



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Blasphemy Laws and the Violation of International Religious Freedom

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Vice Chair Bhargava

Thank you very much, Vice Chair Perkins.

In recent years, some progress has been made towards the abolishment of blasphemy laws. Since 2015, nine countries, including Iceland, Norway, Malta, and Canada, repealed their blasphemy provisions. We commend these countries for taking this action to better promote human rights. However, at the same time, new or amended blasphemy laws have entered into force in countries including Oman, Mauritania, Morocco, and Brunei.

As Vice Chair Perkins mentioned, the researchers for the *Violating Rights* study found cases of enforcement against individuals exercising their rights to freedom of religion and expression in almost half of the countries with blasphemy laws. This means the other half of countries maintain these laws without active enforcement.

USCIRF calls on all countries to repeal blasphemy laws, but we particularly implore states where there is no active enforcement to take immediate steps to get these laws that are not in use off the books. The abolishment of dormant blasphemy laws serves to acknowledge that such provisions violate international human rights law. Repealing inactive blasphemy laws can also help build momentum towards reform and repeal in countries where blasphemy laws are vigorously enforced both by the state and society.

Beyond continuing to pressure governments to abolish blasphemy laws, the U.S. government can also advocate for religious prisoners of conscience that are imprisoned under blasphemy provisions. As part of USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project, our colleague, Commissioner Fred Davie, advocates for the release of Mubarak Bala, President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, who

has been detained without charge since April, allegedly for the peaceful expression of his humanist beliefs on social media. He also advocates for the release of Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, a Muslim gospel musician from a minority Muslim sect who was sentenced to death in July by a state-sanctioned Shari'a court in Kano state, Nigeria for committing blasphemy in a private WhatsApp recording.

Commissioner Maenza advocates for the release of Raif Badawi, a peaceful blogger in Saudi Arabia sentenced to a decade in prison and 1000 whip lashes for blasphemy. Chair Manchin advocates for Iranian activist Golrokh Iraee, who was charged with blasphemy after writing an unpublished short story criticizing the practice of stoning adulterous women.

USCIRF also highlights religious prisoners of conscience on its Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List, including several individuals that are imprisoned for blasphemy. This includes Shagufta Kausar and wheelchair confined Shafqat Emanuel, a Christian Pakistani couple sentenced to death in 2014 for allegedly texting blasphemous texts despite being illiterate. And Ramzan Bibi, a 55-year-old Ahmadi woman who was accused of blasphemy after making a donation to a local mosque. Junaid Hafeez, a former lecturer at the University of Multan was accused of making derogatory statements on Facebook about the Prophet Muhammad in 2013. His lawyer Rashid Rehman was murdered in 2014 while Hafeez remained in

solitary confinement. Last year, Hafeez was sentenced to death for blasphemy after languishing in jail for over six years.

These individuals represent the many individuals around the globe jailed for exercising their freedom of religion and expression. We must continue to shine a light on these victims of blasphemy laws and call for their release.

Thank you, and I look forward to hearing our witnesses' views on these topics. I will now turn the floor back to Chair Manchin.