News



The daughters of Asia Bibi, a Catholic accused of blasphemy, pose in 2010 with an image of their mother while standing outside their residence in Sheikhupura, Pakistan. The Oct. 31 acquittal of Bibi is being challenged in the country's Supreme Court, according to her husband. (CNS/Adrees Latif, Reuters)

Simon Caldwell

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The acquittal of a Pakistani Catholic woman sentenced to hang for blasphemy is to be challenged in the country's Supreme Court, according to her husband.

Three judges of the court ordered Oct. 31 that the death sentence against Asia Bibi, a mother of five, was to be set aside and she was to be released from prison, where she has spent eight years in solitary confinement.

But her husband, Ashiq Masih, confirmed in a Nov. 4 telephone interview with BBC World Service that the court had since agreed to accept a review petition questioning the legitimacy of her acquittal.

The British Pakistani Christian Association said in a Nov. 5 press release that the review was to begin that same day. The source was Joseph Nadeem, a close family friend, according to spokesman Wilson Chowdharay.

The challenge to Bibi's freedom has been made by Tehreek-e-Labbaaik, an extremist group which is also putting pressure on the government to try to stop Bibi from leaving Pakistan, even if her acquittal is upheld.

In his interview, Ashiq told the BBC that he was "hopeful" and "confident" that the Supreme Court in Lahore would dismiss the appeal.

"I really hope it will not take very much time — two to four days — and this matter could be disposed of by the government and the Supreme Court," he said.

Ashiq said neither he nor his family have seen Bibi, 55, who has remained in protective custody since she was acquitted.

"I haven't been able to see her, I haven't been able to meet her yet," said Ashiq, adding that the family was "really worried" about her safety.

He said the family was desperate to find asylum in Europe or North America as soon as possible because they believed their lives were in danger.

He said: "We are so restricted our mobility is virtually zero. We cannot go out anywhere. Even for basic things, we have to rely on other people.

"I have never been so afraid as I am now for my family," he added. "My life and the life of my family is really under threat. Since the verdict has come out, we haven't been provided with any security."

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The ordeal of Bibi, who worked as a farmhand, began in June 2009 when she was accused of insulting Muhammad, the founder of Islam, after Muslim co-workers objected to her drinking from a common water supply because she is a Christian.

Bibi was rescued from a mob by police, only to be sentenced to death in 2010 for violating Section 295C of the Pakistan Penal Code, which makes insulting Muhammad a capital offense.

No one has been executed under the law so far, but Christians who are falsely accused often are lynched or spend many years in prison.

Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer was assassinated in January 2011 after he said he would fight for Bibi's freedom and, two months later, Minority Affairs Minister Shahbaz Bhatti, a Christian, was gunned down after he said he would seek the reform of the blasphemy laws to stop them being abused to persecute innocent Christians.

Following Bibi's acquittal, Saiful Malook, her lawyer, fled Pakistan amid death threats to his family.

Salman Akram Raja, an advocate of the Supreme Court, said Bibi and her family were "quite right to fear for their lives."

He said he was confident, however, that the review petition would be dismissed and there would be no legal obstacles to Bibi and her family leaving Pakistan.

"Asia is an acquitted person, she has no charges pending against her," he told the BBC in a Nov. 4 telephone interview. "There is no law under which the state could restrain her from leaving the country if she has a valid passport and a travel visa.

"There is no grounds for restraining her, so to say that she is being detained on account of some agreement with a religious group (and the government) is to go completely outside the ambit of the law," he continued.

Raja said that review petitions were seldom sustainable and were particularly weak if made by "busybodies off the streets" rather than by the state or by an original complainant. "Review petitions, legally speaking, are not sustainable," he said.