



United Nations Human Rights Council: 28th Session (2 -27 March 2015)
Item 4 General Debate
Tuesday 17 March 2015
Speaker: BHA representative, Amelia Cooper
Blasphemy laws: extrajudicial and State violence in the name of religion

Thank you Mr President.

I make this statement as a member of the International Coalition Against Blasphemy Laws [a collection of more than 200 organisations engaged in a campaign for the global repeal of blasphemy and related laws].

In his report, the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief recognised that the principal obstacles to combating violence committed in the name of religion are 'failure [of the State] in combating terrorism or violence of non-State actors', indirect or direct State support for violence or animosity, or the State apparatus itself.¹

Blasphemy laws are the embodiment of these obstructions, and their continued use necessarily violates International Law.²³

Such laws lend legitimacy to extrajudicial violence, and heighten interfaith and intercommunal animus. Individual accusations can thus spark mass riots, as was seen in Gojra City, Pakistan in 2009, where following the alleged desecration of a Quran at a Christian wedding, Muslim demonstrators set fire to local houses, causing the deaths of six people.⁴

Blasphemy related reprisals have also targeted individuals working in politics and the judicial sphere, as demonstrated by the assassinations of lawyer Rashid Rehman (2014),⁵ governor Salman Taseer (2010), and Minorities Minister Shabaz Bhatti (2010) in Pakistan.⁶

However, it must also be noted that encoding corporal punishment for blasphemy convictions is nothing less than State violence in the name of religion. Four of the thirteen states who punish apostasy or blasphemy with the death penalty are current members of this Council, and are thus mandated to 'uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights'.⁷ This is hypocrisy of the highest order.

Therefore, we urge States:

- To demonstrate their commitment to Resolution 16/18 by implementing it at the domestic level, supported by the Rabat Plan of Action;

And the Council:

- To ensure that existing and future Council members conform to the obligations established in UNGA Resolution 60/251; and
- To pressure States to urgently investigate harassment against those exercising their free expression.

Thank you.

¹ A/HRC/28/65 Paragraph 5

² CCPR/C/GC/34:48

³ <http://end-blasphemy-laws.org/about/the-international-human-rights-consensus-against-blasphemy-laws/>

⁴ <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/08/01/pakistan.sectarian.violence/>

⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/08/world/asia/pakistani-activist-shot-dead-aided-blasphemy-suspects.html>

⁶ <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/05/14/pakistan-investigate-killing-rights-lawyer>

⁷ A/RES/60/251