

The intriguing case of Dr Aafiya Siddiqui

Contributed by Yvonne Ridley
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THE Pakistan Government has been ordered to secure the release of scientist Dr Aafiya Siddiqui from US custody. The Islamabad High Court made the ground-breaking directive in a move welcomed by her family, supporters and anyone who wants to see justice delivered to a woman who has been trapped in a hellish existence for the last six years. However, not everyone is happy that Justice Raja Saeed Akram has ordered the government to work towards bringing Aafiya home.

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As I discovered a few days ago during a visit to Pakistan it seems her ex-husband Dr Muhammad Amjad Khan has been briefing against the mother of his three children.

In an exclusive interview given to Karachi journalist Aroosa Masroor at The News, Dr Khan said that most claims about Aafiya, propagated to garner public support and sympathy, are untrue.

Why he chose to break his silence after six years is not immediately obvious ... unless you buy in to the crazy theory that he was instrumental in his wife's arrest and disappearance.

Of course it would be outrageous and defamatory to suggest Dr Khan was involved and I certainly have no evidence to suggest otherwise, but what intrigues me is why this man would want to try and deliberately mislead the public as he did in his first on-the-record interview.

I am not sure what are his motives but, in a conference I gave at the Islamabad National Press Club this week I threw out a challenge to Dr Khan to either put up or shut up.

In his February 18 interview he said: "Aafia's release cannot be secured by propagating stories based on falsehood and deception," and then he went on to tell a lie so blatant that I can no longer remain silent, and here's why.

He reckons that the iconic photograph of Aafiya, slumped to one side with eyes closed, was a stunted up picture taken by her sister Fowzia years ago. He even goes into fine detail explaining her injured mouth, saying that Aafia's upper lip was cut by a milk bottle in an accident.

Fowzia, he says, warned him at the time that if he tried to divorce Aafia, she would use the picture against him alleging him to be an abusive husband. "It was made to appear in the picture that Aafia was badly injured. Today, the same picture is being circulated in the media to claim that Aafia was tortured for years in Bagram," he states in The News interview.

There's no hesitation in this statement - he is very clear about the origins of "that picture". Well I am also clear about the origins of "that picture" because it was taken by the office of the Governor of Ghazni in July 2008.

How do I know? Because the governor told me so himself, and then showed me copies of that and other pictures taken of Aafiya on the day of her arrest that he stored on his personal laptop. If you check this unedited footage shot by filmmaker Hassan al Banna Ghani who accompanied me on my investigations to Pakistan and Afghanistan last year, the origins of that iconic picture become very clear.

That is why I stood up in a press conference a few days ago and called Dr Khan a liar, and then invited him to sue me "in a court of his choice" for slander and defamation. As a journalist I know the seriousness of making such a statement and I do not make it lightly but I also mean what I say and say what I mean.

In the meantime, I will let you - the viewer - make your own judgment about the photograph of Dr Aafiya. Perhaps you have your own theories about why her ex-husband would lie. Here is the clip
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBhseSkNX68>

The divorce was, without doubt, a very bitter experience for both sides as most divorces are. Bitterness can remain a lifetime companion, but at the end of the day Dr Aafiya is the mother of his three children and as such she deserves his

support and respect.

If he can't give it, then I suggest Dr Khan returns to the shadows once more and stops briefing against his wife.

Sharing details of his failed marriage with Dr Aafia, serves no purpose although I have to question why Dr Khan signed a legal agreement whereby the custody of the three children was given to Aafia after their split, if he really thought his wife was (as he portrays in the article) ... a violent, unstable woman in the sway of jihadists.

In the meantime two of Dr Aafia Siddiqui's children - Marium now aged 10, and six-year-old Suleiman - are still missing.

Perhaps that is something which would concern any parent, but Dr Khan states casually: "I am sure they are around Karachi and in contact with their maternal family as both Aafia and the children were seen around their house here and in Islamabad on multiple occasions since their alleged disappearance in 2003.

"They may be living under an assumed identity just like Aafia and Ahmed had been living [as Saliha and Ali Ahsan] for five years before they got arrested."

He said Dr Fowzia's claim that the children are missing after being removed from the Bagram prison in Afghanistan "may be an attempt to attract sympathy of the government and the people and distract its attention from the real location."

He also attempts to pour cold water on claims that Aafia was held in US custody, including Bagram for five years - but how would he really know?

I, on the otherhand, have eye witness accounts that the woman known as Prisoner 650 who was held in Bagram for years is none other than Dr Aafia Siddiqui.

Even the US authorities, after months of denial, finally supported my statements and admitted that Prisoner 650 was indeed a female detainee in their custody.

The only dispute we have now is the identity of Prisoner 650. The US authorities say she isn't Aafia but refuse to say who she is and to which country she was returned.

I, on the other hand, now have an interview statement given freely by former Guantanamo detainee Binyam Mohamed confirming that Prisoner 650 and Dr Aafia Siddiqui are one in the same. This man saw her during his time in Bagram and has made a positive identification. His evidence is, in my opinion, irrefutable.

Again, make your own judgments by checking out Binyam Mohamed's interview through this link:
<http://www.presstv.com/programs/player/?id=90350>

I now understand Aafia's case is going to be submitted to the International Court of Justice in The Hague and that the government of Pakistan is making serious efforts on this issue.

In the meantime the case against Aafia will be resumed in New York later this month after a psychologist and physician give their reports regarding her health and if she is fit to plead.

The court hearing is, in itself, illegal and I'm not sure how it can go ahead. I say that on the basis Aafia, is after all a Pakistani citizen who is being tried for an alleged offence carried out in Afghanistan. She is only standing trial in America because she was put on a rendition flight to America - and was certainly not extradited.

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References to this article:

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Interview with Governor of Ghazni: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBhseSkNX68>

Interview in The News: <http://www.thenews.com.pk/print3.asp?id=20404>