

**United Nations Human Rights Council, 37th session
26 February - 23 March 2018
Pakistan UPR
Speaker: Dr David Harvey, Humanists UK¹**

Thank you, Mr President.

We wish to draw the Council's attention to the repeated recommendations of member states to the Pakistani Government to abolish the country's anti-blasphemy laws.

The notion of 'blasphemy' has been repeatedly criticised as inconsistent with normative human rights standards, as set out in the Rabat Plan of Action and elsewhere.² It is used to justify violence against the non-religious, apostates, and religious minorities, who are subjected to arbitrary arrest and extra-judicial killing. And it has become a tool by which the state silences dissent³, invokes narrow identity politics⁴, and denies citizens their freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief.

In 2013 the Council of Islamic Ideology, the constitutional body that advises the legislature on the compatibility of its laws with Islam, recommended against any softening of Pakistan's anti-blasphemy laws. The Federal Shariat Court, too, has stated unequivocally that the death penalty is the only appropriate sentence for those convicted of blasphemy.

This was the sentence conferred on Sawan Masih, for instance, in 2014 - a Christian man from Lahore whose trial had to be conducted in jail due to fears over his safety. Indeed, since 1990 there have been at least 67 murders committed extra-judicially over unproven allegations of blasphemy or apostasy. This includes humanist Mashal Khan who was beaten to death at his university in April 2017 for supposedly blasphemous comments made during a university debate on freedom of religion or belief.⁵ It is not at all surprising that people such as Hamza bin Walayat, a Pakistani ex-Muslim and humanist seeking asylum in the UK, are extremely concerned about their safety and the safety of their family - something that, dismayingly, the UK Home Office presently is not taking seriously.

We therefore join members states in urging Pakistan to abolish its anti-blasphemy laws immediately and explicitly condemn all violence provoked by allegations of blasphemy or apostasy.

Thank you.

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

² (http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/SeminarRabat/Rabat_draft_outcome.pdf); the SR on Freedom of Religion or Belief calls for their repeal in A/HRC/25/58; blasphemy laws are based on the concept of 'defamation of religions' which was rejected by this Council as being inconsistent with human rights norms and standards.

³ <http://iheu.org/prominent-atheist-blogger-remains-danger-pending-blasphemy-trial-bangladesh/>

⁴ <http://iheu.org/pakistan-time-has-come-politicians-police-and-clerics-must-confront-blasphemy-mobs-unison-and/>

⁵ <https://end-blasphemy-laws.org/countries/asia-central-southern-and-south-eastern/pakistan/>