were both killed for advocating on her behalf and opposing the blasphemy laws . Noreen 's family went into hiding after receiving death threats , some of which threatened to kill Asia if released from prison .

= = Background and arrest = =

Aasiya Noreen was born and raised in Ittan Wali , a small , rural village in the Sheikhupura District of Punjab , Pakistan , thirty miles outside of Lahore . Christians in the district , and elsewhere in Pakistan , usually have lower class occupations such as being cleaners and sweepers . Noreen , who is a Roman Catholic , worked as a farmhand in Sheikhupura to support her family . She married Ashiq Masih , a brick laborer who had three children from a previous marriage , and had two more children with him . Noreen and her family were the only Christians in the village . Before her incarceration , she had been repeatedly urged by her fellow workers to convert to Islam .

In June 2009 , Noreen was harvesting falsa berries with a group of other farmhands in a field in Sheikhupura . She was asked at one point to fetch water from a nearby well ; she complied but stopped to take a drink with an old metal cup she had found lying next to the well . A neighbor of Noreen , who had been involved in a running feud with Noreen 's family about some property damage , saw her and angrily told her that it was forbidden for a Christian to drink water from the same utensil from which Muslims drink , and some of the other workers considered her to be unclean because she was a Christian . Some arguments ensued . Noreen recounts that when they made derogatory statements about her religion , she responded , " I believe in my religion and in Jesus Christ , who died on the cross for the sins of mankind . What did your Prophet Mohammed ever do to save mankind ? "

Later , some of the workers complained to a cleric that Noreen insulted Muhammad . A mob came to her house , beating her and members of her family before she was rescued by the police . The police initiated an investigation about her remarks , resulting in her arrest under Section 295 C of the Pakistan Penal Code . She subsequently was imprisoned for over a year before being formally charged .

= = Prosecution and imprisonment = =

Noreen denied that she had committed blasphemy and said that she had been accused by her neighbor to " settle an old score " . In November 2010 , Muhammed Naveed Iqbal , a judge at the court of Sheikhupura , Punjab , sentenced her to death by hanging . Additionally , a fine of the equivalent of \$ 1 @,@ 100 was imposed . With the verdict , she became the first woman condemned to death in Pakistan on blasphemy charges . Noreen described the day of her sentencing as follows :

I cried alone , putting my head in my hands . I can no longer bear the sight of people full of hatred , applauding the killing of a poor farm worker . I no longer see them , but I still hear them , the crowd who gave the judge a standing ovation , saying : " Kill her , kill her ! Allahu Akbar ! " The court house is invaded by a euphoric horde who break down the doors , chanting : " Vengeance for the holy prophet . Allah is great ! " I was then thrown like an old rubbish sack into the van ... I had lost all humanity in their eyes .

Noreen 's husband , Ashiq Masih , 51 years old at the time , announced that he planned to appeal the verdict , which has to be upheld by the Lahore High Court . A month later , Salmaan Taseer , the governor of Punjab who investigated the affair for the President Asif Ali Zardari , stated that Noreen would most likely be pardoned if the High Court did not suspend the sentence . Zardari was poised to grant pardon but Lahore High Court issued a stay order against potential Presidential pardon , which remains in force till date . Court transcripts show numerous inconsistencies in the evidence presented and reporters say they dare not repeat Bibi 's testimony lest they also be accused of blasphemy .

Noreen was put in solitary confinement in an 8 @-@ by @-@ 10 @-@ foot ( 2 @.@ 4 m x 3 @.@ 0 m ) cell without windows at the Lahore prison . Before his assassination , Taseer visited her at the jail several times with his wife , Aamna , and daughter , Shehrbano , though Pakistani court officials later ruled that she could be visited only by her husband and lawyer . Khalid Sheikh , the prison superintendent , said that while he wanted her to be treated " like any other prisoner " , she had to be kept away from other inmates for her own well @-@ being , as other individuals accused of blasphemy had been killed while in prison . Out of concern that she could be poisoned , prison officials began giving Noreen raw materials to cook her own food . The Masihi Foundation , a human rights group , described her physical condition as " very frail " , and her health was reported to be in decline due to poor living conditions at the jail . She has also been threatened by other inmates and subjected to physical abuse from prison guards .

According to Human Rights Watch , Noreen 's situation is not unusual . Though no one has been executed for blasphemy yet in Pakistan , the accused often remain imprisoned for an extensive amount of time while the case is being processed . In May 2014 , Noreen 's appeal hearing was delayed for the fifth time .

= = Appeals = =

On October 16 , 2014 the Lahore High Court dismissed Noreen 's appeal and upheld her death sentence . On November 20 , 2014 , her husband appealed to Pakistan 's President for clemency . On November 24 , 2014 , her lawyer appealed to the Supreme Court .

On July 22 , 2015 the Supreme Court of Pakistan suspended Bibi 's death sentence for the duration of the appeals process . In November of 2015 , Bibi 's lead attorney , Naeem Shakir , announced that , after two postponements in 2015 , the Lahore High Court would hear an appeal in Bibi 's case on March 26 , 2016 .

= = Local reactions = =

Noreen 's conviction led to divided opinions on the blasphemy laws and drew strong reactions from the public . Pakistani Human Rights Watch researcher Ali Dayan Hasan said , " The law creates this legal infrastructure which is then used in various informal ways to intimidate , coerce , harass and persecute . " He further described the law as " discriminatory and abusive " . Governor Salmaan Taseer and Pakistan 's Minority Affairs Minister Shahbaz Bhatti both publicly supported Noreen , with the latter saying , " I will go to every knock for justice on her behalf and I will take all steps for her protection . " She also received support from Pakistani political scientist Rasul Baksh Rais and local priest Samson Dilawar . The imprisonment of Noreen left Christians and other minorities in Pakistan feeling vulnerable , and liberal Muslims were also unnerved by her sentencing .

The general population was less sympathetic towards Noreen . Several signs were erected in Sheikhpura and other rural areas declaring support for the blasphemy laws , including one that

called for Noreen to be beheaded . Mohammad Saleem , a member of the Jamiat Ulema @-@ e @-@ Pakistan Party , organized a demonstration in Rawalpindi and led a small crowd chanting , " Hang her , hang her . " In December 2010 , a month after Noreen 's conviction , a Muslim cleric announced a 500 @,@ 000 Pakistani rupee award ( the equivalent of \$ 10 @,@ 000 ) to anyone who would kill her . One survey reported that around 10 million Pakistanis had said that they would be willing to personally kill her out of either religious conviction or for the reward . The village mosque in Ittan Wali was reportedly indifferent towards Noreen 's plight ; its imam , Qari Mohammed Salim , stated that he had wept for joy on learning that she had been sentenced to death and threatened that some people would " take the law into their own hands " should she be pardoned or released . However , journalist Julie McCarthy suggested that the country 's " more peaceful majority views " had been overshadowed by the more vocal fundamentalists .

Noreen 's family has received threats and has gone into hiding . Ashiq , her husband , stated that he was afraid to let their children go outside . He also expressed concern about how Noreen would be kept safe should she be released , saying , " No one will let her live . The mullahs are saying they will kill her when she comes out . " Her family declined to leave the country while she remained in prison , but Italy , France , and Spain all offered to grant her and her family asylum in the event of her release .

= = = Assassinations of Taseer and Bhatti = = =

On 4 January 2011 , at Kohsar Market of Islamabad , the governor of Punjab , Salmaan Taseer , was assassinated by Malik Mumtaz Hussein Qadri , a 26 @-@ year @-@ old member of his security team , because of his defence of Noreen and opposition to the blasphemy law . ( Mumtaz Qadri was sentenced to death for the assassination and hanged on February 29 , 2016 . ) Taseer was outspoken in his criticism of the law and the verdict in Noreen 's case . The next day , thousands turned up for the governor 's funeral in Lahore in spite of warnings by the Taliban and some clerics , while a portion of the Pakistani population also praised Qadri as a hero ; thousands of Sunni Muslims rallied in support of the blasphemy laws in Pakistan after the murder , and 500 Barelvi clerics prohibited their followers from sending condolences to the family of Taseer . This resulted in concerns that the public was becoming tolerant of extremists .

Prison officials said that Noreen " wept inconsolably " on learning of Taseer 's assassination while repeatedly saying , " That man came here and he sacrificed his life for me . " Father Andrew Nisari , a senior Catholic Spokesperson in Lahore , described the situation as " utter chaos " . Seven months later , Taseer 's 28 @-@ year @-@ old son , Shahbaz , was kidnapped . Shahbahz was later found or released in March 2016 , and he returned to Lahore on March 9 after five years in captivity .

Minority Affairs Minister Shahbaz Bhatti said that he was first threatened with death in June 2010 when he was told that he would be beheaded if he attempted to change the blasphemy laws . In response , he told reporters that he was " committed to the principle of justice for the people of Pakistan " and willing to die fighting for Noreen 's release . On 2 March 2011 , Bhatti was shot dead by gunmen who ambushed his car near his residence in Islamabad , presumably because of his position on the blasphemy laws . He had been the only Christian member of Pakistan 's cabinet .

= = International response = =

Noreen 's death sentence drew international outrage and strong condemnation from human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch who saw the blasphemy laws as a form of religious persecution and called for them to be abolished . Pope Benedict XVI publicly called for clemency for Noreen . In his statement , he described his " spiritual closeness " with Noreen and urged that the " human dignity and fundamental rights of everyone in similar situations " be respected .

Her case also achieved extensive media coverage , and American journalist John L. Allen , Jr. writes that she is " almost certainly the most famous illiterate Punjabi farm worker and mother of five

on the planet " . According to Allen , she has become a celebrity among Christian activists , an unusual instance when cases of discrimination against Christian minorities typically receive little attention in the press . A number of campaigns have been organized to protest her imprisonment through online petitions , Twitter trends , and concerts . Ooberfuse , a Christian pop band based in the United Kingdom collaborated with the British Pakistani Christian Association , and released a song titled " Free Asia Bibi " with a music video that included " a disturbing visual portrayal of the squalid prison conditions where Bibi is being held " . She has also been the subject of books and documentaries .

One petition received over 400 @, @ 000 signatures from individuals from over 100 countries . Another petition , organised by the American Centre for Law & Justice ( ACLJ ) , obtained over 200 @, @ 000 signatures and called for America 's eight billion dollar yearly aid to Pakistan to stop whilst persecution of minorities is allowed in that country .

= = = Memoirs = = =

French journalist Anne Isabelle Tollet assisted Noreen in writing a memoir titled Blasphemy : A Memoir : Sentenced to Death over a Cup of Water . Noreen is illiterate , and Tollet was unable to visit her directly due to prison restrictions , but Tollet was able to conduct interviews through Noreen 's husband , who passed questions and answers between them . Tollet also met other members of Noreen 's family , including her children and sister , and had known Shahbaz Bhatti before his assassination .