

Human Rights Council resolution on blasphemy

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Reporters Without Borders is extremely concerned by a resolution condemning “defamation of religions” which the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted on 25 March. It was submitted by Pakistan on behalf of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

“Under the pretext of trying to reconcile freedom of expression and religious freedom, some member states are establishing a mechanism with the sole aim of forbidding criticism of religions, above all Islam,” Reporters Without Borders said. “This is a dangerous process that needs to be stopped. Respect for freedom of expression is as fundamental as respect for religious freedom. One cannot exist without the other.

“Caricature, artistic freedom, the right of opinion and all other spheres of intellectual activity that constitute freedom of expression are endangered by this resolution. Its unfortunate result will be to even curb exchanges of views within religions while invoking the need to protect them. Will it be possible to debate ideas within a religion without running the risk of being accused of defamation by the dominant group seeking to impose its viewpoint?

“Respect for free expression and democratisation is conspicuous by its absence in several OIC member countries. They use blasphemy laws for political ends, in order to ban all forms of debate and reinforce their authority. Journalist Mohageg Nassab had to flee Afghanistan because his newspaper, Women’s Rights, dared to call for a stop to the stoning of women. As a result, he was convicted of insulting Islam and sentenced to death. The authorities in many countries cast any debate about intellectual or social issues as a religious debate – a practical way of banning any criticism of the way they govern and preventing any evolution in moral standards.

“This kind of resolution gives governments that show little respect for human rights more scope to continue discriminatory policies against religious minorities, dissidents and secularists. One may also wonder whether multinationals will not be tempted to introduce forms of prior censorship to avoid violating an international resolution. We have already seen leading international corporations filter their content to avoid upsetting certain markets, as in the case of cartoonist Pierre Kroll, some of whose bawdy drawings were censored by Apple from an iPhone app.”

Reporters Without Borders also regrets the political aspects of the resolution, which was the outcome of internal UN machinations, and reminds member states of the danger of manipulating such sensitive issues for their own agendas.

“Certain countries within the Human Rights Council have been pushing for the adoption of such a resolution for years,” the press freedom organisation said. “For them, this is just the first step. We will be watching for a second draft resolution in the coming months that could lead to an enforceable international instrument banning defamation of religions.”

Reporters Without Borders is disturbed to see an organisation such as the UN Human Rights Council undermine its own credibility.

“The blasphemy resolution’s adoption raises serious questions about the council’s credibility at a time when Iran, a country that can give no one lessons in human rights, is a candidate to be a member with a good chance of being accepted. We hope the council will not suffer the sad fate of its predecessor, the Human Rights Commission, which fell victim to self-serving policies and had to dissolve itself in 2006.”

Blasphemy is an ambiguous concept open to different interpretations, but Ireland nonetheless adopted a law last December making blasphemy punishable by a fine of up to 25,000 euros. Poland’s criminal code and broadcasting law have for several years required the Polish media to “respect Christian values.” Punishments for offending religious feelings range from a fine to two years in prison.

P.S.

* From RSF:

<http://en.rsf.org/human-rights-council-resolution-on-29-03-2010,36856.html>