Religion-Fueled Mobs on the Rise Again in Pakistan

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/20/world/asia/pakistan-blasphemy-religious-violence.html>

Last month, a man named Muhammad Mushtaq was accused of burning pages of the Quran inside a mosque in central Pakistan. A mob armed with sticks, bricks and axes gathered at the mosque and dragged him out.

Mr. Mushtaq was tortured for hours and eventually killed, his body hung from a tree. A handful of police officers were among those who watched.

The Feb. 12 killing in the district of Khanewal was denounced across Pakistan. Prime Minister Imran Khan said the government had “zero tolerance” for such mob violence and promised that the police officers would be punished.

But lynchings over offenses to Islam, real or imagined, are far from new in Pakistan, where blasphemy is punishable by death. Rights activists say lynch mobs exploit anti-blasphemy laws to take matters into their own hands.

In recent years these episodes have risen to an alarming level, with increasing cases of fatal violence.

Critics and rights activists say that vows like those made by the prime minister are mere lip service and that Mr. Khan’s government, much like his predecessors, has not taken any practical steps to curb violence.

Instances of mob violence, and state-enforced criminal blasphemy cases, are more frequent in Pakistan than anywhere else, according to a[report by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom](https://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/uscirf-spotlight/enforcing-blasphemy-laws-have-dire-consequences).

“The lack of political will and commitment has always stood as the biggest obstacle to prevent the abuse, misuse, and exploitation of blasphemy laws,” said Tahira Abdullah, a rights activist based in Islamabad.

Mr. Khan’s government is no different from its predecessors in promising to tackle the menace of religious violence, she said. But “it is too cowardly to confront” influential religious parties in Parliament, Ms. Abdullah said, “and the rampaging militant extremist groups outside Parliament.”

Blasphemy allegations have led to the vandalizing of Hindu temples and neighborhoods, the burning of police stations by angry mobs, the lynching of a student on a university campus and the killing of a provincial governor by his own security guard. After Musthaq’s killing, a senior police official told a parliamentary committee that 90 percent of those involved in blasphemy violence are between the ages of 18 and 30.

Just two months ago, a Sri Lankan, Priyantha Diyawadanage, was lynched by workers he oversaw in a factory in the eastern city of Sialkot. Mr. Diyawadanage was accused of tearing off stickers with religious inscriptions from the factory walls. He was tortured for hours by an enraged mob before his body was thrown off the factory’s rooftop, beaten and set on fire.

In 2021, at least 84 people faced blasphemy accusations in courts and from angry street mobs, according to the Centre for Social Justice, a Lahore-based minority rights group. Three people, including Mr. Diyawadanage, were killed by a mob over such allegations, it noted.

In August, a mob in the Rahimyar Khan district, also in Punjab Province, damaged statues and burned down a Hindu temple’s main door after a court released an 8-year-old Hindu boy on bail. He had been charged with blasphemy for allegedly urinating in the library of a madrasa.

Defense lawyers are also at risk. In 2014 gunmen murdered a Pakistani lawyer,[Rashid Rehman](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/08/world/asia/pakistani-activist-shot-dead-aided-blasphemy-suspects.html), in Multan city for defending Junaid Hafeez, an academic charged with making derogatory comments about the Prophet Muhammad. Mr. Hafeez had been in prison, unable to find a lawyer, before Mr. Rehman agreed to take up his case.

In 2011, two politicians were murdered in similar episodes. [Salman Taseer](https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/05/world/asia/05pakistan.html), then a provincial governor, was killed by a bodyguard after expressing opposition to blasphemy laws. [Shahbaz Bhatti](https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/04/world/asia/04pakistan.html%22%20%5Co%20%22), a federal minister, was murdered for opposing the death sentence imposed on Asia Bibi, a Christian convicted of verbally insulting the Prophet Muhammad. Though Ms. Bibi was acquitted in 2019, she fled Pakistan and her lawyer has been receiving death threats.

“The increasing theocratization of Pakistan and rising militant extremism makes it very difficult for lawyers to defend alleged blasphemers,” Ms. Abdullah said. “It takes a great deal of personal courage and professional integrity to withstand huge overt pressure and threats.”

Law enforcement agencies are not trained, or equipped to handle, frenzied vigilante mobs, and find themselves overwhelmed, Ms. Abdullah noted.

Pakistan inherited 19th-century British laws outlining punishments for offenses related to blasphemy. But the government revamped these laws in the 1980s, introducing new clauses adding severe penalties and even a death sentence for anyone who insults Islam.

Iran, Brunei and Mauritania are the other three countries that impose the death penalty for insulting religion.

“Since the death penalty, a mandatory punishment for blasphemy, was made a law, there have been several bouts of religion-based violence in Pakistan,” said Peter Jacob, executive director of the Centre for Social Justice.

While no one has ever been executed for the offense, violence against alleged blasphemers is hardly unusual.

Rights activists link the current spike in blasphemy-related violence to the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, an emerging radical religious party. And Islamist parties and militant groups in Pakistan have been emboldened by the Taliban’s coming to power in neighboring Afghanistan last year.

“The government’s narrative about Islamophobia in the rest of the world” fuels the religion-based violence, Mr. Jacob said.

“This narrative builds on anger among the youth, which becomes ready-made ammunition for sporadic but large-scale violence against anyone who is suspected of offering any disrespect to religious persons, scripture, places or articles,” he said.

Tehreek-e-Labbaik, the radical religious party, first came to prominence as an organized force when it demonstrated for the release of Mumtaz Qadri, the police bodyguard who fatally shot Governor Taseer in 2011. Mr. Qadri was[eventually sentenced to death and hanged in 2016](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/29/world/asia/pakistan-hangs-killer-of-salman-taseer.html). Since then, it has shaped itself into a political party, contesting elections and continuing to unsettle governments.

In April last year, Tehreek-e-Labbaik organized violent, countrywide protests demanding the expulsion of the French ambassador after President Emmanuel Macron of France [eulogized](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/21/world/europe/france-teacher-beheading.html)a French teacher murdered for showing caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in a classroom.

The Pakistani Taliban have also announced support for anti-blasphemy campaigns and promoted armed struggle to protect the honor of Islam.

Posters offering a reward of some $56,000 to kill Faraz Pervaiz, a Pakistani Christian, for posting anti-Islamic content on social media often appear in anti-blasphemy protests in the country.

Mr. Pervaiz, 34, now living in self-exile in Thailand, said that he started speaking out for the rights of non-Muslim communities on social media after[a Muslim mob attacked a Christian neighborhood](https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/10/world/asia/explosion-rips-through-mosque-in-peshawar-pakistan.html) in Lahore in 2013, torching more than 150 houses and two churches following reports that a Christian sanitation worker had blasphemed the Prophet Muhammad.

“Even in Thailand, I feel insecure,” he said in an interview, after a Pakistani Muslim refugee shared one of his videos and his location on social media. Mr. Pervaiz left the country in 2014 after receiving threats, he said.

Journalists in Pakistan have refrained from reporting on blasphemy cases since the rise of the extremist parties and their growing influence.

“Covering the issue of blasphemy as a journalist, and especially for the Urdu-language press, can either get you killed, or you’ll be fired for jeopardizing the survival of the organization you work for,” said Razeshta Sethna, a journalist and author of a recent report on the stifling media environment in the country.