

The blasphemy syndrome

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There are eight Muslim-majority countries, including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran, where blasphemy is liable to death penalty. In 13 countries, the punishment against blasphemy is imprisonment. At least in 19 Muslim-majority countries, state stays neutral in religious realm. Even Israel and India have blasphemy laws. The case of India is special as Hinduism, the majority religion in the country, does not have the notion of blasphemy. The blasphemy injunctions were promulgated by the Muslim rulers. The British colonial administration lifted the injunctions but re-imposed in the 1870s. However, it is either Nigeria or Pakistan where often 'mob justice' is meted out in case of 'blasphemy' even before the law takes its course.

'Islamic Republics' with death penalty against blasphemy:

1. Afghanistan
2. Bahrain
3. Iran
4. Mauritania
5. Oman
6. Pakistan
7. Yemen
8. Saudi Arabia

'Officially Muslim' have imprisonment against blasphemy:

1. Algeria
2. Bangladesh
3. Egypt
4. Iraq
5. Kuwait
6. Libya
7. Malaysia
8. Maldives
9. Morocco

10. Somalia
11. Somaliland (unrecognised state, claimed in whole by Somalia)
12. Tunisia
13. United Arab Emirates

‘Secular’ states, neither supporting nor opposing any particular religion:

1. Albania
2. Azerbaijan
3. Bosnia and Herzegovina
4. Burkina Faso
5. Chad
6. Djibouti
7. Gambia
8. Guinea
9. Indonesia
10. Kazakhstan
11. Kosovo
12. Kyrgyzstan
13. Mali
14. Northern Cyprus
15. Senegal
16. Tajikistan
17. Turkmenistan
18. Turkey
19. Uzbekistan

Blasphemy laws in different Muslim countries:

Afghanistan

Afghanistan prohibits blasphemy as an offence under Sharia. Blasphemy may be punished by penalties up to execution by hanging.

Algeria

Although ninety-nine percent of Algeria's population is Sunni Muslim, and the Constitution declares that Islam is the state religion, Algeria uses legislation rather than Sharia to combat blasphemy against Islam.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh discourages blasphemy by a provision in its penal code that prohibits "hurting religious sentiments," and by other laws and policies that suppress freedom of speech.

Egypt

The vast majority of Egyptians are Sunni. The majority uses the law against blasphemy with other laws to persecute members of Egypt's minorities, especially: Shia, Sufi, Christians, Bahai, and atheists.

India

Since Hinduism, India's dominant religion doesn't have the concept of blasphemy; such laws are absent in tradition. However, blasphemy laws were introduced by the Muslim rulers to safeguard Islamic interests. In 1860, the British repealed blasphemy laws so that Christian missionaries could proselytize. Today, Section 295A of the Indian Penal Code punishes as hate speech insults or attempts to insult the religion or the religious beliefs of any citizen with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings.

Indonesia

Article 156(a) of Indonesia's Criminal Code forbids anyone from deliberately, in public, expressing feelings of hostility, hatred, or contempt against religions with the purpose of preventing others from adhering to any religion, and forbids anyone from disgracing a religion. The penalty for violating Article 156(a) is a maximum of five years imprisonment. The Muslim majority uses the Criminal Code, presidential decrees, and ministerial directives to persecute religious minorities and unorthodox sects. The persecution in Indonesia makes it a place of much discrimination, harassment, and violence.

Iran

Iran derives its law against blasphemy from Sharia. The law against blasphemy complements laws against criticizing the Islamic regime, insulting Islam, and publishing materials that deviate from Islamic standards.

Israel

In Israel, blasphemy is covered by Articles 170 and 173 of the penal code.

Jordan

Jordan's Penal Code prohibits anyone from blaspheming Islam, demeaning Islam or Muslim feelings, or insulting Prophet Mohammed. Violating the prohibitions makes the violator liable for imprisonment (up to three years) and a fine.

Kuwait

Kuwait is an Islamic state. It suppresses any blasphemy against Sunni Islam with legislation rather than by applying Sharia. Accusations of blasphemy in Kuwait usually target the Shia, academics, and journalists.

Malaysia

Malaysia prevents insult to religion and to the religious by education, by restrictions upon the broadcasting and publishing media, and by the legal system. Some states in the Malaysian federation operate Sharia courts to protect Islam, and, when Sharia is not applicable, the Malaysian Penal Code provides penalties for offenses against religion.

Nigeria

Nigeria prohibits blasphemy by section 204 of its Criminal Code and by permitting Sharia courts to operate in some states. Vigilantism frequently usurps the jurisdiction of the courts.

Pakistan

Among Muslim-majority countries, Pakistan has the strictest anti-blasphemy laws. § 295-A of Pakistan's Penal Code forbids outraging religious feelings. § 295-B punishes defilement of the Quran with life imprisonment. § 295-C prescribes the death penalty or the death penalty with a fine for the "use of derogatory remarks in respect of the Holy Prophet." 298-B and 298-C prohibit the Ahmadiyya from proselytizing or from behaving in any manner as Muslims.

The blasphemy laws are part of a system which fosters injustice, sectarian violence, and violence between religions. The usual victims are Shia, Ahmadiyya, Christians, and Hindus. Persons accused of blasphemy as well as police, lawyers, and judges are often subject to harassment, threats, and attacks when blasphemy is in issue.

In November 2008, Pakistan's government appointed Shahbaz Bhatti as Federal Minister for Minorities, and gave him cabinet rank. Bhatti has promised that the Asif Ali Zardari government will review Pakistan's blasphemy laws. Pakistan has been an active supporter of the campaign by the Organisation of the Islamic Conference to create global laws against blasphemy.

Saudi Arabia

Islam is Saudi Arabia's state religion. The country's monarchy favors one school of Sunni Islam, namely, Wahhabism. The country's laws are an amalgam of rules from Sharia, royal edicts, and fatawa from the Council of Senior Religious Scholars. Those laws prescribe penalties up to the death penalty for blasphemy.

Sudan

Sudan has Sunni Islam as its state religion. About seventy percent of the country's population is Muslim. The next largest group—about twenty-five percent of the population—is animist.

Section 125 of the Sudanese Criminal Act prohibits "insulting religion, inciting hatred and showing contempt for religious beliefs." The section includes as penalties: imprisonment, a fine, and a maximum of forty lashes. In November 2007, the section gave rise to the Sudanese teddy bear blasphemy case. In December 2007, the section was used against two Egyptian booksellers. They were sentenced to six months in prison because they sold a book that the court deemed an insult to Aisha, one of Prophet Mohammed's wives.

In May 2005, the authorities arrested Mohammed Taha Mohammed Ahmed, and charged him with violating section 125. Ahmed was the editor-in-chief of a daily newspaper Al-Wifaq. The paper had published an article about a 500-year-old Islamic manuscript which says the real name of Mohammed's father was not Abdallah but Abdel Lat, or Slave of Lat, an idol of the pre-Islamic era. A court fined Al-Wifaq eight million Sudanese pounds—the paper was shut down for three months—but acquitted Ahmed. Ahmed was found decapitated in September 2006.

United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates discourage blasphemy by controlling what is published and distributed, by using Sharia punishments against Muslims, and by using judge-made penalties against non-Muslims.

Yemen

Accusations of blasphemy in Yemen serve the same purpose there as elsewhere. The accusations victimize religious minorities, intellectuals and artists, reporters and human rights defenders, and opponents of the ruling clique. If vigilantism or abuse by the authorities does not kill an accused or force an accused into exile, the accused in Yemen will be subject to Islamic law (Sharia). Sharia, according to some interpretations, prescribes death as the proper punishment for blasphemy.

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P.S.

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* The original article contains a long table listing cases of blasphemy which is not reproduced here.