

Global Prevalence

USCIRF has since identified a total of 83 countries with blasphemy provisions. Roughly one-third of the world's countries maintain blasphemy laws today. Roughly one-third of the world's countries maintain blasphemy laws today. USCIRF's report *Respecting Rights?: Measuring the World's Blasphemy Laws* reviewed the blasphemy laws in 71 countries, ranging from Canada and Switzerland to Iran to Indonesia.² While implementation varies across these countries, [blasphemy laws are still actively applied in many countries throughout the world.](#)

Regional Distributions of Laws (as of January 2020)

Regions of the world	Countries in Region with Blasphemy Laws
Middle East and North Africa (21.6%)	Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen
Asia-Pacific (27.7%)	Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Brunei, Burma, Cyprus, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Thailand, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu
Europe (16.8%)	Andorra, Austria, Finland, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Russia, San Marino, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine
Sub-Saharan Africa (22.9%)	Botswana, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Comoros, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Kenya, Malawi, Mauritania, Mauritius, Nigeria, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe
Americas (10.8 %)	Antigua and Barbuda, Brazil, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago

Human Rights Concerns

Blasphemy laws are inconsistent with universal human rights standards, failing to respect recognized rights including freedom of religion and expression. While it is legitimate to speak out against blasphemy, laws criminalizing blasphemy are detrimental to religious freedom and related human rights. USCIRF accordingly urges all countries to repeal their blasphemy laws and free those detained or convicted for blasphemy.

In **Pakistan**, blasphemy charges have been used to stifle discussion and dissent, including on college campuses. For example, Junaid Hafeez has been in jail since 2013 for blasphemy charges based on a guest lecture he organized on women's rights.

1. Blasphemy laws violate freedom of religion or belief:

Religious freedom includes the right to express a full range of thoughts and beliefs, including those that others might find blasphemous.

2. **Blasphemy laws violate freedom of expression:** Laws prohibiting blasphemy, by definition, place limits on speech and expression. Many blasphemy laws criminalize the expression of opinions that may be counter to religion or belief, further impeding free expression over open discourse concerning religion.

3. **Blasphemy laws promote intolerance and discrimination against minorities:** While advocates for blasphemy laws argue that they are needed to protect religious freedom and promote harmony, these laws empower authorities to sanction citizens who articulate minority views, and signal to society that those views are disfavored. In some countries, such as Pakistan, blasphemy laws aim to support the majority religion in a way that impermissibly discriminates against other groups.

In **Saudi Arabia**, Ahmad al-Shamri was sentenced to death by a court for posting social media content that allegedly insulted Islam and the Prophet Muhammad in April 2017

² The report, drafted in June 2016, reviewed legislation penalizing blasphemy in 73 countries. However, since that time, Mauritania added a blasphemy law (2018). USCIRF identified through additional research blasphemy law provisions in Botswana, Burma, Cameroon, Cape Verde, the Gambia, Jamaica, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal, Seychelles, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Trinidad and Tobago, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. Malta (2016), Denmark (2017), Canada (2018), New Zealand (2019), Greece (2019), and Ireland (2019).



4. Blasphemy laws are often misused: By making governments the arbiters of truth and religious doctrines, these laws are ripe for abuse. The application of these laws has resulted in individuals being jailed for merely expressing a different religious belief or being falsely accused of offensive statements. Blasphemy laws can embolden religious extremists to commit acts of violence. Accusations of blasphemy have resulted in arrests and arbitrary detentions and have sparked assaults, murders, and mob attacks.

5. Blasphemy laws are frequently vague and overbroad: Adding to their problematic nature, blasphemy laws are frequently vaguely worded and fail to contain the specificity needed to satisfy international law standards. Blasphemy laws are often overly broad in failing to define or limit the forum in which blasphemy can occur for purposes of punishment. Further, many blasphemy laws lack a requirement of specific intent.

In **Russia**, social media activist Ruslan Sokolovsky was convicted of blasphemy for having played the smartphone game Pokémon Go in a cathedral.

Professional Staff

Harrison Akins
Policy Analyst

Danielle Ashbahian
Communications Specialist

Keely Bakken
Policy Analyst

Dwight Bashir
Director of Outreach and Policy

Elizabeth K. Cassidy
Director of Research and Policy

Patrick Greenwalt
Researcher

Roy Haskins
Director of Finance and Office Management

Thomas Kraemer
Senior Advisor for Strategic Outreach

Kirsten Lavery
International Legal Specialist

Jason Morton
Policy Analyst

Dominic Nardi
Policy Analyst

Jamie Staley
Senior Congressional Relations Specialist

Zachary Udin
Project Specialist

Scott Weiner
Policy Analyst

Kurt Werthmuller
Supervisory Policy Analyst

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on threats to religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.