



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 Perkins

Thank you very much, Chair Manchin. I would like to join in welcoming you all to today's hearing.

Despite the grave human rights concerns outlined by Chair Manchin, countries continue to enforce blasphemy laws, often justifying enforcement as necessary to promote intergroup religious harmony. USCIRF's new report found 674 cases of state enforcement against alleged blasphemers in nearly half of the 84 countries with criminal blasphemy laws. The six countries with the highest number of cases

– Pakistan, Iran, Russia, India, Egypt, and Indonesia – are all countries that USCIRF identifies as among the world’s worst violators of religious freedom.

While the research focused on identifying cases between 2014-2018, blasphemy laws continue to be vigorously enforced. In some contexts, we have seen an unfortunate uptick in the enforcement of these laws during 2020.

Just last month in Egypt, security forces arrested at least five individuals on blasphemy-related charges. In one related case, public prosecutors held in pre-trial detention two Coptic Christians who are accused of appearing in a video in which they publicly discussed prayer in Islam. They are expected to face charges of “insulting religion,” which falls under Article 98(f) of Egypt’s Penal Code. That provision bans “ridiculing or insulting a heavenly religion or a sect following it” and is used almost exclusively to prosecute individuals accused of insulting Islam, sometimes for making fairly innocuous statements about Islam. Crucially, such accusations often carry serious legal AND societal consequences in Egypt. For example, also in November, a mob in the village of Barsha in Minya province ransacked and burned Christian homes and businesses, stole livestock, and sent at least one elderly Coptic woman to the hospital with severe burns. This violence

occurred because a rumor spread in the village that a local Coptic man had posted a comment on Facebook deemed offensive to Muslims. Following the mob attack, that young man—and none of those who incited or carried out the violence—is expected to face charges of insulting religion.

In Turkey, government authorities have detained individuals under politically-motivated charges of blasphemy, increasingly in connection with social media posts. In some cases, individuals are briefly detained and investigated, though ultimately released; but in others, those investigations result in prosecutions.

Earlier this year, the Turkish government even investigated the Ankara Bar Association for “insulting religious values” when it criticized the government-run Religious Affairs Directorate for anti-LGBT statements that the Bar Association characterized as hate speech.

In some states, civilians enforce blasphemy prohibitions extrajudicially, committing acts of violence in the name of protecting God or religion. Often times, these acts of mob violence or threats coincide with state enforcement of blasphemy laws, such as the horrific act of mob violence in Egypt just mentioned. Our witnesses will also discuss the grave situation in Pakistan, one of four countries

where blasphemy is punishable by death. There, violence is not solely directed against those accused of blasphemy, but often targets anyone seen as empathetic or showing support to alleged blasphemer, including lawyers, family, and faith-based community members.

I will now turn to Vice Chair Bhargava to further discuss the need to repeal blasphemy laws and highlight opportunities for U.S. policy action.