

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Hearing

Blasphemy Laws and the Violation of International Religious Freedom

December 9, 2020

Senator James Lankford (R-OK) Opening Statement

I appreciate the introduction, and I appreciate even more the work that this body is doing, the research that has happened to be able to pull the report together, and the ongoing work every single day for people around the world to be able to live out this most basic human right. It is interesting to note that on December 10, 1948—that would be 72 years ago tomorrow—the United Nations in Paris did the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In that Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it recognized the inherent right to freedom religion and conscience and declared that protection, which America has recognized from the beginning as a human right, but it's still being spread around the world. Seventy-two years later, the words that they put together that day on December 10, 1948, still ring true today, where they said, 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes the freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.'

Despite representatives from different legal and cultural backgrounds from all regions of the world working together to draft this Declaration 72 years ago, there are still 84 countries in the world that enforce or uphold blasphemy and apostasy laws—84 countries. Some of those choose not to enforce those laws, but they also choose not to take those laws off the book either, so that they're still available to them. Depending on the country, punishment for individuals who engage in expressions deemed by the government to be blasphemous, heretical, apostate, defamatory of religion, or insulting religion can range from fines, to imprisonment, to even death sentences. This affects Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Baha'is, secularists, and many other groups.

Although there are people all over the world who are punished because of these laws every year, there are cases that do stand out, and there are cases that are more chilling than others. We had an American that was killed in Pakistan while on trial for blasphemy earlier this year. Tahir Ahmad Naseem was arrested two years ago and charged with blasphemy. He was shot and killed in the courtroom on July 29, 2020, by a suspect who had spoken and said that he was guilty of blasphemy, and wanted to carry it out himself.

This is just a problem in Pakistan. More than one-third of the world's countries have these blasphemy laws on the books. Saudi Arabia has issued death sentences for insulting Islam and the Prophet Muhammad on social media. Likewise, Russia has convicted individuals of blasphemy for social media-related offenses. It shouldn't take the death of a U.S. citizen or numerous other death sentences or criminal convictions to provoke us to work to repeal blasphemy laws around the world, to be able to protect the basic human rights and dignities that the world has recognized for 72 years but has yet to implement.

Earlier this week, the House of Representatives passed its resolution to condemn global blasphemy laws 386 to 3—that is an overwhelming vote in the House of Representatives—386 to 3. It is long past time for the Senate to be able to do the same. A year ago, I led a bipartisan resolution to call for the global repeal of blasphemy, heresy, and apostate laws. That resolution is currently being blocked in the Senate from even being voted on. The resolution urges foreign countries to repeal such laws, release individuals who have been prosecuted or imprisoned on charges of blasphemy, and ensure the safety of those individuals and their families. We need to be able to get that finished in the Senate. We have days to be able to get it done in this session, and it is our hope to be able to get that passed so the Senate can make as clear of a statement on blasphemy and apostasy as the House has already done even this week.

While there's clearly more work to be done, all of us are very, very grateful for USCIRF and the work that's happening and the research that's been provided. I really do want to thank all of the Commissioners and the staff for the tireless work that you do to be able to draw attention to this and to be able to make sure people don't lose track of it. As you all know, it's hard to fix a problem that you cannot see, and many countries don't want to discuss blasphemy and apostate laws, and they choose to be able to hide these things. You have brought things in the darkness into the light, and that is a great gift. Reports like this, as they exist, no longer give Americans or the United States government the opportunity to claim that they don't know that this is happening. You bringing it into the light, every legislator in the United States Congress can see clearly what is happening around the world and then can choose to be able to act or not act based on that knowledge.

We cannot turn a blind eye to this because it has been exposed. We have the right and the responsibility to be able to share this core value that we have as Americans, the right to believe, the right to not believe, the right to be able to change your faith or choose any faith of your choice, or have no faith at all. That is a great gift that we pass on, but it's a human right that we respect on this. Blasphemy laws are antithetical to that right, and it's entirely appropriate that you are speaking out on it today and the report that you've carried out is then being distributed today. So, thank you for the work on that. In fact, I would say to you: God bless you for the work that you continue to be able to do for the entire world, to be able to speak out for those who cannot speak for themselves.