

United Nations Human Rights Council, 57th Session
9 September to 11 October 2024
Item 6: Universal Periodic Review – Afghanistan
Speaker: Humanists UK representative: Kathy Riddick¹

We are aware that Afghanistan has accepted recommendations from the Holy See to uphold the right to freedom of religion or belief, and from New Zealand to rescind discriminatory edicts and decrees that curtail the fundamental rights and freedom of religious and other minority groups.²

We would like to remind Afghanistan of the Human Rights Committee's *General Comment No 22* which makes clear that Article 18 'protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief'.³ This means that states have a duty to respect, protect and promote the right to freedom of religion or belief of the non-religious, as well as of religious minorities.

Since before the Taliban takeover, blasphemy and apostasy have been punishable by death. Those accused of these so-called crimes are given three days to recant or face death.⁴ This runs counter to this Council's resolution 36/17 which urges all states that have not yet abolished the death penalty to make sure it is not imposed for specific forms of conduct, including apostasy.⁵

Therefore, while we are aware Afghanistan's acceptance of recommendations to re-establish a moratorium on the death penalty, we are extremely concerned by the absence of any commitment to abolish the death penalty, or to commute existing sentences of capital punishment.⁶

Humanists International has received an unprecedented number of requests from non-religious Afghans seeking to flee for their safety since the Taliban takeover in 2021, accounting for nearly a third of all requests for assistance they have received globally in this time. Non-religious Afghans are not only subjected to raids and summary executions by the Taliban, they also report receiving threats from friends and family. Even many of those who broadly adhere to democratic values consider defending the right to criticise or abandon Islam a taboo.

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

² United Nations, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review – Afghanistan*, A/HRC/57/5, 11 June 2024, paras 109.6, 109.27, <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/57/5>; United Nations, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review – Afghanistan. Addendum 1*, A/HRC/57/5/Add.1, 9 September 2024, para 5, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/af-index>.

³ UN Human Rights Committee, *CCPR General Comment No. 22: Article 18 (Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion)*, 30 July 1993, CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4: <https://undocs.org/CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4>

⁴ Humanists International, *Freedom of Thought Report: Afghanistan*, 13 September 2024, <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-southern-asia/afghanistan/>.

⁵ Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on 29 September 2017 36/17, 'The question of the death penalty.' https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/36/L.6

⁶ A/HRC/57/5, paras 109.53-109.65; A/HRC/57/5/Add.1, paras 12-20(b).

We implore Afghanistan to repeal the death penalty for blasphemy and apostasy, and to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of the non-religious as well as those from religious minorities.⁷

⁷ *Freedom of Thought Report: Afghanistan*