



# Briefing on Blasphemy Crackdown in Pakistan 2017: Disappearances, Arrests, and “Blasphemy” Hysteria

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## Summary

During 2017 to date there has been an upsurge in persecution of non-religious bloggers and activists in Pakistan. There are broadly three interconnected issues:

- Enforced disappearances of at least five men without charge, during which torture is alleged
- Arrests of ‘atheist’ social media users and activists for ‘blasphemy’ on spurious grounds
- A High Court-led effort to “remove” blasphemy from the internet, reportedly with active support from Facebook, resulting in the domestic blocking of websites and social media accounts

# First wave (January 2017): Disappearances and alleged torture

In January 2017, several 'liberal', non-religious or secularist activists and bloggers (including social media users) were "disappeared" or detained by security services in Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> Those detained included at least the following individuals:

**Ahmad Waqass Goraya (or Waqas Goraya)**

Disappeared: Wed 4 January

Facebook: [facebook.com/AWGoraya](https://www.facebook.com/AWGoraya)

**Asim Saeed**

Disappeared: Wed 4 January

**Salman Haider (aka Sallu Bhai)**

Disappeared: Fri 6 January or Sat 7 January?

Academic, playwright and poet

Board member of Tanqeed magazine <[tanqeed.org/](http://tanqeed.org/)>

Urdu language blog: [tanqeed.org/section/blogs/sallu-ka-blog/](http://tanqeed.org/section/blogs/sallu-ka-blog/)

Facebook: [facebook.com/salman.zaheer.313](https://www.facebook.com/salman.zaheer.313)

**Ahmed Raza Naseer**

Reported missing: Sat 7 January

A polio sufferer, Ahmed Raza uses a wheelchair, and was reportedly "taken away in front of his father without any trace of his whereabouts"

**Samar Abbas**

Reported missing: Sat 7 January

President of the Civil Progressive Alliance of Pakistan (CPAP), an anti-extremism group

<[facebook.com/CivilProgressive/](https://www.facebook.com/CivilProgressive/)>

All five were released without charge approximately three weeks after their disappearance.

However police reportedly said that the men had been tortured during their detention and made to sign agreements that they would not discuss their detention. There was also widespread abuse directed at those detained, both online and in traditional media and via some television channels.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to their release, there was parliamentary discussion about the disappearances, with some representatives calling for the return of the disappeared activists. However, the government does not appear to have made any information available about the abductors, nor taken any action against them.

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<sup>1</sup> [iheu.org/pakistans-disappeared-activists-what-we-know/](http://iheu.org/pakistans-disappeared-activists-what-we-know/)

<sup>2</sup> [thehindu.com/news/international/Three-weeks-on-five-missing-Pakistani-rights-activists-return-home/article17108386.ece](http://thehindu.com/news/international/Three-weeks-on-five-missing-Pakistani-rights-activists-return-home/article17108386.ece)

## Second wave (March 2017): “Blasphemy” arrests, threats, and prejudice

On 22 March 2017 (~16:00) a blogger and theological scholar **Abdul Waheed** (penname: **Ayaz Nizami**) was kidnapped by Pakistan security services.<sup>3</sup>

Around the same time, another blogger **Rana Noman** was also arrested.

Media reported publicly that two had been arrested for “uploading offensive content on social media”, linking them to sites including “realisticapproach.com, The Free Thnkrz, AAAP, truth.com, CEMB”, and describing them as “admins of the social media pages on which they were both uploading blasphemous content”. There was a further accusation that they “used the SIM for this shameful act for Holland, received financial and technical assistance from the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States while avoiding arrest.”<sup>4</sup>

The IHEU understands that the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) may have verified the pen name and attempted to gain access to his accounts by pressuring Abdul Waheed during “interrogation”.

The link to his pen name (which was previously anonymous) has now been widely circulated in traditional media and online. This ensures that even when he is released, Abdul Waheed’s life will be at risk from extremists prepared to kill to settle “blasphemy” accusations.

The hashtag #HangAyazNizami trended on Twitter for some days after his arrest, and continues to date.<sup>5 6</sup>

The IHEU understands that further bloggers/activists are at risk of arrest.

The families of those arrested may also be at risk of harassment or persecution, potentially from non-state actors.

The FIA claims to be investigating dozens of people in connection with “blasphemous” content.

Ayaz Nizami’s page on the AAAPakistan website was here: <http://aaapakistan.org/ayaz-nizami/> but is not currently available.

## Connected threat to activist abroad

At least one atheist activist overseas has been threatened with “extradition” by Pakistani authorities. The FIA and also in the newspaper Ummat there are accusations of atheists abroad

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<sup>3</sup> [92newshd.tv/two-arrested-disseminating-blasphemous-content-objectionable-literature-seized/](http://92newshd.tv/two-arrested-disseminating-blasphemous-content-objectionable-literature-seized/)

<sup>4</sup> [dailypakistan.com.pk/national/23-Mar-2017/547723](http://dailypakistan.com.pk/national/23-Mar-2017/547723)

<sup>5</sup> [twitter.com/hashtag/hangayaznizami](https://twitter.com/hashtag/hangayaznizami)

<sup>6</sup> [secularism.org.uk/news/2017/03/pakistani-twitter-users-call-for-hanging-of-blasphemer](http://secularism.org.uk/news/2017/03/pakistani-twitter-users-call-for-hanging-of-blasphemer)

receiving funding to “spread blasphemy” from the Council of Ex-Muslims (UK) and the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). Such accusations are false.

## Views of the accused

As described by the Atheist & Agnostic Alliance Pakistan, Abdul Waheed / Ayaz Nizami has Islamic training in “Tafseer, Principles of Tafseer, Hadith, Principles of Hdith, Fiqh. Principles of fiqh, Arabic language (grammar, vocabulary, and literature), philosophy & logic.” He claims that the study of Islam in an academic context, in addition to the other Abrahamic faiths, led him to the conclusion that religions were not divine, but are a “creation of the human brain and are a bi-product of culture and civilisations in the world especially the Middle East”. His mission was to “educate and enlighten his fellow countrymen and share his findings with them” for the sake of truth.<sup>7</sup>

## Accused prevented from leaving the country

There were reports 8 March 2017 that those accused of posting “blasphemous” content would be put on the Exit Control List (ECL), effectively preventing them from seeking asylum.<sup>8</sup>

## Wider crackdown on “blasphemous content”

Since the beginning of the year, government officials and the courts have agitated against supposed “blasphemous” content, claiming that dozens of people are under investigation, and that there is a need to remove masses of “blasphemous” content from social media in particular.

On 27 February, the Islamabad High Court (IHC) directed the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) to block pages or websites containing blasphemous material on social media.

On 7 March 2017 the IHC summoned Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan for the following day, on a contempt of court petition. The petitioner (Salman Shahid, through his counsel Tariq Asad) contended that the authorities including the PTA have failed to comply with a prior court order to block websites and social media accounts containing “blasphemous” material. The judge Shaukat Aziz Siddiqui issued said: “This matter requires immediate attention, otherwise, the patience of the followers of Holy Prophet (PBH) may run out of control. Due to delicacy, importance and seriousness of the issue, let honourable Minister of Interior, Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan be directed to appear in person for tomorrow, who is expected to take some steps in his own supervision to eliminate this evil, even at the cost of blocking the entire social media.” Reportedly, “Tears rolled down the face of Justice Siddiqui when he dictated the order”, and he said that: “Hazrat Muhammad (SAW) who will be our saviour on the Day of Judgment is the most sacred personality and blasphemy has been committed against him. We would not leave this issue for the bureaucracy to handle... There will be proceedings against blasphemers and against those who

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<sup>7</sup> [conatusnews.com/free-ayaz-nizami/](http://conatusnews.com/free-ayaz-nizami/)

<sup>8</sup> [pakistanatoday.com.pk/2017/03/08/islamabad-high-court-orders-blasphemers-names-be-put-on-ecl/](http://pakistanatoday.com.pk/2017/03/08/islamabad-high-court-orders-blasphemers-names-be-put-on-ecl/)

remained silent spectators. This is the greatest form of terrorism and people involved in this heinous act were the biggest terrorists".<sup>9</sup>

As a result of this pressure, the Interior Minister on behalf of government is now stoking a media campaign telling people that their right of free expression is subject to a long list of restrictions. In addition to individual arrests, Facebook and possibly other social networking sites are reported to be collaborating with the law enforcement to provide information about social media users.<sup>10</sup> This has been confirmed by the Interior Ministry giving evidence at the High Court.

On 27 March it was reported that the IHC had heard from the Interior Minister that meetings with Facebook had been successful and that "85%" of "blasphemous" content had now been removed.

<sup>11</sup> What – if anything – this figure corresponds to is debateable. However, it seems clear that Facebook has at least to some extent collaborated with government to block or remove some content.

## Other forms of mounting pressure

Parliament has passed resolutions condemning what it describes as blasphemous content on social media.<sup>12</sup>

An MNA has issued an ultimatum to the secularists: mend your ways or leave.<sup>13</sup>

The Interior Minister held a meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Conference on "blasphemy" online.<sup>14</sup> This appears to be an attempt to position Pakistan as a leader in the Islamic world in combating so-called "blasphemy".

A retired official of the armed forces, Air Marshal Shahid Latif, has accused the Prime Minister of committing blasphemy for making a speech on religious tolerance and inclusiveness.<sup>15</sup>

## Blocked websites

The websites of several atheist communities and organizations have been blocked in Pakistan. These include the website of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain (CEMB) and Atheist Agnostic Alliance Pakistan (AAAP).

Their Facebook pages as well as that of the largest non-religious group in the country, Pakistani Freethinkers, are also unviewable in Pakistan but not from elsewhere.

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<sup>9</sup> [nation.com.pk/newspaper-picks/08-Mar-2017/blasphemers-are-terrorists-ihc-judge](http://nation.com.pk/newspaper-picks/08-Mar-2017/blasphemers-are-terrorists-ihc-judge)

<sup>10</sup> [dailytimes.com.pk/editorial/26-Mar-17/in-the-name-of-god](http://dailytimes.com.pk/editorial/26-Mar-17/in-the-name-of-god)

<sup>11</sup>

[indianexpress.com/article/world/facebook-removed-blasphemous-content-on-governments-request-pakistan-4587702/](http://indianexpress.com/article/world/facebook-removed-blasphemous-content-on-governments-request-pakistan-4587702/)

<sup>12</sup> [dailytimes.com.pk/editorial/26-Mar-17/in-the-name-of-god](http://dailytimes.com.pk/editorial/26-Mar-17/in-the-name-of-god)

<sup>13</sup> [tribune.com.pk/story/1363949/secularists-mend-ways-leave-country-says-pti-lawmaker/](http://tribune.com.pk/story/1363949/secularists-mend-ways-leave-country-says-pti-lawmaker/)

<sup>14</sup> [dailytimes.com.pk/editorial/26-Mar-17/in-the-name-of-god](http://dailytimes.com.pk/editorial/26-Mar-17/in-the-name-of-god)

<sup>15</sup> [dailytimes.com.pk/editorial/26-Mar-17/in-the-name-of-god](http://dailytimes.com.pk/editorial/26-Mar-17/in-the-name-of-god)

## Political distraction?

While the motivation of clerics and some other actors when it comes to stoking “blasphemy” hysteria may be religious, there may also be political motives for the current push. For example, the “blasphemy” furore may serve some political interests as a useful distraction from ongoing corruption allegations linked to the Panama leaks.

It is tempting to think that this may apply to the Islamabad High Court judge, Justice Shaukat Aziz Siddiqui, who is driving much of the furore around “blasphemy” in 2017. Last year, he was widely accused of being implicated in multifarious corruption scandals.<sup>16</sup>

Prior to his appointment as a High Court justice, he was also an open supporter of Mumtaz Qadri, the self-confessed killer of Salman Taseer, murdered for his criticism of the “blasphemy” law.<sup>17 18</sup>

## Recommendations

The IHEU is calling on civil society, national governments and international institutions to:

- condemn the anti-“blasphemy” and anti-“atheist” hysteria of the Islamabad High Court and the Interior Ministry of Pakistan
- pressure the government of Pakistan to release those accused of “blasphemy” and desist in persecuting voices that are ‘liberal’, ‘atheist’, or ‘secular’ under the “blasphemy” law
- pressure the government of Pakistan to uphold freedom of thought, religion or belief, and freedom of expression, by abolishing anti-“blasphemy” laws
- investigate the role of international corporations such as Facebook in allegedly facilitating the suppression of “blasphemous” content and free expression

For more information on the “international human rights consensus against blasphemy laws” see: [end-blasphemy-laws.org/about/the-international-human-rights-consensus-against-blasphemy-laws/](http://end-blasphemy-laws.org/about/the-international-human-rights-consensus-against-blasphemy-laws/)

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<sup>16</sup> [alaiwah.wordpress.com/2016/05/07/a-reference-against-islamabad-high-court-judge-will-he-be-dismissed/](http://alaiwah.wordpress.com/2016/05/07/a-reference-against-islamabad-high-court-judge-will-he-be-dismissed/)

<sup>17</sup> [new-pakistan.com/2014/06/06/impeach-shaukat-aziz-siddiqui/](http://new-pakistan.com/2014/06/06/impeach-shaukat-aziz-siddiqui/)

<sup>18</sup> [azharayaz.wordpress.com/2016/10/29/why-social-media-is-criticizing-justice-shaukat-aziz-siddiqui/](http://azharayaz.wordpress.com/2016/10/29/why-social-media-is-criticizing-justice-shaukat-aziz-siddiqui/)