

United Nations Human Rights Council, 41st Session (24 February to 20 March 2020)

Item 6: Universal Periodic Review: Egypt

Speaker: British Humanist Association Representative, Tallulah Gordon¹

We call upon Egypt to take up recommendations made by member states that it increases efforts to ensure respect for freedom of religion or belief, including by removing reference to religion from national identity cards.²

We are concerned by a series of persecutory measures taken by the Egyptian Government since 2014 against the non-religious, described by *The New York Times* as Egypt's 'war on atheism'.³ In 2018, a bill proposed by Egyptian lawmakers sought to criminalise atheism as a form of 'contempt of religion', punishable by up to five years in prison.⁴ This proposal took place in the context of increasing arrests and sentences made for blasphemy, a proliferation of incidents of intimidation and harassment by the government towards atheists, and the launching of a 're-education' and media campaign intended to 'eradicate atheism' from the country.⁵ These measures severely threaten the freedom of religion or belief of Egypt's non-religious. According to Human Rights Watch, atheists now comprise one of Egypt's least protected minorities.⁶

As highlighted by member states, Egypt currently requires the religion of citizens to be listed on their national identity cards. This requirement exposes religious minorities to discrimination, including in employment. We welcome the proposal made by an Egyptian Member of Parliament in 2018 that this be removed,⁷ and call for this to be enacted presently.

We call on Egypt to follow its obligations under the UDHR and International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights and immediately end its campaign of persecution against the non-religious, including by releasing all individuals convicted of blasphemy.

Thank you.

¹ Humanists UK is the operating name of the British Humanist Association.

² United Nations General Assembly, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Egypt*, 27 December 2019.

<https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/43/16>

³ Mona Eltahawy, 'Egypt's War on Atheism', 27 January 2015.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/28/opinion/mona-eltahawy-egypts-war-on-atheism.html>

⁴ Humanists International, 'Humanists denounce proposed law to criminalize atheism in Egypt', 24 January 2018.

<https://humanists.international/2018/01/humanists-denounce-proposed-law-criminalize-atheism-egypt/>

⁵ Humanists International, *Freedom of Thought Report 2019: Egypt*.

<https://fot.humanists.international/countries/africa-northern-africa/egypt/>

⁶ Human Rights Watch, '3-Year Sentence for Atheist', 13 January 2015.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/01/13/egypt-3-year-sentence-atheist>

⁷ Cairo Scene, 'Egyptian MP wants religion removed from National ID Cards', 12 November 2018

<https://www.cairoscene.com/Buzz/remove-religion-egypt-national-id>