

Political Economy of the Blasphemy Problem in Pakistan: How it Moved from a Religious Issue into a Money-Making Enterprise

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Abstract

This paper examines the political economy of blasphemy in Pakistan, arguing that blasphemy accusations have evolved from matters of religious offense into a structured system of profit, intimidation, and political control. Drawing on case studies from the past decade, including high-profile prosecutions and mob-violence incidents, the paper shows how the design and severity of Pakistan's blasphemy laws, particularly Section 295-C, make them uniquely vulnerable to abuse. Once an accusation is made, the threat of death, public hysteria, and institutional paralysis combine to produce outcomes largely detached from evidence or due process.

The analysis traces the historical evolution of the laws from colonial public-order provisions to instruments of theological crime under Islamization, situating this shift within broader processes of desecularization. It then documents the rise of organized "blasphemy gangs": networks of clerics, lawyers, political actors, and local power brokers who manufacture accusations to extract money, seize property, and consolidate influence. The paper further explores the financial and political incentives that sustain this system, including donations, extortion, electoral mobilization, and tacit state support. By framing blasphemy as a political economy rather than solely a religious or legal issue, the paper explains why reform has proven so resistant and identifies the conditions under which meaningful change might become possible.

Keywords: Blasphemy laws; Political economy; Religious extremism; Pakistan; Legal abuse

1. Introduction

In a crowded Lahore courtroom, a young student accused of blasphemy sits inside an iron cage. Outside, a mob chants threats while clerics pack the front rows. The evidence is little more than rumor, yet the accused's fate seems sealed before the judge utters a word. To the utter horror of the defendant and his counsel, the judge ordered a death sentence against the defendant, setting shockwaves across the country. This scene captures the political economy of blasphemy in Pakistan: what was once framed as a matter of faith and law has metastasized into a tool of profit, intimidation, and political control.

This paper examines the rising threat of blasphemy accusations in Pakistan, a charge that carries the death penalty, and in worse cases, instigates mob violence with impunity. By presenting a survey of important blasphemy-related cases and events from the past decade, this paper reveals the strong organized networks behind the rise of religious extremism. I also contextualize the history of the blasphemy law in order to trace the transformation of religious extremism from a current that produced episodic and isolated incidents of religious outrage into a predictable and organized enterprise. The central question is how this system developed, who benefits from it, and why it persists despite its destructive impact. I argue that blasphemy in Pakistan is no longer only about belief; it is about power and

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money. Networks of clerics, political actors, and businessmen have cultivated an industry where accusations become weapons, protests become revenue streams, and silence is maintained by fear.

The discussion proceeds in five sections. First, I contextualize the origins of the laws and their evolution and demonstrate how the law itself became the perfect weapon through its design and misuse. Second, I examine the rise of blasphemy gangs and their central role in converting accusations into extortion. In particular, I analyze the financial underpinnings of the system, asking who funds it and why. Third, I assess the consequences of rising extremism for individuals and institutions, including cases like that of Junaid Hafeez. Fourth, I trace how political and institutional dynamics sustain and propel the blasphemy economy. Finally, I consider policy windows and the conditions necessary for reform.

2. Contextualization

The blasphemy laws in Pakistan originated under British colonial rule, primarily to prevent communal violence between Hindus and Muslims [1]. Initially, these provisions were relatively narrow and aimed at maintaining public order. After independence in 1947, Pakistan inherited these colonial statutes but added sharper edges through a series of constitutional and legal changes. Under General Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s, the laws were expanded dramatically, culminating in Section 295-C of the Penal Code, which mandates death for insulting the Prophet Muhammad [2].

What had been a colonial-era public order regulation was transformed into a theological crime with capital punishment. The very severity of the law changed how society responded: accusations no longer needed to be proven to be deadly. From that point forward, blasphemy allegations became automatic triggers for hysteria. Mob violence surged in the 1980s and 1990s, and the law acquired a reputation as a weapon of choice for settling personal vendettas [3].

As Sadia Saeed has shown, this trajectory reflects a broader politics of desecularization in Pakistan, where religion was systematically folded into the state's legal apparatus [4]. The military, clerics, and conservative parties embraced the laws not just as moral imperatives but as political tools. Over time, the combination of legal severity, public hysteria, and institutional weakness created the perfect conditions for exploitation.

The harshness of Pakistan's blasphemy laws makes them uniquely susceptible to abuse. Because conviction carries death, mere accusations destroy lives. Courts rarely acquit due to public pressure, and mobs often act before trials conclude. This environment has turned the law itself into a political and economic weapon. The case of Asia Bibi illustrates this dynamic. A Christian farmworker accused in 2009 after an argument over water, she spent nearly a decade on death row before being acquitted by the Supreme Court in 2018 [5]. Her case demonstrated how flimsy accusations could trap individuals in endless trials, while politicians like Punjab Governor Salman Taseer, who defended her, were assassinated [6]. The message was unmistakable: questioning the law is itself a risk to life.

Similarly, the 2019 death sentence of Junaid Hafeez, a university lecturer, exposed how academic freedom and judicial independence collapse under blasphemy pressures [7]. Hafeez's trial dragged on for six years with repeated delays as judges recused themselves or were transferred. His first lawyer was murdered, and others faced threats. The conviction rested on contested digital evidence, yet the court yielded to pressure. As one observer noted, judges who even consider acquittal fear for their safety.

These cases show how the law's design and social weight make it a perfect weapon. Accusations require little proof, and once made, they unleash processes, legal, social, and violent, that are almost impossible to resist.

3. Blasphemy Gangs: Extortion at the Core

The weaponization of the law has given rise to organized exploitation by what can be described as blasphemy gangs. These are networks of clerics, lawyers, and local power brokers who manufacture accusations to extract money, property, or influence. Reports from Punjab indicate that entire groups specialize in orchestrating false blasphemy cases. Victims are often entrapped through fabricated social media conversations or rumors. Once accused, they face the impossible choice of paying extortionate sums to have the case withdrawn or enduring years of detention and trial. One investigation found that nearly 90 percent of cases in a cybercrime unit originated from the same group of complainants, suggesting a systematic racket [8].

The economic logic is straightforward: accusations generate revenue. Clerics who file complaints receive donations and community status. Lawyers profit from prolonged litigation. Police officers and lower officials take bribes to register or

dismiss cases. Extorted families pay to save their loved ones. This machinery operates with efficiency and predictability. Case studies highlight this pattern. In Lahore's Joseph Colony in 2013, a false blasphemy accusation led to a mob attack that destroyed hundreds of Christian homes. Survivors later testified that the incident was engineered by local businessmen who wanted to seize the land [9]. Similarly, investigations into false cases in 2025 revealed that networks connected to religious parties deliberately entrapped young men online to blackmail their families [10].

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), the far-right Barelvi party, has amplified this dynamic. Since its founding in 2015, TLP has mobilized mass protests and street blockades in defense of blasphemy laws [11]. The party uses these spectacles to pressure governments and collect funds while shielding clerics and activists involved in false cases. In the 2024 general elections, TLP gained mass support, rising as the fourth largest party in terms of percentage of votes. Its rise reflects how blasphemy gangs have moved from the margins to the center of Pakistan's political stage.

4. Funding: Who Pays and Why

Blasphemy gangs and their political patrons require financing, and funding flows from diverse sources. First, ordinary citizens contribute through mosque collections, donations, and political rallies. Many believe they are defending the Prophet's honor, not realizing that funds are diverted to sustain extortion networks. Second, businessmen and landlords often pay as a form of protection money. Supporting clerics and parties like TLP reduces the risk of being targeted themselves. In some cases, funding accusations becomes a way to eliminate rivals. Human Rights Watch has documented how minority-owned businesses are disproportionately accused of blasphemy, with accusers benefitting financially [12].

Third, political parties and state actors sometimes enable or bankroll blasphemy protests for strategic ends. In 2017, TLP members staged a massive sit-in at Faizabad, the entry point to the country's capital Islamabad. The protest led to incitement of violence against government officials, including a murder attempt on a sitting minister, creating a tense law and order situation. It was shocking to find out, however, that during the 2017 Faizabad sit-in, elements within the state were later revealed to have distributed money to TLP protesters [13]. These included high level military officers who were funding and guiding the TLP protestors to destabilize the elected government. Such episodes demonstrate how the political establishment sometimes sees value in weaponizing religious outrage to weaken rivals or deflect attention. The result is a complex political economy in which fear, profit, and ideology intersect. Clerics maintain street power, politicians gain leverage, businessmen protect assets, and gangs secure revenue.

The consequences of this system are devastating for individuals, institutions, and society. For individuals, accusations often mean death or lifelong exile. Victims like Asia Bibi had to flee the country even after acquittal. Former Punjab Governor Salman Taseer was murdered by his own guard in 2011 for suggesting that Aasia Bibi was innocent [18]. Similarly, lawyers who defend the accused, such as Rashid Rehman in the Junaid Hafeez case, have been assassinated [14]. Accused individuals in custody have been lynched by mobs storming police stations. For institutions, the blasphemy economy corrodes the rule of law. Judges often convict to save their lives rather than uphold justice, while the police officers often become bystanders during mob violence, as in the 2023 Jaranwala attacks, where churches and homes were destroyed with little intervention from the state [15]. Politicians avoid reform to preserve their careers. The system breeds judicial paralysis and political cowardice.

For society, the effects are chilling. Minority communities live in constant fear. Public discourse is silenced, with journalists and academics self-censoring to avoid accusations. The law erodes social trust, as neighbors and rivals know accusations can be weaponized. The result is a culture of suspicion, intimidation, and violence.

5. Institutional Story

The persistence of this economy is tied to Pakistan's institutional history. Successive governments, whether military or civilian, have used religion for legitimacy. Zia's Islamization entrenched clerical power [2]. Later governments, facing weak legitimacy, often ceded space to groups like TLP to avoid confrontation.

The judiciary, historically under pressure from both the executive and public opinion, has struggled to assert independence. As Charles Kennedy noted decades ago, determining "repugnancy to Islam" became not a legal matter but a political one [16]. This trend has only deepened. Civil-military imbalance also plays a role. As the International Crisis Group has observed, the military has often used religious groups to destabilize civilian governments [17]. Allowing TLP and similar actors space in politics serves broader strategic purposes, as witnessed during the Faizabad sit-in in 2017. This dynamic reinforces the impunity of blasphemy gangs and weakens reformist efforts.

Despite the grim picture, moments of potential reform have emerged. The Supreme Court's acquittal of Asia Bibi in 2018 was one such window, though it required extraordinary international pressure [5]. Civil society organizations like the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan continue to call for procedural safeguards and commissions to investigate misuse [18].

Policy windows will likely depend on shifting incentives. Business elites, for instance, may eventually tire of extortion. Political parties could face backlash if blasphemy gangs destabilize governance too severely. International pressure, while limited, remains important in protecting high-profile victims. However, without structural reforms, such as repealing or at least amending Section 295-C, protecting judges and lawyers, and strengthening police response, blasphemy will remain a lucrative industry. The political economy sustains itself because too many actors profit from it, while too few bear the costs.

6. Conclusion

Blasphemy in Pakistan has become more than a matter of religion or law. It is an economy powered by fear, financed by protection money, and enforced by mobs. Blasphemy gangs exploit legal loopholes, political parties harness outrage for votes, and businessmen pay to avoid being targeted or to seize rivals' assets. The law, once intended to preserve harmony, has become a tool of violence and extortion.

Understanding blasphemy as a political economy clarifies why reform is so elusive: it is not simply about belief but about material interests and power. To dismantle this system, Pakistan would need more than legal changes; it would require a shift in political will, institutional courage, and societal norms. Until then, the cycle of accusation, profit, and fear will continue to define one of Pakistan's most dangerous industries.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

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