

**United Nations Human Rights Council, 39th Session (10-28 September 2018)
Item 4 - General Debate**

Speaker: Humanists UK¹ representative, Dr David Harvey

Freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression are universal human rights as laid out in Articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.² We wish to draw the Council's attention to recent attempts to restrict these rights through the promotion of global blasphemy laws.

Laws which prohibit the display of a lack of respect for religion are incompatible with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.³ The Rabat Plan for Action notes that blasphemy laws are often applied in 'a discriminatory manner' targeting in particular the non-religious and other minority religious groups.⁴

In Pakistan, in addition to formal accusations of blasphemy, false allegations are rife and mob mentality develops easily. Since 1990 there have been at least 67 murders committed extra-judicially over unproven allegations of blasphemy or apostasy. We are concerned that the recent election of Pakistan's new Prime Minister, Imran Khan, will precipitate an increased effort to restrict freedom of religion or belief not only in Pakistan but internationally. Mr Khan has stated his intention is to revive calls for the UN to create global laws criminalising defamation of religion. He has also vowed to protect the Pakistan's laws which mandate the death penalty for blasphemy.⁵

We note that next month the Republic of Ireland is holding a referendum on abolishing its blasphemy law, a debate that was reignited after a police investigation into comments made about God by our patron Stephen Fry. We urge the citizens of Ireland to vote in support of abolition.

Further, we urge all member states to oppose any attempts to create new laws against blasphemy, and to bring pressure to bear on Pakistan to abolish its own blasphemy laws.

Thank you.

¹ Humanists UK recently changed its name from the British Humanist Association.

² <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/ccpr.pdf>

⁴ https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/SeminarRabat/Rabat_draft_outcome.pdf

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/09/imran-kahn-accused-over-defence-of-pakistan-blasphemy-laws>