

United Nations Human Rights Council, 47th Session (21 June to 29 July 2021)

Item 6: Universal Periodic Review: Mauritania

Speaker: Humanists UK Representative, Karen Wright¹

We call on Mauritania to support the Netherlands' recommendation to 'remove from legislation any identification of blasphemy and apostasy as a crime and enable Mauritians to fully enjoy their right to freedom of religion or belief, including the right to change religion and the right not to believe.'²

We welcome the release of anti-slavery blogger, Cheikh Ould Mohamed M'kheitir in 2019. He was sentenced to death for blasphemy in 2014 and spent over five years imprisoned for speaking out against caste discrimination and slavery.³ He spent two years in solitary and arbitrary detention, even after his sentence was reduced to time already served. However, after his release, he was forced to leave Mauritania as his life would still be at risk from religious extremists who continue to call for his execution.⁴

We are deeply concerned that apostasy and blasphemy laws have become even more stringent. In 2018, the Government enacted mandatory death sentences for apostasy and blasphemy remains a capital offense.⁵ These laws are not compatible with the rights to life, freedom from torture and inhuman or degrading treatment, freedom of expression, or the freedom of religion or belief. We urge Mauritania to repeal these laws to guarantee the rights of all its citizens and those within its jurisdiction.

Islam is the only recognised religion in Mauritania. Non-Muslims are restricted from having citizenship status. Muslims who convert from Islam lose their citizenship, property rights, and even their lives under the apostasy laws.⁶ The preamble of Mauritania's 1991 Constitution declares a 'right to equality' and the 'fundamental freedoms and rights of human beings'.⁷ These are empty and meaningless words.

We implore the Mauritanian Government to heed the example of Sudan last year in repealing the death penalty for apostasy.⁸ Sudan has shown that it is possible to do this in spite of pressure from Islamic extremists. Mauritania would not only make progress towards its obligations to realise the human rights of its citizens, but would also bring about a greater prosperity and peace.

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: Mauritania*, 9 April 2021 (130.126) <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/47/6>

³ Human Rights Watch, *Mauritania: Blogger in 'Blasphemy' Case Freed After 5 Years*, 30 July 2019 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/30/mauritania-blogger-blasphemy-case-freed-after-5-years>

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ US Department of State, *2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Mauritania*, 21 May 2021 <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/mauritania/>

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ Mauritania's Constitution of 1991 with Amendments through 2012, https://adsdatabase.ohchr.org/IssueLibrary/MAURITANIA_Constitution.pdf

⁸ Humanists UK, 'Success! Sudan abolishes death penalty for apostasy', 14 July 2020.

<https://humanism.org.uk/2020/07/14/success-sudan-abolishes-death-penalty-for-apostasy/>