

Mosul Yezidi Fearful of Honour Crime Executions

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They're concerned that death sentences for killers of Yezidi girl could revive inter-communal violence.

Members of Iraq's Yezidi community fear the possible execution of four men for the high-profile murder of a teenage girl will reignite tensions with the Muslim majority in Mosul province.

Some Yezidi warn that the death sentences handed down last month by a Mosul court for the murder of 17-year-old Duaa Khalil Aswad, a Yezidi girl suspected of starting a relationship with a Muslim man, could spark retaliation from the families of those convicted and heap more condemnation on the ancient and secretive faith.

Human rights activists, however, have defended the verdict as a step towards ending so-called honour killings in which women are murdered in the belief that they have shamed their families by violating traditional religious taboos.

The execution sentences have been sent to the Iraqi Supreme Court for approval. The body is expected to make a decision within the next month.

"This..is not fair," said Darman Khatari, a female Yezidi member of the Mosul Provincial Council. "This issue had been solved and Duaa's family had settled it through sulih (tribal reconciliation) with the families of the four convicts. Due to the [death sentences], the issue might blow up again and lead to other problems."

Duaa was beaten, kicked and stoned to death by a mob of fellow Yezidi in the Bashiqa bazaar in Mosul province on April 22, 2007. The brutal scene was recorded by mobile phone camera and later spread to the internet where it triggered outrage both inside Iraq and abroad.

Some locals see the coverage of the crime as a slight to both the 20,000 Yezidis living in Bashiqa and to the religion as a whole.

"When I remember the killing of Duaa, I feel ashamed," Walid Ali, 27, a labourer in Bashiqa, said "We have paid a high price for the killing, because it has damaged the image of the Yezidi people."

The Yezidi practice a millennia-old faith based partly on Christianity, Islam and an ancient religion known as Zoroastrianism. They have faced fierce persecution at several points in history, and look down on marriage with outsiders. An estimated 450,000 Yezidi live in Iraq's Nineveh and Duhok provinces, according to community leaders.

Karim Sulaiman, spokesman of the Yezidi's supreme spiritual council, said religious leaders demanded the law be applied following the murder.

"Immediately after the incident, we condemned it strongly and said it doesn't reflect our culture and religion," Sulaiman said.

"What is strange and unfortunate for us is that this case has been used to insult us and our religion. Many girls before Duaa and after her have been killed, but these stories didn't resonate in the media. I don't know why this story got more attention."

According to the Mosul police department, Ziad Mahmud Khidr, Riadh Kamal Omar and two of Duaa's cousins, Aras Farid Salim and Wahid Farid Salim, confessed to the crime after interrogations by authorities.

Twenty-four Yezidi labourers were killed by gunmen in Mosul one day after Duaa's killing. Many in the Yezidi community believe the murders were in retaliation, as there were unconfirmed rumours Duaa had converted to Islam for her boyfriend.

The young man, according to Bashiqa locals, is still living in the Mosul area. His family, including his father who was a school headmaster, fled the area after the killing.

The violence escalated tensions between the Yezidi and Muslim inhabitants of Bashiqa, locals said, and some are concerned that the execution of Duaa's killers will renew the problems.

A senior Yezidi leader, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, described the death sentence verdict as "another awful problem for the Yezidi".

"The execution will create more problems because of [strained] social relations. If those four people are executed, their families will take revenge," he said.

Hanaa Edward, an activist and head of the Amal (Hope) NGO in Baghdad, said the threat of sectarian problems should not influence the administration of justice.

"Execution is the only deterrent verdict available in Iraqi law for crimes of deliberate killing," Edward said.

"The Yezidi people do not have the right to be angry; the law should be imposed. We can't have tribal traditions taking precedence over the rule of law. The law should never be replaced by clerics and tribal leaders."

Edward believes education must also play a role in ending the culture of honour killings, arguing that traditional communities can learn to adjust their religious beliefs to modern times.

Some within the community believe outsiders need some education of their own about the Yezidi.

"We don't have anything in our religion about stoning people; it is not acceptable. But some people now think this about the Yezidi," Yezidi religious leader Sheikh Allu Khalaf said.

"The Yezidi community is famous for being tolerant and peaceful. We believe in coexistence, and we hope this case will not hinder this anymore."

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