

Save Asia Bibi! The Human Rights Debate and Pakistan

by Matthias Küntzel

Asia Bibi is a member of Pakistan's Christian minority. This farm worker and mother of five has been condemned to death by hanging because, it is alleged, in the course of an argument with a fellow worker, she compared Muhammad to Jesus. The death sentence was handed down in November 2010 on the basis of a law that makes blasphemy punishable by death.

Until the beginning of this year Asia Bibi enjoyed the support of Salman Taseer, the influential governor of her province. Taseer was a Muslim – a liberal Muslim with a Western lifestyle. He pleaded for mercy for Bibi and called on the Pakistani government to repeal the blasphemy law. For that very reason – because as a Muslim he supported this Christian woman and visited her in prison – he was shot dead in the street on 4 January. Since then, the crisis has continued to escalate. Following Taseer's assassination, tens of thousands of Pakistanis took to the streets, not to mourn or denounce his murder, but to praise the killer. They celebrated his death as the long-awaited signal for the suppression of freedom of expression and religion in the name of Sharia.

This case is part of a conflict over the role of human rights *within* Islamic societies that is now erupting, from Egypt to Iran to Pakistan. A key document in this conflict was drawn up in Cairo in 1990, when the foreign ministers of the 45 countries of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) drew up and signed an alternative to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR): the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam.

While Article 1 of the Universal Declaration insists that "all human beings are born free", the Cairo Declaration asserts that "All human beings ... are united by their subordination to Allah". While Article 3 of the UDHR states that "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person", at the Cairo Conference the 45 foreign ministers declared that, "Life is a God-given gift ... and it is prohibited to take away life *except for a shari'a prescribed reason* (Article 2)." While the UDHR unreservedly defends freedom of expression,

Article 22 of the Cairo Declaration stipulates that, “Everyone shall have the right to express his opinion freely in such manner as would not be contrary to the principles of the Shari'ah” or would “violate sanctities and the dignity of Prophets”, as Asia Bibi is accused of doing.

The legal status of the Cairo Declaration is controversial. This has not hindered the progressive introduction of its principles into the work of the United Nations Human Rights Council, where, in spring 2010, Pakistan introduced a draft resolution condemning “defamation of religion” as “a serious affront to humanity”. Well-meaning people might be inclined to accept this, since, after all, no one wants to defame anyone. However, cases such as that of Asia Bibi show what is really at stake. Some Muslims consider even the slightest doubts about sharia as defamation of their religion. Thus-what the Pakistani initiative seeks to protect is not the individual right “to freedom of thought, conscience and religion” or “to freedom of opinion” (Arts. 18 and 19 of the UDHR) but sharia. Indeed, the Pakistan Press Association sharply criticised this proposal from its own government’s as an attack on “religious minorities, dissenting voices and non-believers”.

The Human Rights Council adopted the Pakistani proposal by 20 votes to 17. It is simply amazing that so far the West has failed to respond either to this decision or the impending execution of Asia Bibi. For example, when the German Foreign Minister Westerwelle was in Pakistan four days after the murder of Taseer, he uttered not a word in public about the Bibi case or the blasphemy law.

The exception has been Pope Benedict XVI. He has spoken up for Bibi and called on the Pakistani government to repeal the law. In response, a leading Pakistani hardliner denounced the Pope for wanting to “plunge the whole world into a bloody war”. However, the Pope’s weapons are words, while Pakistan has nuclear weapons. This is a further powerful reason to support the Pakistani human rights movement and save the life of Asia Bibi.

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