

AI Index: PRE 01/001/2012
04 January 2012

Pakistan: Blasphemy law reform even more urgent year after Governor's killing

The Pakistan government must urgently reform the country's 'dangerous' blasphemy laws, Amnesty International said today on the first anniversary of the assassination of a politician who criticized the laws.

Punjab Governor Salmaan Taseer was killed by one of his security guards on 4 January 2011 after campaigning for Asia Bibi, a Christian farmer from rural Punjab sentenced to death for blasphemy in November 2009 despite serious flaws in the investigation convicting her.

"Salmaan Taseer was killed in cold blood because he supported a defenceless victim of Pakistan's blasphemy laws," said Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific director Sam Zarifi.

Taseer's security guard, Constable Mumtaz Qadri, confessed to killing the governor because of his criticism of the country's highly problematic blasphemy laws.

Mumtaz Qadri was convicted and sentenced to death for Taseer's murder on 1 October 2011. The judge who sentenced him to death immediately went into hiding fearing reprisals from Qadri's supporters.

"Both the Bibi death sentence and threats faced by the judge in the Taseer murder trial highlight the dangerous erosion of the rule of law caused by the blasphemy laws," Sam Zarifi said.

Asia Bibi's mental and physical health has deteriorated in prison, where since June 2009 she has lived in virtual solitary confinement for fear of being killed by one of her fellow inmates.

An appeal against her death sentence has yet to be heard by the Lahore High Court.

The blasphemy laws' vague formulation, along with inadequate investigation by authorities and intimidation by militant religious groups, has created a dangerous climate of fear and vigilantism in Pakistan.

"Even the Council of Islamic Ideology, a constitutional body mandated to advise the state on Islamic issues, in 2010 called for the blasphemy laws to be reformed citing these concerns," Sam Zarifi said.

In 2009 and 2010, the government pledged to review and improve "laws detrimental to religious harmony", only to fall silent following Taseer's assassination and the killing of Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti in March 2011.

In August, Taseer's son Shahbaz was kidnapped in Lahore and there are concerns the perpetrators may seek to negotiate a reward with extremists for his release, in exchange for Mumtaz Qadri.

"These dangerous developments demonstrate that the blasphemy laws, as they currently operate, are a risk to all Pakistanis because they send the signal that anyone can commit violence and justify it as a defence of religion. Yet most of the individuals accused of blasphemy are mainstream Muslims," said Sam Zarifi.

"A year after the assassination of Salmaan Taseer, the authorities must honour his legacy and protect their citizens by undertaking practical reforms to the blasphemy laws. The government must send a clear signal that no one is either above the law or allowed to take the law into their own hands," said Sam Zarifi.

