

**United Nations Human Rights Council, 38th Session (18 June - 06 July 2018)**  
**Interactive Dialogue with SR on freedom of opinion and expression**  
**June 2018**

**Speaker: Humanists UK<sup>1</sup> representative, Dr David Harvey**

In 2016 the UNHRC adopted a resolution on 'The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the internet'.<sup>2</sup> The resolution 'Condemns unequivocally all human rights violations and abuses, such as torture, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and arbitrary detention, expulsion, intimidation and harassment, as well as gender based violence, committed against persons for exercising their human rights and fundamental freedoms on the Internet'. We welcomed that resolution and are saddened by how little regard is paid to it by too many Member States.

In Bangladesh, for example, the Information and Communication Technology Act has been used in recent years to criminalise freedom of expression online. It is, in all but name, an anti-blasphemy law. Dozens of arbitrary arrests have been carried out by the police under section 57 of the Act, which authorises the prosecution of anyone who 'causes or may cause hurt to religious belief' in what they publish online. Concerningly, a new Digital Security Act proposed by the Government may well restrict free speech even further.<sup>3</sup>

Similar situations exist elsewhere. In Pakistan the Telecommunication Authority was established last year to crack down on internet and social media posts that criticise or offend Islam.<sup>4</sup> Islamabad's High Court has directed the Ministry of Interior to act swiftly when allegedly blasphemous material appears online.

This aggressive crackdown on blasphemy by the State, whether online or not, creates an environment in which vigilante attacks against religious and non-religious minorities become commonplace. In Bangladesh, secularist and humanist bloggers have been murdered with impunity for years, and only this month yet another humanist writer, Shahzahan Bachchu, was shot dead in his home village.<sup>5</sup> Mashal Khan, a humanist student beaten to death in Pakistan having been accused of posting blasphemous content on social media, is just another tragic example.

The internet can and should be a vessel for self-expression, for access to information and knowledge, and for the free exchange of ideas and opinions. But where blasphemy laws are enforced, it becomes a tool of oppression. We urge all States to abolish their anti-blasphemy laws immediately, including those that seek to limit freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief online.

Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> Humanists UK recently changed its name from the British Humanist Association.

<sup>2</sup> [http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage\\_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/32/L.20](http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/32/L.20)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/digital-security-act-be-revised-1580227>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-blasphemy-online-regulatory-body/4101325.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://humanism.org.uk/2018/06/12/humanist-writer-murdered-in-bangladesh/>