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The case of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman is believed to have been falsely accused of blasphemy because of an argument and whose death sentence in 2010 is under appeal, has sparked protests inside and outside of Pakistan. *(Photo from www.jihadwatch.org)*

Now It's Official: Pakistan's Blasphemy Law Is 'Man-made' and Promotes 'Religious Vigilantism'

Naeem Shakir

Laws are normally deemed to protect people and their rights. However, laws can also be a weapon that are especially dangerous when they are associated with religion. In

Pakistan, the country's blasphemy laws have played this latter role since they were enacted in the 1980s, particularly against the country's religious minorities. Now their "sanctity" is being questioned by even Pakistan's religious authorities. [\[Read more\]](#)

Demanding Land Rights Is Not Terrorism

Farooq Tariq

Across Asia, the appropriation of land by government officials or corporations, often in the name of development, that forces people to leave their homes and their land and to lose their livelihoods is a common phenomenon. A recent case of this injustice in Pakistan and the negation of people's rights that accompanied it is shared by the author. [\[Read more\]](#)



Pakistan's Military Intensifies Operation in Balochistan

Asian Human Rights Commission

In the ongoing violence that frequently wracks Pakistan, it is often easy to forget the brutality that envelopes the southwestern province of Balochistan and its people. A separatist movement has periodically sought independence for the province from Pakistan since the creation of the country in 1947. The most recent conflict for independence erupted more than a decade ago. This



article outlines the response of the Pakistani government to this desire for self-determination that has resulted in the destruction of people's lives in the province.

[\[Read more\]](#)

As Temperatures Rise in Burma so Do Religious Tensions

Burma Partnership

The new civilian government in Burma led by the National League for Democracy (NLD) faces numerous challenges after a half century of military rule. Among them is responding to the communal tensions and violence orchestrated by ultranationalist Buddhist monks against the country's religious minorities, especially its Muslim population. [\[Read more\]](#)



'Learn from the World to Build My Homeland'

Gunawan

A School of Peace (SOP) alumni from Indonesia shares the beginning of his learning experience in the U.S. city of Chicago as part of the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) professional fellowship program. He offers his impressions and reflections of his new environment and the work of the Cara Program where he is assigned that assists the poor and homeless who are working to build a new life for themselves. [\[Read more\]](#)





Protesters express their feelings about Pakistan's blasphemy law. (Photo from <http://aclj.org>)

Now It's Official: Pakistan's Blasphemy Law Is 'Man-made' and Promotes 'Religious Vigilantism'

Naeem Shakir

It is not known what prompted the chairman of the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) publicly to announce a U-turn in the blasphemy law, for Maulana Mohammad Khan Sherani [announced](#) in January this year that, if formally requested by the government, the CII would be prepared to review the controversial law.

The move sounds intriguing as this law since its inception has been heavily wrapped up in politics in the name of religion.

This public statement ostensibly has been made against a background of continuing discussions about the abuse of the blasphemy law. On numerous occasions,

neighborhoods have been burnt, people lynched alive, their homes and worship places burnt and destroyed. It was vigilante justice each time, unleashed by a violent mob carried away by religious fervor to avenge the honor of the Prophet or of the Qur'an, thus acting as prosecutors, judges and executioners.

Yet the record bears out that this law has, in reality, been abused for settling personal scores, professional rivalry, land-grabbing and religious persecution. It is also true that all segments of society, including the judiciary, political leadership, civil society and even the religious leaders themselves, have acknowledged that abuse of this law has caused tremendous loss to society as a whole.

In light of this discussion, there has been constant pressure to revisit the law. But the religious extremists have always protested, exercising street power through their pupilage of madrassas (Islamic seminaries) and issuing threats of dire consequences and fatwas (religious decrees) against any move that would disturb the law as it exists.

Need for Justice

The blasphemy law, as presently constituted on the statute books, has not only many a time created a law and order situation and negated the concept of the rule of law and due process of law, but it also has impaired the concept of the safe administration of justice. As drafted, it is vague and ambiguous and, by casting its net too wide, catches any unsuspecting citizen on a false accusation of blasphemy.

Who is responsible for this grave situation?

Parliament is the state organ that is constitutionally obliged to be responsible for all legislation. The CII merely has a recommendatory capacity under Article 230 of the Constitution for matters relating to Islamic injunctions. Through various judgments, the High Courts and Supreme Court of Pakistan, while adjudicating cases under the blasphemy law, have made important comments and given cautions over the gravity of

the situation and have issued procedural recommendations, including those involving the registration, investigation and standard of proof for cases, and have called upon the executive and the legislature to adopt remedial measures.

Power of the Religious Lobby

The crucial point is what is preventing the legislature from exercising its constitutional right to discuss this sensitive subject. There appear to be two reasons: (1) fear of the religious lobby coming onto the streets should there be any move to change or modify the law, and (2) the politicians, whether in or out of power, are not prepared to anger the clergy.

The clergy and the religious political parties have deliberately created the impression that the law as framed by the authors is “divine” and must be preserved as such and that any move to disturb the text would be tantamount to blasphemy.

Ordinary people need to be educated that this text was prepared by earthly men mandated by an army general, Zia ul Haq, and passed through an unelected Parliament made up of his handpicked members. As far as the honor of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the Holy Qur’an are concerned, there could hardly be any controversy, especially in a state that is an Islamic republic and has a population that is more than 95 percent Muslim.

The recent judgment of the three-member bench of the Supreme Court of Pakistan in the case of [Mumtaz Qadri](#) has had a salutary effect in this regard. Mumtaz Qadri was an official bodyguard of the provincial governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, when he assassinated him in 2011, deeming him a blasphemer for criticizing the blasphemy law and expressing support for Asia Bibi, a Christian mother of five who has been sentenced to death in a blasphemy case.

The sentence against Qadri was upheld by the High Court. The bold observations made in this judgment are that the blasphemy law was a man-made law and that any criticism or

comment about its reform could not be termed as a blasphemous act. It added that no one could be allowed to take the law into their own hands “as a door would open for religious vigilantism that would deal a mortal blow to the rule of law in the country in which divergent religious interpretations abound and tolerance stood depleted to an alarming level.”

Honest Inquiry

It is the constitutional, political and religious duty of the government to launch a campaign in the state media to dispel this wrong impression that any comment or discussion over this law is blasphemous.

Therefore, let there be an honest and meaningful debate on this sensitive issue in and outside the Parliament, and let all schools of religious thought be heard.

Religious minorities have grave reservations about this law because it overrides their constitutional right to religious freedom to profess, practice and propagate their faith.

[Engage Pakistan](#), a courageous institute for research and reform, has made a remarkable contribution in establishing how the jurisprudence of the [Abu Hanifa School](#) of thought, on which the present blasphemy law has been supposedly based, was misreported and misinterpreted in the 1990 judgment of the Federal Shariah Court that established the fixed penalty of death for disrespecting the Prophet as provided under Section 295-C of the penal code. Under Islamic jurisprudence, the concept of blasphemy relates to apostasy, and more importantly, this research establishes that there is a consensus under the Hanafi tradition of jurisprudence that a non-Muslim blasphemer should not be killed.

Incidentally, the researchers further exposed the myth on which this previous perception was based by confronting all the religious leaders and scholars with the evidence.

Subsequently, they openly acknowledged that there had been a serious lapse by the

Shariah Court and at the legislative level in framing this law in 1984 and 1986 and later in 1990 when the Shariah Court enhanced the sentence to capital punishment.

Laws are framed by and for human beings and thus are organic in nature and cannot remain static. Laws grow as society grows. The process of social growth is retarded when society's administrators fail in delivering justice. The judiciary has an important role in society to maintain the rule of law. The truth is that a democratic order cannot be sustained without an independent and vibrant judiciary, and, in this context, the past of Pakistan's judiciary has been unenviable. What is lacking in Pakistan is the political will to undo wrongs done at the executive and legislative level.

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Tanks were used by the Pakistan military to control the protest of the peasants of Anjuman Mozareen Punjab (AMP) who were demonstrating for their land rights. *(Photo from <http://new-pakistan.com>)*

Demanding Land Rights Is Not Terrorism

Farooq Tariq

A massive repression of the peaceful peasant movement, the Anjuman Mozareen Punjab (AMP), is under way. Most of its leadership has been arrested under false anti-terrorist laws. Dozens of members are missing while more than 50 remain behind bars. All have been declared “terrorists” by the Okara district police, working hand in hand with the Military Farms administration, which mainly serves military officers.

The source of the problem is that while 14,000 acres of land in Okara District is owned by the Punjab government it is occupied by the Military Farms administration. Since 2001, the tenants of Military Farms have refused to turn over half of their crops (bitai), which

they and their families had been paying for more than 90 years. How could ordinary people dare to say no to military officers? That is their real “crime”—their demand of their land rights.

The high point of the repression took place on April 16, 2016, when police raided the home of Mehr Abdul Sattar, general secretary of AMP. He was considered the main “terrorist,” having modern weapons at home and surrounded by “proclaimed offenders.” He was taken into preventive custody under the Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance, and, as a precaution against massive resistance, the military moved tanks from other cantonments.

Yet Mehr Abdul Sattar was arrested without resistance. No weapons were discovered nor were there “proclaimed offenders” who fired back during his arrest. This myth was consciously promoted to demonize the peasant movement.

Despite a severe crackdown by the military and the police, the AMP went ahead with its planned convention on April 17, marking the International Day of Peasants’ Struggle. Thousands of peasant activists gathered in Okara District to demand an end to state violence and to seek the release of Mehr Abdul Sattar and other AMP leaders.

After being unable to stop the huge peasant convention, the police are now resorting to arrests, intimidation and mass charges in order to force peasants off the land. Currently, the police are organizing dozens of heavily weaponized police vehicles to patrol the area.

Pattern of Arrests and Protests

Following the successful observance to commemorate the 13th anniversary of the death of Bahsir Shaheed, who was killed by state agents in 2002 in Ranalkhurd, its main organizer, Nadeem Ashraf, was arrested at his home. He was charged with murder, attempted murder, anti-terrorism and various other serious criminal charges.

Malik Salim Jakhar, one of the main leaders of the AMP movement from Kulyana Military Estate, has also been arrested and framed on various criminal charges. Hafiz Jabir and Shabir Ahmad Sajid were arrested as well each time tenants protested on the main road. All of these arrests took place during 2015 and 2016.

As part of their plan to isolate and destroy the peasant organization, the police charged Okara journalist Hafiz Husnain Raza, who works for the Nawai Waqt Group, in April 2016 with breaking several anti-terrorist laws. His real crime is following his father's path to speak the truth. The police prefer journalists who allow them to review articles.

On April 16—the same day that Mehr Abdul Sattar was arrested—police broke down the doors of Hafiz Husnain's home in order to arrest him too. Fortunately, he was in Lahore to see his mother off as she was going to perform umrah (minor pilgrimage to Mecca). Two of his uncles, attempting to locate the journalist at home, were arrested three days later, however.

In an official communique, the district administrator of Okara claimed that about 200 to 300 AMP members tried to block the road after the arrest of Mehr Abdul Sattar but they were “successfully” dispersed.

On April 18, the Daily Dawn reported that 4,000 Muzareen had been booked under anti-terrorist laws for “injuring police.” However, no police officer had been injured on the day as tanks and other military vehicles were used to disperse the crowd.

After arresting Mehr Abdul Sattar, the district police officer of Okara claimed that Mehr Abdul Sattar was wanted in 150 cases; but in the Lahore High Court, only 26 cases were entered. Among those 26 cases, the lower courts have already acquitted Mehr Sattar in five cases while the police themselves have declared him innocent in another nine. Among the other seven cases, one in particular stands out: two peasants of Anjuman Mozareen were killed in 2014 when Pakistan Rangers fired at them, but the deceased's family and the main AMP leadership were charged with committing the crime.

What Drives the Repression?

Under the civilian government of Nawaz Sharif, the military has been given the constitutional power to establish military courts. This decision was to be the tool through which terrorism could be eliminated. In fact, military operations in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) had some initial success in pushing back the growing tide of religious fundamentalism.

However, in Okara, the AMP became a long-awaited target. A retired military-captain-turned-police-officer was posted to Okara to launch the attack against the peasant organization. The district administration created the myth that “tenants are armed and hosting terrorists” in order to justify massive repression.

At rallies with thousands of supporters, however, there was never any looting, burning or damage to property or to state security forces. The protests were a peaceful expression of a mature peasant movement, representing the collective voice of the voiceless.

It is the unjust control of land by military-run companies and some individual officers though that drives the protests. The peasants have built a strong organization and have pursued their just cause through their constitutionally guaranteed rights of protest and assembly. The government of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), or PMLN, is doing what Gen. Pervez Musharraf as a dictator could not do.

According to traditional accounts, the peasantry is expected to resort to armed struggle. Yet in this political struggle against the brutality of the State, the peasants’ main tool has been the building of a mass movement.

Defending Peasant Protests

Speaking in defense of the Okara peasant movement at a press conference in Lahore on April 18, human rights activist Asma Jehangir said that “we will never accept that

peasants are forbidden to demonstrate on GT [grand trunk] roads," adding that "protest at the place with sound and light" is accepted worldwide.

The human rights lawyer pointed out that when protesters led by Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) and Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) staged a sit-in in front of the Parliament for more than two months no army tanks were called to disband the protesters.

"The military, the federal and the provincial governments," she said, "must clarify their position regarding the suppression of the protesting peasants in Okara. What is the criteria being used to determine legitimate threats to national security and law and order?"

"The right to assembly is guaranteed in our Constitution," she added. "The government must answer why a group formed to lobby for the rights of peasants has been branded a terrorist group. AMP represents more than 100,000 peasants who work and live on Pakistani government and military-owned land. How did a peasant convention called for International Peasants Day threaten to cause a law and order situation?"

"The use of tear gas and tanks to disperse unarmed citizens is a serious waste of our taxes," Jehanghir asserted, "and calls into question enforcement of the National Action Plan under which terror laws can apparently be used arbitrarily to crush any form of dissent."

Chaudhary Sajjad Ahmed, brother of AMP leader Mehr Abdul Sattar, told the press conference that his brother had been detained.

"When policemen came to take him away, we did not resist," he said. "If we were terrorists, we would have brandished guns and fought back. We have put up with many search operations and raids. No one has ever found weapons or any literature that indicates that we are enemies of the State."

The misuse of the National Action Plan against terrorism as a pretext for suppressing the peasants' struggle is very evident in the case of Okara. The peasants are not terrorists. Rather, they are victims of state terrorism. They have lost at least 11 comrades in their 14-year struggle. The real issue is that the army wants to take back the land from the peasants. We will not let that happen. The actions of the authorities must be condemned.

The country's Constitution allows the AMP to hold conventions and to press for its demands for land rights, the fair distribution of agricultural resources and an end to state violence. The right of peaceful democratic protest is non-negotiable.

There should be an immediate stop to all attempts at dispossession and violence perpetrated by any state actor. The State must develop a comprehensive land reform plan with a just and equal distribution of agricultural land and water resources in the country.

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The militarization of Balochistan to quell a separatist movement in the province has resulted in the deaths of non-combatants and widespread human rights violations, including disappearances and extrajudicial killings. (Photo from <https://baluchsarmachar.wordpress.com>)

Pakistan's Military Intensifies Operation in Balochistan

Asian Human Rights Commission

Pakistan's security establishment has been conducting military operations in Balochistan Province since 2001 to obtain control over the Baloch land and resources. Tortured and bullet-riddled bodies of Baloch missing persons are found daily in the province. Resistance by the cornered populace is perceived as insurgency and a threat to national security. The construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has given the

government a further excuse to accelerate the military operation against the insurgency fighting for their legitimate right to control their resources.

The Baloch ethnic population perceives the corridor project as a plan to convert them into a minority in their own homeland, and thus, they have openly opposed it on every level. This opposition has fueled military atrocities, such as burning houses and conducting aerial bombardments, victimizing children and women.

During the past month, many Balochistan districts were seized by the security forces. Many people were killed, including children and women, while dozens went missing after their arrest. In the latest development, some parts of Bolan District have been seized. People are not allowed to go outside as the security forces search for militant separatist leaders. All houses have been searched with women and children being manhandled and many people injured.

In the area of Johan in Mastung District, the security forces bombarded the civilian population. Out of 35 people killed, only six were militants, and the remaining victims were civilians, including one woman and five children. The government claimed that among the dead militants there was a prominent separatist, Abdul Ghani Bangalzai, who later stated on social media that he was not killed and was, indeed, still alive.

According to media reports, more than 100 people were arrested on suspicion of being involved in subversive activities. These areas were also seized earlier in January on the suspicion of hiding separatist leaders.

For many years, the security forces' routine practice is to bring arrested people before the media and claim that a huge quantity of arms, including rocket launchers, have been recovered from them, but these people are never produced before any court of law. The mutilated bodies of unknown victims, however, are found every other day.

The home minister of Balochistan, Sarfaraz Bugti, confirmed on April 9 that 34 suspects were killed in a two-day operation conducted in the Johan area. He said the killed

suspects had links to a proscribed organization whose key commander, Abdul Ghani Bangalzai, was also among the dead. A large cache of arms, including hand grenades and explosives, were said to be recovered during the crackdown.

The Baloch Republican Party (BRP) claims that about 40 people were killed in military operations in different parts of Balochistan Province on April 7, operations that involved aerial bombardments by helicopters. Among the casualties were again women and children. The Frontier Corp (FC) of the Pakistan army was conducting a search for guerrillas from the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA). During this year, the FC has conducted several operations in their search for militants during which more than 100 innocent citizens have been killed.

According to a BRP spokesman, a state-sponsored armed group, locally known as a death squad, attacked and stormed into a house located in the Pullabad area of Panjgur District and fired rockets. As a result of the brutal assault, seven innocent Baloch civilians, including one woman, were killed. The attackers managed to escape successfully. The victims are believed to be supporters of a pro-freedom political party.

In April this year, five people from the same family were killed in the Patfeedar area by Pakistani forces during an operation. The deceased have been identified as Hasoo Bugti along with his wife Shantul Bibi and three children—Shahoo, Rukiya and Naaz Gul. Those who were abducted were identified as Loti Bugti, his wife Pazi Bibi and sons Baggan, Jameel and Bashir as well as the wife and children of Hayatan Bugti— Samreen Bibi, Noor Khan, Nazghi and Noor Bibi.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has shown distress at reports emerging from Johan, Kalat, and Isplingi in Mastung District of Balochistan that indicate a large number of civilian casualties during an alleged army operation in these areas. Reports quote inhabitants to have seen 27 dead bodies being brought to the Quetta Civil Hospital where no identification was allowed.

The Voice of Baloch Missing Persons (VBMP) in a recent report has stated that the cities of Kalat, Narmik, Johan, Mushkay, Awaran, Bolan and other districts of Balochistan are under the complete siege of state organizations. A large number of people have gone missing, and women and children have been harassed by state forces during military operations in these areas. The people of the affected areas who have contacted VBMP have stated that a large number of people were abducted and killed during the military operation.

In Kalat District, security agencies claimed up to 34 separatists had been killed. Included among the dead were the bodies of Sabz Ali, Pukar Khan, Khair Jan and Haji Mohammad Waris Lehri, who were later identified by their relatives. The four men were coming to their area of Mungchar along with their relatives and livestock. After their extrajudicial killing in custody, the law enforcement agencies refused to hand over the bodies to their families.

Quoting local media, VBMP says only 23 dead bodies were brought to the civil hospital in Kalat; no one knows where are the other 11 bodies. Reports claim that the majority of the victims were local shepherds and farmers who were heading towards Mastung when forces stopped them, made them stand in a line and shot them one by one.

On April 9, the deputy commissioner of Kalat District instructed that the dead bodies should be immediately handed over to the Edhi Center, a charitable organization which performs swift burials. This decision proves that the government is hiding the true facts; for in previous military operations, the dead bodies were identified by relatives.

To hide their atrocities, the security agencies are blaming the Baloch unrest as being driven by India after the arrest of a retired Indian naval officer as an Indian agent involved in the Baloch insurgency. Because of the civilian government's lack of control over local affairs in Balochistan, the security forces are using brute force and are trying to resolve political issues with guns. The indiscriminate use of force cannot be permitted

under any circumstances as it will further alienate the people of Balochistan and is unlikely to win any support for the government or security forces.

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) is a regional non-governmental organization monitoring and lobbying human rights issues in Asia. The Hong Kong-based group was founded in 1984. More information is available on AHRC's web site at <<http://www.humanrights.asia>>.



Buddhist monks protest at the U.S. embassy in Rangoon on April 28, 2016, against the use of the word *Rohingya* in an embassy statement about the deaths of Rohingyas in a capsized boat off the west coast of Burma. (Photo from www.yahoo.com)

As Temperatures Rise in Burma so Do Religious Tensions

Burma Partnership

The ugly head of religious extremism has reared itself again as a number of incidents involving nationalistic and extremist figures spreading hateful and destructive messages have presented a major challenge to the new government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD) just one month into its term in office.

On April 17, 2016, ultranationalist Buddhist monks [threatened](#) Muslim vendors at Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon to stop selling their goods. They seized their wares

without compensation and physically assaulted them. This act of bullying was not denied by U Thu Seikkta of the Patriotic Monks Union of Rangoon, who implausibly defended their actions by [stating](#), “No one could have done anything if they had bombed the pagoda while wearing their burqas in which case they would not have been able to be identified.”

The impunity of using violence while acting as vigilantes is a particularly worrying trend that could give carte blanche for further and more extreme acts of violence.

About 10 days later on April 28 a crowd of ultranationalist monks and members of the nationalist youth Myanmar National Network that promote anti-Muslim sentiment [gathered](#) at the U.S. embassy in Rangoon. They were protesting the use of the word Rohingya in a U.S. embassy [statement](#) expressing condolences regarding a recent incident where more than 20 Rohingya drowned off the Arakan coast when their boat capsized.

The Muslim Rohingya have for decades faced state-led [restrictions](#) and persecution; and since two major bouts of violence in Arakan State in 2012, they have largely been interned in camps with thousands undertaking a perilous journey to escape to Malaysia or other countries in Southeast Asia. The term “Rohingya” is hotly disputed, none more so than by extremist organizations, such as those who organized the U.S. embassy protest. Their slogans and statements have effectively [denied](#) the existence of such a group of people called the “Rohingya” and have proclaimed that they are illegal Bengalis from Bangladesh. These are the same organizations that stirred religious violence between 2012 and 2015 and are behind the mass spreading of hate speech, whether through social media or through the dissemination of materials. The Muslim Rohingya are used by such organizations as an example of an “Islamic takeover” of Burma, and they justify their lobbying to deny the Rohingya’s basic rights based on the need to protect “race and religion.”

Religious tensions are not exclusive to Rangoon and Arakan State, however. In Karen State, a Buddhist monk has been sewing discord among Christian and Muslim communities by building stupas on the grounds of churches and near a mosque, [defying a request](#) from both the Karen state government and the Karen state sangha (monastic order) to halt construction of stupas.

Yet, despite the inflaming actions of extremist organizations and certain factions of the monkhood, rights-based activists in Rangoon have been opposing this spread of hate speech. After the threats and harassment of Muslim vendors in Shwedagon Pagoda, an online [petition](#) addressed to Rangoon's chief minister was started, demanding the authorities "to take effective action since this incident could lead to religious disputes and have a negative impact on [Burma's] democratic transition and on interfaith harmony in the country." A three-day conference of interfaith leaders held in Rangoon between April 26 and 28 this year also called for dialogue and an end to hate speech.

Speaking at the conference, Aung Naing Win of the Metta Setwaing Organization [stated](#), "We want to work with law enforcement to take action against those who use hate speech, and we want to empower our community through education to positively engage for peace."

Meanwhile, on April 25, about 25 activists opposing hate speech and religious extremism conducted a [short demonstration](#) shouting such slogans as "we will never accept discrimination and we will keep fighting against it." Yet, regrettably, these activists felt the need to cover their faces to avoid reprisals. Unfortunately, it was not enough to avoid [charges](#) that will now be filed against them by the police.

Several days later on April 29 the U.K.-based Burma solidarity group Burma Campaign UK [called for](#) the "unconditional and immediate" release of three other interfaith activists who are still in prison on false charges. Their continued incarceration reveals how vulnerable people are who demonstrate and advocate for religious harmony and oppose

discrimination and extremism. Those demonstrating for religious harmony face charges and are in jail while also fearing for their lives—a sad indictment of the priorities of the authorities.

Given the rise in incidents that are exacerbating religious tension and spreading hate speech, the NLD-led government is presented with an opportunity to show its support to those that promote peace rather than hate. It must release the three interfaith activists as it did with the [release](#) of political prisoners in the past month and show its commitment to act against those who are fanning the flames of religious hate and violence.

The international and diplomatic community in Rangoon must also show its commitment to the protection of human rights defenders and interfaith activists by also calling for the release of those in prison for their peacebuilding activities. They must also offer early and effective responses and assistance to those that may face recriminations, both from the police and from extremist groups, when human rights crises and emergencies occur.

Burma faces a long road ahead in maintaining religious harmony; but by committing to the rule of law and implementing policies aimed at building peaceful coexistence and pluralism rather than separation and nationalism, the diversity of Burma can become a strength rather than a problem.

Burma Partnership is a network of organizations throughout the Asia-Pacific region that advocate and work toward realizing a movement for democracy and human rights in Burma. Based in Thailand, it acts as a link between groups inside the country and solidarity organizations around the world.



Gunawan, an Indonesian School of Peace (SOP) alumni living, working and learning in the United States for several months

‘Learn from the World to Build My Homeland’

Gunawan

Being a member of the Indonesian delegation of the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) professional fellowship program is one of my major accomplishments this year. The five-week internship program from May to June 2016 is organized by the U.S. State Dept. and American Councils for International Education. This opportunity is good for me to get more experience in improving my professional carrier goals and then working for my community through my organization, Sikola Mombine (Women’s School), in my home country of Indonesia. I never would have imagined previously that I would be able to stand with 25 other young professional leaders from around Southeast Asia who have different expertise and professional backgrounds. Flash back six years ago when

the School of Peace (SOP) was my first step ahead to achieve this accomplishment and encourage myself to serve my community through building informal education programs. I found my standing point working for the women and children during my time of learning at SOP in 2010 in India.

America, as a developed country, stimulates my curiosity to learn from their best practices about developing informal education programs based on their experience. I am fortunate to get a placement working with the Cara Program in Chicago, a non-profit organization that prepares and inspires motivated individuals to break the cycle of homelessness and poverty, transform people's lives, strengthen the community and forge paths to lasting success.

Poverty in Chicago—the third largest city in the United States—is closely related with other urban issues, such as crime, gangs, domestic violence, homelessness and drug addiction. To respond to those wanting to emerge from this environment, the Cara Program provides four weeks of intensive training to increase the students' personal and professional skills and then links them to job opportunities according to their skills and interests. After the student attains their permanent job, this program also supports them with skills in financial literacy, leading a healthy life and getting further education. In addition, the program provides personal assistance for their career development. Most of the graduates are now employed, so they become independent economically and have a better life in this city.

Even though the issues in Chicago are very different from my own community of Poso, there are similar basic focal points, such as providing education and economic development. Consequently, my greatest expectation during my fellowship is to learn about building a sustainable curriculum process, strategies for sustaining organizations and integrating informal education and economic empowerment programs. These areas are strongly connected with my responsibilities as program director of the Women's School.

Most of my work with the Cara Program is under the program department, so I work with the curriculum staff, professional development staff and gain experience with the students in their class activities. The most significant observations during my first week here are that this program not only helps people get a job but it also builds a community in order to provide people with a bridge so that they are involved together to motivate and encourage others and build solidarity as one community.

During my time in America, I celebrate the diversity here. I live with an American family and meet new people so that we can share and learn from each other about our cultures and country issues. My experience of being engaged in the regional interfaith movement of Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) helps me a great deal to share more information about peace and justice issues in Asia, especially within our movement.

Another thing that sparks my curiosity here is intrafaith, which, through this opportunity, I learn more about my own faith as a Muslim. I have visited some Muslim organizations here at the city's Islamic Center. I have come to understand that Muslims in America have equal opportunities for access in the community's social life, such as worship, work and education. The mosque is not only a place for worship but is also an Islamic learning center, a place to build interaction among Muslims and a center for social service to the surrounding community. I have been impressed, for it is the opposite from my expectations about the life of Muslims in America before I came here.

The United States can be addictive for people who visit because many good things are available here. In fact, many young people from many countries come to learn here and then don't return to their home country because they want to make dollars in this country. They are not wrong; it can naturally happen, of course. For me, however, I am constantly reminded of my foremost responsibility with my organization: I must learn more and then come back to do more for my society in Poso, Indonesia. This mission, I

believe, is the greatest responsibility that I have: learn from the world to build my homeland.

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