

Asia Bibi arrives in Canada after leaving Pakistan

Asia Bibi, a Christian woman who spent eight years on death row in Pakistan for blasphemy before she was freed last year, has flown to Canada where she has reunited with her family, her lawyer has said.

“It is a big day,” Saiful Malook told the Guardian. “Asia Bibi has left Pakistan and reached Canada. She has reunited with her family. Justice has been dispensed.”

Bibi’s arrival in Canada could mark the end of a nine-year ordeal for the farm labourer whose case – based on a dubious accusation she had insulted the prophet Muhammad – became linked to the assassinations of a provincial governor and a cabinet minister and a cause célèbre among Christian and human rights activists.

She has been in protective custody since she was released from prison last year after Pakistan’s top court acquitted her of blasphemy. By the afternoon of the verdict on 31 October, demonstrators wielding clubs had blocked highways and were pelting police with stones in cities including the capital, Islamabad, and Karachi.

Islamist groups including Tehreek-e-Labbaik (TLP), a movement dedicated to upholding Pakistan’s harsh blasphemy laws, protested for three days after the verdict, paralysing parts of the country until the government struck an agreement that included a promise the case would be appealed. The supreme court upheld the acquittal in January.

Canada had offered Bibi asylum, but close friends had told the Guardian the woman was being prevented from leaving by authorities. Her children left for the country late last year.

Malook said Bibi’s safe arrival in Canada was the result of hard work by activists, foreign diplomats and others “who stood by Bibi in hard times and worked for her freedom”.

Bibi, a Roman Catholic from the village of Ittanwala near Lahore, was accused by Muslim villagers of insulting the prophet in a row over a cup of water in June 2009. The supreme court judgment said there was no evidence to support the charge.

Five days after the altercation, a local mosque broadcast allegations she had committed blasphemy and Bibi was dragged from her home by a mob and beaten in the presence of police officers before she was taken into custody.

Bibi was sentenced to death in 2010 in what became Pakistan’s most infamous blasphemy case. She always maintained her innocence.

One of Bibi’s highest-profile supporters, the governor of Punjab Salman Taseer, was killed by one of his own security guards in January 2011 after he publicly appealed to the president of

Pakistan to pardon Bibi.

Taseer was shot 27 times at close range by Malik Mumtaz Hussain Qadri, who was showered with rose petals by supporters when he appeared in court. He was executed in 2016.

Pakistan's first federal minister for minority affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti, who also supported Bibi and called for the reform of blasphemy laws, was killed by self-described Taliban gunmen in March 2011.

The only Christian in the cabinet at the time, Bhatti had predicted his own death and recorded a farewell tape that was released to television channels after he was killed, in which he vowed to fight for Christian and other minority rights whatever the cost.

"I will die to defend their rights," he said on the tape released to the BBC and al-Jazeera. "These threats and these warnings cannot change my opinions and principles."

Blasphemy is a highly inflammatory issue in Pakistan, where even unproven accusations of insulting Islam can spark lynchings. Human rights activists say blasphemy charges are frequently used to settle personal scores.

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Kuvat: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=1qvU-ESXUci96LARA2LayZLsLWraH-Dyc>