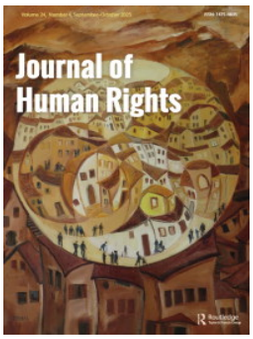

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How violence and fear constrain international religious freedom diplomacy: Lessons from the case of Asia Bibi

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ABSTRACT

Many Western governments have started to integrate the protection of religious freedom into their foreign policies. Research on the implementation of these policies, however, has been scarce, and it focuses primarily on their broader impact and why they often do not attain their goals. We argue that their implementation should be studied using specific case studies in which governments successfully engaged in religious freedom diplomacy. We therefore use the international campaign to free Asia Bibi, a Christian woman in Pakistan sentenced to death for blasphemy, to pursue the following questions: How can governments successfully implement international religious freedom policies, particularly in contexts in which religion is highly politicized? What are the specific constraints of international religious freedom diplomacy in such emotionally laden contexts? Based on a variety of qualitative data, this article identifies important lessons learned from the case study to inform future campaigns, such as the importance of private diplomacy in the face of violent backlash. It contributes to the literature on governmental human rights diplomacy by emphasizing the role of uncivil society and the emotion of fear constraining government behavior in both the target state and among intervening diplomats.

Introduction

With increasing awareness of the difficult situation of religious minorities in many countries, many Western governments have made the protection of religious freedom one of their foreign policy priorities (Barker et al., 2019; Bettiza, 2019; Foret, 2017; Toft & Green, 2018; Wolff, 2021). However, our understanding of the impact of these policies remains limited. Empirical assessments of the international promotion of religious freedom have been rare. Most research has focused on the question of why and how foreign policies to promote religious freedom have evolved, usually suggesting that the impact of these policies has been rather limited due to inconsistent implementation, misconceptions, and secularist attitudes among policymakers and diplomats (Bettiza, 2019; Farr, 2013; Foret, 2017; Toft & Green, 2018). Others have criticized the misuse of these policies to further other political interests and the oversimplification of the situation on the ground, reinforcing differences and divisions between religions rather than stressing social bonds based on other affiliations (Bettiza, 2019; Hurd, 2015; Wolff, 2021, pp. 128–133). What is largely missing are positive case studies on international religious freedom promotion in which governments achieved their goals to investigate how and why international religious freedom policies can make a difference.

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Therefore, rather than mapping religious freedom policies or criticizing their lack of or negative impact, this article focuses on the case of the international campaign to free Asia Bibi, a Christian woman in Pakistan sentenced to death for blasphemy in 2010, who, after international protest, was acquitted in 2018. We use the case study to explore the following questions: How can governments successfully implement international religious freedom policies, particularly in contexts in which religion is highly politicized? What are the specific constraints of international religious freedom diplomacy in such emotionally laden contexts? Insights from a positive case study on these questions can help inform future strategies of international religious freedom promotion.

We argue that the case, and international religious freedom promotion in general, should be understood in the context of human rights, not only of religious freedom but also of access to other rights. Discrimination against religious minorities, for example, is always multidimensional. In the case of Asia Bibi, her rights to freedom of expression; access to a fair trial; and freedom from cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment or punishment were violated, intersecting with limited access to education and employment. Many Christians in Pakistan are marginalized not only religiously but also socioeconomically (Ispahani, 2018). Asia Bibi herself emphasized the negative impact of her illiteracy on her plight, robbing her of control over her situation in court and prison (Bibi & Tollet, 2013, pp. 6, 44). Due to her poverty, she did not have access to proper legal assistance during her first trial in the local court (Hussain, 2022, p. 141). We, therefore, understand the international campaign calling for her release as a case of human rights diplomacy in which several Western governments, alongside religious interest groups and human rights organizations, engaged in different forms of diplomatic action. Governmental human rights diplomacy has not received as much academic attention as transnational human rights advocacy. That is why we use the case study not only to drive forward knowledge on international religious freedom promotion but also to contribute to the theorization of governmental human rights diplomacy.

Based on semistructured interviews[1] with diplomats, activists, and journalists who were either involved in the campaign or observed it at the time, as well as the analysis of official documents and media reports, our case study makes theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it refines some of the scope conditions of Myrick and Weinstein's (2022) typology of governmental human rights diplomacy. For instance, they argued that domestic backlash makes private diplomacy more likely, and that the lack of willingness of intervening governments to prioritize human rights makes it more likely that they prefer weaker forms of "naming and shaming" over a more coercive "carrots and sticks" approach.

Our case study shows that these decisions, on both sides, are not always based solely on a rational unwillingness of governments, as discussed in previous literature. In violence-prone contexts with highly politicized religion, government decisions can also be influenced by emotions such as fear if there are nonstate actors that spread violence and intimidation to prevent action in favor of religious freedom and human rights. The contribution of our case study, therefore, can also be understood in the context of the "emotional turn" in international relations (Bleiker & Hutchison, 2008).

Practically, the study demonstrates that in such violence-prone contexts, private diplomacy is preferable, which is why knowledge of local dynamics is imperative when developing strategies for religious freedom promotion. In contexts like Pakistan, everything raising public attention can be counterproductive because violent opposition jeopardizes not only the case but also the safety of all supporters involved. Coordination between everybody involved in a campaign is crucial in such contexts to ensure that private diplomacy is not mistaken for nonaction, leading to counterproductive public awareness-raising.

The article is structured as follows: We first build on the literature on human rights diplomacy and advocacy to develop a framework for the case study analysis. After discussing the methodology and introducing the case, we analyze the international campaign to free Asia Bibi, structured along different types of diplomatic action to identify strategies employed and to

discuss each of their constraints. We end with a summary of the theoretical argument and a reflection on the practical lessons that can be learned from the case in the conclusions.

International human rights diplomacy to promote religious freedom

Religious freedom—or, more broadly, the freedom of religion or belief (FoRB)—includes the right to have, adopt, change, or leave a religion or belief; to be free from coercion; to practice and manifest a religion or belief; to nondiscrimination on the basis of religion or belief; and to bring up one's children in accordance with one's religion or belief. The intensity of violations can vary, ranging from intolerance and exclusion to discrimination and violence (Petersen & Marshall, 2019, pp. 25ff). International approaches of how to protect FoRB vary. They differ, for example, with respect to whether FoRB is interpreted as a religious or a human rights issue; as a primarily Christian or a universal concern (Petersen, 2021); whether it is framed in the context of religious tolerance, religious minorities, or explicitly as FoRB; and whether it is understood as an issue of human rights, development, or security (Toft & Green, 2018). Because FoRB is codified in a range of international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 18) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 18), we argue that embedding both research and practice on international FoRB promotion in a human rights framework is the most promising way forward.

Unlike the role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international law and organizations, and the media in transnational human rights advocacy (e.g., Hafner-Burton, 2008; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Risse & Sikkink, 1999; Simmons, 2009), there is little theorization of the practice of governmental human rights diplomacy, even though most European and North American governments do engage in some form of international human rights promotion. The main exception constitutes Myrick and Weinstein's (2022) typology of strategies of diplomatic action to make sense of governmental human rights diplomacy and the interaction of public and private diplomatic measures. To contribute to this literature, we use our case study to first assess the validity of the typology in a similar issue area (imprisoned individual) but in a different national context,[2] and then build on their typology to identify constraints and scope conditions of international religious freedom diplomacy.

Myrick and Weinstein's (2022) typology is based on two dimensions—type of action (expressive or coercive) and the forum in which diplomacy takes place (public or private)—to delineate four types: More common, according to them, are expressive forms of diplomacy through which government officials raise human rights issues in other countries, either (1) publicly to name and shame human rights abusers (e.g., through press releases, public speeches, statements, or reports about human rights practices) or (2) privately, meaning outside of the public view (e.g., through communications in bilateral meetings or diplomatic cables). Less common, but potentially more effective (Myrick & Weinstein, 2022; Smith, 2014), are coercive measures, such as implicit or explicit promises of rewards if a human rights-violating state changes its practices, or the threat of punishments if they do not. Coercive measures can be communicated (3) publicly (e.g., through press releases or in parliamentary debates) or (4) privately (through bilateral meetings, diplomatic cables, etc.). In addition, Myrick and Weinstein (2022) formulate scope conditions under which each of the four types is the most likely strategy employed (Figure 1).

We argue that the typology is a useful first step in the theorization of governmental human rights diplomacy. However, as a consequence of being parsimonious, it undertheorizes the domestic sources of some of the constraints governments face when choosing to employ any of these strategies. We therefore draw on some of the international human rights literature that focuses on transnational relations to bring domestic dynamics back into the model. We focus primarily on backlash and willingness to prioritize human rights because, according to Myrick and Weinstein, they determine whether governments choose to engage in either public or private diplomacy, and whether they employ expressive or coercive strategies (see Figure 1).

		Type of action	
		Expressive ('naming & shaming')	**Coercive** ('carrots & sticks')
Forum in which diplomacy takes place	**Public**	If minimal potential for backlash & if not willing to prioritise human rights	If minimal potential for backlash & If sufficient leverage over the target state & if willing to prioritise human rights
	Private	If existing diplomatic relations, but backlash expected & if not willing to prioritise human rights	If existing diplomatic relations, but backlash expected & if sufficient leverage over target state & if willing to prioritise human rights

Figure 1. Typology of governmental human rights diplomacy. Source: Myrick and Weinstein (2022), own depiction.

Backlash as a response to public diplomacy

According to Myrick and Weinstein (2022), public diplomacy is unlikely in countries where backlash against diplomatic action is to be expected, because diplomats fear negative repercussions for the bilateral relationship. However, they do not go much into detail with regard to the possible sources of such backlash and what diplomatic actors can expect if they engage in public diplomacy in contexts characterized by contestation.

The observation that *naming and shaming*—meaning the dissemination of information about specific human rights violations to publicly criticize and put pressure on governments and other norm-violating actors—can produce counterproductive backlash is not new (Hafner-Burton, 2008; Kinzelbach & Lehmann, 2015). Different forms have been identified in the literature. Although it has been mentioned that backlash can emanate from the targeted government or from nonstate actors, most research has focused on how (primarily authoritarian) governments resist international human rights advocacy.

Mentioning examples from the Middle East but also North America, Jetschke and Liese (2013) argue that targeted governments may justify their behavior by invoking other norms, such as state sovereignty and national security. Gruffydd-Jones (2019) demonstrate how China uses international pressure to construct counterframes that jeopardize domestic human rights, for instance, by framing international intervention as an attack on the state; as a postcolonial, imperial endeavor; and domestic activists as pawns of Western governments.

In their work on LGBTI rights in Uganda, Nuñez-Mietz and García Iommi (2017) highlight that targeted governments may even "immunize" the state against a human rights norm. They adopt legal impediments, meaning laws and policies that ban the norm, and physically repress local norm advocates to constrain their opportunities to champion the norm in the country.

Less empirical attention has been paid to the fact that global publicity can also have the unintended consequence of "providing incentives for groups to orchestrate acts of violence large enough to attract the spotlight" (Hafner-Burton, 2008, p. 692). Religious networks, for instance, may employ traditional normative counternarratives to mobilize public resistance (Snyder, 2020). As our case study will demonstrate, the fear spread by violent backlash can significantly constrain the capacity of the government of the targeted state to implement reforms.

The reform capacity of target states has been discussed in the literature on international human rights norms. According to this literature, the ability to comply with human rights norms is more likely in states with strong capacities and centralized compliance decisions than in states with weak capacities and a decentralized decision-structure—states in which the government, for instance, must persuade and negotiate the compliant behavior of others (e.g., in federal

states). Accordingly, reforms may be easier in some areas, such as reforming political institutions or adopting new laws, than in others, like stopping human rights violations by actors outside of the government's direct control (Hafner-Burton, 2008; Risse & Sikkink, 2013).

Governments may also use blaming private actors that are not under their control as an excuse for human rights violations (Jetschke & Liese, 2013). Our case study illustrates not only how violence by nonstate actors leads to human rights violations difficult to control by the government but also how fear spread through such violence can have silencing and paralyzing effects, prolonging the solution of human rights cases even if the government otherwise might have been more responsive to international pressure. Our case study, therefore, expands the taxonomy of potential backlash dynamics by increasing awareness of the impact that not only opposing governments but also uncivil society (Kopecký & Mudde, 2003) can have on governmental human rights diplomacy.

Backlash, in general, can be expected in cases in which local and international norms collide (Cardenas, 2004). If religious freedom norms, for instance, do not resonate with local preconceptions and beliefs, it is difficult to establish their legitimacy in the domestic context of the target state. In the case of such norm collisions, diplomats advocating a norm need to find ways to reframe it in a way that enhances domestic legitimacy to increase the potential of its effectiveness (Acharya, 2004).

Relational approaches, in addition, emphasize that the response to international shaming also depends on the relationship with the shamer. Geopolitical adversaries, for example, are more likely to condemn human rights abuses, but they also often provoke a counterproductive response. Geopolitical allies, by contrast, are more effective shamers, but they can be reluctant to impose meaningful sanctions (Terman, 2023). If the shaming is "wielded by cultural outsiders in ways that appear to condemn local social practices, shaming is likely to produce anger, resistance, backlash, and deviance from outgroup norms, or denial and evasion" (Snyder, 2020, p. 109).

Due to such backlash, public human rights diplomacy, primarily in the context of religious freedom promotion, can be counterproductive. This is interesting, as it contradicts what the transnational human rights advocacy literature for a long time has emphasized—namely, that a combination of internal and external public pressure by transnational networks is necessary for sustainable human rights change (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Risse & Sikkink et al., 1999; Simmons, 2013). Some religious freedom scholars share this view (e.g., Seiple, 2012). Practitioners, however, have become more cautious, warning that strong public messages can be counterproductive, primarily if they contribute to "antagonising public sentiment against foreign interference and creating impression of religious minorities as stooges of foreign (particular western) governments" (Ackerman & Finlay, 2017, p. 19). Instead, "success almost always comes through highly sophisticated, quiet, and behind-closed-doors diplomacy" (Meral, 2012, p. 30). The strength of this private human rights diplomacy, however, depends on the willingness of intervening states to prioritize human rights.

Willingness to prioritize human rights

Coercive human rights diplomacy is seen as potentially being more effective than just expressive forms (Myrick & Weinstein, 2022; Smith, 2014), particularly in states vulnerable to international pressure due to dependence on international aid or concerns about their international reputation (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, pp. 29, 208; Kinzelbach & Lehmann, 2015; Risse & Sikkink, 1999, p. 24). Engaging in coercive human rights diplomacy is a prerogative of state actors. Unlike nonstate actors, they can not only name and shame but also provide incentives, foreign aid, and economic trade, or impose sanctions (Zhou et al., 2023). They can publicly communicate these actions to increase the pressure, or apply them through more private channels.

According to Myrick and Weinstein's (2022) typology, an important scope condition for applying coercive human rights diplomacy is that governments are willing to prioritize human rights over other concerns. However, engaging in public coercive diplomacy not only can lead

to backlash, an additional constraint is that it may put a strain on diplomatic ties and have negative effects on aid payments and economic trade (Kinzelbach & Lehmann, 2015, pp. 21ff). That is the main reason why, according to Myrick and Weinstein (2022, p. 387), coercive diplomacy is less common, because "policymakers are reticent to burn bridges with their diplomatic counterparts solely in pursuit of human rights objectives." Governments, accordingly, often prioritize their political and economic interests at the expense of human rights concerns (Donnelly & Whelan, 2020; Forsythe, 2017). This can lead to neglecting human rights concerns altogether or the inconsistent threat of coercive measures. Yet, if coercive diplomacy is not implemented consistently, it becomes an empty threat, loses credibility, and so remains ineffective (Smith, 2014).

Our case study, in line with the already noted emotional turn in world politics (Bleiker & Hutchison, 2008), illustrates that the reluctance to prioritize human rights is not necessarily always and exclusively caused by rational interests. The interest in national security, for example, can also be shaped by fear—namely, by the fear of violence spilling over from the target state into their own territories, in the form of terrorist attacks either on embassies and their staff or in their home countries.

The willingness to prioritize human rights, however, can be heightened by public pressure, and that is where the interaction between the different types of diplomacy comes in. Myrick and Weinstein (2022), for example, highlight how public expressive diplomacy may elevate a case on the agenda of other diplomats, making the often-more-effective private coercive diplomacy possible. In our case study, public advocacy, even though producing counterproductive backlash, also kept the case on the agenda of Western governments so that they sustained private pressure over an extended period of time.

Methodology

We use the case of Asia Bibi and the international campaign calling for her release to analyze how governments, alongside religious interest groups and human rights organizations, engage in religious freedom diplomacy. We selected the case of Asia Bibi for three reasons. First, it is a "positive" case, in which the campaign achieved its goal, the release of Asia Bibi. Second, it lasted almost 10 years, giving us the opportunity to study different diplomatic actions and domestic responses over time. Third, blasphemy in Pakistan is a highly contested issue, allowing us to explore how religious freedom diplomacy works in the face of violent backlash.

Studying the effect of public and private diplomacy on human rights change is difficult for two reasons: First, it is nearly impossible to establish causal effects, meaning to determine which activities exactly led to Asia Bibi's release. Second, private diplomacy cannot be observed directly, as it takes place behind closed doors and reports are confidential. That is the reason why most studies on human rights diplomacy focus primarily on public forms of diplomatic action.

We have addressed these issues through the use of process-tracing and the triangulation of different data sources. We use process-tracing (Bennett & Checkel, 2014) to assess the validity of two of the scope conditions in Myrick and Weinstein's (2022) typology of governmental human rights diplomacy: (1) that backlash makes the use of public diplomacy unlikely and (2) that the unwillingness to prioritize human rights makes the use of coercive diplomacy unlikely. To assess these two expectations in the case of the international campaign to free Asia Bibi, we have reconstructed the campaign in as much detail as possible, as well as the domestic events that followed international actions. We argue that the sequence of events allows for some causal inference.

Furthermore, we rely on the judgments of our interviewees and triangulate them with evidence found in official documents and media reports, as well as the secondary literature. The analysis of the case study is based on 11 semistructured interviews with American, European, and Pakistani diplomats, lawyers, activists, and journalists who were either involved directly in the campaign or indirectly as observers. In addition, we analyzed around 300 official government and parliamentary documents, almost 100 media reports in Western and Pakistani media, as

well as Twitter (now X) trends, nonacademic books, and documentaries. The triangulation of this variety of sources has allowed us to reconstruct the campaign as well as its perceptions by a variety of actors to detail the diplomatic actions deployed, including strategies employed in private that are otherwise difficult to observe.

Given the fact that most of the governmental diplomacy around the case of Asia Bibi used private channels, our analysis relied to an initially unexpected extent on interviews. Yet, recruiting diplomats for elite interviews is difficult due to time constraints and confidentiality. That is why we combined interviews with "both 'inside' and 'outside' experts, meaning those that make and those that analyze political decisions" (von Soest, 2023, p. 277). The latter confirmed what we had learned from diplomats and NGOs involved in the campaign, so that the interviews relatively quickly reached a point of saturation (Saunders et al., 2018).

The international campaign to free Asia Bibi

Aasiya Noreen, popularly known as Asia Bibi, is a Christian Pakistani woman who was accused of blasphemy in rural Punjab in 2009. While working on a berry farm, Asia Bibi had a row with one of her Muslim coworkers over the use of the same drinking pot and later was accused by the same woman of insulting the Prophet. A few days later she was arrested by the village police based on Article 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), which makes any "defiling" of the "name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad" punishable by death or imprisonment for life.

Her case was heard for the first time in a local court in Lahore District. Based on the witness statement and without any in-depth investigation, Asia Bibi was given the death sentence in 2010 on the charges of blasphemy. Throughout her case, Asia Bibi refuted all the charges and pointed out that the law was used against her to settle a personal vendetta. She later made an appeal to the Lahore High Court, which retained the verdict, and in 2014, her lawyer appealed to the Supreme Court. After several delays, Asia Bibi was finally acquitted in 2018 of all charges (Ahmed, 2021). Due to death threats, she and her family had to go into hiding. In 2019, they were granted asylum in Canada.

The case received considerable international attention. It became "a sort of signature blasphemy case" (Interview, May 18, 2022), and Asia Bibi became "the face of the blasphemy law in Pakistan" (Interview, August 12, 2022). Several international governmental and nongovernmental actors called for her release. However, they did not form one consistent coalition. Instead, it was a loose coalition of Western governments and the European Union that engaged in human rights diplomacy, and a network of religious interest groups publicly calling for Asia Bibi's release. In addition, there were a few international human rights NGOs, such as Amnesty International, that monitored the case. Some of these actors worked with domestic human rights activists and groups, which, for security reasons, maintained a low profile. Most organizations from within Pakistan were reluctant to get publicly involved in the case because speaking out on blasphemy "puts a target on your back" and thus would have jeopardized the rest of their work (Interview, August 12, 2022). This would apply even more to Muslim than to Christian organizations, because they do not have the protection and support of their own faith community (Interview, November 23, 2022). In addition, a few journalists followed the case to raise awareness.

The case was also regularly raised in UN bodies, for example, by human rights activists or other governments, like India (a geopolitical rival), in the then Human Rights Commission (European Centre for Law & Justice, 2018; Ponteficio Instituto Missioni Estere asianews, 2012; Sibal, 2019); and by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in the context of high-profile violence against religious minorities (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2011). However, given the long-running conflicts within the UN Human Rights Commission (now Council) about criminalizing the defamation of religion versus promoting freedom of religion or belief spearheaded by Pakistan (Peterson, 2021, pp. 219ff), there

	Expressive	Coercive
Public	Religious interest groups European and US parliamentarians 'Christian' governments EU High Representative	US (international religious freedom policy) EU Commission (GSP+ status) EU Special Envoy for FoRB
Private	Most involved governments EU Delegation	None

Figure 2. Diplomatic action used in the case of Asia Bibi.

never was consistent pressure from the majority of the Commission on Pakistan to release Asia Bibi, let alone change the blasphemy laws.

The Western governments and nongovernmental actors that engaged in human rights diplomacy and advocacy to free Asia Bibi used a range of strategies (Figure 2). Religious interest groups and parliamentarians engaged primarily in public expressive diplomacy, whereas most governments, including the EU, relied mostly on private expressive diplomacy. Only a few US and EU actors also threatened publicly with coercive measures, although mainly with reference to broader human rights issues, not the case itself. However, these threats quickly lost credibility due to a lack of implementation. We did not find any evidence for private coercive diplomacy.

Our case study confirms the scope conditions identified by Myrick and Weinstein (2022), as shown in Figure 1. With a few exceptions, most governments refrained from public and coercive pressure due to the violent backlash and their unwillingness in this context to prioritize human rights over other concerns. In the following paragraphs, we discuss each type of diplomatic action, its constraints, and insights into the varying dynamics of backlash and foreign policy priorities that we discovered in the case.

Public expressive diplomacy

Most governments refrained from engaging in public diplomacy. That was due to the backlash they encountered, which jeopardized the case. The backlash, however, did not come from the Pakistani government itself, as most of the literature on human rights contestation would have led us assume. It mostly came from domestic nonstate actors spreading violence and fear among governmental and judicial actors, thus silencing them and paralyzing their support.

Religious, primarily Christian, representatives were the first to publicly speak out against Asia Bibi's conviction. Pope Benedict XVI, during a weekly meeting in 2010, called for her release and highlighted the discrimination against Christians in Pakistan (BBC News, 2010). This sparked interest from the international media and Christian interest groups. In 2011, for instance, the organization Voice of Martyrs launched a global petition that gained 400,000 signatures, including those of Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis (Murashko 2011). Other organizations—such as Aid to the Church in Need, Open Doors, and Christian Solidarity Worldwide—followed the case and included it in their press releases, reports, and advocacy to raise international awareness.

The US government learned about the case through individual contacts between representatives of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom and Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan's Federal Minister for Minorities Affairs. Bhatti, himself a Christian, had previously worked with them on other blasphemy cases. Subsequently, the US government engaged in both public and private human rights diplomacy. Publicly, Asia Bibi's case (among others) was regularly mentioned in the US annual reports on the international promotion of religious freedom.[3]

A few European governments also called publicly for Asia Bibi's release: The Italian foreign minister, for example, instructed the Italian embassy in Islamabad to intervene and called on the Pakistani government to revoke her death penalty (Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, 2013). The spokesperson of the EU's High Representative for

Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, in line with the EU's common policy of opposing the death penalty, issued a statement expressing concern about the Lahore High Court's upholding of Asia Bibi's death penalty. The statement expressed "hope that the verdict will be appealed to the Supreme Court and struck down swiftly" (European Commission, 2014).

Parliamentarians were also active in calling for Asia Bibi's release, confirming Toft and Green's (2018, p. 11) observation that, in the case of FoRB, it is often parliamentarians, especially from Christian Democratic parties, who engage in public awareness raising. The European Parliament, for example, issued eight resolutions between 2011 and 2019 that mentioned Asia Bibi, organized a parliamentary debate specifically on her case (European Parliament, 2014), and members of the European Parliament visited Pakistan and talked to politicians and the press there (World Watch Monitor, 2017; Interview, July 11, 2022). In the United Kingdom, a group of 54 MPs criticized Asia Bibi's conviction in a letter to the Pakistani government (Catholic Herald, 2014). In Germany, it was the president of the German Bundestag who criticized Asia Bibi's conviction in a meeting with the Pakistani prime minister (Deutscher Bundestag, 2014), while the government did not issue a public statement.

Our interviewees agreed that public calls were mostly counterproductive, because they created backlash from violent Islamist movements, which jeopardized the case and the safety of Asia Bibi, her family, and her supporters. Within Pakistan, the case of Asia Bibi quickly became a symbol of the conflict between different views of Pakistan's identity and future trajectory: on the one hand, a conservative, Islamist view critical of Western interference; on the other, a more liberal view in search of international esteem. The government's capacity to improve the situation of those accused of blasphemy was significantly weakened by the broad public support for the punishment of blasphemy and the rise of religious parties, which mobilize violence against those accused of blasphemy and advocate harsh penalties for them (Ashraf, 2021; Haq, 2019; Hussain, 2022). These parties instrumentalized the case of Asia Bibi to build momentum for the movement and in support of the existing blasphemy laws (Interview, November 23, 2022; Kakar, 2022).

Many Pakistani parliamentarians, for example, issued statements in response to Western calls for FoRB, condemning the lack of religious freedom in Europe and critiquing the hypocrisy of European Muslim headscarf bans (Interview, August 12, 2022). Religious parties accused Western governments of using Asia Bibi to attack Islam and Pakistan (Haq, 2019, p. 99). As the Union of Catholic Asian (UCA) News reported (2014a), when the Lahore High Court dismissed Asia Bibi's appeal and upheld her death sentence in October 2014, several clerics—including the one who had brought forward the initial complaint against here—called the verdict a "victory of Islam and [were] chanting religious slogans outside the courtroom." In 2016, supporters of an Islamist group staged rallies, and a group of clerics issued a statement, both calling for Asia Bibi's execution and warning the government of more street protests should she be released (UCA News, 2016a, 2016b).

The broad parliamentary support for harsh blasphemy laws manifested in January 2023, when the National Assembly adopted amendments to the laws that further increased punishment for insulting Prophet Mohammed's companions and family members from three to 10 years of imprisonment, along with a hefty fine. Human rights groups, such as Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), have expressed their concerns that these amendments will fuel further rights abuses against religious minorities (Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), 2023). The gradual tightening of the blasphemy laws, as well as other policies aggravating the situation of religious minorities in Pakistan, can be traced back to efforts of Islamist radicals and authoritarian military regimes to mobilize religious sentiment and maintain their own grip on the political and administrative structure of the state (Ispahani, 2018).

Only a minority of politicians dares to speak out against the harsh application of the blasphemy laws, and this minority is increasingly shrinking, because, in the words of one of our interviewees, they are "scared to death" (Interview, April 21, 2022). Two high-level Pakistani

politicians were assassinated in 2011 for supporting Asia Bibi's mercy petition and speaking out against the blasphemy laws. In January 2011, Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab, after he had publicly called for Asia Bibi's release and criticized Pakistan's blasphemy laws, was assassinated by his bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri.

Two months later, Pakistan's first federal minister for minorities affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti, was assassinated, presumably by Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a radical militant group (BBC News, 2011). Bhatti had visited Asia Bibi in prison, "took care" of her family, spoke to domestic and foreign journalists about the case, and traveled to the United States and Canada, talking to the Canadian prime minister and the US secretary of state about the case (Bibi & Tollet, 2013, p. 122).

Another example is Sherry Rehman, an MP for the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), who in 2010 had tabled a bill seeking to abolish the death penalty for blasphemy. As a result, she received death threats, was accused of blasphemy herself, and had to go into hiding for a while before being sent away as ambassador to the United States (Brulliard, 2011). More than 89 people have been killed extrajudicially since 1947 following accusations of blasphemy (Nafees, 2021).

The Pakistani judiciary was under immense pressure as well. The intimidation of lawyers has become a main strategy by extremist groups to prevent blasphemy death sentences from being overturned in court (Amnesty International, 2016). Asia Bibi's lawyer, accordingly, had to flee the country. Since his return to Pakistan, he has been living under police protection and is "condemned" to help Christians accused of blasphemy, because Muslims will not use his services anymore (Interview, June 17, 2022). Leaders of religious militant groups also mobilized thousands of their followers to demonstrate prior to the ruling of the Lahore High Court, and several lawyers of a religious movement were present in court to put pressure on the judges to uphold the death sentence (Hussain, 2022, p. 149).

After Asia Bibi's acquittal by the Supreme Court, the leader of one of the religious parties, Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP), called for the killing of the three Supreme Court judges (Hussain, 2022, p. 155; Kakar, 2022, p. 75). The publication of the ruling was delayed for three weeks "after blasphemy campaigners promised to 'paralyze' the country and kill the judges if they did not uphold Bibi's death sentence" (Barker, 2018).

The trial in both courts was delayed several times due to the absence of judges, because "judges feel intimidated by the violence" and, therefore, "politely" avoided the case (UCA News, 2014b), and because one of the Supreme Court judges recused himself (UCA News, 2018). Local judges are even less protected than those in higher courts—one of the reasons, according to one of our interviewees, why the case was not resolved in the local court already; it would have compromised the safety of the local judges (Interview, August 12, 2022).

Several sources confirmed that primarily lower-court judges in Pakistan are reluctant to acquit defendants for fear of violent retribution (Barker, 2018; US Department of State, 2019). However, there have been other cases with less publicity in which the defendants were acquitted already by the Lahore High Court (see examples in International Commission of Jurists, 2015; Hussain, 2022, p. 149), suggesting that the publicity of the Asia Bibi case significantly prolonged it. Islamist backlash might also be one of the reasons why the Supreme Court judges, when acquitting Asia Bibi, appealed primarily to Islam rather than to the Constitution in their ruling, which has been criticized for leaving the blasphemy laws unchallenged and, thus, inadvertently furthering the cause of the religious right (Ahmed, 2021; Kakar, 2022).

Given these political dynamics, it was not surprising that the government was reluctant to follow international calls for Asia Bibi's immediate release and a softer approach toward blasphemy. Any activities raising public awareness were seen as counterproductive. In the words of on interviewee: "[R]aising the case backfired, any diplomatic pressure backfired, getting politicians to speak out backfired, and confronting the Mullahs backfired … once you cross a line and it becomes a big story nationally, then you can't counter it with a big story internationally" (Interview, November 11, 2022).

Public coercive diplomacy

Even though coercive diplomacy could have been much more effective than expressive diplomacy, Western governments, despite a few threats, did not consistently apply it. In line with most of the literature, the main reasons for that were the political and economic interests of these governments. However, our interviews revealed that these, at least partly, were also shaped by fear of violence spilling over into their own territories.

Examples of public threats of coercive diplomacy included the United States, whose Commission on International Religious Freedom had recommended since 2002 to designate Pakistan as a *country of particular concern* (CPC), according to the US International Religious Freedom Act, which would have meant obligatory punitive measures. However, the US State Department did not follow that advice until 2018, and even then granted a waiver to Pakistan due to its security interests in the country as a major partner in the "war on terror" (Akins, 2020).

Another example of public coercive diplomacy was the European Union's threat that lifting the moratorium on the death penalty would jeopardize Pakistan's preferential treatment under the Generalized Scheme of Preferences (GSP+) for export tariffs (Kinzelbach & Lehmann, 2015, p. 32). Pakistan had announced at the end of 2014 that it would lift the moratorium on the death penalty, in place since 2008. Due to her death sentence, this intention also affected Asia Bibi. The withdrawal of the GSP+ status would have functioned as a form of economic sanction. However, the threat referred to the death penalty, not to the violation of FoRB through the strict interpretation of the blasphemy laws. Ultimately, the GSP+ status was extended even though Pakistan had lifted the moratorium in 2015, illustrating the European Union's unwillingness to prioritize human rights over other concerns. The then EU-Special Envoy for the Promotion of FoRB outside the EU was the only one who wanted to make the extension of Pakistan's GSP+ status also conditional on Asia Bibi's release (Christian Post, 2018). According to some of our interviewees, his public announcement, however, was counterproductive, as it was not supported by other EU institutions and therefore lacked credibility. In their view, it did more harm than good by creating backlash from domestic opponents of Asia Bibi's release.

In addition to political and economic interests, some of our interviewees explained the reluctance of Western politicians to put too much pressure on the Pakistani government by their fear of violence spilling over into their own territories. Interviewees had observed that some diplomats were quite concerned about the security of their embassy staff in Pakistan as well as security "back home," particularly in countries with large Muslim diasporas. This unwillingness to intervene strongly in favor of Asia Bibi's human rights surfaced both before her release as well as afterward, when Western governments negotiated which country should grant her and her family asylum.

On the other hand, Pakistan's dependence on both European and American markets, aid, and investments made it difficult for the government to completely ignore the international pressure around the case (Delegation of the European Union to Pakistan, 2025; US Department of State (n.d.).[4] Although none of our interviewees expected this to be a main cause of Asia Bibi's release, they still conceded that it was the reason why the Pakistani government could not quietly execute her and had to find a "face-saving" solution "that didn't look like an obvious climb down in the face of Western pressure … not looking like a sellout on the issue of blasphemy as well" (Interview, May 18, 2022; a similar argument was made by Haq, 2019, p. 148).

Consequently, the government argued that, due to the separation of powers, it was not able to interfere with the judicial process and, therefore, had to wait until the judiciary had processed the case. In line with Jetschke and Liese's (2013) argument, we found that the targeted Pakistani government justified its behavior by invoking other norms. However, in this case, it did not invoke norms such as state sovereignty or national security, as often done by authoritarian governments opposing Western human rights diplomacy; instead, it used an argument of checks and balances that would resonate with Western governments. In the view of one of our interviewees, the argument was used to disarm criticism of the government, as the Pakistani

government knew that it was difficult to counter from a democratic perspective. It, thus, helped avoid additional international pressure.

Private expressive diplomacy

We did not find any evidence for private coercive diplomacy, illustrating the unwillingness of Western governments to prioritize human rights in the context of the case. Given the violent backlash, most governments preferred private expressive diplomacy over public pressure, confirming Myrick and Weinstein's (2022) scope conditions.

The US government officials, for example, annually discussed Asia Bibi's case and the broader issue of blasphemy with Pakistani officials. Pursuant to relational approaches (Terman, 2023), in these private diplomatic conversations, the United States worked closely with the Canadian government, because, "they don't have the same baggage we do" (Interview, April 21, 2022). Both governments often coordinated their views beforehand and then let Canadian representatives take the lead in the talks. After the Supreme Court admitted Asia Bibi's appeal in 2015, they tried to build an international network to discuss how to put pressure on the Pakistani government in case the death penalty was upheld, and on how to get Asia Bibi out of the country in the case of acquittal.

European governments and the European Union became part of this network around this time. They also engaged in both public and private diplomacy but preferred private channels. British government officials, for instance, regularly raised their concerns about the application of the blasphemy laws in general and Asia Bibi's conviction specifically when meeting Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and other high-level politicians (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2014). Other European government officials also brought up the case during diplomatic visits, and the European Union, with support of its member states, always included the case in its annual human rights dialogue with Pakistan (Interviews, April 21, 2022, and July 11, 2022).

Given the violent contestation around Asia Bibi's case, the diplomats we spoke with favored private diplomacy to avoid more backlash that would jeopardize the case and everybody involved supporting Asia Bibi. This led, however, to what Terman (2023) called a "shamer's dilemma"—when governments are aware of the sensitivity of an issue and therefore use private diplomacy rather than public shaming but then come under pressure from their societal publics for going "too soft" on human rights violators.

In the European Union, for instance, diplomats often favor "quiet diplomacy" because they deem it to be more effective (because it does not harm the relationship with the target state), whereas the European Parliament is more in favor of "public diplomacy" (Kinzelbach & Lehmann, 2015, pp. 9ff). In several European parliaments, a group of primarily conservative members regularly sent parliamentary questions to the government to raise awareness of the case. Indeed, public statements by governmental officials were often in response to parliamentary calls and questions (e.g., European Commission, 2014; République Française, 2014).

These dynamics confirm Myrick and Weinstein's (2022) proposition that expressive public diplomacy and advocacy, even though not very effective in themselves, are often used to raise awareness of a case among other diplomats so that they continue exerting private pressure on the norm-violating state and maybe even start considering more coercive measures. However, as discussed, this public awareness raising can have counterproductive effects if it amplifies violent backlash.

Conclusions

Positive case studies are essential for understanding how international religious freedom policies can succeed. In this article, we used the international campaign to free Asia Bibi as a case study to explore successful religious freedom diplomacy. It is not only its prominence that makes the case a key example; its length and the highly politicized context of blasphemy also allowed us

to study successful religious freedom diplomacy over time, and its specific constraints in such emotionally laden contexts.

Confirming scope conditions formulated by Myrick and Weinstein (2022) in their typology of governmental human rights diplomacy, our analysis demonstrates that, in violence-prone contexts such as blasphemy in Pakistan, most diplomats prefer private diplomacy to avoid, or at least minimize, backlash, and that they prefer expressive over coercive diplomacy due to an unwillingness to prioritize human rights. Supported by the views of diplomats, activists, and journalists who were involved in the campaign, the study reveals that private diplomacy is indeed preferable in such sensitive, violence-prone environments to avoid exacerbating the situation, at least in cases in which the target government signals responsiveness to international pressure.

The Asia Bibi case thus confirms warnings by FoRB practitioners that too much pressure from foreign governments and/or international media not only can harden the position of the FoRB violating state but can also bring violent mobs to the streets that threaten and thus silence politicians, the government, and the judiciary, which otherwise might be much more responsive to these international calls. However, despite the counterproductive effect of facilitating violent backlash, public diplomacy has its role too, if it helps keeping the case on the agenda of a wider circle of diplomats.

Each type of diplomatic action has its constraints: Public diplomacy can create violent backlash; private diplomacy can produce the shamer's dilemma and thus counterproductive awareness-raising; expressive diplomacy often is ineffective; and coercive diplomacy risks losing credibility if it is not implemented consistently. Avoiding these issues and choosing the right diplomatic approach requires local knowledge and strategic coordination.

Our study also makes a theoretical contribution to the literature on governmental human rights diplomacy. It refines Myrick and Weinstein's (2022) typology and extends the taxonomy of backlash. It shows that capacities by both the domestic government and diplomats are not always based solely on a rational unwillingness of governments, as discussed in previous literature. In violence-prone contexts with highly politicized religion, government decisions can also be influenced by emotions such as fear if there are nonstate actors that spread violence and intimidation to prevent action in favor of religious freedom and human rights.

To prevent severe backlash, some scholars have suggested avoiding calling for respect of FoRB directly and instead finding alternative strategies that do not encounter as much emotional resistance, such as focusing on notions of citizenship, nondiscrimination, coexistence, freedom of speech, and other individual rights (Kakar, 2022; Petersen & Marshall, 2019). Following from our findings, we suggest promoting the rule of law and the safety of lawyers and judges so that the judicial system can do its work and victims of false blasphemy accusations are not stuck in prisons for many years because local lawyers and judges fear for their lives if they support and acquit them. As a liberalization of the blasphemy laws is highly unlikely any time soon, because that would be "political and actual suicide" (Interview, August 12, 2022), this could be an alternative solution. It would give legal staff the security and space to take legal, instead of political, decisions to acquit those convicted (Interview, August 12, 2022). There is no perfect solution, but reframing blasphemy specifically and FoRB more generally as a legal rather than political or religious matter may help avoid, or at least minimize, violent backlash.

Finally, we need to stress that success is relative. We started the analysis from the assumption that the release of Asia Bibi was a success. However, the length of the proceedings and their long-term consequences also allow for a different interpretation. Asia Bibi remained imprisoned for almost 10 years. Now, due to her lack of education, she leads a life of poverty in Canada (Zehra, 2023).

Finally, all the "frenzy" around the case may have made it more difficult for future blasphemy cases (Interview, May 18, 2022), as the case was instrumentalized by the Islamist movement and gave it new, violent momentum, limiting domestic capacities to help blasphemy victims in the future, because it further increased many lawyers' and judges' reluctance to become involved in

blasphemy cases (Interviews, April 21, 2022, November 11, 2022; US Department of State, 2019). There are still about 300 people on trial for blasphemy, most of them Muslims, who are even more vulnerable than Christians because they do not receive much support from their own faith community within and outside of the country (Interview, November 23, 2022). Consistent and coordinated efforts are necessary to address the human rights of those accused of blasphemy in Pakistan, and of prisoners of conscience everywhere. We hope the lessons identified from the Asia Bibi case will help inform these efforts in the future.

Notes

1. The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Aston University's School of Social Sciences and Humanities (REC ID SSH-21/22-005). All interviews were conducted online between May 2022 and August 2023.
2. Myrick and Weinstein (2022) developed their typology based on a case study of a US campaign to free female political prisoners in a range of countries.
3. The State Department's International Religious Freedom Reports are available at https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/. The case was first mentioned in 2010 and 2011, then again each year between 2014 and 2019.
4. One-third of products exported by Pakistan reach the EU market, and Pakistan receives about EUR 700 million of development aid and humanitarian assistance annually from the EU and its member states (https://www.eeas.europa.eu/pakistan/european-union-and-pakistan_en?s=175). Until 2018, Pakistan was an important strategic partner of the United States in its "war on terror," and the United States has been one of the largest sources of foreign direct investment in Pakistan and is Pakistan's largest export market (https://www.state.gov/countries-areas/pakistan/).

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