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PAKISTAN | Death Sentence for Blasphemy on Facebook

Taimoor Raza, a Shi'a Muslim, became the first person to be sentenced to death by Pakistan's Anti-Terrorism Court (ATC) on June 10, for allegedly committing blasphemy on Facebook.

Raza is from Okara in Punjab province. He was arrested in 2016 and accused of allegedly posting derogatory content about Islam on Facebook after he got into a debate with a man working as a counter-terrorism agent.

The case against Raza was registered under Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), which concerns making derogatory remarks about the Prophet Muhammad; and Sections 9 and 11-W of the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA), regarding stirring up and disseminating material to incite sectarian hatred. Although 15 other people were arrested under similar charges last year, this is the harshest sentence to be applied to anyone accused of online blasphemy.

Raza's sentence is symbolic of a wider campaign to quell dissent, including criticism of the present government and military, on social media. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif described blasphemy as an "unpardonable offence" and stated March 14 that effective steps must be taken to remove and block blasphemous content on social media. Interior Minister, Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, has since confirmed that Facebook has agreed to enter into consultation with the Pakistani government about content deemed to be blasphemous on their social media site. Blasphemy in Pakistan is a highly sensitive issue with a disproportionate number of false accusations lodged against religious minorities, though the highest number of accusations are filed against Muslims. The laws are widely misused to settle personal scores or in matters related to money, property or business rivalry. Blasphemy accusations often result in mob violence. On April 13, university student Mashal Khan was beaten to death by a mob at Abdul Wali Khan University in Mardan after being accused of posting blasphemous content online, a claim which was later found to be false.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are deeply concerned about Mr. Raza's conviction on blasphemy charges and the severity of his sentence, which sets a dangerous precedent from the Anti-Terrorism Court and puts his life at risk, particularly as a member of a religious minority. This conviction has a chilling effect on upholding an individual's right to exercise their freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression online. We are concerned that this sentence will further encourage people to misuse the blasphemy laws and social media to register false cases against anyone with whom they may have a personal vendetta. We continue to urge the government of Pakistan to review the blasphemy laws and to ensure the implementation of much-needed procedural amendments to minimize their misuse."