

PAKISTAN'S GEO NOW ACCUSED OF BLASPHEMY: THAT COULDN'T HAPPEN HERE, COULD IT?

Just under a month ago, Pakistan's largest private television news station was engaged in a dispute with Pakistan's intelligence agency, ISI, over charges that the ISI was behind an assassination attempt on one of its anchors. For Geo, those probably seem like the good old days, because now the station is engaged in a controversy that has already caused a proliferation of lawsuits and threatens to erupt into massive vigilante violence against Geo employees and buildings. Reuters describes the threats Geo now faces and how the situation came about:

Pakistan's biggest television station said it was ramping up security on Tuesday after it became the object of dozens of blasphemy accusations for playing a song during an interview with an actress.

Geo Television is scrubbing logos off its vans and limiting staff movements after receiving scores of threats over allegedly blasphemous content, said channel president Imran Aslam.

"This is a well-orchestrated campaign," he told Reuters. "This could lead to mob violence."

/snip/

The cases allege a traditional song was sung about the marriage of Prophet Muhammad's daughter at the same time a pair of shoes was raised.

Both elements are traditional in a

wedding ceremony but the timing was insulting to Islam, dozens of petitioners have alleged. Others allege the song itself was insulting.

Lawsuits arising from the incident are proliferating. The Express Tribune has a partial list of the cases filed recently here.

But the Reuters article points out that under Pakistani law, blasphemy itself is not actually defined clearly:

Blasphemy carries the death penalty in Pakistan but is not defined by law; anyone who says their religious feelings have been hurt for any reason can file a case.

But it gets even wilder. It turns out that a rival station is now also accused of blasphemy. Why? Because they repeatedly played snippets of the original program carried on Geo. And Reuters points out that blasphemy cases also are dangerous for judges and attorneys, as well:

Advocate Tariq Asad said his suit named the singers and writers of the song, cable operators, television regulators, a national council of clerics and ARY, a rival television station.

ARY repeatedly broadcast clips of the morning show, alleging it was blasphemous, an action that Asad said was blasphemous in itself.

Judges frequently do not want to hear evidence in blasphemy cases because the repetition of evidence could be a crime. Judges acquitting those accused of blasphemy have been attacked; a defense lawyer representing a professor accused of blasphemy was killed this month.

So just repeating the blasphemous material, even as a judge or attorney citing it in court, is a

blasphemous act in itself worthy of vigilante action.

But of course, nothing so outrageous could happen here in the US, could it? Sadly, such a ridiculous state of affairs doesn't seem that far off here. Note that politicians, even leading candidates for the US Senate, now openly state that "Government cannot force citizens to violate their religious beliefs under any circumstances" and even that such stances are not negotiable in any way. But that's not just a campaign stance. We have companies now going to the Supreme Court to state their right to ignore laws to which they object on religious grounds.

So if both politicians and companies now openly advocate to ignore laws on religious grounds, how far away are we from these same zealots advocating for prison terms or even death sentences for those who offend their religious sensibilities? After all, we have already seen a bit of the vigilantism that goes along with such attitudes.

Update: It turns out that the incident with ISI hadn't blown over yet. Breaking news from Dawn:

A committee formed by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (Pemra) has suspended the licences of three television channels owned by the Geo TV network.

The committee has also decided that Geo TV offices be immediately sealed.

However, a final decision on the revocation of the licences will be announced following the meeting on May 28, which will also be attended by government representatives.

The committee, which includes members Syed Ismail Shah, Pervez Rathore and Israr Abbasi, was tasked to review the Ministry of Defence's application filed against Geo TV network for leveling allegations against an intelligence

█ agency of Pakistan.

It will be interesting to see how Geo responds.