

**United Nations Human Rights Council, 41st Session (24 June-12 July 2019)**  
**Item 4 – General debate**

**Speaker: British Humanist Association Representative, Farah Mohammed**

In 2011, the UN Human Rights Council issued General Comment 34 on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights stating that ‘prohibitions of displays of lack of respect for a religion or other belief system, including blasphemy laws, are incompatible with the Covenant.’<sup>1</sup>

Blasphemy or apostasy is still punishable by death in 13 countries around the world,<sup>2</sup> such as Pakistan where no evidence is required to prosecute a charge of blasphemy and there are no penalties for making false allegations.<sup>3</sup>

We are concerned about the ongoing campaign of persecution against the non-religious in Egypt, which has continued since the ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood-supported Mohamed Morsi Government in 2013. In 2014, the Ministry of Youth began a media campaign aimed at ‘eradicating’ atheism. Since then there has been a dramatic increase in the number of arrests and convictions for blasphemy, as well as government intimidation of known atheists. We are particularly concerned by proposals put before Egyptian lawmakers last year to introduce legislation to make atheism a criminal offense with severe punishments for offenders.<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch has called this campaign a ‘coordinated government crackdown on perceived atheists’<sup>5</sup> who are one of Egypt’s least protected minorities, and the campaign was described by *The New York Times* in 2014 as ‘Egypt’s war on Atheism’.<sup>6</sup>

We therefore call upon member states to abolish blasphemy laws and recognise the right to express religious dissent or criticism as a central tenet of the right to freedom of expression.

Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, General Comment 34 (2011), <https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/docs/gc34.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> End Blasphemy Laws campaign. <https://end-blasphemy-laws.org/>

<sup>3</sup> End Blasphemy Laws campaign, Pakistan  
<https://end-blasphemy-laws.org/countries/asia-central-southern-and-south-eastern/pakistan/>

<sup>4</sup> Humanists International, Humanists denounce proposed law to criminalise atheism in Egypt  
<https://humanists.international/2018/01/humanists-denounce-proposed-law-criminalize-atheism-egypt/>

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch, Egypt: 3-Year Sentence for Atheist  
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/01/13/egypt-3-year-sentence-atheist>

<sup>6</sup> Humanists International, Freedom of Thought Report 2018: Egypt  
[https://fot.humanists.international/countries/africa-northern-africa/egypt/#Apostasy\\_surge](https://fot.humanists.international/countries/africa-northern-africa/egypt/#Apostasy_surge)