

United Nations Human Rights Council, 54th Session
11 September to 13 October 2023
Item 6: Universal Periodic Review – United Arab Emirates
Speaker: Humanists UK Representative: Blend Ademi¹

We call on the United Arab Emirates to support Nigeria’s recommendation to ‘adopt positive measures to eliminate discrimination against persons belonging to religious minorities.’² Further, we recommend the UAE adopts positive measures to protect the rights of and eliminate discrimination against the non-religious.

Article 31 of the United Arab Emirates Constitution establishes that the freedom to hold religious ceremonies shall be safeguarded, but it does not protect non-religious views. This limited interpretation of the rights to freedom of religion or belief is also broadly qualified as it can only be exercised ‘in accordance with established custom’ and ‘provided that such ceremonies are consistent with the public policy and with public morals.’³ So-called ‘blasphemy’ is criminalised by Federal Decree Law No. 2 of 2015 and prosecutions are fairly common. In 2019, a man was fined for insulting God in a workplace and in 2020, three Sri Lankan workers were fined and deported after being found guilty of offending religion in social media posts.⁴

We are also concerned by provisions in the new Federal Crime and Punishment Law, that came into force in January 2022. This new law retains many provisions from the old penal code that are not human rights-compliant including the criminalisation of so-called blasphemy. It also adds further restrictions or harsher punishments on existing provisions.⁵ We note that the UAE states that the death penalty is reserved for serious crimes,⁶ yet articles 155 and 174 of the new penal code provide for death sentences for vaguely worded crimes relating to acts that intentionally ‘compromise the sovereignty of the state or its independence, its unity or its territorial integrity’ and acts that ‘could harm political relations.’⁷ We note that the UAE government has previously used national security as a pretext to detain its critics and human rights defenders under the 2012 Cybercrime Law and 2014 Terrorism Law. In 2020, Ahmed Etoum, was convicted and sentenced to 10 years in prison, solely for posting peaceful criticism of the Jordanian royal family and government.⁸

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

² Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: United Arab Emirates A/HRC/54/15*, 29 June 2023, para 35.107 <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/54/15>

³ Constitute, ‘United Arab Emirates, 1971 (rev. 2004)’;

https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/United_Arab_Emirates_2004

⁴ Humanists International, ‘Freedom of Thought Report: United Arab Emirates’ 23 October 2020, <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-western-asia/united-arab-emirates/>

⁵ Human Rights Watch, ‘UAE: Sweeping Legal “Reforms” Deepen Repression’, 5 June 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/05/uae-sweeping-legal-reforms-deepen-repression>

⁶ A/HRC/54/15 para 25

⁷ Human Rights Watch, ‘UAE: Sweeping Legal “Reforms” Deepen Repression’

⁸ Ibid.

We urge the UAE to support the UK's recommendation to 'guarantee the rights to freedom of opinion, freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, in line with international human rights law'.⁹ Further, we call on the UAE to repeal its blasphemy and apostasy laws. These laws are intrinsically subjective and inconsistent with the rights to freedom of religion or belief and to freedom of expression.¹⁰

⁹ Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: United Arab Emirates* A/HRC/54/15, 29 June 2023, para 35.163. <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/54/15>

¹⁰ United National General Assembly, *Interim report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief* A/72/365, 28 August 2017, para 2, <https://undocs.org/A/72/365>