

Maid Murder Rocks Pakistan

by Fatima Bhutto

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Courtesy of Pakistan Christian Post

The brutal murder of a 12-year-old maid, believed to have been killed by her powerful employer, has stunned the country. But from the corrupt government to the honor killing of a wealthy woman, Fatima Bhutto says the country's rich always get away with it.

Shazia Masih, a tiny 12-year-old who looked years younger than her age, was laid to rest last week after a Christian funeral at Lahore's Cathedral Church. She had been employed by the wealthy and influential former president of Lahore's Bar Association, and for a generous \$8 a month she cleaned her employer's toilets, the cars that filled their suburban garage, and the filth that collected on the floors of their home.

Her employer insists she died of a skin disease. Her death certificate says it was blood poisoning. The preliminary medical report fails to mention either factor as a cause: Instead, it lists 17 violent injuries, including bruises on her forehead and a swollen scalp and face, most likely caused by an object of "blunt means." More details have yet to be released, but we know now that Shazia Masih did not die an ordinary death. Local newspapers, obsessed with printing bloodied photographs of the dead in the place of obituaries, have run haunting pictures of the dead girl. Her skin does not appear to be ravaged by any sort of dermatological disease. Her arms, feet, skull, and chin are wrapped in gauze. She looks, in the morbid photographs, like a little boy—dressed in blue and white shorts and a striped T-shirt.

There is a line that runs through our society—a visible marking that differentiates between those who can, and do, get away with murder, and those who have no access to the law.

As grim as her killing may be, it will not be all that surprising if her murderer goes free. In a country where the entire top echelon of government, from the president to the prime minister,

have been granted amnesty from corruption charges, murder cases, narcotics smuggling, kidnapping, and extortion so that they may lead Pakistan and pave the way for an obsequiously pro-American cooperation in the war on terror, why is anyone surprised that the rich and powerful are unaccountable? Why is anyone particularly horrified by the monstrous VIP culture that denies justice to the majority of the country and celebrates the injustices of the dominant, moneyed tastemakers?

We know that employing a child of school age in such demanding labor is cruel. We know that there is such a thing as minimum wage—even in Pakistan. We know that one can't, shouldn't be able to, get away with murder, but those things don't really matter when one is above the law.

In 1999, 29-year-old Samia Sarwar was in her lawyer's office in Lahore. She had been married to a cousin, a violent man, whom she wished to divorce. She had two children; some people say she had fallen in love with another man, a handsome army captain, whom she wanted to marry. Some people say that all she wanted was a divorce. It doesn't matter. Samia's father was the chairman of his local chamber of commerce and a successful and wealthy businessman; her mother was a doctor. Samia came from rich Pakistan. She had fled her marital home and was living in a women's shelter until her divorce came through when her mother asked to see her at her lawyer's office. Samia stood and waited to meet her mother, who entered the lawyer's building with the assistance of a young man Samia didn't recognize, and who her mother claimed was helping her, frail and old as she was, to walk. Once Samia's mother was inside the lawyer's office and in front of her daughter, the man pulled out a pistol and shot Samia in the head. He tried to kill her lawyer, too, but missed.

We have seen the photographs of Samia Sarwar lying in a pool of her own blood. Her lawyer, a respected member of the legal community, was witness to her honor killing. And yet the authorities have never made any arrests in the case. Samia's mother and father are free and respected members of their community.

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Take Karachi's latest bombings. Last week the ghoulishly unelected interior minister, a business partner of the president, turned up in Karachi to survey the city after a particularly violent month that saw targeted killings and political violence between the ruling Pakistan People's Party and its coalition partner, the Muhajir MQM Party, reach fever pitch. Thousands of the city's security forces were diverted to protect him. Had the traffic police been armed, there's no doubt they too would have been enlisted to protect the sensitive minister, who came, saw, and did nothing.

Several days later, Shiites in Karachi were marking the end of Muharram, a religious holiday that commemorates the murder of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson. Just a couple of months earlier, they saw their followers killed in Karachi's first bombings since 2007, on the holy day of Ashura. As they began their procession, a motorbike laden with explosives hit a bus full of Shiites. As the injured were being evacuated by ambulances, another bomb hit the gates of the hospital where the dead and injured were being brought. Thirty-three people died and another 165 were injured. Where were the security forces that day? They were not brought out in the

thousands to protect a preplanned procession of the already vulnerable Shiite community. Maybe there was a politician in town who needed their services instead?

This is a country whose laws cater only to the rich and powerful. We knew that before the small corpse of Shazia Masih was buried in Lahore.

Since Shazia's death, politicians, most of them footloose and fancy free after dodging criminal charges of their own, have been screaming their shock and horror over the young girl's murder. But what hope is there for justice? Samia Sarwar's killers, her parents, have never been held accountable for their crimes. Mukhtar Mai, gang-raped by powerful and politically prominent feudal lords in her village, has been fighting for justice in the Pakistani courts for the last five years, to little avail. Add to that a state that serves only the powerful, defies transparency, and celebrates its criminals so long as they have the right surname or bountiful enough bank accounts. This is the atmosphere in which Shazia Masih's parents, a house-cleaning mother and garbage-collecting father with a combined income of \$62 a month, will have to pursue their daughter's killer.

Fatima Bhutto is a graduate of Columbia University and the School of Oriental and African Studies. She is working on a book to be published by Jonathan Cape in 2010. Fatima lives and works in Karachi, Pakistan.