



PAKISTAN | Cleric Acquitted in Rimsha Masih Blasphemy Case

The religious cleric accused of damaging a Qur'an to falsify evidence in the blasphemy case of <u>Rimsha Masih</u> was acquitted of all charges on Aug. 17.

The case against cleric, Khalid Jadoon Chishti, was dismissed after the court ruled there was insufficient evidence against him. Witnesses had previously made statements alleging he had planted burnt pages of the Qur'an in the rubbish bag used by Rimsha, before making blasphemy accusations against the girl over his mosque's loudspeaker, inciting mob violence. The same witnesses later stated they had been coerced by police and withdrew their statements.

Last October, in response to its Universal Periodic Review at the UN, the Pakistani government cited the arrest of Chishti as progress, when confronted with multiple criticisms relating to the blasphemy laws. It was described as sending "a strong message to all those trying to misuse" the laws, and a "turning point in the history of Pakistan."

Tahir Ashrafi, Chairman of the Pakistan Ulema Council, a leading coalition of Islamic clerics in Pakistan, has expressed disappointment at the decision. The Council made headlines last year by condemning the "misuse" of the country's blasphemy laws and calling for Rimsha's case to be handled fairly.

Rimsha, who was deemed to be 14 years old but with a younger mental age, was charged with desecrating the Qur'an under section 295B of the Pakistan Penal Code in August 2012. Her case was dismissed by Pakistan's Supreme court in January 2013 and she and her family have been granted asylum in Canada.

Benedict Rogers, Acting Advocacy Director at Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "The arrest of Rimsha's accuser last year was widely lauded as a turning point for blasphemy cases in Pakistan. The collapse of the case is therefore disappointing and reinforces the continued lack of accountability and sense of impunity that lie at the heart of false blasphemy allegations. It sends the

message that those who misuse the laws will remain unpunished. In contrast, those accused and their communities often live with the negative effects long after the accusation. This development also reminds us that much remains to be done to strengthen policing, judicial processes and rule of law in Pakistan, raising questions of witness protection and manipulation, as well as questionable investigation processes. We urge the Pakistani government to increase investment in these areas, and to expedite debate and reform to tackle the misuse of the blasphemy laws and those who make false accusations."