



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

LEGISLATION FACTSHEET: BLASPHEMY (2023 UPDATE)

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Overview of Blasphemy Legislation

USCIRF defines blasphemy as “the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God or sacred things.” Blasphemy laws punish expressions or acts deemed blasphemous, defamatory of religions, or contemptuous of religion or religious symbols, figures, or feelings. Blasphemy laws can be contained in a variety of legal instruments, including constitutions and statutory laws, and are often part of national penal codes. Punishment for blasphemy ranges from fines to imprisonment to death sentences.

USCIRF has long monitored blasphemy laws. In 2020, USCIRF published a comprehensive [report](#) examining and comparing state implementation and enforcement of criminal laws prohibiting blasphemy and a [factsheet](#) detailing which states retain criminal laws prohibiting blasphemy. This factsheet provides an updated list of states with laws criminalizing blasphemy and explains how legislation criminalizing blasphemy is inconsistent with international human rights law. Since the publication of the 2020 factsheet, USCIRF’s ongoing monitoring of religious freedom conditions abroad revealed several additional countries with blasphemy laws, which are included in this updated factsheet.

USCIRF’s Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Regional Distribution of Laws (as of September 2023)

USCIRF has identified 95 countries with legislation criminalizing blasphemy. As the following table shows, these countries are in every region of the world. USCIRF’s [Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#) documents selected blasphemy cases from countries USCIRF has recommended for designation as “countries of particular concern” or “special watch list” status, pursuant to the [International Religious Freedom Act](#).

Regions of the World	Countries with Blasphemy Laws
Americas	Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago
Asia-Pacific	Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Burma, Cambodia, Cyprus, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kiribati, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Thailand, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Tuvalu, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu
Europe	Andorra, Austria, Finland, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, Poland, Portugal, Russia, San Marino, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine
Middle East and North Africa	Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen
Sub-Saharan Africa	Botswana, Cape Verde, Cameroon, Comoros, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Kenya, Malawi, Mauritania, Mauritius, Nigeria, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe

Countries’ Maximum Sanctions for Blasphemy

Maximum Sanction	Countries
Death penalty	Brunei Darussalam, Iran, Mauritania, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia
Compulsory or correctional labor	Moldova, Russia
Imprisonment	Algeria, Andorra, Antigua and Barbuda, Austria, Bahamas, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Barbados, Botswana, Brazil, Burma, Cambodia, Cameroon, Comoros, Cyprus, El Salvador, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Finland, Gambia, Germany, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kiribati, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Liechtenstein, Malawi, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, Nepal, Nigeria, Oman, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Rwanda, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, San Marino, Seychelles, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Suriname, Syria, Tanzania, Thailand, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Turkey, Tuvalu, Uganda, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu, Yemen, Zambia, Zimbabwe
Fines	Colombia, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan
No sanction specified	Afghanistan, Cape Verde, Kyrgyzstan

Human Rights Concerns

Blasphemy laws are inconsistent with international human rights law. While it is legitimate for individuals to speak out against blasphemy, legislation criminalizing blasphemy violates the right to freedom of religion or belief and the right to freedom of opinion and expression. International human rights law protects the rights of individuals; it does not protect religious feelings, figures, or symbols from behavior or speech considered blasphemous. USCIRF urges all countries to repeal their blasphemy laws and free those detained for or convicted of blasphemy.

1. Blasphemy laws violate the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Article 18 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR) provides that every individual has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Article 18 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR) also provides that every individual has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Under international human rights law freedom of religion or belief includes the right to express a full range of thoughts and beliefs, including those that others might

find blasphemous. The United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief [notes](#) that the “international normative standard” for blasphemy laws is clear: “states may not impose punishment for insults, criticism or giving offence to religious ideas, icons, or places, nor can laws be used to protect the feelings of religious communities.”

“The right to freedom of religion or belief does not include the right to have a religion or belief that is free from criticism or ridicule.”

– SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

2. Blasphemy laws violate the right to freedom of opinion or expression.

Article 19 of the UDHR provides that every individual has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including the freedom to “hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” Article 19 of the ICCPR similarly provides that every individual shall have the right to hold opinions without interference and the right to free expression, including “freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing, or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media” of the individual’s choice. [General Comment 34](#), the [UN Human Rights Committee’s](#) interpretive guidance to Article 19 of the ICCPR, states that “prohibitions of displays of lack of respect for a religion or other belief system, including blasphemy laws, are incompatible with the [ICCPR].”

3. Blasphemy laws promote government intolerance and discrimination against minorities and minority viewpoints.

Proponents of blasphemy laws argue that such legislation is necessary to protect religious freedom and promote harmony. However, in practice, blasphemy laws empower government officials to punish individuals who express minority viewpoints. In Bangladesh, a tribunal recently [sentenced](#) a Hindu man to seven years in prison for allegedly insulting Islam in a Facebook post. In Nigeria, [Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#), an Islamic gospel musician, was found guilty of blasphemy after circulating audio messages deemed blasphemous toward the Prophet Muhammad. He was sentenced to death by hanging and is currently filing a petition with the Nigerian Supreme Court [challenging](#) that sentence. Also in Nigeria, self-

identified atheist [Mubarak Bala](#) was [sentenced](#) to 24 years in prison after pleading guilty to blasphemy charges alleging he insulted the Prophet Muhammad in a Facebook post. In Pakistan, [human rights activists](#) are [concerned](#) that the country’s proposed expansion of blasphemy laws targets minorities, particularly Ahmadiyya Muslims. In Russia, blasphemy charges are [often](#), though [not exclusively](#), used to target individuals who are perceived to have insulted the Russian Orthodox Church. In Turkey, journalist [Hakan Aygün](#) poked fun at a Turkish government COVID-19 relief initiative using a religiously-inspired play-on-words, which included references to the Qur’an. Authorities [arrested](#) and charged him with “provoking the public to hatred and enmity” and “insulting religious values.” A lower court [sentenced](#) Aygün to seven and a half months’ prison time before deferring the sentence.

4. Blasphemy laws encourage individuals and non-state actors to seek retribution against alleged blasphemers.

Blasphemy laws signal to society that alleged blasphemers should be punished. As such, individuals accused of blasphemy risk retribution from individuals and non-state actors in addition to government officials. In February 2023, a crowd in Pakistan [stormed](#) a police station and [killed](#) a man being held on suspicion of blasphemy. In May 2022, a mob in Nigeria [killed](#) a college student after a WhatsApp message she sent was deemed blasphemous. In May 2023, Sri Lankan authorities [arrested](#) stand-up comedian Jayani Natasha Edirisooriya for [allegedly](#) “defaming Buddhism” during a comedy show. Individuals and non-state actors also use blasphemy laws to target those with whom they have had a personal dispute, even if the allegedly “blasphemous” conduct did not actually occur. In January 2023, the colleague of a Christian woman working with Pakistan’s Civil Aviation Authority [threatened](#) to accuse her of blasphemy following a workplace dispute. In July 2022, a Pakistani court reportedly sentenced [Ashfaq Masih](#) to death for blasphemy. The blasphemy allegation emerged following a dispute Masih, a bicycle mechanic, had with a customer. In June 2022, [Stephen Masih](#) was released from prison in Pakistan following his arrest and detention in 2019 for blasphemy. Reports indicate that the blasphemy allegation stemmed from a dispute Masih had with a neighbor. In 2019, Meiliana, a Buddhist woman, was [released](#) from an Indonesian prison after serving 12 months in prison for blasphemy. She was [convicted](#) of blasphemy in 2018 after complaining about the volume of a local mosque’s call to prayer.



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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.