

Allegations of blasphemy and mob violence in Mujahid Colony, Sargodha

An HRCP fact-finding report



Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

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Introduction

On 25 May 2024, a large mob gathered in Mujahid Colony in Sargodha and attacked the house of Nazir (Lazar) Masih and his son Sultan Masih, following allegations that they had deliberately burnt pages of the Holy Quran. An announcement to this effect was reportedly made from a local mosque, inciting a mob of about 2,000 people to gather outside the adjoining homes of Nazir and Sultan Masih, demanding they be put to death. Videos of the mob and their demand went viral on social media platforms soon after. The police were able to eventually evacuate nine members of the family. However, Nazir Masih was caught by the mob and severely beaten. He was taken to the hospital in critical condition and succumbed to his injuries a week later on the night between 2 and 3 June 2024.

On 28 May 2024, a fact-finding mission led by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) visited Sargodha. The mission comprised Maheen Pracha (staff member), Asad Jamal (lawyer and human rights activist) and Yaqoob Khan Bangash (academic and human rights activist). They met local religious, community and political leaders from the Christian community, senior police officers, members of the victim's family, and various residents of Mujahid Colony. The mission's terms of reference were to:

- Ascertain the facts of the case, including what triggered the mob, what allegations were made and against whom, the basis for these allegations, the mobilization of the mob, the extent of violence, and the response of law enforcement teams.
- Investigate the persecution of the Christian community and Christian-Muslim relations in the area before the incident.
- Assess the role of the civil administration and law enforcement agencies, with a special focus on steps taken to ensure the safety of religious minorities following simmering religious tension in Maryam Town, Sargodha, in September 2023.
- Probe persistent underlying religious and political tensions that may have instigated violence against the Christian community and steps taken by authorities to resolve these tensions.
- Evaluate the sense of insecurity among the Christian community and precautionary measures taken by them.
- Investigate claims of deviation from due process while lodging FIRs against Christian community members following this violent episode.
- Assess (a) the reasons for the Punjab government's efforts to seemingly downplay the incident and (b) the efficacy of such a strategy.

Meeting at Catholic Parish House, Sargodha

The mission met the parish priest, Fr David John, and his pastoral team, including the catechist for Mujahid Colony, at the Catholic Church of St Francis Xavier. Bishop Joseph Rehmat, the Catholic bishop of Faisalabad, and local Christian lawyers and activists also attended the consultation.

From the discussion, it became clear that while there had been several cases of Christian-Muslim strife in villages around Sargodha, this was the first such incident in Mujahid Colony, which is located a few minutes from the city centre. The mission was told that about 150–200 Christian families reside in Mujahid Colony among about 2,000 Muslim families. It was stressed that, by and large, inter-faith relations had been cordial in this neighbourhood.

The mission was told that Nazir Masih was a well-to-do resident and had lived abroad for many years, visiting Sargodha periodically. He had two sons, with Sultan Masih living next door and another son, Ilyas Masih, living abroad.

According to participants at the meeting, the timeline of the incident was as follows. On 25 May, Nazir Masih woke up early as usual and swept the area outside his house. He then burnt fallen leaves and other rubbish near a water pump and went home. Soon thereafter, an announcement was made from the nearby mosque by one Manzar Abbas, urging residents to gather outside the homes of Nazir Masih and Sultan Masih because they had ‘committed blasphemy’. Residents were also reportedly sent WhatsApp messages to this effect.

The announcement and messages alleged that while burning rubbish, Nazir and Sultan Masih had also deliberately burnt pages of the Holy Quran. Consequently, an enraged crowd of several hundred people—armed with rocks, sticks and petrol bombs—gathered outside the Masih’s adjoining homes, demanding that the family be put to death. The allegation itself was made by one Ayub Gondal, Nazir Masih’s neighbour. Participants at the meeting also claimed that Sultan Masih and Ayub Gondal’s children had had an altercation a couple of days earlier.



Meeting with representatives of the Christian community

As the mob tried to break into the house, the police were called and arrived within about an hour. They initially tried to reason with the crowd but then chose to evacuate the family when this proved unsuccessful. Consequently, under the cover of tear gas, they evacuated nine members of the Masih family, including women and children. Unfortunately, Nazir Masih was caught by the mob and severely beaten with rocks and sticks, sustaining serious head injuries. According to another version of events put forward by Christian residents, Nazir Masih was left behind deliberately for the mob to exact ‘retribution’ while allowing the police to rescue the rest of the family.

The mission was also told that Nazir Masih’s family owned a shoe business and that their workshop/warehouse was just a few doors down from their house on the same street. The business employed nine workers—all Christian—but had been burnt down by the mob and the stock either burnt or stolen.

The local Christian leadership stressed that while their relations with the majority community were largely cordial, the lack of prosecution of culprits involved in similar incidents had given license to miscreants in such cases. Citing the Jaranwala case, the bishop of Faisalabad—under whose jurisdiction it lies—stated that none

of the accused had been convicted or jailed for the incident.¹ ‘This allows people to act with impunity,’ he said, ‘because they know that even if they are arrested, it will be for a short time only.’

Site visit and meeting with law enforcement team in Mujahid Colony

The mission then visited Mujahid Colony, where the superintendent of police (SP) who had spearheaded the operation, SP Ziaullah, provided a briefing.

The team observed that Mujahid Colony, like other localities in Sargodha, was compact with narrow streets that often led to dead ends. Only small vehicles and motorcycles can access the area easily. The homes of Nazir and Sultan Masih are about a three-to-four-minute walk from the main road. Their corner house is clearly one of the largest and most well-built in the area. Ayub Gondal’s house is adjacent to the Masih homes but set further back in a dead-end street.



Evidence of the damage and arson perpetrated by the mob

On entering the first house owned by the Masih family, the mission studied the state of the room that had sustained damage at the hands of the mob. Virtually the entire room was charred and even the metal window frame had melted. According to SP Ziaullah, after the police evacuated the family, the mob broke through a side window and threw petrol bombs into the room, setting it alight and damaging furniture, the walls and other household items. The mission also noted that part of the room had been whitewashed. On being asked why, the SP explained that all the necessary evidence had been collected and the police had been instructed to restore the room to its original state by the Punjab chief minister.

The mission asked the SP to explain how Nazir Masih had been caught by the mob despite police attempts to evacuate the family. He explained that while the family had been instructed by the police to run in one direction under the cover of tear gas, Nazir Masih had become disoriented and run in the opposite direction. As a result, he was apprehended by the mob, severely beaten and left for dead.

After the rest of the family had been rescued, the police returned to find Nazir Masih in critical condition. He was then taken to an ambulance parked on the main road. There, the police found that the driver had also

¹ In August 2023, mobs attacked and burnt down scores of Christian homes and churches in the town of Jaranwala, following allegations of blasphemy, in an incident that garnered widespread public condemnation.

fled while the ambulance itself was being pelted with stones. A police officer then drove Nazir Masih to the hospital. He was subsequently shifted to the Combined Military Hospital in Rawalpindi where he was receiving specialist treatment and undergoing surgery.

The mission also visited the adjoining house owned by the Masih family where the mob had reportedly broken through the front entrance and vandalized a room that used to house a beauty parlour. The room and its contents had clearly sustained extensive damage while the tear gas shells used by the police to disperse the crowd were visible on the ground outside. The SP mentioned that he had been instructed to restore the room to its original condition.



The mission visited the site of the mob attack in Mujahid Colony

According to the police, the composition of the mob was primarily local—from Mujahid Colony itself and adjoining areas. The fact that the allegation was made by an immediate neighbour was instructive in this regard, the SP stated. He also pointed out that among the mob were several women, including elderly women, who appeared to be as charged as the rest of the mob and had threatened to ‘burn them [the Masih family] alive’.

The mission also noted that many of the houses in the neighbourhood were locked from the outside—evidently vacant. The SP said that this was likely because of the ongoing operation against the alleged perpetrators: the police had conducted house-to-house searches and arrested over 50 people till that point; many had fled, however, presumably to escape arrest. He also said that footage from two CCTV cameras had been recovered and was being used to identify and find the culprits.

The mission observed that the Masih family’s shoe workshop/warehouse—a single room with a store—had also been gutted. Once again, the mission noted that the warehouse’s blackened walls and ceiling had been whitewashed but was told by the SP that all the necessary evidence had been collected and the restoration process begun.

The mission spoke to a female member of Nazir Masih’s family and asked about their wellbeing. She told the team—in the presence of the police—that the latter had looked after them and done well to evacuate them in time. However, while the SP declared that the family would be able to return safely to their home, the family

member told the mission privately that returning to Mujahid Colony was impossible. ‘How do we have any guarantee that this will not happen again?’ she said. Her sense of fear and despair was palpable.

Meeting with neighbourhood residents

While in Mujahid Colony, the mission spoke to several residents, both Muslim and Christian. The team’s conversations revealed that the incident seemed specific to Nazir Masih and his son Sultan as no other Christians were attacked or harmed. The mission noted that there appeared to be a history of bad blood between Ayub Gondal and Nazir Masih’s families and this may have been a way to ‘settle scores.’ That said, the Mission was informed that relations between Muslims and Christian in the area were generally cordial.

On speaking to a local shop owner, a Christian resident of Mujahid Colony, the mission confirmed that an announcement had indeed been made from the local mosque, accusing Nazir Masih of having defiled the Quran.

The mission also observed a Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) poster displayed prominently outside a shop reportedly owned by Ayub Gondal. Members of the Christian community said that Gondal was an active TLP supporter and had worked closely with the party’s local candidate in the February 2024 elections.

Analysis of first information reports

Two FIRs were filed in connection with this incident (see Annex 1).

The first was lodged against Nazir Masih on 25 May 2024 under S. 295A and 295B of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) along with S. 9 of the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997 on grounds of ‘sectarian hatred’. This FIR was registered at 0830 and is based on the verbal statement of one Muhammad Jahangir, a resident of Mujahid Colony and a councilor of the local municipal corporation. Jahangir claims that, at about 0700, he exited his residence on hearing a noise in the street and witnessed Nazir Masih ‘defiling the Quran’ by setting pages alight.

Jahangir also claims that one Muhammad Irfan Gondal [Ayub Gondal’s son] and Muhammad Akram witnessed the alleged offence, following which Nazir Masih ran and hid inside his residence. The FIR goes on to say that Muhammad Akram called the police on 15 to report the alleged offence. Jahangir claims that he, Gondal and Akram presented the burnt pages to the police officials who arrived at the scene in response to the call as ‘evidence’.

The mission was, however, told by representatives of the Christian community that when the police initially arrived in response to the 15 call, they did not deem the complaint serious enough to take cognisance. This perceived ‘inaction’ on the part of the police may have spurred Gondal and his associates into instigating mob violence by having the allegations of blasphemy made public through the local mosque’s loudspeakers.

The second FIR was lodged several hours after the lynching incident, on charges of attempted murder (S. 324 of the PPC) and other offences committed by the mob, including charges under S. 186, 353, 436, 440 and 149 of the PPC and S. 7 and 11 of the Anti-Terrorism Act 1957. Since Nazir Masih’s death on the night between 2 and 3 June, the charge of murder has also been added to the report. The mission noted, however, that the original FIR made no mention of the announcement issued from the mosque loudspeaker under the relevant provisions of the Punjab Loudspeakers Act 2015, despite this having played a direct role in rallying the mob.

Conclusion

The mission observes that it was highly likely that that this was a targeted attack against Nazir and Sultan Masih's family, emanating from a personal dispute that was given a religious colour to exact maximum leverage.²

The connection between Ayub Gondal as the alleged instigator and the TLP must be taken very seriously, given HRCP's previous observations regarding a similar role played by TLP supporters in alienating, accusing and instigating attacks against members of religious minorities.

Even apart from this nexus, HRCP has reason to believe that interfaith relations, however cordial on the surface, have become increasingly subject to deep-seated resentment over issues—mainly non-religious—that often give way to allegations of blasphemy. Even where violence is not a direct result, wider societal discord is now inevitable.

While the mission commends the role of the police in evacuating the family from the area, this does not absolve them of responsibility for protecting an elderly vulnerable man from being lynched by a mob. HRCP now expects all the culprits involved in the attack to be charged, convicted and sentenced for their crimes.

The mission also notes that the police failed to anticipate that the 15 call they received (prior to the mob attack) alleging an instance of blasphemy could put the Christian residents of Mujahid Colony at serious risk.

Finally, the mission notes with deep concern the Punjab government's attempt to downplay the incident by reportedly discouraging press coverage and failing to engage with the Christian community in Sargodha. Had the chief minister unequivocally condemned the incident, this would have served the Christian community far better than attempting to 'restore' the victims' homes as though the incident were an anomaly.

Recommendations

- Those who participated in the mob attack and were responsible for the death of Nazir Masih must be arrested, investigated and duly charged, followed by prosecution, convicting and sentencing. No leniency should be shown to anyone.
- The district, regional and provincial leadership of the police and provincial government should share information on how the investigation is proceeding and explain what steps are being taken to ensure that such incidents do not recur. Measures to restore Christian citizens' confidence are critical and should be taken promptly without compromising the investigation or prosecution.
- Concerted efforts must be made to counter hate speech of all kinds, especially on social media platforms and through mosque loudspeakers.
- Strict action should be taken against political parties that use blasphemy allegations as a tool for political purposes.
- Police response time should be improved and adequate equipment and powers given to them to deal with such incidents. Police officers on the ground must be sensitized to the very real risk that complaints of alleged blasphemy can carry for religious minorities.
- The 2014 Supreme Court judgment on the rights of religious minorities must be implemented in letter and spirit.
- The government must ensure the physical and economic wellbeing of the affected families and rehabilitate them as swiftly as possible.

² It is worth noting that, as against the first FIR claiming that pages of the Quran had been burnt, it is highly improbable that the debris presented to the police could have been established conclusively as Quranic pages in the first instance, given the speed with which paper burns.

- Interfaith work should be strengthened at the national, provincial, district and local levels, both at the government and non-government levels, so as to promote stronger interfaith relationships and discourage the misuse of religion.
- The blasphemy laws should be amended to prevent their misuse, especially by adding penalties for false accusations.

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