

January 22, 2020

Senator John Barrasso
307 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, District of Columbia
20510

Dear Senator Barrasso,

The undersigned faith-based, nontheist, and religious freedom advocacy organizations, as well as individuals involved with religious freedom advocacy, write in support of S.Res.458, a bi-partisan international religious freedom resolution introduced by Senators Lankford (R-OK) and Coons (D-DE) in the Senate. A companion resolution has been introduced by Representatives Raskin (D-MD) and Meadows (R-NC) in the House.

This Resolution calls upon the President and the U.S. State Department to make the repeal of blasphemy laws a priority in their relationships with countries that have such laws and to release prisoners who have been accused or convicted of blasphemy offenses. In addition, the resolution encourages the President and the State Department to designate countries that enforce such laws as "countries of particular concern for religious freedom" under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. Finally, the resolution urges the President and State Department to vigorously oppose any efforts at the United Nations or other international forums to support blasphemy laws, or any attempts to expand the international norm on incitement to include blasphemy or defamation of religions.

Blasphemy laws are the most explicit laws banning the expression of doubts or criticism regarding religion, and various countries employ them to ban criticism of religious beliefs, symbols, and figures. In January of this year, USCIRF revised the number of countries known to have blasphemy laws from 70 to 84.¹ Although an alarming rise, the new numbers show that the international community has much to do to eradicate these dangerous laws that are not only used against the nonreligious, but dissidents and minorities of all religious sects.

In Pakistan alone, approximately 40 individuals are on death row for blasphemy or are serving life sentences.² Many of those accused of blasphemy aren't even given the opportunity to have their cases heard by the judicial system, as they are murdered by religious extremists before a trial can occur. This has been the case in Bangladesh, as nearly a dozen secular bloggers, including American citizen Dr. Avijit Roy, were murdered either at home, work, or in public after being accused of blasphemy offenses.³

Another case in Pakistan that received a great deal of international attention was that of Asia Bibi. Bibi, a Pakistani Christian woman, was accused of blasphemy, convicted and served almost ten years on death row until she was finally acquitted this year.⁴ This case mirrors the poor treatment of many Pakistani

¹ [insert revised report from USCIRF after 1/1/20]

² https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_PAKISTAN.pdf

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-31656222>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/29/asia-bibi-pakistans-top-court-upholds-blasphemy-acquittal>

Christians, such as that of Yaqoob Bashir, a 25-year-old mentally disabled Pakistani Christian who was accused of blasphemy and suffered greatly as a result from beatings and other forms of mistreatment.⁵

These are just some of the many cases of individuals who have been affected by blasphemy laws. Thankfully, Congress has the unique ability to promote international religious freedom on the global stage and to encourage governments of countries where religious and non-religious rights are not respected to remedy the situation. **As such, the undersigned groups urge you to co-sponsor this important resolution, and support its passage should it come to the floor or a committee on which you serve.**

Sincerely,

ORGANIZATIONS

American Humanist Association
American Atheists
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty
Baptist World Alliance
Center for Inquiry
Center for Pluralism
Coptic Solidarity
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
Church of Scientology National Affairs Office
Christian Freedom International
Faith & Liberty Institute
Freedom from Religion Foundation
Friends Committee on National Legislation
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists
Hindu American Foundation
Jubilee Campaign USA
Institute for Global Engagement
Institute on Religion and Democracy
International Christian Concern
Northwest Religious Liberty Association
Red Eagle Enterprises
Save the Persecuted Christians
Secular Coalition for America
South Asia Minorities Alliance Foundation
Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission
St. Charles Institute
Tahrir Alnisa Foundation
The Council of the Ethnic Peoples and Religious of Vietnam
The United Methodist Church – General Board of Church and Society
The Voice of Karachi
The Way to Happiness Association of Tampa Bay

⁵ <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2018/october/mentally-disabled-pakistani-christian-sentenced-to-life-in-prison>

Union for Reform Judaism
Vietnamese People's Evangelical Fellowship
World Muslim Congress
21WilberForce

INDIVIDUALS

Organizational affiliation for the individuals below is for identification purposes only and does not imply an organizational endorsement of this letter.

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