

EU parliament calls on Pakistan to abolish the death penalty for blasphemy

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The European parliament has voted for a resolution condemning Pakistan's blasphemy laws, saying that they were increasingly being used to "target vulnerable minority groups."

The resolution, which is non-binding, calls for a "thorough review of the blasphemy laws and their current application" and urged the Pakistani government to repeal the laws and abolish the death penalty. Although Pakistan does currently have prisoners on 'death row' for blasphemy convictions, there has been a virtual moratorium on executions since 2008. Nonetheless, even the allegation of blasphemy can have fatal consequences.

The resolution noted the case of Christian couple Shama Bibi and Shahbaz Masih, who were recently beaten by a mob and burnt to death, after accusations that the couple had damaged pages from a Koran.

The parliament also drew attention to the case of Asia Bibi, who was sentenced to death for blasphemy by a Pakistani court back in 2010. Bibi filed an appeal against the sentence last week, however this process "may take years," according to the resolution. The European parliament called on the President of Pakistan to issue a presidential pardon for Asia Bibi, and also urged the Pakistani Supreme Court to "start its proceedings on the case swiftly and without delay and to uphold the rule of law and full respect for human rights."

The EU parliament cited further cases of Pakistani blasphemy convictions in its resolution, including Sawan Masih, Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar who have all been sentenced to death.

The European Parliament's resolution urged the government to "increase efforts towards better inter-religious understanding, to actively address religious hostility by societal actors and combat religious intolerance... and acts of violence."

The resolution strongly condemned "acts of violence against religious communities, as well as all kinds of discrimination and intolerance on the grounds of religion and belief" and urged the European Commission to "use any tools at their disposal... for the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief, to aid religious communities and to pressurise the Pakistani Government to do more for the protection of religions minorities."

A Pakistani "anti-terrorism" court recently sentenced Veena Malik, Asad Bashir Khan and Mir Shakil-ur-Rahman to 26 years each in prison for blasphemy, after a "blasphemous" wedding scene, starring Veena Malik, aired on Pakistani TV.

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