

Afghan Christian averts death for apostasy as Italy grants asylum: American Muslims insist death for apostates not mandated

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After a week of intense lobbying by Western governments for his release, Abdul Rahman, an Afghan who faced the death penalty for converting from Islam to Christianity, arrived in Italy, where he received political asylum.

Religious conservatives who have supported President Bush and the U.S. military presence and the push for democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq had expressed dismay over signs that religious freedoms are untenable in those overwhelmingly Muslim countries.

Despite the opinions of some U.S.-based Muslim scholars that Islam does not require a death sentence for Muslims who become Christians, the force of popular sentiment in Afghanistan made it unlikely that Rahman, 41, would have been safe after his release by a court late last month.

The Rahman saga, like the earlier mass protests around the world over published Danish cartoons that unflatteringly depicted the prophet Muhammad, has stirred Western debate on the Bush administration's efforts to encourage democratic government where autocratic rule and hard-line religious law have deep roots.

The Afghan convert had become a Christian about 15 years ago, but he was arrested only in February while filing papers in court for custody of his children from a previous marriage.

Rahman's release from jail March 27 prompted a demand by Afghanistan's parliament that the government not permit Rahman to leave the country. In addition, Afghan clerics expressed harsh criticism of President Hamid Karzai for

bending to Western political and religious pressure.

Two days earlier, the Vatican had sent a telegram to Karzai on behalf of Pope Benedict XVI, calling for Rahman's release out of "respect for every person's freedom of conscience and religion."

Rahman was relocated from a high-security prison in Kabul to a safe house on March 27, prompting an offer of asylum from Italian foreign minister Gianfranco Fini. Italy maintains troops near Kabul as part of a NATO peacekeeping mission.

Rahman arrived in Italy on a military flight March 29 from Afghanistan. A statement from the Italian government said that Italy was acting on a request from the United Nations for a Western government to provide Rahman refuge.

Earlier, Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, a conservative Christian advocacy group, said that Rahman's release because of lack of evidence still did not address the lack of religious freedom in Afghanistan.

"As the United States continues its work in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is vital that the Bush administration secure a clear understanding of religious freedom from these new governments," said Perkins. "If we can't secure the most basic of human rights, Americans will increasingly question whether we should continue the expenditure of lives and resources in these countries."

American Muslims have disputed claims by conservative clerics that Islamic law mandates death for apostates. Maher Hathout, a senior adviser to the Los Angeles-based Muslim Public Affairs Council, argues in his recent book *In Pursuit of Justice: The Jurisprudence of Human Rights in Islam* that the Qur'an makes no mention of punishing apostasy by death, and states instead that "there is no compulsion in religion."

"While apostasy may be a sin in the eyes of God, it is not considered to be criminal behavior," Hathout writes. "We strongly oppose the state's use of coercion in regulating Islamic belief in such a manner, since faith is a matter of individual choice on which only God can adjudicate."

Similarly, Asma Afsaruddin, who teaches Islamic studies at the University of Notre Dame, said that Islam "threatens punishment in the next world, but that is God's prerogative. The Qur'an has no penalty prescribed for apostasy."