

Afzal's anguished outpouring leads to outrage in Kashmir

Mohammed Afzal's anguished plea that the noose would be better than uncertainty of life on death row Monday evoked outrage from rights campaigners, separatist leaders and others here who lashed out at the Indian government for dithering over his case.

Afzal, who has been on death row for the last three years in New Delhi's Tihar Jail after he was convicted for his role in the 2001 attack on the Indian parliament and is one of India's most controversial convicts, said he wished for Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) L.K. Advani to become prime minister as 'he was the only one who can take a decision and hang me'.

'I really wish L.K. Advani becomes India's next prime minister as he is the only one who can take a decision and hang me. At least my pain and daily suffering would ease then,' Afzal told IANS in an exclusive interview from jail, a scathing indictment of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government that has been unable to take a call on the much publicised case.

The desperate plea for death led Syed Ali Geelani, the hardline separatist leader and chairman of the breakaway Hurriyat group, to say: "Afzal has been subjected to psychological torture by the jail authorities. His statement betrays the frustration that has beset him in the jail."

Mirwaiz Umer Farooq, chairperson of the moderate Hurriyat group, added: "Kashmiris cannot expect justice from the Indian system. The whole system is biased against Kashmiris."

Though Farooq Abdullah, former chief minister and patron of the regional national conference (NC), refused to comment on Afzal's statement, ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) general secretary Nizam-ud-Din Bhat said he was 'living under the shadow of the gallows'.

Afzal's cousin, Yaseen Guru, reacted strongly to his statement. "He has been driven to desperation. His entire family has been harassed since his arrest. He has been demonized by the Indian media. He never got a fair trial."

Nayeem Khan, chairperson of the National Front, a constituent of the Mirwaiz led Hurriyat group, said India claimed to be the biggest democracy in the world but did not follow democratic principles.

'They are themselves the violators of their own constitutions. Afzal's statement speaks volumes about the treatment of prisoners in Indian jails. Kashmiri prisoners are treated on communal lines.'

Echoing the view, Sajad Lone of the People's Conference described the situation as 'deplorable'. The Indian government, he said, had announced capital punishment and the least they could do was to let Afzal live as a human being.

Said Khurram Parvez, coordinator of the Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society, a human rights group: 'It is basically a question of fair trial which Afzal did not get. It is a case of state hegemony. The statement by Afzal speaks of the tremendous agony under which he is living.'

Zafar Shah, a lawyer and a former president of the Kashmir Bar Association, agreed and said Afzal's outpouring reflected the desperate conditions in which he had been living in prison. 'He wants an early end to his suffering. Advani being an influential person has been urged by Afzal to

intervene in the matter.'

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