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Pakistan: Blasphemy laws should be abolished

Following the court ruling in the case of Dr. Younus Sheikh, Amnesty International said it is appalled that yet another innocent person has been convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death.

"The charges were maliciously brought, the allegations did not establish blasphemy and the trial which led to the conviction on such grounds could not have been fair," the organization said.

"The blasphemy laws of Pakistan are a handy tool to silence debate and dissent. They are also used to detain people when the real motivation includes land issues or professional rivalry. In the interest of justice, the blasphemy laws should be abolished or as a first step amended to prevent abuse."

Dr Younus Sheikh, a Muslim homeopathic doctor and lecturer, was charged with blasphemy for answers he gave to his students about whether the Prophet Mohammad followed Muslim practices before he assumed prophethood. Those who brought the charges had not been present in the lecture hall and are known for their sectarian bias.

Only last month, a Christian man, Ayub Masih, had his death sentence for blasphemy confirmed by the High Court. Amnesty International believes that the real motive for bringing the blasphemy charge was a land dispute in his village.

Both men are prisoners of conscience and Amnesty International believes that they should be immediately and unconditionally released. Ayub Masih has on several occasions been ill-treated in custody and Dr Sheikh has been attacked by clerics on the court premises.

Both Ayub Masih and Dr Sheikh are not in imminent danger of execution; the former has filed an appeal in the Supreme Court of Pakistan and the latter will be appealing to the High Court. Should their convictions and sentences be confirmed, both men can appeal to the president for pardon. So far no one has been executed after a death sentence for blasphemy.

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