



Testimony of

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On behalf of the

American Humanist Association

Before the

United States House of Representatives

Foreign Affairs Committee

Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International
Organizations

and Oversight and Reform Committee

Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties

Joint Hearing on

“Ending Global Religious Persecution”

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Chairman Raskin, Ranking Member Roy, Members of the Oversight and Reform Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, Chairwoman Bass, Ranking Member Smith, and Members of the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations, thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the American Humanist Association concerning the harm caused by the numerous prohibitions against blasphemy that exist around the world.

My name is Rafida Bonya Ahmed. I am a Bangladeshi-American author and blogger. I am a humanist and atheist. I am a mother to a recent John's Hopkins graduate. I am a U.S. citizen and a visiting fellow at the London School of Economics Human Rights Centre. And I am here today to provide a much-needed voice for the nonreligious communities and individuals harmed by religious persecution.

While I would not venture to represent the interests of all nonreligious people, I am a person who knows first-hand the violence accusations of blasphemy can incite.

I appreciate that the committees are putting an overdue spotlight on the egregious violations of human rights conducted in the name of religion, and I urge both committees and Congress to pursue policies that hold bad actors to account.

Our Story

Founded in 1941, the American Humanist Association strives to bring about a progressive society where being good without a god is an accepted and respected way to live. The Association accomplishes this through its defense of civil liberties and secular governance, by supporting more than 240 humanist groups around the country, by outreach to the growing number of people without traditional religious faith, and through a continued refinement and advancement of the humanist worldview.

Humanism encompasses a variety of nontheistic views (atheism, agnosticism, rationalism, naturalism, secularism, and so forth) while adding the important element of a comprehensive worldview and set of ethical values – values that are grounded in the philosophy of the Enlightenment, informed by scientific knowledge, and driven by a desire to meet the needs of people in the here and now.

As a humanist, nearly life-long atheist, and Bangladeshi-American blogger, author, and moderator of the Bengali blog Mukto-Mona—the first freethinking blog in Bengali language—I deeply value skepticism, knowledge, and the sharing of reasoned ideas.

I was born in Bangladesh and I came to the United States to complete my undergraduate degree in the early 1990s and have lived here ever since. My husband Dr. Avijit Roy was also born in Bangladesh and moved to the United States in 2006, after completing his PhD in biomedical engineering.

In February 2015, we were visiting Bangladesh, our home country, for a book signing event at a widely attended book fair. On the 26th of February, when we were leaving the well-lit, crowded fair to get back to our car, Avijit and I were attacked by Islamic militants.¹ We were stabbed repeatedly with machetes on the side of the road. The area was surrounded by police officers and video cameras and thousands and thousands of people. Nobody came to help us. The police stood by. We owe thanks to a young journalist who did act, and rushed us to the nearby hospital. Avijit died in the hospital and I was gravely injured as a result of four stab wounds around my head, and my thumb was sliced off. I have injuries on both hands, fingers and my body. Four days after the attack, I was brought to the Mayo Clinic for treatment. I've had multiple surgeries to repair damaged nerves and arteries, and was on PTSD watch.

¹ The local militant group Ansarullah Bangla Team claimed responsibility for this attack, which later merged with Al Qaeda of Indian Subcontinent.

How did we arrive at that terrible day? Avijit created the first online freethinking platform in Bangla called Mukto-Mona (which means Freethinker) in 2001 when he was a PhD student in the National University of Singapore studying biomedical engineering. Mukto-Mona is not just a blog, it is a platform and a community. Along with other moderators, bloggers, and writers, Mukto-Mona became the name of a secular humanist movement for Bangla-speaking people. It was special for me in more than one way: it connected me to my community and introduced me to Avijit.

Avijit was an atheist, a blogger, a writer, and above all he was a secular humanist who tried to answer the larger questions in life. Notably, we wrote in Bangla because we wanted to popularize the basic as well as the cutting-edge concepts of science, philosophy, and art in this language. I have written a book on biological evolution. Avijit also wrote about science, which he loved; one of his last books tackled how the universe could emerge from nothing. He wrote books about the origin of life, the science behind homosexuality, yet another one on love from the perspective of evolutionary psychology. However, he did not only write about science and atheism; he wrote in opposition to all kinds of prejudice, injustice, and unscientific, irrational beliefs. He protested injustice and intolerance in society anywhere, something which can be demonstrated in the breadth of topics he covered in his writings. But two of his books, titled *Philosophy of Disbelief* and *Virus of Faith*, garnered far greater attention. On one hand, these books made him exceedingly popular among young adults and progressive readers. On the other hand, these books fueled hostility and anger towards Avijit from religious fundamentalists.

That is the summation of our crimes. We wrote.

Avijit was perhaps the most prominent victim of religiously motivated violence in Bangladesh targeting secularists, but he was neither the first, nor the last such victim. After the attack on us, Islamist terrorists killed another two humanist bloggers and writers in Bangladesh in the same manner within couple of months. They vowed to kill one a month.

In August 2015, as our government stayed completely quiet, militants walked into the apartment of another atheist blogger and stabbed him to death in front of his partner. They also targeted two of Avijit's publishers in their office, one of whom they slaughtered. Many secular bloggers, writers, and publishers had to flee the country to save their lives.

The Bangladeshi government remained largely silent as the killing spree continued. When the government finally addressed the violence, it simultaneously blamed the victims for their own deaths for crossing boundaries and warned against writing anything that could hurt religious feelings. Not only that, the government started arresting publishers and social media activists using an old semi-blasphemy law called ICT Act 57, which I expand upon below.

We saw the inevitable results of encouraging a culture of impunity in Bangladesh. The systemic pattern of assassinations and attacks extended from attacks on atheist bloggers to attacks on minority Shiite, Hindu or Christian groups, foreign nationals, progressives, secular university professors, intellectuals, and activists.

In April 2016, machete-wielding terrorists marched into the apartment of the editor of the first Bengali gay magazine and stabbed him along with his friend in front of his mother. Their crime? They were homosexuals. Terrorists assassinated six people in that month alone. Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent and ISIS took responsibility for these slayings.

The government's response was unconscionable. While they condemned these killings, they also arrested bloggers, writers and publishers, closing publications under the guise of a British colonial blasphemy law which has been enforced in recent times with an increased amount of severity.

The government was finally spurred to action in the wake of a July 2016 terror attack in which five assailants held hostages for twelve hours and killed twenty-two people before a raid ended the standoff.²

I now work to raise awareness within the international community, such as the European Union and the United Nations, while also helping threatened and displaced bloggers and writers by providing temporary shelter in countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, India, and Sri Lanka and assisting with their migration to safe haven. I have worked with Amnesty International, Humanists International (formerly the International Humanist and Ethical Union or IHEU), ICORN and Frontline Defenders to create a confidential master list of more than fifty threatened bloggers in Bangladesh. I founded a London-based charity organization called Thinkschool in 2019 to create education videos in different languages in science, technology, art, and culture which promote critical thinking. There is much high quality, credible and thought-provoking online content in English, but close to none in languages like Bengali, Hindi or Arabic. I am also working on a memoir which will reflect how countries like Bangladesh changed in last few decades.

Demographics

In 2012, the Pew Research Center estimated that religiously unaffiliated people make up 16% of Earth's population, or 1.1 billion individuals, joining Christians and Muslims as one of the three largest belief groups in the world.³ And in the United States, at least one in four people count themselves as religiously unaffiliated or nonreligious.⁴ Our numbers are made up of atheists, humanists, freethinkers, skeptics, and people who simply say they have no religious preference. We exist in every country, ethnicity, race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, age group, and economic class, with cares and concerns that reflect our diverse backgrounds. And yet, we are united by our belief that freedom of religion depends upon a government free from religion.

Blasphemy Accusations and Laws

Blasphemy is the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for a god or a religion. Blasphemy is criminalized by laws restricting free expression across the globe. Through new information in a forthcoming report from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom that compiles evidence from its 2017 report measuring the world's blasphemy laws with a 2019 report that identified additional blasphemy laws in Africa, we now know of at least eighty-three countries around the world that have blasphemy laws.⁵ Penalties for those convicted of blasphemy crimes can include fines, torture, life or long-term imprisonment, and the death penalty.

² "Holey Artisan cafe: Bangladesh Islamists sentenced to death for 2016 attack." (2019, November 27). *BBC*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50570243>

³ Hackett, C., & Grimm, B. J. (2012). *The Global Religious Landscape: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Major Religious Groups as of 2010*. Pew Research Center: The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

⁴ Jones, P., Cox, D., Cooper, B., Lienesch, R. (2016, September 22). *Exodus: Why Americans Are Leaving Religion—and Why They're Unlikely to Come Back*. Public Religion Research Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/PRRI-RNS-Unaffiliated-Report.pdf>

⁵ 2020 report forthcoming. See Fiss, J., Kestenbaum, J. (July 2017). *Respecting Rights? Measuring the World's Blasphemy Laws*. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. Retrieved from <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Blasphemy%20Laws%20Report.pdf> and Bagga, F., Lavery, K.

Blasphemy laws are supposedly intended to protect religion and the religious, however they purport to do so at grave cost. In reality, blasphemy laws cause innumerable harm. There are three particulars I would like to highlight today. First, blasphemy laws restrict our freedom of expression and restrict discourse necessary for the health of a robust civil society, including critique, skepticism, and satire. Second, as I hope I've already made clear, blasphemy laws also legitimize vigilantism and mob violence. Third, religious minorities, political dissidents, women, and LGBTQ individuals bear the greatest burdens of these laws, as blasphemy laws are often used to justify persecution of those who threaten the religious status quo. Humanists International's 2019 Freedom of Thought Report and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's Blasphemy Laws Report from 2017 offer compelling evidence of these violations of human rights and others.

Blasphemy laws produce the opposite effect of protecting religious freedom: they entangle policymakers, courts, and law enforcement with narrow views of religion that often prop up already powerful religious groups. And the impact on minority religions and on nonreligious groups is far reaching.

Bangladesh's blasphemy laws can be found in Articles 295, 295A, and 298 of the country's penal code and include offenses such as: uttering words "with the deliberate intention of wounding the religious feelings of any person," destroying, damaging or defiling "places of worship with the intent to insult the religion of any class," and insulting or attempting to insult the religious beliefs of a class of citizens.⁶ Further, more recent laws, including the Digital Security Act and its predecessor the Information and Communication Technology Act, more severely penalize publications or broadcasts charged with injuring religious values or sentiments and give law enforcement the power to make arrests without judicial review.⁷ These restrictions and their repercussions are not limited to Bangladesh.

Mashal Khan, a humanist university student, was killed when he was beaten with sticks and shot in the head in Pakistan in 2017 after being accused of blasphemy.⁸

Prominent atheist and secular bloggers and activists Rana Norman and Abdul Waheed were arrested in Pakistan the same year, 2017, for producing blasphemous content.⁹

Secularist blogger, Yameen Rasheed, who often satirized religion in his writing was stabbed to death in his home in the Maldives in 2017.¹⁰

(December 2019). *Apostasy, Blasphemy, and Hate Speech Laws in Africa: Implications for Freedom of Religion or Belief*. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. Retrieved from: https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Africa%20Speech%20Laws%20FINAL_0.pdf

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Amnesty International. (2018, November 12) "Bangladesh: New Digital Security Act is attack on freedom of expression." Retrieved January 24, 2020, from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/11/bangladesh-muzzling-dissent-online/>

⁸ Humanists International. (2019, February 1). "Humanist murdered by fellow university students for alleged blasphemy." Retrieved January 24, 2020, from <https://humanists.international/2017/04/humanist-murdered-fellow-university-students-alleged-blasphemy/>

⁹ Humanists International. (November 2019). "The Freedom of Thought Report 2019: Key Countries Edition."

¹⁰ Safi, M. (2017, April 23). "Maldives Blogger Stabbed to Death in Capital." *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/23/maldives-blogger-yameen-rasheed-stabbed-to-death-in-capital>

And in Afghanistan in 2014, Ahmad Al Shamri was arrested on charges of atheism and blasphemy and ultimately sentenced to death. He is currently believed to be imprisoned, but his exact status is unknown.¹¹

According to an August 2019 Pew report, religiously unaffiliated people are experiencing government and social harassment in a growing number of countries.¹² While secularists and atheists are disproportionately targeted by these laws, Christians and Muslims are still frequent targets of harassment and persecution. The same Pew study shows that the number of countries in which Christians and Muslims experience harassment has declined, however we must not replace that progress with other forms of intolerance or harassment, especially given the modern growth in the religiously unaffiliated population worldwide.

Solutions

Humanists rely on reason- and evidence-based decision-making. We believe in the inherent moral worth of each individual person and in each person's right to free expression, and we believe that human-made problems require human-devised solutions.

Thus, I strongly urge the House of Representatives to pass House Resolution 512, introduced by Representatives Raskin and Meadows and supported by a broad coalition of more than sixty faith-based, nontheistic, and religious freedom advocacy organizations. The resolution calls for the global repeal of blasphemy, apostasy, and heresy laws around the globe.

More precisely, House Resolution 512 calls upon the President and the Secretary of State 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 Secretary of State 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 the Secretary of State 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.

A companion resolution has been introduced in the Senate by Senator Lankford and Senator Coons.

This resolution is a critical first step toward creating a more tolerant world and an opportunity for the U.S. Congress to establish itself firmly as a leader on this issue. Sometimes people forget the power within congressional resolutions. Resolutions, such as H.Res. 512, are important diplomatic tools for establishing international leadership and norms.

The passage of this resolution would send a clear message to the international community that the United States Congress will not tolerate such laws that so censoriously restrict human rights.

But the opportunity to lead on this issue will not be around much longer. Momentum is growing and increased international scrutiny has already spurred some countries to act. Since 2015, countries such as Canada, Denmark, France, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, and Malta have removed blasphemy laws from their

¹¹ Humanists International. (November 2019). "The Freedom of Thought Report 2019: Key Countries Edition."

¹² Villa, V. (2019, August 12). Religiously unaffiliated people face harassment in a growing number of countries. *Pew Research Center: Fact Tank*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/12/religiously-unaffiliated-people-face-harassment-in-a-growing-number-of-countries/>

constitutions. I urge Congress to act now or we risk foregoing the opportunity to lead and, more importantly, we risk allowing future violence perpetrated in the name of religion to go unchecked.

Conclusion

My husband Avijit once wrote, “Those who think victory will be realized without any bloodshed are merely living in a fool’s paradise. We risk our lives the moment we start wielding our pens against religious bigotry and fundamentalism.” Today, I ask you to take up the cause of those armed only with pens. We all must have the right to examine, question, criticize, oppose, express ourselves, demonstrate, and write free from the culture of fear propagated by blasphemy accusations and other forms of religious persecution.

I thank you again for convening today’s hearing and for the opportunity to testify on behalf of humanists, atheists, and secularists around the globe. The American Humanist Association and I look forward to continuing to work with Congress to ensure the rights of people from all faiths and none are protected.

I’m happy to answer any questions. Thank you.