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Campaign for mother facing death by stoning

Iranian family say adultery conviction was bogus

Woman has already been subjected to 99 lashes

Saeed Kamali Dehghan

A 43-year-old Iranian woman is facing death by stoning unless an international campaign launched by her children forces the authorities to quash what her lawyer calls a bogus conviction.

In a case that highlights the growing use of the death penalty in a country that has already executed more than 100 people this year, Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani was convicted in May 2006 of conducting an "illicit relationship outside marriage."

Sakineh already endured a sentence of 99 lashes, but her case was re-opened when a court in Tabriz suspected her of

murdering her husband. She was acquitted, but the adultery charge was reviewed and a death penalty handed down on the basis of "judge's knowledge" - a loophole that allows for subjective judicial rulings where no conclusive evidence is present.

Speaking to the Guardian, her son Sajad, 22, and daughter Farideh, 17, say their mother has been unjustly accused and already punished for something she did not do.

"She's innocent, she's been there for five years for doing nothing", Sajad said. He described the imminent execution as barbaric. "Imagining her, bound inside a deep hole in the ground, stoned to death,



Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani was originally acquitted but later convicted on 'judge's knowledge'

has been a nightmare for me and my sister for all these years."

Under Iranian sharia law, the sentenced individual is buried up to the neck (or to the waist in the case of men), and those attending the public execution are called upon to throw stones. If the convicted person manages to free themselves from the hole, the death sentence is commuted.

Iran, embarrassed by the international attention over stonings, has rarely practiced it in public in recent years. But the country still executed 388 people last year - more than any other country in the world apart from China, according to Amnesty International. Most are hanged.

Last night protesters gathered outside the Iranian embassy in London to demand Sakineh's release.

Five years ago when Sakineh was flogged, Sajad was 17 and present in the punishment room. "They lashed her just in front my eyes, this has been carved in my mind since then."

Mohammed Mostafaei, an acclaimed

Iranian lawyer volunteered to represent her when her sentence was announced a few months ago. He wrote a public letter about her conviction shortly after. "This is an absolutely illegal sentence," he said. "Two of five judges who investigated Sakineh's case in Tabriz prison concluded that there's no forensic evidence of adultery.

"According to the law, death sentence and especially stoning needs explicit evidences and witnesses while in her case, surprisingly, the judge's knowledge was considered as enough," he said.

Mina Ahadi, a human rights activist in Germany who helped Sakineh's children to launch their campaign internationally has been in regular contact with Sajad and Farideh.

She said that after the campaign was launched last week, she received phone calls from the families of two other women kept in Tabriz prison, where Sakineh is, revealing that they are also convicted of adultery and sentenced to death by stoning. Azar Bagheri, 19, and Marian

Ghorbanzadeh, 25, are their names, Ahadi disclosed.

"Azar was arrested when she was just 15. They couldn't punish her before she became 18 years old according to the law, so they waited until now ... and want to stone her to death," Ahadi said. She has been subjected to mock stonings, complete with partial burial in the ground. "They're preparing her for the real one," said Ahadi.

Ahadi who has been following the stoning sentence in Iran over the past few years says that she is aware of the names of 12 other women who are sentenced to death by stoning in Iran at the moment.

"These are just the women I know, I estimate that at least 40 to 50 other women are waiting for the same destiny in Iran right now," she said.

"Stoning to death is not simply just a judicial punishment, it's a political means in the hands of the Iranian regime to threaten people. It has more function than just a simple punishment for them."

Scores killed in suicide attack on Sufi shrine in Lahore

Declan Walsh Islamabad

Pakistani authorities were under fresh pressure yesterday to deal with the growing number of militant attacks in Punjab after suicide bombers devastated one of the country's most famous Sufi shrines.

At least 42 people were killed and 180 wounded on Thursday night when two bombers attacked the Data Ganj Baksh shrine in central Lahore, where thousands of people had gathered to pray, dance and listen to devotional music.

It was the second assault on a religious site in the city in recent months - an assault on members of the minority Ahmadi sect in late May killed 94 people - and underscored how extremists are determined to bring their bloody campaign to the heart of Punjab, Pakistan's most populous and powerful province.

The bombing was captured on CCTV and shown on TV. The first bomber was seen running into a basement clutching a bag filled with explosives and ballbearings, pursued by a guard, before a large explosion swept across the room.

As the smoke cleared a presumed second bomber is seen slipping into the building, against the tide of fleeing worshippers, and running up a staircase into the main area, where he also blew himself up.

Images from the site showed debris and body parts scattered across the blood-stained marble courtyard of the shrine.

Angry worshippers surged through the streets outside, throwing rocks at police and attacking TV broadcast vans. Police fired shots in the air to calm the crowd.

Ripples of outrage spread across the country. Hundreds of people rallied in Lahore yesterday demanding the resignation of Punjab government officials.

"This is a barbaric attack and should serve as a wake-up call," wrote Raza Rumi, a prominent Lahore blogger. "Data Saheb's shrine is not just another crowded place -



Security officials examine the site of suicide bomb attacks at the Sufi shrine in Lahore. The brutal attack was caught on CCTV Photograph: Arif Ali/AFP/Getty Images

it represents tolerant Sufi Islam, which is directly under attack by the puritans."

Farahnaz Ispahani, spokeswoman for President Asif Ali Zardari, said: "This sickening poison of extremism will be driven out of our nation and we will not be cowed. Those who still pretend we are not a nation at war are complicit in these deaths."

Who Pakistan is at war with, however,

'Those who pretend we are not a nation at war are complicit in these deaths'

remains an open question. Angry protesters at the site of the bombing raised slogans against Israel, the US, the Taliban and the ultra-orthodox strain of Wahhabi Islam. Senior local officials also appeared to be confused.

The Lahore commissioner, Khushro Perwaiz, blamed the attack on a "conspiracy in which locals are being used" - a euphemism often used to point the finger at neighbouring India.

Other residents suggested the Ahmadi community - which has no history of organised violence - was taking revenge for the attacks on its mosques in May.

The most likely perpetrators, however, come from within Punjab itself. A network of hardline madrasas scattered across the

province, mostly in the southern belt, is home to thousands of religious extremists, many with links to jihadi outfits once fostered by military intelligence.

Over the past year the Punjab provincial government has repeatedly vowed to crack down on the militant networks following attacks on the visiting Sri Lankan cricket team, intelligence and police buildings, and busy market places. But little action has been taken.

The task of "draining the swamp" is further complicated by the machinations of the military intelligence agencies, which appear to be continuing their policy of distinguishing between "good" and "bad" jihadi groups - a policy that analysts warn is dangerously destabilising to Pakistan.

Thursday night's assault is not the first attack on Sufis. In March 2009 extremists in Peshawar blew up the shrine to Rahman Baba. Earlier this month militants struck another shrine in the same area.

In Lahore, the glittering Data Ganj Baksh shrine is among the city's most famous and revered landmarks. It is devoted to Hazrat Usman Hajwery, a 12th century mystic popularly considered to be the spiritual protector of the city.

The shrine is busiest on Thursday nights when worshippers pray, listen to devotional music and, in some cases, smoke hashish - which, presumably, is why extremists struck then.

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Pakistani MPs face losing seats amid inquiry into fake degrees

Declan Walsh Islamabad

Scores of Pakistani parliamentarians could lose their seats as part of an inquiry into fake university degrees that has gripped the political system and could even trigger a fresh election.

The supreme court has ordered the election commission to verify the degrees of nearly all 1,100 federal and provincial parliamentarians after at least a dozen were found to have cheated. The authorities have already challenged 160 politicians over their degrees, which appear to be fakes, and sent another 850 to universities in Pakistan and abroad for verification.

The fake degree epidemic, which cuts across party lines, has caused tremors

within the political class amid worries that the government could be forced to declare midterm elections. If recent opinion polls are accurate, a new vote would unseat the Pakistan People's party government.

As the media and courts focus on the fake degrees, the tension is starting to tell. On Tuesday the chief minister of Balochistan issued a rebuke to reporters. "A degree is a degree! Whether fake or genuine, it's a degree! It makes no difference!" said Nawab Aslam Raisani, who claims to have a master's in political science.

The rule requiring politicians to have a degree is no longer in place. Introduced in 2002 by the then president, Pervez Musharraf, ostensibly to raise standards in parliament, critics saw it as a gambit to sideline opponents to his military rule.

Others said it made little sense in a country where barely half the population is literate and political power usually flows from family ties and money. The degree requirement was scrapped in April 2008, but only after parliament had been elected under the old rules.

The fake degree scandal has touched a nerve in powerful electronic media and among middle-class Pakistanis, where the current president, Asif Ali Zardari, is widely considered a corrupt figure heading an incompetent government.

"A common man can only regret having elected these cheats to the assemblies," said one letter to The News, a major English-language daily.

But the accountability drive is being directed by the chief justice, Iftikhar

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Muhammad Chaudhry, who is driving to have the president tried for corruption.

Some warned that the clamour to expose fake degrees could offer "unelected institutions" (the army or courts) an excuse to remove elected politicians. "The out-of-focus shrill on the fake degrees contains the seeds of political instability," wrote the columnist Raza Rumi this week.

The scandal does not inspire confidence in politicians' integrity. Some claimed to have studied at non-existent universities; others forged certificates from real institutions; and others have passed off their children's degrees as their own.

At least 12 politicians have been forced to resign so far. Some lost their seats in subsequent byelections but others were voted back in.