

United Nations Human Rights Council, 49th Session (28 February - 1 April 2022)
Item 4 – General Debate

Speaker: Humanists UK representative: Rachel Taggart-Ryan¹

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’.² Yet blasphemy is not only enshrined in the Pakistani Penal Code but further entrenched by the Anti-Terrorism Act, falsely equating the non-religious, religious minorities, and dissenting Muslims as a threat to the nation itself.³

The pandemic has exacerbated an existing climate of intolerance towards the non-religious and religious minorities, with blasphemy allegations being used to enact personal vendettas. They have led to extrajudicial violence and mob justice.⁴ In February, a mob of 80 killed a man for allegedly burning pages of the Koran.⁵ The month before, a Pakistani court sentenced a 26 year-old woman to death, for sharing images on WhatsApp deemed to be insulting of the Prophet Muhammad.⁶ And the month before that, a Sri Lankan textile factory manager was beaten to death and his body set on fire by a mob of 100 people following rumours that he had tore down posters with the name of the Prophet Muhammad.⁷ This cannot continue.

It is a sad truth that little progress has been made towards the realisation of the right to freedom of religion or belief for all in Pakistan in recent years. We urge Pakistan to revive the failed Protection of the Rights of Religious Minorities Bill from 2020,⁸ to abolish its blasphemy laws, and to do everything it can to end all violence provoked by allegations of blasphemy or apostasy.

Thank you.

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

² Human Rights Committee. General Comment n. 34. July 2011. <https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/docs/gc34.pdf>

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

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ BBC News, ‘Pakistan: Man accused of blasphemy killed by mob in Khanewal’ 13 February 2022. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-60368498>

⁶ Asad Hashim, ‘Pakistani court sentences woman to death for WhatsApp ‘blasphemy’’, *Al Jazeera*. 20 January 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/20/pakistan-rawalpindi-court-sentences-woman-death-whatsapp-blasphemy#>

⁷ BBC News, ‘Pakistan: Killing of Sri Lankan accused of blasphemy sparks protests’. 6 December 2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/59501368>

⁸ The Protection of the Rights of Religious Minorities Bill 2020. https://senate.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1598276327_813.pdf