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Bishop Franco Mulakkal, flanked by relatives, including, at right, his brother-in-law P.P. Chacko, goes to his car parked inside the compound of the Additional District and Sessions Court in Kottayam, Kerala, India, where he was acquitted on Jan. 14 of charges of raping a nun. (M.A. Salim)



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A court in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala Jan. 14 acquitted Bishop Franco Mulakkal of Jalandhar in the historic case of the rape of a nun, saying the prosecution failed to prove the charges against him.

The court did not explain the reasoning behind its verdict. Additional District and Sessions Court Judge G. Gopakumar pronounced the verdict in an open court minutes after it assembled at 11 a.m. The majority of the trial has been held in closed sessions, excluding the public and the media.

"Praise the Lord," Mulakkal said in Malayalam, his native language, as his first reaction to the verdict after seating himself inside his car before driving away with relatives and friends.

Sr. Anupama Kelamangalathuveli, the spokesperson for the nun who made the accusations, said she was disappointed over the verdict, calling it "quite unexpected."

"We will continue to fight until our sister gets justice," she asserted, speaking to media persons outside her convent in Kuravilangad, a village 13 miles north of Kottayam.

S. Harisankar, a key investigating officer and former Kottayam district superintendent of police, called the verdict "extremely unfortunate" and asserted that the case had enough materials on record to convict the accused.

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"We had expected a conviction. We will appeal. We had a lot of corroborative evidences," he told media.

The nun at the center of the trial, a Missionaries of Jesus former superior general, and her five supporters are now under round-the-clock police protection in their isolated rooms in their convent.

The bishop, whose diocese of Jalandhar is based in Punjab, 1,930 miles north of the convent, has jurisdiction over it.

Mulakkal's brother-in-law P.P. Chacko, who stood close to him outside the box, closed his eyes and began to pray, folding his hands for the next four minutes until the court announced the prelate's acquittal, which was not audible in the din of the crowded courtroom.

After hearing the order, Mulakkal rushed out of the accused box and the courtroom along with his family members, and the media crew inside the court followed him.



A front view of the Additional District and Sessions Court in Kottayam, Kerala, India, where a not-guilty verdict was pronounced in favor of Jalandhar Bishop Franco Mulakkal, accused of raping a nun multiple times (M.A. Salim)

After the verdict was announced, some Mulakkal supporters on the court's grounds responded loudly, "Praise the Lord," as the prelate's vehicle moved out of the court premises where the district administration had imposed tight police security.

"We knew from the beginning the bishop was the victim and our stand is now vindicated," Chacko told GSR.

A press release from the Jalandhar Diocese thanked all who in the past few years believed in the innocence of Mulakkal and rendered legal help to him. The press release, written in Malayalam on the letterhead of the diocese, was issued in Kottayam immediately after the verdict was announced.

Ahead of the verdict, policemen both in uniform and plainclothes were seen inspecting those entering the court corridors.

The district administration imposed tight security, reportedly fearing backlash from Mulakkal supporters in case of an adverse verdict.



Security persons let people inside the Additional District and Sessions Court in Kottayam, Kerala, India, where Jalandhar Bishop Franco Mulakkal was acquitted on Jan. 14 of the charge of raping a nun. (M.A. Salim)

In June 2018, the accuser told police Mulakkal raped her 13 times from 2014 into 2016 in her Kuravilangad convent. The sister had said she had complained to higher church officials but had gotten no response or remedy.

Soon the demand for action against Mulakkal gathered momentum. A public protest was launched in a square near the Kerala High Court in Kochi, Sept. 8, 2018. Kelamangalathuveli and four companions supporting the alleged rape survivor joined a sit-in that deplored police inaction in the case and demanded Mulakkal's arrest.

Mulakkal was arrested in September 21, 2018, and charged with wrongful confinement, rape, unnatural sex and criminal intimidation. Mulakkal has denied all charges throughout a trial that began in August 2020 and concluded in December 2021.*

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Chacko said the bishop and their family "suffered immensely but at the end we are happy that the truth has come out."

Shaiju Antony, joint convener of Save Our Sisters, a civil forum that supports the survivor and her companions in their legal fight, called the verdict "highly disappointing, unexpected and unbelievable."

"Obviously we are disappointed but that doesn't mean that we will stop our fight," he said and added, "We will continue our fight until she gets justice."

He said they would tap all legal remedies to help the sister.

"We will plan our future strategies after reading the court order and consulting our legal team," Antony said.

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* *This story has been updated since publication to clarify key dates.*

This story appears in the **Bishop Mulakkal trial** feature series. View the full series.