

The Freedom of Thought Report 2024

Key Countries Edition

A global report on the rights, legal status and discrimination against humanists, atheists and the non-religious



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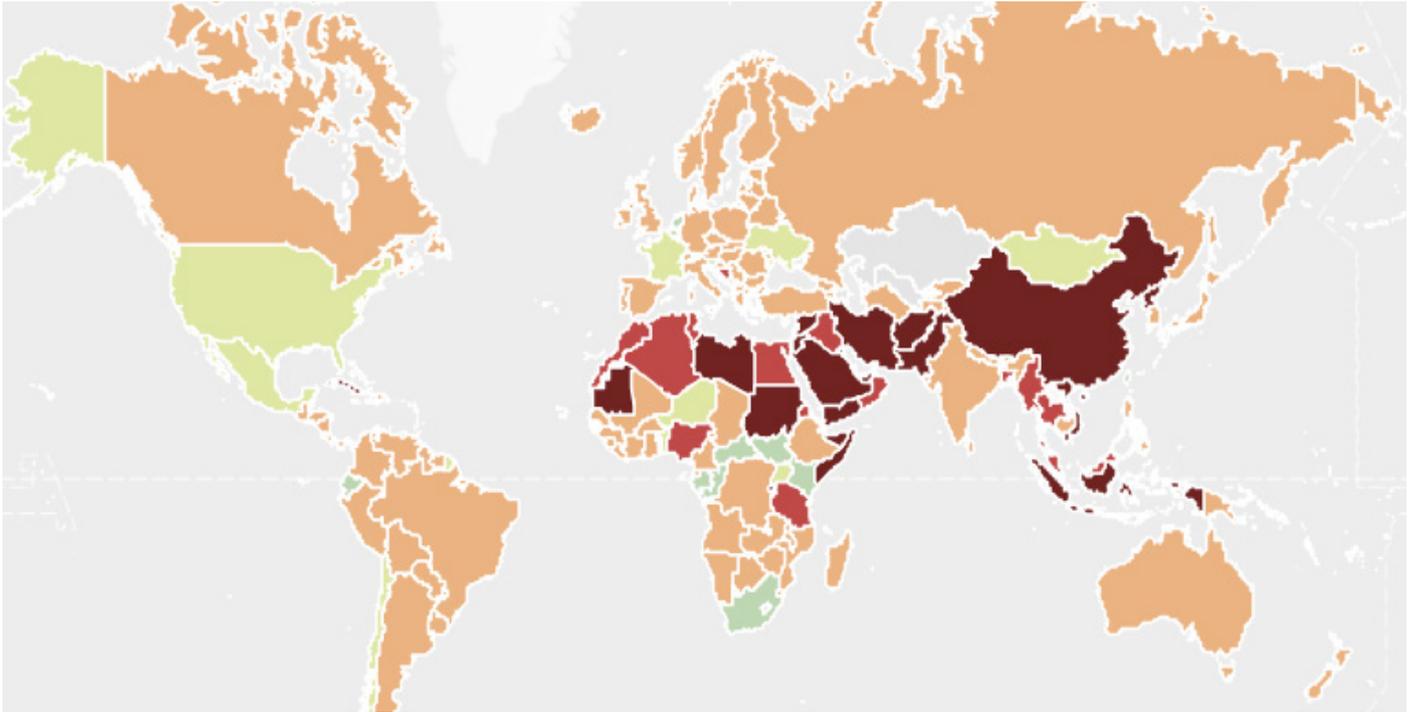
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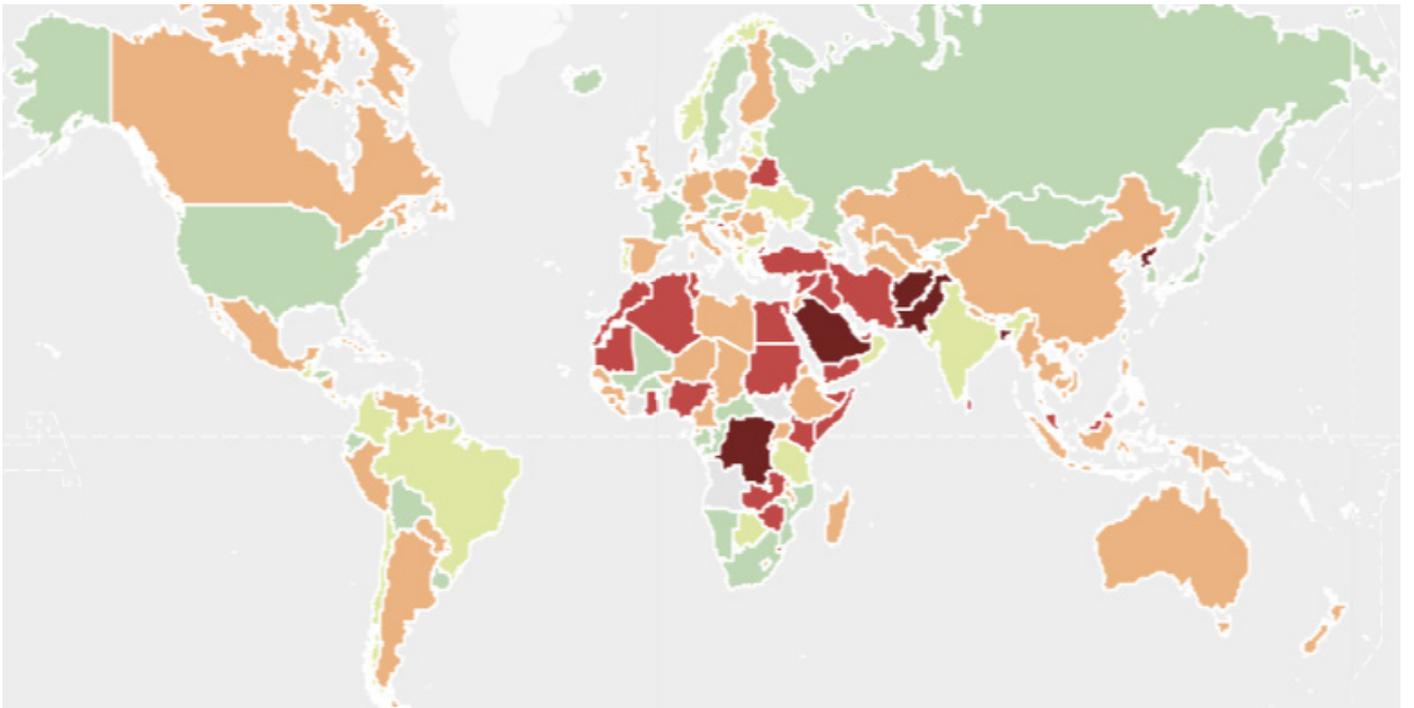
Humanists International is the global representative democratic body of the humanist movement, which unites a diversity of humanist (and other non-religious) organizations and individuals. We want everyone to live a life of dignity in a world where universal human rights are respected and protected, including adherence to political secularism by all states. We work to build, support and represent the global humanist movement by defending human rights, particularly those pertaining to non-religious people, and promoting humanist values world-wide as exemplified in the Amsterdam Declaration (2002).

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Constitution & Government



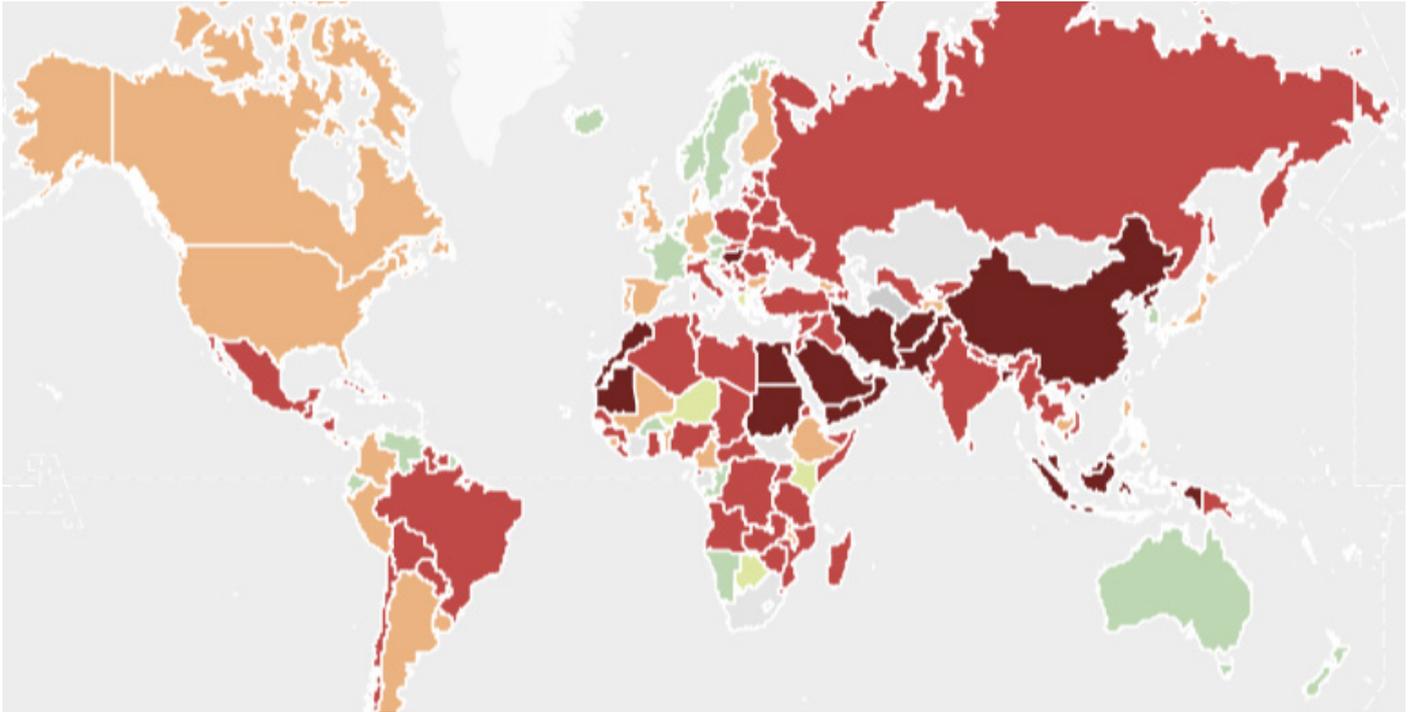
Education & Children's Rights



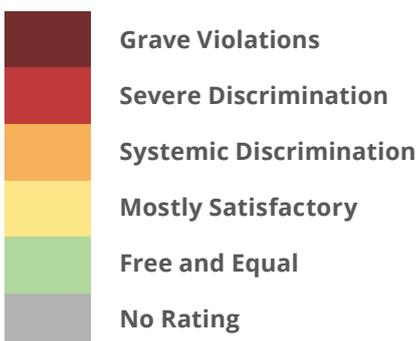
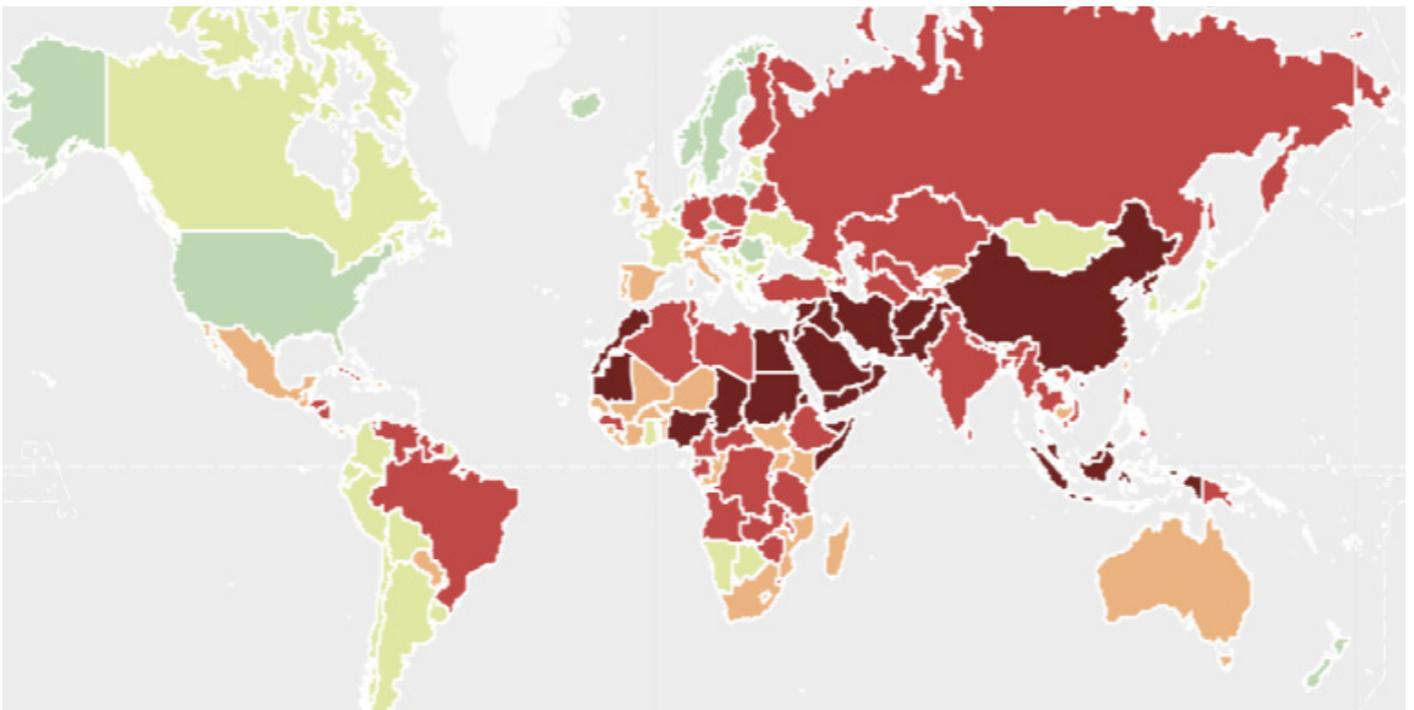
These maps depict the findings of the full Freedom of Thought Report which is available in a complete Online Edition at fot.humanists.international

The maps correspond to each of the four thematic strands of the Report: Constitution & Government; Education & Children's Rights; Society & Community; Freedom of Expression & Advocacy of Humanist Values. Each map shows the highest severity level (see key, right) of any boundary condition applied in each thematic strand.

Society & Community

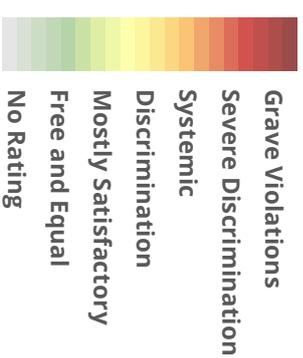


Freedom of expression, humanist values

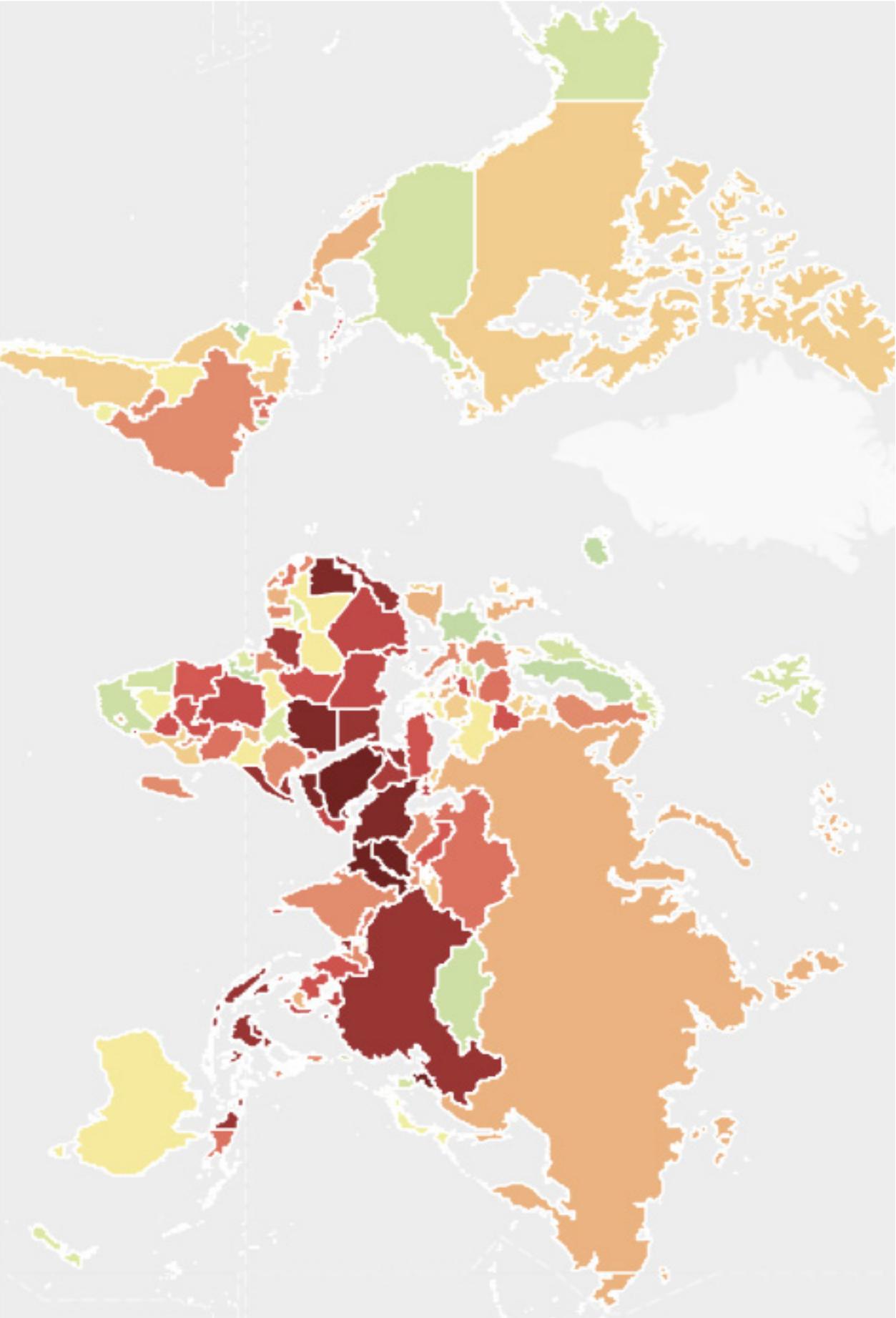


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The following maps colour each country by the level of the most severe boundary condition(s) applied in each category. For example: if the worst boundary condition that is found to apply in the “Freedom of expression” category was at the level of “Severe discrimination” then this country will be coloured red (see the key, right).



Summary Score



Preface to the 2024 edition

By Andrew Copson, President of Humanists International

The freedoms of expression, thought, conscience, and belief are the foundations upon which our humanist ideals are built. They are the measure of an open, modern, democratic society. They are also legal human rights, and as humanists, we defend them at every turn and for every person.

There are major and growing challenges to the full realization of these rights across the globe. Many of these challenges are evident throughout the *Freedom of Thought Report*, and its Key Countries Edition. One of the most pressing is the chilling of thought and silencing of expression through 'blasphemy' laws, including through provisions intended to promote religious harmony or national security. On this, international law is clear: the criminalization of 'blasphemy' can never be justified.

Our research shows that 'blasphemy' laws exist in 89 countries across the globe. In seven countries, a convicted 'blasphemer' may be sentenced to death, and simply being accused can put your life at risk long before any trial. A further 63 countries prescribe prison sentences ranging from months to years. It is possible to receive a fine or other administrative sanction in 19 countries. These laws are enforced to varying degrees worldwide and although the severity of the punishment may vary, the effect remains the same: to stifle dialogue, criticism and expression.

In the last four years – since we established our Humanists at Risk programme – Humanists International has received more than 700 requests for help from non-religious people experiencing discrimination and persecution for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of religion or belief. Our analysis of these requests shows that 62% cite allegations of 'blasphemy' as a primary concern.

For the non-religious community, merely identifying as such may be taken as evidence of 'blasphemy'.

Data shows that the fear of being labeled as a 'blasphemer' is one of the primary drivers of non-religious people choosing to live a closeted existence. In doing so, they are trying to avoid violence and ostracism – from family or the wider community. But this avoidance is at the expense of their health and wellbeing as well as their freedom. Those more outspoken in their views – be they humanists, atheists, rationalists or freethinkers – face the threat of legal prosecution, termination of employment, and death. Moreover, those accused of 'blasphemy' often struggle to find legal representation.

The theme of this year's Report is also very relevant to our own advocacy work. Since 2011, there has been a consensus at the United Nations as to how to deal with 'blasphemy' and hatred based on religion or belief. This consensus was forged through years of hard-fought negotiations, principally between the United States, European Union, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), with the inputs of numerous other stakeholders, including our work lobbying democratic states on the issue. The discussion led to compromise resolutions at the UN Human Rights Council that – until 2024 – were renewed each year. The resolutions sought to ensure that acts that include incitement to hatred are viewed on a case-by-case basis and in context, rather than placing a blanket ban on any particular action or expression.

But in the last number of years, we have seen this consensus slowly slip away. In 2023, in response to book burnings that took place in Sweden, the OIC brought an emergency resolution that condemned acts of religious hatred, including the burning of the Quran. The language of the resolution equated all acts of “desecration of sacred books and religious symbols” with manifestations of religious hatred, setting a dangerous precedent for language around insult and offense in relation to religion. This emergency resolution was passed in 2023, and while we successfully lobbied against its renewal in 2024, one of the usual consensus-based resolutions was not renewed, further highlighting the deterioration of any unified approach to free speech and ‘blasphemy’ at the UN.

Humanists International and its partners have been campaigning for the repeal of ‘blasphemy’ laws globally for almost a decade, starting with the low-hanging fruit of so-called “dead letter” laws – laws that appear on statute books but are not enforced. In that time we have seen ten countries repeal their outdated legislation. But recent developments in Denmark have demonstrated that we must not be complacent; ‘blasphemy’ laws, once abolished, can return in another form.

Where ‘blasphemy’ laws are enforced, no one, whatever their religion or belief, is immune to persecution. Beyond their use in a court of law, their existence justifies, enables, and promotes discrimination, ostracism, and vigilante violence. Now more than ever, we must work together to ensure the repeal of ‘blasphemy’ laws globally, in favor of the promotion of dialogue and mutual respect for everyone’s right to freedom of religion or belief.



Andrew Copson is President of Humanists International

Foreword to the 2024 edition

By Leena Manimekalai, award-winning Indian filmmaker and poet

'A trial by fire'

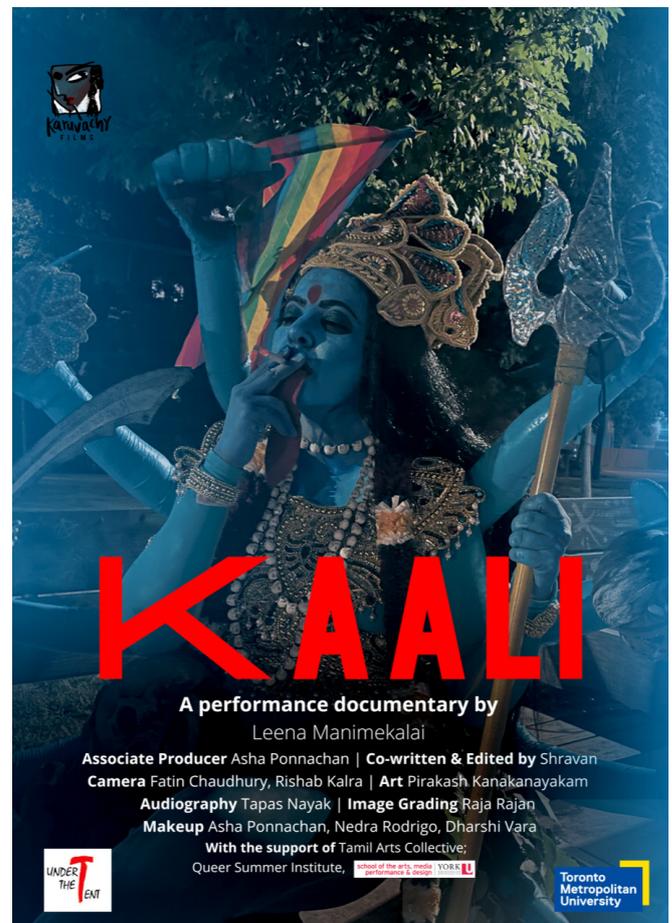
In December 2021, when I received word that my submission to the i am...project's call for proposals¹ had been selected as part of Toronto Metropolitan University's "Under the Tent"² cohort of graduate students from universities across Canada, I was elated. Though it wasn't meant to bring me either credits or grades, I was excited to be part of an academic research project that would take me beyond my own master's course in Film at York University.

Exactly seven months later, on 2 July 2022, I finally had an opportunity to share the creative piece that I had spent the duration of the program developing, in an exhibition at the Aga Khan Museum for Canada Day celebrations. The performance documentary short, Kaali, is a film-meditation on the themes of being, becoming and belonging in the city of Tkaronto³. In the film, I embodied the Indian goddess Kali, whose roots lie in the Indigenous and caste-oppressed communities of the Indian subcontinent,⁴ and wandered the streets of downtown Tkaranto to evoke the reactions of people from all walks of life. Along with a pride flag and camera to represent my spirit as a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) Queer filmmaker, my embodiment of Kali included a poignant moment in which I, dressed as the goddess, shared a cigarette with a street dweller at the park near Kensington Market. This moment, which was intended to highlight the radically inclusive nature of the deity whose image I grew up with, made its way onto the poster for the film, which I proudly shared on social media.

While I slept in my campus residence on the night of 2 July, Twitter India started trending with thousands of tweets, all with the same hashtag: #ArrestLeenaManimekalai. Literally overnight, a tsunami of death threats, rape threats, and other hateful abuse flooded

my timelines, spewed from the keyboards of enraged Indian netizens who felt that my film poster had insulted Kali. It took a moment for me to fully comprehend what was happening; like so many other Indian artists and activists in recent years,

I had become the victim of Hindu fundamentalist cyber-vigilantes' carefully orchestrated campaign of digitized violence.⁵ My poster, it seemed, had become the fodder for their hate machine.



The abuse was not just limited to me—my crew, family, friends, and even more distant acquaintances all were trampled by monstrous amounts of online hate and slander. This vicious hate campaign also extended into the real world—in addition to several police cases filed against me in various Indian states,⁶ a “lookout notice” that gives Indian police the power to ‘trace’ accused criminals abroad,⁷ as well as an open call to behead me by a Hindu religious leader—all for the “crime” of artistic expression.⁸

Fascism always demands loyalty to a single authority, often to a single race or religion. In my case, fascism came in the form of a statement by the Indian High Commission in Ottawa, demanding that Toronto Metropolitan University and the Aga Khan Museum withdraw my film.⁹ Instead of standing by their professed values of free speech and creative expression, these institutions gladly fed me to the wolves.¹⁰ First, they caved to the smear campaign by issuing statements of regret and distancing themselves from my film, a move which was praised by far-right Indian media and fuelled the relentless witch hunting against me. Several organizations such as Humanist’s International, Frontline Defenders, PEN Canada, Artists at Risk Connection, Dalit Solidarity Forum of USA, India Civil Watch International, Poetic Justice Foundation, Hindus for Human Rights, and XFA Equity Committee of TMU came together and mounted a protest screening to remind the University of its commitment to Academic Freedom.

On 20 January 2023, the Supreme Court of India heard my plea challenging the Union Government and granted interim relief protecting me from any coercive action by the police and recorded that my Kaali film poster was not meant to insult religious feelings.¹¹ Further on 10 April 2023, the Chief Justice of India extended the protection, transferred all the criminal cases to the Delhi High Court



Leena Manimekalai, award-winning Indian filmmaker and poet

and directed me to approach to have the case quashed.¹² The Delhi police is yet to file a report under Section 173 of the Code of Criminal Procedure that could allow me to appeal to have the case quashed and I am learning that this delay is a menacing tactic in the cases of political persecution, as the State wants to keep the knife hanging over the heads of citizens who refuse to be silenced.

This may read as a story of trauma, but I see it as a story of a triumph. As an artist, my faith in the power of art is reiterated when a single image rattled the entire population of bigots, caste supremacists, hetero patriarchs, religious fundamentalists et al and rallied secular communities across the world to protest, cultivate solidarity, and push for systemic change.

***Art can be many things to many.
For me, art is resistance.***

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General Introduction

The *Freedom of Thought Report* by Humanists International is a unique annual report and online resource which looks at the rights and treatment of humanists, and the non-religious generally, in every country in the world.

Specifically, this report looks at how non-religious individuals—whether they call themselves atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, or are otherwise just simply not religious—are treated because of their lack of religion or absence of belief in a god. We focus on discrimination by state authorities; that is, systemic, legal or official forms of discrimination and restrictions on freedom of thought, belief, and expression. We also try to include some consideration of extra-legal prosecution or persecution by non-state actors, social discrimination, and personal experience where possible.

In setting the parameters of this survey, we focus on the global human rights agreements that most affect the non-religious: the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief; the right to freedom of expression; and, to some extent, the rights to freedom of assembly and association. We consider national laws that compromise or violate these rights or which otherwise enshrine discrimination against the non-religious. Of course, laws and practices affecting the non-religious often also impact religious groups—usually religious minorities in a national context—so we also consider the corresponding impact of discriminatory laws on other groups. Sometimes, we also consider wider social and ethical issues indicative of the marginalization of humanist values.

Our findings show that the overwhelming majority of countries fail to respect the rights of humanists, atheists, and the non-religious. For example, there are laws that: deny atheists their right to identify; revoke their right to citizenship; restrict their right to marry; obstruct their access to or experience of public education; prohibit them from holding public office; prevent them from working for the state; or criminalize the expression of their views on and criticism of religion. In the worst cases, the state or non-state actors may execute the non-religious for leaving the religion of their parents, deny the rights of atheists to exist, or seek total control over their beliefs and actions.

By limiting the scope of the report to the systemic, legal, or official forms of discrimination—so-called ‘hard’ indicators—the effect of social stigma, non-official discrimination, and other ‘soft’ factors which might affect the lives of the non-religious are underestimated. We acknowledge this limitation, and it is our intention to expand the remit of this report when we have the resources to do so.

In 2020, we were funded by the UK Government to undertake a separate report with a more limited scope into the lived experiences of humanists in eight countries around the world. This report, *The Humanists At Risk: Action Report 2020*, found that in these countries, many humanists reported experiencing bullying, discrimination, ostracism, and social isolation.¹

This year’s Key Countries edition examines 10 countries across the globe that have been updated in 2024, including recent developments in Afghanistan, Italy, and Nigeria, with all other country entries available online.

A secularizing world

Any rights violations and discrimination are important, even when only small numbers of people are affected. However, the non-religious are not a small group. Atheists (those who do not believe in any god), humanists (those who embrace a morality centered on human welfare and human flourishing that does not appeal to any supernatural or divine entities), and others who consider themselves non-religious constitute a large and growing population across the world. A detailed survey in 2012 revealed that religious people make up 59% of the world’s population, while those who identify as “atheist” make up 13%, and an additional 23% identify as “not religious” (while not self-identifying as “atheist”).² According to the same survey, atheism and the non-religious population are growing rapidly—religious adherence dropped by 9 percentage points and atheism rose by 3 percentage points between 2005 and 2012. Another finding is that religion declines in proportion to the rise in education and personal income, which is a trend that looks set to continue. Even in countries which, at first glance, seem to have few self-identifying non-religious people, it should be remembered that often it is these states or societies that are most oppressive of non-religious views.

Far from thinking that a country with seemingly very

few non-religious people is probably not contravening the rights of the non-religious, commentators should recognize that the apparent absence of non-religious voices may well indicate that the non-religious are self-censoring their views in response to oppressive laws or social taboo, or that they are being actively silenced, as this report documents all too often.

Freedom of thought under the human rights framework

The right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief protects the individual conscience of every human being. This right was first stated by the global community in 1948 in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.³ It states:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

— Article 18, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

This simple but powerful statement was given the force of international law by Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1976. In 1981, it was given broader application and detail by the United Nations (UN) Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.⁴

Just as freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief protects the right of the individual to follow a religion, it also protects the right to reject any religion or belief, to identify as humanist or atheist, and to manifest non-religious convictions through expression, teaching, and practice. As the UN Human Rights Committee explains (General Comment 22):⁵

“1. The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (which includes the freedom to hold beliefs) in article 18.1 is far-reaching and profound; it encompasses freedom of thought on all matters, personal conviction and the commitment to religion or belief, whether manifested individually or in community with others...”

2. Article 18 protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief. The terms ‘belief’ and ‘religion’ are to be broadly construed. Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions.”

— General Comment 2022

Thus, it is not necessary to describe atheism as a religion or analogous to religion to guarantee atheists the same protection as religious believers. On the contrary, atheism and theism are protected equally as manifestations of the fundamental right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief.

Religious believers and non-believers are equal in human rights because they are all human, irrespective of their religion or beliefs. Just as the profession of religion is protected as a manifestation of belief and conscience, so is the atheist’s criticism of religious beliefs and practices. Just as speaking in support of one’s religious convictions and moral values can be of fundamental meaning and importance to the individual, so can advocating core humanist values of democracy, freedom, rationalism, or campaigning for human rights, equality, and the principles of secularism. As the United Nations says, “religion or belief, for anyone who professes either, is one of the fundamental elements in his conception of life.”⁶

Article 18 protects atheists’ rights to be atheist and to manifest their atheist beliefs, and non-beliefs, in public and private, in teaching and practice. The right to freedom of religion or belief is therefore central to our examination of the status of atheists and other non-religious people around the world. But there are other rights that are necessary for people to express their conscience, thoughts, and beliefs.

Other rights and freedoms

The right to freedom of expression is not only necessary for people to express their beliefs, but also to explore and exchange ideas. As stated by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the right to freedom of expression includes the right to share ideas and, crucially, the freedom of the media that is necessary for the free exchange of opinions as well as news:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

— Article 19, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

In addition to expressing their thoughts through private discussion or public media, people also have the right to associate with others who share those beliefs, and to express their thoughts at meetings, including public assemblies and demonstrations. These rights are protected by Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.”

— Article 20, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

It is no coincidence that these three rights are stated together in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; Articles 18, 19, and 20 are intertwined and generally stand or fall together. Our survey, therefore, looks at violations of the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association, as well as freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, to show how non-religious people are prevented from, or persecuted for, expressing their atheist ideas or humanist values.

The countries with the worst records on freedom of thought are usually the countries with the worst records on human rights overall. This is no coincidence either: when thought is a crime, no other freedom can survive for very long.

Rights violations and discrimination against the non-religious

Apostasy and blasphemy laws

In some countries, it is illegal to be, or to identify as, an atheist. Many other countries, while not outlawing people of different religions or no religion, forbid leaving the state religion. In these countries, the punishment prescribed in law for ‘apostasy’ (converting religion or declaring oneself not of a religion) is often death. In fact, for at least 10 countries in which ‘apostasy’ is punishable, it is punishable with death in whole or in part of the country (Afghanistan, Brunei Darussalam, Iran, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritania, Nigeria, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Yemen). Pakistan doesn’t have a death sentence for ‘apostasy’, but it does for ‘blasphemy,’ and the threshold for ‘blasphemy’ can be very low. Meanwhile, in territories controlled by militant organization, Al-Shabaab, in Somalia, people of non-Muslim faiths and converts from Islam routinely face execution. So, in effect, you can be put to death for expressing atheism in 12 countries.

More common than crimes relating to simply being an atheist are the criminal measures against expressing atheist views. Many countries have ‘blasphemy’ laws that outlaw criticism of protected religions, religious beliefs, religious figures, or religious institutions. For example, Pakistan has prosecuted over a thousand people for ‘blasphemy’ since introducing its current anti-blasphemy laws in 1988. Dozens of those found guilty remain on death row, and there are repeated calls from Islamist leaders to lift the effective moratorium, enforce the death penalty, and make death the only sentence for ‘blasphemy’ convictions.

The “crime” of criticizing a religion is not always called “blasphemy” or “blasphemous libel.” Some countries outlaw “defamation of religion”; sometimes, it is included under hate speech laws (i.e., some hate speech laws outlaw expressions that fall well below any internationally acceptable standard of actually inciting hatred or violence); some quasi-blasphemy

laws outlaw instead “hurting religious sentiments” or “insulting religion.” As documented in this report, there are legal restrictions against expressing ‘blasphemy,’ defaming or insulting religion or religious beliefs, or offending religious feelings, etc. in dozens of countries.

‘Apostasy’ and ‘blasphemy’ laws get a lot of attention because they are often fairly quantifiable, and certainly within the context of human rights discourse, there is a wide consensus that they constitute human rights violations. There are other laws that severely affect those who reject religion, however.

Other discriminatory laws

Some countries have family law that, in effect, excludes atheists from getting married (unless they pretend to be religious) or will remove parental rights from parents known to be atheists. Some countries require that certain public offices be restricted to persons of a particular religion, thereby excluding the non-religious. Some governments require citizens to identify their religion (for example, on state ID cards or passports) but make it illegal, or do not allow, for them to identify as an atheist or as non-religious. Sometimes, the purpose of citizens identifying their religion is not to discriminate against atheists—or any religion—but to ensure government benefits are given to people in accordance with their faith, or that religious laws enforced by religious courts will apply to them on certain matters, especially family matters. However, in many such countries this means that atheists are marginalized.

In fact, discrimination against the non-religious is often caused, not by a desire to hurt atheists, but by the desire to help one or more religions. The promotion of religious privilege by the State is one of the most common forms of discrimination against atheists. Freedom of religion or belief requires equal and just treatment of all people, irrespective of their beliefs. However, when States start to define citizens not by their humanity, but by their membership of a religious group, discrimination automatically follows. For example, as a result of its 15-year-long civil war and with a view to bringing peace to the country, the entire system of government in Lebanon is based on sectarian quotas, with different rights and roles available to Sunni Muslims, Shiite Muslims, and Maronite Christians, etc. This practice not only codifies and encourages religious discrimination, but it also discourages people from leaving the religion of their birth because they will lose all the State privileges that come with belonging to that religion.

Religious privilege is also seen in many countries’ public services and public education. The most common and substantial of these privileges is religious control of state-funded schools. For example, in Northern Ireland, 94% of state-funded schools are religious

in character.⁷ This not only reinforces sectarianism beyond the school gate, but also excludes the non-religious.

Family law, also known as “personal status law,” is the set of laws that control marriage, divorce, inheritance, child rearing, and child custody—all of family life. More than that, personal status law also determines the individual’s relationship with the community and state. For example, a wife has different legal rights and legal relationships than an unmarried woman. Many Muslim majority countries give control of family law to the Sharia courts operating Muslim, not civil, law. Other countries, usually those with historically large religious minorities, have voluntary religious family courts for the different religious communities. Unfortunately for freethinkers who may have left or want to leave the religion of their family, these “optional” religious family courts can become a trap that is far from voluntary, where opting out may raise suspicions of ‘apostasy’ or threats of social exclusion or abandonment by one’s family. Notably, non-religious women often suffer double discrimination in religious family courts, whereby they are discriminated against not only on the grounds of their belief, but on the grounds of their gender also.

In compiling this evolving annual report, we also find that religious privilege is not only a form of discrimination in and of itself, but it is also a signifier of more general societal discrimination against atheists. When a religion is singled out as special, then it generally follows that the members of that religion receive advantages not available to others. Even when there is just a vague state preference for generic religion or belief in a god, it may reinforce societal prejudice and discrimination against the non-religious. Therefore, we also consider in this report religious discrimination, or religious privilege, even when its supporters claim it is merely ceremonial or symbolic. We agree that some religious signaling by the State is sometimes “only” a matter of symbolism, but what it symbolizes is the State’s preference for religion or for a particular religion, and the second-class status or disfavoring of the non-religious.

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The Ratings System

Every country in this report is assessed against a range of “boundary conditions”. The boundary conditions are statements which may or may not apply to each country. Each boundary condition is associated with one of four thematic strands (these are the vertical columns in the

table below). Also, each boundary condition is placed at a given level of severity (these are the coloured horizontal rows in the table below). The following table lists all the possible boundary conditions.

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values
GRAVE VIOLATIONS			
<p>Complete tyranny precludes all freedoms of expression and thought, religion or belief</p> <p>Religious authorities have supreme authority over the state</p> <p>State legislation is largely or entirely derived from religious law or by religious authorities</p> <p>Quasi-divine veneration of a ruling elite is enforced, or a single-party regime holds uncontested power, subject to severe punishment</p> <p>The non-religious are barred from holding government office</p>	<p>Religious or ideological indoctrination is utterly pervasive in schools</p> <p>Religious or ideological instruction in a significant number of schools is of a coercive fundamentalist or extremist variety</p>	<p>Expression of non-religious views is severely persecuted, or is rendered almost impossible by severe social stigma, or is highly likely to be met with hatred or violence</p> <p>There is a pattern of impunity or collusion in violence by non-state actors against the nonreligious</p> <p>Government figures or state agencies openly marginalize, harass, or incite hatred or violence against the non-religious</p> <p>It is illegal to register an explicitly humanist, atheist, secularist or other non-religious NGO or other human rights organization, or such groups are persecuted by authorities</p>	<p>Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom and human rights is brutally repressed</p> <p>'Apostasy' or conversion from a specific religion is outlawed and punishable by death</p> <p>'Blasphemy' or criticism of religion is outlawed and punishable by death</p> <p>It is illegal to advocate secularism or church-state separation, or such advocacy is suppressed</p> <p>It is illegal or unrecognised to identify as an atheist or as non-religious</p>

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values
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SEVERE DISCRIMINATION

<p>The non-religious are barred from some government offices (including posts reserved for particular religions or sects)</p> <p>State legislation is partly derived from religious law or by religious authorities</p>	<p>Religious or ideological instruction is mandatory in all or most state-funded schools with no secular or humanist alternative</p>	<p>The dominant influence of religion in public life undermines the right to equality and/or non-discrimination</p> <p>The non-religious are persecuted socially or there are prohibitive social taboos against atheism, humanism or secularism</p> <p>Systemic religious privilege results in significant social discrimination</p> <p>Government authorities push a socially conservative, religiously or ideologically inspired agenda, without regard to the rights of those with progressive views</p> <p>Prohibitive interreligious social control (including interreligious marriage bans)</p> <p>Religious control over family law or legislation on moral matters</p> <p>It is made difficult to register or operate an explicitly humanist, atheist, secularist or other non-religious NGO or other human rights organization</p>	<p>Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom or human rights is severely restricted</p> <p>'Apostasy' is outlawed and punishable with a prison sentence</p> <p>'Blasphemy' is outlawed or criticism of religion is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence</p>
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SYSTEMIC DISCRIMINATION

<p>There is systematic religious privilege</p> <p>Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general</p> <p>There is an established church or state religion</p> <p>Legal or constitutional provisions exclude non-religious views from freedom of belief</p> <p>There is a religious tax or tithing which is compulsory, or which is state-administered and discriminates by precluding non-religious groups</p>	<p>There is state funding of at least some religious schools</p> <p>Religious schools have powers to discriminate in admissions or employment</p> <p>Religious or ideological instruction is mandatory in at least some public schools (without secular or humanist alternatives)</p> <p>Some concerns about children's right to specifically religious freedom</p>	<p>Use of Conscientious Objection clauses resulting in the denial of lawful services to women and LGBTI+ people</p> <p>There is significant social marginalization of the non-religious or stigma associated with expressing atheism, humanism, or secularism</p> <p>Some religious courts rule in civil or family matters on a coercive or discriminatory basis</p> <p>Discriminatory prominence is given to religious bodies, traditions or leaders</p>	<p>Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom, or human rights is somewhat restricted</p> <p>Criticism of religion is restricted in law or a de facto 'blasphemy' law is in effect</p>
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Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values
State-funding of religious institutions or salaries, or discriminatory tax exemptions		Religious groups control some public or social services	

MOSTLY SATISFACTORY

<p>There is a nominal state church with few privileges or progress is being made toward disestablishment</p> <p>Official symbolic deference to religion</p> <p>Anomalous discrimination by local or provincial authorities, or overseas territories</p>	<p>State-funded schools offer religious or ideological instruction with no secular or humanist alternative, but it is optional</p> <p>State-funded schools provide religious education which may be nominally comprehensive but is substantively biased or borderline confessional</p>	<p>Religious courts or tribunals rule directly on some family or 'moral' matters; it is legally an opt-in system, but the possibility of social coercion is very clear</p> <p>Localised or infrequent but recurring and widespread social marginalization or prejudice against the non-religious</p>	<p>Some concerns about political or media freedoms, not specific to the non-religious</p> <p>Concerns that secular or religious authorities interfere in specifically religious freedoms</p>
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FREE AND EQUAL

The state is secular, with separation of religious and political authorities, not discriminating against any religion or belief	No formal discrimination in education	No religious tribunals of concern, secular groups operate freely, individuals are not persecuted by the state	No fundamental restrictions on freedom of expression or advocacy of humanist values
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NO RATING

Insufficient information or detail not included in this report	Insufficient information or detail not included in this report	Insufficient information or detail not included in this report	Insufficient information or detail not included in this report
No condition holds in this strand			

Example ratings table for a single country

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values
		Government authorities push a socially conservative, religiously inspired agenda, without regard to the rights of those with progressive views	'Blasphemy' is outlawed or criticism of religion is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence
Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general State-funding of religious institutions or salaries, or discriminatory tax exemptions	Religious instruction is mandatory in at least some public schools (without secular or humanist alternatives)	Some religious courts rule in civil or family matters on a coercive or discriminatory basis	Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom of human rights is somewhat restricted
Official symbolic deference to religion			Some concerns about political or media freedoms, not specific to the non-religious Concerns that secular or religious authorities interfere in specifically religious freedoms

How countries are rated

Only the boundary conditions which are found to apply to a given country are shown in that country's own "ratings table." Here is an example ratings table which would be found on a country's individual page.

In the individual country ratings table, rows at the edges of the table are omitted when no boundary conditions were found to apply in those rows. In the example, there is no green row and no dark red row, because no strand was found to meet boundary conditions at the lowest level or at the highest level of severity.

A "signal light" summary system sits alongside the title of each country on its individual page. The "signal light" shows the worst rating received in each strand. In the example table above, the worst-rated boundary conditions applying in the left-most two strands are both at the middle level of severity: orange. The worst-rated boundary conditions applying in the right-most two strands are both at the second highest level of severity: red. (They don't always come in pairs like this!)

A "signal light" shows that the worst boundary conditions applied in this example were at levels, 3, 3, 4 and 4.

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Here is an example "signal light" summary which corresponds to the example ratings table above.

The "signal light" is designed to give an at-a-glance visual summary of the country's rating within the scope of this report.

Another look at the full list of boundary conditions

It is common for a condition on the more free end of the spectrum (except for the "Free and equal" conditions) to be superseded by a condition on the more severe end of the spectrum. In this case, the less severe condition may remain implicit, and not listed against the country in the report. For example: If blasphemy is punishable

by a maximum sentence of “death,” then the less severe boundary condition stating that blasphemy that is punishable by “imprisonment” may be omitted in an individual country’s ratings table.

The table is designed to break the boundary conditions into separate “strands” of concern, allowing for a clearer visualisation of what information is available or included in the Report. This means that as we gather more information we will be doing a better job at identifying gaps in our own coverage. As stated in earlier edition of this Report, given the way the ratings are designed, some ratings are likely to get worse over time simply because we are satisfied that additional, more severe boundary conditions have been met.

Omission of a boundary condition in the ratings box does not necessarily mean that that condition does not hold in reality; it may be that that information is missing from the Report. We are always interested in new sources of information.

The bottom, grey row does not contribute toward the “severity” rating of a country. Only the null conditions “No condition holds in this strand” or “Insufficient information or detail not included in this report” appear at this level.

Cautions

It should be noted that this report cannot claim to be exhaustive. While all sovereign nations are recorded in this report, some “overseas territories” are not detailed and are not necessarily without discrimination on freedom of thought. Likewise, the individual cases listed as “Highlighted Cases” in this report are examples, not exhaustive lists.

Lack of transparency in some countries makes comprehensive analysis of those countries more difficult. In some countries, usually among the worst offenders, the secrecy of courts, or state control of media, or lack of reporting, make it impossible to produce a complete account. In some countries, vague laws or broad legal powers delegated to local authorities make it difficult to ascertain exactly how laws are applied (or not applied) on the ground.

We may still be overlooking serious concerns in some countries where we have little on-the-ground contact and the last thing we want to achieve is to make already marginalised non-religious people feel like their problems are being ignored or overlooked because we have given the country a better rating than it deserves, or because we have overlooked issues of concern. If you find yourself in this situation, or you have any other information including mitigation or errata for a given country, please take it as a prompt to reach out to us and make contact via fot.humanists.international/contact/

Watch List 2024

Following a revision to our editorial policy in 2022, it has now been agreed that each year, one fifth of all countries across the globe are reviewed as part of a rolling cycle of updates. The following are countries that have not been updated in this year's cycle, but that Humanists International continues to monitor closely.

Bangladesh

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Though in theory a secular democracy, the government has frequently given into pressure from Islamist parties, and continues to threaten atheists and others on charges of “hurting religious sentiments”. The tension between Islamism and secularism in Bangladesh has resulted in the legal and extrajudicial persecution of freethinkers and minority belief groups.

Following weeks of protests triggered by the reinstatement of a quota system for allocation of civil service positions in July 2024, Bangladesh’s Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled the country. Human rights monitors indicate that human rights violations perpetrated by security forces intended to quell the protests have resulted in the death of an estimated 300 people, the injury of thousands, and the arrest of some 10,000 citizens. Activists have reported enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings.

The former prime minister’s rule was characterized by a culture of impunity alongside grave security force abuses. In addition, authorities failed to provide adequate protection to secular activists feeding a climate of fear and self-censorship. Between 2015-2018, at least nine humanist writers, bloggers and secular publishers were killed by non-state actors. During this period, the attacks expanded to include civil society actors, academics and religious figures with diverse views.

At this critical juncture, Humanists International has called on the interim authorities to ensure that the rights of all its citizens are protected. The organization is monitoring the situation closely.

India

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Despite its famously secular Constitution, there are serious concerns about Hindu nationalism and interreligious tensions that have risen under the premiership of Narendra Modi. Modi’s presidency has been linked to a rise in Hindu nationalism, both socially and on the part of officials appearing to elevate and promote a politicized Hindu nationalist agenda. Several state or federal laws introduced by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have been designed to promote patriotism - or Hindu national identity in particular - discriminating against religious and belief minorities in the process. Along with a rise in Hindu nationalist rhetoric and state-sponsored religious fundamentalism, these developments have sparked deep concern for minorities and their right to freedom of religion or belief.

For many years, violence against minorities has been a significant problem, particularly against Muslims and Dalits. More recently the number of violent incidents against Christians is reported to have risen sharply.

Threats against known rationalists and humanists in the country are not uncommon. Since 2013, at least three prominent Indian rationalists have been murdered in retaliation for their work challenging superstition. Others have been the subject of smear campaigns. Many critics of the government are often labeled as ‘anti-national’, ‘unpatriotic’, ‘naxalites’, ‘maoist-sympathizers’ or ‘communists’. More recently, the President of the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations, Narendra Nayak, has been identified as a target for assassination - his name appearing on numerous ‘hit lists’. As a result, from 2016 until 2023 police protection was provided for him. That protection was removed in 2023 without explanation.

There has also been an escalated crackdown on civil society and the media by the government, with authorities prosecuting critics such as journalists, campaigners and peaceful protesters, on fabricated counterterrorism and hate speech laws.

Iran

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

The right to freedom of religion or belief, and the freedoms of expression, association and assembly in the Islamic Republic of Iran are all severely restricted. Iranian law bars any criticism of Islam or deviation from the ruling Islamic standards.

While the Iranian Constitution does not itself include any provision criminalizing apostasy, there are several legal provisions that give judges the discretion to find defendants guilty of apostasy.

The government periodically jails and executes dozens of individuals on charges of “enmity against God” (*moharebeh*). Although this crime is framed as a religious offense, and may be used against humanists and other religious dissenters, it is most often used as a punishment for political acts that challenge the regime (on the basis that to oppose the theocratic regime is to oppose Allah). Iranian writer and human rights defender,

Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee, and blogger Soheil Arabi, are two individuals who have been imprisoned for long periods on these grounds.

The Baha’i faith is not recognized and is routinely described by authorities as a heretical variant on Islam. Its members face immense discrimination.

Nepal

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Prior to a civil war between Maoist rebels and the government in 2006, the country was officially a Hindu State. In 2008, Nepal became a secular democratic republic. The new Constitution as of 2015 retains “secularism,” but places restrictions on freedom of religion or belief.

Reports indicate that the influence of Hindutva – Hindu nationalist – politics is growing in Nepal, with several political parties seeking to appeal to the Hindu-majority population by calling for the reinstatement of Hinduism as the State religion.

In 2017, Nepal introduced laws that not only criminalize ‘blasphemy’, but could render any public expression of belief an offense due to the overbroad nature of the formulation of the laws.

Humanists International is closely monitoring developments following reports of threats made against non-religious individuals in the country.

Pakistan

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Pakistan has long suffered chronic sectarian violence and intolerance against religious and non-religious minorities, with Shia Muslims subjected to the majority of the violence, and many extremely serious incidents against Christian and Ahmadi minorities. It is uncommon for individual non-religious persons to speak out, but those revealed or alleged to be non-religious tend to provoke swift condemnation, threats of violence, or criminal ‘blasphemy’ charges.

at the UN Human Rights Council on religious hatred. The resolution equates all acts of “desecration of sacred books and religious symbols” with manifestations of religious hatred. It also threatens a longstanding consensus on how to tackle religious intolerance in line with international law. This resolution passed, and in 2024, Pakistan attempted to table it for renewal, although it was eventually withdrawn.

Pakistan’s anti-blasphemy law was strengthened earlier this year, and as well as providing grounds for legal convictions, has provided cover for vigilante violence. Those who have been accused of ‘blasphemy’ have been burned to death, shot dead in courtrooms and hacked to death on the side of the road, among other forms of extrajudicial executions. Fear of reprisal as a result of ‘blasphemy’ allegations leads many individuals to reach out to Humanists International for assistance each year. In July 2023, Pakistan introduced a last-minute resolution

As well as bringing the emergency Resolution in 2024, Pakistan and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation declined to renew Resolution 16/18 - one half of the two consensus resolutions which had been adopted annually. In and of itself, Resolution 16/18 is considered a landmark achievement of the UN Human Rights Council, and a tool to tackle religious intolerance, as it outlines positive steps that can be taken. Pakistan’s push against its renewal can be seen as an extension of its internal policy into international fora.

Russia

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Over the past many years under the renewed Put in regime, the country has continued to decline in its human rights standards and failures to uphold democracy and provide accountability. Today, Russia is more repressive than it has ever been in the post-Soviet era. The authorities crack down on critical media, harass peaceful protesters, engage in smear campaigns against independent groups, and use a variety of nefarious means to undermine democratic choice in the country.

The role of clericalism as an aspect of social control is expanding, with authorities continuing to target “nontraditional” religious minorities with fines, detentions, and criminal charges under the pretext of combating extremism.

Since its reprisal at the domestic level, the Russian Orthodox Church has become a major figure in shaping Russia’s foreign policy, especially in relation to social

issues. Through the Russian state, the Orthodox Church has pushed its anti-rights agenda at the United Nations Human Rights Council and elsewhere.

On 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, an act which went contrary to all standards of international law, and has caused an escalating humanitarian crisis, gross and systematic human rights abuses on a massive scale, and has led to apparent war crimes in some areas. The head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, has offered moral backing to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. He has incited religious propaganda to legitimize Russian aggression, and has claimed the war is necessary to defend Russian “traditional values” from “harmful gender and LGBTI+ ideology”.

Saudi Arabia

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an Islamic state governed by an absolute monarchy in tandem with a powerful religious elite.

Under the rule of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, the regime has claimed to be making improvements in terms of respecting civil liberties and human rights; however, most improvements have been minimal, and a highly restrictive regime persists. In 2017, the Crown Prince pledged reforms including to lift the ban on women driving, however many human rights campaigners and prisoners of conscience remain imprisoned years later, with sporadic fresh crackdowns on those considered dissidents or troublemakers, including peaceful protesters and activists for political reform and freedom of expression. Women still need permission from their “guardian” (usually father or husband) to obtain a passport.

The situation for humanists, the non-religious, progressives and other dissidents in the country is dire. Most forms of public religious expression must be consistent with the government’s fundamentalist brand of Sunni Islam. An anti-terror law continues to suppress many forms of criticism or dissent in extremely broad terms, and is actively intended to prosecute political dissent and religious or belief minorities. Prosecutions for ‘apostasy’ or promoting atheism have been made in recent years, with individuals facing possible death sentences and serving long jail terms.

Humanists International closely monitors and advocates on behalf of several cases of individuals in prison.

Sri Lanka

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Sri Lanka’s post independence history has been marked by ethnic violence and a 30-year civil war that ended in 2009. Reverberations of the conflict continue to be felt across the political, social and economic spheres and have had an impact on the enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Four religions are recognized by law: Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and Christianity. However, Article 9 of the Constitution also accords Buddhism the “foremost place” and commits the government to protecting it, but does not recognize it as the State religion. Tensions between the Buddhist majority and the Christian minority—particularly evangelical Christian groups, which are accused of forced conversions—sporadically flare into attacks on churches and individuals by Buddhist extremists. Muslims have also faced harassment, particularly following the Easter Sunday bombings in 2019. Humanists also face persecution and very often cannot openly identify as non-religious for fear of reprisals.

In the name of calming ethnic and religious tensions, the Sri Lankan authorities utilize a range of overly-broad legislation to restrict freedom of expression. These include the Official Secrets Act 1955, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) 1979, additional anti terrorism regulations issued in 2006, the ICCPR Act and laws on defamation and contempt of court. Several of these laws amount to de facto ‘blasphemy’ laws.

In May 2023, the government announced a dedicated task force established to crack down on persons or groups that disrupt religious harmony; several individuals have since been arrested by the task force. These arrests have taken place in the context of a rise in fundamentalist and ultra-nationalist rhetoric from senior political figures in the country.

Humanists International is closely monitoring the country in response to requests it receives from humanists at risk and concerns that efforts to calm religious disharmony may unduly restrict freedom of expression.

Sudan

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Sudan, an Arab republic in which the predominant religion is Islam, has long suffered from severe ethnic strife and has been plagued by internal conflict. Sudan’s long civil war has given the country a poor human rights record, and has led to large numbers of internal displacements within the country. Sudan continues to face political instability after a planned three-year power-sharing transition to democratic rule that began in 2019 was interrupted by a military coup d’etat in late October 2021. An escalating conflict between military and paramilitary forces has resulted in the deaths of thousands, and the forced displacement of more than three million civilians.

The coup was reportedly justified by saying that infighting between military and civilian parties within the transitional government threatened the country’s stability. However, the coup was perceived by some groups as an attempt to reimpose Islamic law. Indeed,

by June 2022, several allies of former President Omar Al-Bashir - and Islamist figures - had been offered posts in government, likely as a result of the need for experienced administrators and the expediency for the military of establishing a tactical alliance with Islamist factions.

As fighting rages on across the country between the military and paramilitary forces, democratic progress is stalled. Progress made to secularize the country since 2019, including the repeal of ‘apostasy,’ has been suspended. Several individuals have reportedly been arrested and charged with ‘apostasy,’ while in Khartoum, a newly formed police unit in charge of “morals” is reportedly reinforcing public order laws that banned women from wearing trousers and the sale and consumption of alcohol.

Key Countries Edition

This “Key Countries Edition” of the *Freedom of Thought Report* contains some of the entries which have been updated this year. These country chapters are a sample only. The full report is available in the Online Edition via the website at fot.humanists.international where every country in the world is featured with its own webpage and interactive ratings table.

Afghanistan

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression
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Afghanistan has been mired by chronic instability and conflict in its modern history, from the Cold War to the civil wars between the Mujahedeen and the Taliban. Most recently, Afghanistan has been the stage of the Afghan War (2001-2014) — fought between a coalition of US, NATO, and Afghan troops against the Taliban. International actors had maintained a peacekeeping force in Afghanistan until August 2021 when all troops were formally withdrawn following a peace deal brokered between the US and the Taliban. The withdrawal of all troops saw the Taliban violate the peace agreement, swiftly moving in to take control of the country and re-establish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, reinstating Sharia Law.¹

The predominantly ethnic Pashtun Taliban emerged as a political force in 1996, when they took control of the capital Kabul and changed the name of the country from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Their rule was characterized by the near-total exclusion of women from public life and strict application of Islamic law.²

Since the 2021 takeover, the Taliban have reportedly summarily executed local government officials and state security personnel, as well as raided the homes of government officials, journalists, and human rights defenders. In addition, women’s rights have been significantly restricted.³

Historically, Afghanistan was religiously diverse, but the vast majority of non-Muslims fled after the Taliban consolidated control of the government in 1996. As a result, current estimates suggest that 99.7% of the country are Muslims – the majority of whom are Sunni.⁴ A small proportion, estimated to be less than 1%, are followers of other religions, such as Hindus, Sikhs, Bahá’ís, Christians, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians.⁵ There are no estimates available for the number of non-religious or humanist individuals; those living in the country live in secrecy for fear of direct persecution.

Constitution and government	Education and children’s rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
<p>Complete tyranny precludes all freedoms of expression and thought, religion or belief</p> <p>State legislation is largely or entirely derived from religious law or by religious authorities</p>	<p>Religious or ideological indoctrination is utterly pervasive in schools</p>	<p>Expression of non-religious views is severely persecuted, or is rendered almost impossible by severe social stigma, or is highly likely to be met with hatred or violence</p> <p>Government figures or state agencies openly marginalize, harass, or incite hatred or violence against the non-religious</p> <p>It is illegal to register an explicitly Humanist, atheist, secularist or other non-religious NGO or other human rights organization, or such groups are persecuted by authorities</p>	<p>Expression of core Humanist principles on democracy, freedom and human rights is brutally repressed</p> <p>‘Apostasy’ or conversion from a specific religion is outlawed and punishable by death</p> <p>‘Blasphemy’ or criticism of religion is outlawed and punishable by death</p> <p>It is illegal to advocate secularism or church-state separation, or such advocacy is suppressed</p>

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
	Religious or ideological instruction is mandatory in all or most state-funded schools with no secular or humanist alternative	Systemic religious privilege results in significant social discrimination Government authorities push a socially conservative, religiously or ideologically inspired agenda, without regard to the rights of those with progressive views Prohibitive interreligious social control (including interreligious marriage bans) Religious control over family law or legislation on moral matters	

Constitution and government

As a newly declared “Islamic Emirate,” a religious leader will now serve as the ultimate authority on law and governance of the nation, based on the Taliban’s interpretation of Islam – derived from the Deobandi strand of the Hanafi school of Islam.⁶

On 7 September 2021, the Taliban announced an all-male caretaker government including an interior minister wanted by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), as well as the reinstatement of the Ministry for the Enforcement of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (*al-Amr bi al-Ma’ruf wa al-Nahi `an al-Munkir*) – a ministry dedicated to the enforcement of the Taliban’s extreme interpretation of Islamic law.⁷

Immediately following the Taliban takeover, it was reported that the Taliban were planning to re-institute the 1964 Constitution.⁸ However, at the time of writing, no such attempts appear to have been made. Instead, the Taliban leadership has indicated that Sharia law governs Afghanistan, unofficially revoking the 2004 Constitution;⁹ any laws predating the Taliban takeover that do not conflict with Sharia law reportedly remain in effect. However, the Taliban leadership has not formally repealed laws that it deems inconsistent with Sharia law. Taliban representatives reportedly issue “guidelines” that are unevenly enforced across the country. As a result, the country does not have in place a clear and cohesive legal framework, judicial system, or enforcement mechanisms.¹⁰

In September 2024, the leader of the Taliban, Hibatullah Akhundzada, reportedly called for closer cooperation between religious scholars and the government stating, “[t]he voice of the state and the pulpit must be unified

for religion, the system, the nation, and the people to progress.”¹¹

The government’s national identity cards indicate an individual’s religion as well as nationality, tribe, and ethnicity.¹² In the current political climate, members of religious minority groups fear being targeted as data on their religious affiliation (provided they told the truth) is in the hands of the Taliban government.¹³ Non-religious individuals report lying for such records to avoid identification and persecution.

Impunity

According to Human Rights Watch:¹⁴

“Impunity for grave abuses has long been a problem in Afghanistan, where the current and previous governments have largely failed to hold officials accountable for rights violations or prosecuted pro-government warlords and militias for serious abuses. The Taliban claim that they hold members of their ranks, including commanders, accountable for abuses, but this has meant little in practice since Taliban officials have seldom considered many human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law as wrongful acts.”

Education and children’s rights

Historically, the primary focus of all schooling in Afghanistan has been instruction in Islam. According to the 2004 Constitution, the “state shall devise and implement a unified educational curriculum based on the provisions of the sacred religion of Islam, national culture, and in accordance with academic principles, and develop the curriculum of religious subjects on the basis

of the Islamic sects existing in Afghanistan.”

In government-controlled schools, religious education was taught more than general education – this was particularly the case in areas where the Taliban held influence.¹⁵ In privately-run *madrassas*, the schooling was even more skewed, with the instruction almost entirely religious.¹⁶

In the initial wake of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, much was unclear about the future of education in the country, with very little coherence in policy.¹⁷

Analysis of Taliban educational policy documents dating to 2019 conducted by independent think tank ODI suggested that the Taliban’s first priority for education would be to:¹⁸

“fulfil spiritual needs and development, in so far as education is essential for an Islamic society. Ensuring all forms of education respect and adhere to Islam is a central principle.”

Indeed, Article 83 of the above mentioned Taliban policy document reportedly reads:¹⁹

“Teaching inappropriate and inaccurate subjects such as anti-jihad topics, immoral and anti-religion topics related to Muslim women, and subjects derived from the infidel laws, and other similar topics shall not be allowed.”

Upon the Taliban’s takeover in August 2021, girls were banned from obtaining a secondary education.²⁰ Promises to allow girls back into segregated secondary schools in 2022 were not fulfilled.²¹ Some reports suggest that girls of all ages are allowed to attend segregated education at local *madrassas*.²² Women teachers have been prohibited from teaching male students leaving a vacuum in many schools, where boys are taught by under-qualified male replacements.²³

According to Human Rights Watch’s research:²⁴

“The absence of female teachers – and the loss of their expertise – has contributed to some subjects not being taught, but the changes go beyond that. Subjects like sports, art, civics, and culture have often been replaced with additional hours dedicated to Quran and Islamic studies.”

In December 2022, Afghan news outlet *Hasht-e-Subh*, reported on a 2020 policy document that presented proposals to modify school curricula. While the authenticity of the document could not be verified, Human Rights Watch reports that the proposals outlined reflect experience reported by students participating in its recent research. Additionally, students report the promotion of so-called “Islamic” views of women’s rights.²⁵

According to January 2024 media reports, the primary school curriculum is undergoing further revision, with

the Taliban seeking to bring education into line with its interpretation of Sharia law.²⁶ The precise details of the revisions were not available at the time of reporting.

The Taliban is also reported to be attempting to reshape the curricula of higher education establishments, removing subjects deemed “modern,” and leaving only religious subjects intact.²⁷

Corporal punishment

According to a report published by Human Rights Watch in December 2023, corporal punishment is becoming increasingly prevalent in schools. Students report being subjected to humiliation, beating, slapping, and foot whipping as forms of discipline.²⁸ These practices illustrate the Taliban’s departure from the pre-existing legal framework. Under Article 39 of the 2008 Education Act²⁹ all forms of physical and psychological punishment are prohibited.

Family, community and society

Persecution of non-religious people

Since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, Humanists International has received an unprecedented number of requests from non-religious Afghans seeking to flee for their safety. Their number far outstrips the number of applications received from any other country, and has, at its highest, accounted for at least 32% of all requests for help that the organization has received.

Humanists International has received numerous reports from reputable sources of the Taliban undertaking door-to-door searches across Afghanistan in the wake of the takeover; the organization understands that many individuals perceived to be hostile to the Taliban, atheists, or collaborators with foreign agents were summarily executed following such raids.

Non-religious Afghans report threats from friends and family, as well as direct targeting by members of the Taliban and their supporters. They report having lived a largely “closeted” life in order to secure their safety, some daring to form groups of like-minded individuals on social networks (read more about their experiences in the ‘testimony’ section below). Inevitably those contacting Humanists International are seeking to flee Afghanistan to secure their long-term future.

Political insecurity and violence against religion and belief minorities

Article 2 of the 2004 Constitution explicitly states that followers of religions other than Islam are “free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of the law,” implying that Islam is privileged in some way – even implying a trump on the law. What little freedom religion and belief minorities may have benefitted from previously, has now been eradicated.³⁰

The non-religious are rarely mentioned in reports on freedom of religion or belief in Afghanistan. From this, one could conclude that it is because holding a religion other than the dominant Sunni Islam is already so dangerous that admitting to holding no religious faith is too dangerous still.

Promotion of Virtue and Elimination of Vice

The Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice – a ministry dedicated to the enforcement of the Taliban’s extreme interpretation of Islamic law – was officially reinstated in September 2021. However, the policing of “vice and virtue” has been an ever-present threat in areas that remained under Taliban control.³¹

During the rule of the former Taliban government, the ministry was one of the government’s most powerful offices, banning music and television, requiring women and teenage girls to wear a *burqa* and be accompanied by a male member of the family (*mahram*) when outdoors, and requiring men to grow beards. Beatings were a common punishment for failures to comply.³²

So-called “morality” officials have monitored residents’ adherence to Taliban-prescribed social codes regarding dress and behavior, including policing beard length, men’s attendance at Friday prayers, and the use of technology. Punishments for infractions since 2001 have ranged depending on those enforcing the rules in the respective province; while corporal punishment has been rare, the Taliban have been known to imprison residents or subject them to beatings.³³

In August 2024, the Taliban approved the Law on the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which imposes a detailed list of repressive provisions on citizens in the country, particularly women.³⁴ Among those provisions are:

- The prohibition of speaking, reciting, or singing in public;
- The requirement for women to be fully covered in public;
- The prohibition of a woman from looking at a man who is not a relative.

Women’s rights – towards codification of “Gender Apartheid”

According to the United Nations Special Procedures, the Taliban has, “implemented a system of discrimination with the intention to subject women and girls to total domination so egregious, that the collective practices constitute gender persecution, a crime against humanity, and has necessitated a discussion about the codification of ‘gender apartheid.’”³⁵

According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights,³⁶ “Restrictions are becoming increasingly severe, quelling women and girls’ fundamental freedoms, effectively confining them to the four walls of their homes – to invisibility.”

In September 2021, the Taliban announced that women would not be able to attend university or work until it was possible to ensure segregation of the sexes and an “Islamic environment.”³⁷ The Taliban imposed a similar “temporary measure” when it came to power in 1996, which was not lifted until the US invasion ousted the Taliban government in 2001.³⁸ Consistent with previous form, the Taliban have not permitted women to return to work.

To date, women face an almost total ban on appearing in public life. They are forbidden from public parks, gyms, and public baths. Beauty salons have reportedly been closed. Women are banned from traveling more than 78 km without a *mahram*, or male chaperone. Women may no longer work for domestic or international NGOs, nor may they work for the United Nations (except in health care, nutrition, and primary education).³⁹ Women’s access to routine and emergency healthcare is also extremely limited.

In January 2024, the United Nations expressed concern at reports that “scores of women and girls in Afghanistan have been arbitrarily detained and subjected to ill-treatment since early January for allegedly violating the Taliban’s dress code for women.” In May 2022, the Taliban ordered that all women observe “proper hijab” – preferably by wearing a *chadari* (a loose black garment covering the body and face) – in public, and made male relatives responsible for enforcing the ban or face punishment.⁴⁰

Reports indicate that Taliban-imposed restrictions have dramatically affected the participation of women and girls in political, public, economic, and socio-cultural life, and led to a significant increase in spousal and intrafamily violence against women and girls.⁴¹ An August 2024 report conducted by the Centre of Information Resilience identified that at least 332 women have been killed by men since the Taliban takeover. A further 840 women and girls have reportedly been subjected to domestic violence since January 2022.⁴²

LGBTI+ Rights

In February 2018, Afghanistan adopted a new Penal Code⁴³ that explicitly criminalized consensual same-sex relations. Under the Taliban’s strict interpretation of Sharia law, members of the LGBTI+ community accused of same-sex sexual relations may face the death penalty or extra-judicial killing.⁴⁴

Human Rights Watch reports that, since seizing control of Afghanistan, the Taliban and its supporters have carried out acts of violence against members of the LGBTI+ community with impunity.⁴⁵

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

Prior to the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, freedom of expression was theoretically guaranteed in Afghanistan – unless it went against national interests or personal privacy – under Article 34 of the Constitution. In practice, however, such freedom had rigid margins and limitations, in particular when it ran up against religion.⁴⁶

Under Taliban rule, the space for freedom of expression, association, and assembly has shrunk significantly. Human rights defenders, activists, journalists, and peaceful protesters have faced growing restrictions, including violence, arbitrary arrest, unlawful detentions and torture.⁴⁷

Freedom of assembly

On 7 September 2021, the Taliban announced that protests, in general, are illegal unless approved ahead of time. Journalists covering some protests have said that Taliban officials have told them that reporting on protests is also now illegal.⁴⁸

Demonstrations against the Taliban's implementation of restrictions on the rights of women and girls have been broken up, with protesters facing beatings.⁴⁹

Culture and artistic expression

Bans on technology and the playing of music have been in place in Taliban-controlled areas, such as Helmand or Kunduz provinces, for years; enforced by civilian "police." Access to technology is also tightly controlled in order to prevent individuals watching videos or listening to music.⁵⁰ On 26 August 2021, the Taliban declared that music had once again been banned across the country. The ministry for promotion of virtue and prevention of vice is responsible for enforcing the Taliban's doctrine, including in the field of arts and culture. The Ministry has been responsible for imposing harsh censorship measures and perpetrating acts of violence.⁵¹

In August 2020, the Taliban reportedly killed a local singer in Takhar Province as he returned home from a wedding.⁵² On 28 August 2021, celebrated Afghan folk singer, Fawad Andarabi, was shot dead at his home in the Andarab Valley in the northern Baghlan province. This incident occurred two days following the announcement by Taliban spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, that music was "forbidden in Islam".⁵³

'Apostasy'

According to the Article 1 of the Penal Code, punishments for *Hudud* and *Qisas* crimes, including 'apostasy' are inflicted in accordance with the Hanafi Jurisprudence of Sharia law, which includes the death penalty for non-believers and apostates.

With regard to non-believers and apostates, very few incidents are recorded, though this probably means that many converts and dissenters from Islam generally are simply too afraid to speak out. Assuming or defending any right to criticize, abandon or renounce Islam is considered a taboo even by many people who adhere to broadly democratic values.

Under some interpretations of Islamic law, converting from Islam to another religion is deemed 'apostasy' and considered an egregious crime. Those found guilty may be given three days to recant, or face death.

In September 2024, it was reported that the Taliban's Minister of Higher Education – who has supported the issuance of *fatwas* calling for the killing of infidels – labeled social media users spreading criticism of the Taliban in pashto as "apostates."⁵⁴ His comments are reported to be in response to international criticism of the Taliban regime on social media. The minister reportedly urged the public not to trust those criticizing the Taliban in pashto claiming that social media users "show no respect for religious scholars, do not recognize the honor of the mujahid [Taliban fighters], and do not respect Islam and the Quran." Some social media users reported fears that the use of the label "apostate" against those who criticize Taliban policy may be used as justification for violent reprisal.⁵⁵

'Blasphemy'

'Blasphemy' – which can include anti-Islamic writings or speech – is a capital crime under the Hanafi interpretation of Islamic law.⁵⁶ As a result atheists and freethinkers are forced to hide their beliefs and the only way they can express their thoughts is anonymously through social media. For males over age 18 and females over age 16 of sound mind, an Islamic judge may impose a death sentence for 'blasphemy'. Similar to apostates, those accused of blasphemy are given three days to recant or face death.

In September 2024, the Taliban's Ministry of Justice reportedly released a statement warning that any criticism of the Taliban's laws will be deemed as criticism of Sharia, and will face Sharia-based punishment.⁵⁷

Testimonies

"I have been living like a fugitive since the day I spoke about leaving Islam and my beliefs.

All my relatives and friends rejected me. Some relatives called my marriage and my son illegitimate and some even wanted to kill me. I lost my freedom and my job, and I also lost a child in my wife's womb that was not yet born. I feared I would lose my life, my wife and my child as well."

– Anonymous, August 2023

"Openly identifying as an atheist is akin to signing a death warrant. Islamic teachings propagate hostility towards those who reject the faith. Consequently, secrecy becomes a survival instinct for atheists. Even my own brother refrained from revealing his atheism for fear of reprisal.

"This silence left me feeling isolated, a sentiment compounded by the pervasive influence of Islam on every aspect of society. From education to festivals, Islamic principles dictated the norms, making it challenging to dissent. The struggle was not just intellectual but also practical; I found myself having to navigate a society filtered through the lens of Islam while harboring views that contradicted its teachings.

"At times, I had to play a charade, attending mosque prayers to avoid punishment and further isolation. It was a delicate dance between self-preservation and conformity."

– Atal (allonym), January 2024

"My curious mind has led me to exploring questions about science and Humanist philosophy. Becoming an atheist as a result of my curiosity, and on some occasions, openly discussing scientific issues and evolution even with my closest friends has put me in trouble. In Afghanistan nothing ends without a reference to God. That reference to God always stopped me from further exploring things openly with people. So I had to explore and talk to likeminded people on social media and Facebook, with, of course, a pseudonym, and openly challenge them and openly ask questions to satisfy my curiosity. The problems I will be facing if my atheistic views become apparent will be too grave, not only from authorities but also from my work colleagues and even my family. When my colleagues go to the mosque to pray I have to go with them, to avoid suspicion or I may be brutally murdered."

— Khalid

"As an atheist I'm facing constant problems with family, friends, and even in dealing with people at the university campus and the community at large. Having any beliefs outside of Islam or that of which is not compatible with Islam and its teachings are considered an unforgivable crime. Such a view is prevalent throughout society, family, friends and even at the university, which is supposed to be a place to question and doubt; Not to mention that such beliefs are systematically reinforced by the constitution and the state's laws. Thus, I am closet atheist, and my Secular Humanist views are limited to social media and to myself alone. The environment in Afghanistan is suffocating for freethinkers and Humanists. There are two ways available to me and others like me: Either stay quiet for your entire life which in turn is an imposed punishment for a social being like humans, or voice your concern for equality, freedom of thought and expression publicly. But to what cost?"

— Arash Kargar (pseudonym)

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The Plurinational State of Bolivia is a landlocked country and a democratic republic located in South America.

In 2006, the assumption of power by the first indigenous president of Bolivia, Evo Morales, was followed by a review of the role of the Catholic Church in the country and its influence on government. In 2009, this culminated in the adoption of a new Constitution following a national referendum, which declared the country a secular State. The Catholic Church nevertheless remains a prominent force in State politics.

According to estimates, approximately 70% of the population identifies as Roman Catholic, 14.5% as Protestant (including evangelical Protestant and Pentecostal groups). Approximately 5% identify as non-religious.¹ The Government did not include questions pertaining to religious affiliation in the country's census in 2012, and reportedly rejected requests to include such questions in the delayed 2022 census (rescheduled to take place in March 2024).²

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
		The dominant influence of religion in public life undermines the right to equality and/or non-discrimination	
Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general			
			Some concerns about political or media freedoms, not specific to the non-religious
	No formal discrimination in education	No religious tribunals of concern, secular groups operate freely, individuals are not persecuted by the state	

Constitution and government

Secular reform

The Constitution and other laws and policies protect freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as freedom of opinion and expression.

In 2009, Bolivia voted in a referendum to approve a new secular Constitution that removed Catholicism as the official state religion. The 2009 Constitution provides a number of guarantees with respect to the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Article 4 states that: "the State respects and guarantees freedom of religion and spiritual beliefs according to their view of the world. The State is independent of religion." Article 21 states that all Bolivians have the right "To

freedom of belief, spirituality, religion and cult, expressed individually or collectively, in public and in private, for legal purposes."

Despite the separation between religion and State guaranteed by Article 4, the Catholic Church is granted a number of prerogatives and privileges by the State, including exemptions from income, real estate, and property taxes. This is due to a number of formal agreements between the Holy See and the State of Bolivia (the first of which was signed in 1957).

In April 2019, the government passed the law on religious freedom, religious, and spiritual organizations (*Ley de libertad religiosa, organizaciones religiosas y de creencia espirituales*).³ The law establishes a clear distinction between religious organizations and NGOs, and builds on Article 21 of the Constitution. Article 6 of the law grants natural persons the following rights in relation to their exercise of "freedom of religion and spiritual beliefs":

- A) To freely choose one's religion, cult or spiritual belief in accordance with their worldview;
- B) To profess one's religion or spiritual belief in accordance with their worldview without discrimination of any form in any circumstance;
- C) To freely attend or belong to a religious or spiritual organization and to leave it when they choose;
- D) To participate in ceremonies, worship, and other religious or spiritual practices in accordance with their religion, cult, or spiritual belief without being obliged to take part in any ceremony or cult against their religion or spirituality;
- E) To disseminate, teach and cite religious texts or religious or spiritual information in accordance with their worldview, in oral, written or digital form in public or in private;
- F) To voluntarily support the functioning of religious or spiritual belief organizations;
- G) To receive religious or spiritual assistance in accordance with their worldview in hospitals, clinics, military and police facilities, rehabilitation centers, prisons, orphanages, children's homes and adult care homes;
- H) To exercise funeral, wedding and other rites in accordance with their religious or spiritual beliefs;
- I) To freely practice the wisdom, knowledge and ancestral worldviews of the indigenous nations and peoples of rural and Afro-Bolivian descent;
- J) To celebrate religious and spiritual festivals in accordance with their worldview;
- K) To disagree regarding the fulfillment of an obligation that contravenes their religious convictions or spiritual beliefs, with the exception of the obligations established in the Political Constitution of the State and the Law
- L) Not to belong to any religious or spiritual belief organization, in conformity with the secular State.

Catholic influence in politics

Alongside seeing in the new secular Constitution in 2009, the Government also signed an agreement - the Agreement on Inter-Institutional Cooperation (*Convenio Marco de Cooperación Interinstitucional*) - with the Catholic Church in Bolivia.⁴ According to the civil society organization, Catholics for the Right to Decide-Bolivia (*Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir-Bolivia*), the agreement strengthened the status of the Church in the country, "which continues to act with a low profile in all aspects of social and political life in the country." The Church's ties to business sectors with large economic capacity has also been strengthened by the agreement, according to *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir-Bolivia*, "especially in the eastern region, which is the centre of the opposition to

the current social and political process."⁵

Former President Morales identifies as a Catholic, but did not shy away from criticizing the Catholic Church, associating it with the Spanish colonization of Latin America in the 16th century. As a defender of indigenous rights and beliefs, he described his presidency as the "decolonization" of Bolivia. Morales' secular reforms angered and spurred a counter-reaction from religious right-wing groups. Bolivia's interim president Jeanine Áñez, who took over from Morales after he fled following accusations of election tampering in 2019, notably chose to invoke the Bible in her first public appearance, declaring God as the source of political power. Both religion and class were leveraged during this period of political insecurity.⁶

In 2020, the Catholic Church was one of three stakeholders - the other two being the United Nations and the European Union - to mediate the disputed 2019 elections, paving the way for a re-run of the elections themselves. Later that year, Morales' party, MAS, returned to power with Luis Arce assuming the Presidency.

In 2023, it was reported that the Government had instructed three bishops to appear before the court on charges of having participated in a "coup" against then-President Evo Morales. Critics raised concerns that the move was evocative of the targeting of the Catholic Church under the Ortega administration in Nicaragua.⁷

Registration and tax requirements

The registration of religious and belief groups is regulated by the law governing religious freedom, and religious and spiritual organizations (Law No. 1161).⁸

Religious organizations must fulfill a number of requirements in order to register with the Government, including the submission of notarized legal documents, information on members and details on the organization's finances and other activities. Pursuant to a Concordat with the Holy See, the Catholic Church is exempt from these registration requirements.

Education and children's rights

Part of the Morales Government's secular reform process involved changes to the education curriculum, including the requirement that schools be secular.⁹

Religious organizations are permitted to provide religious education in accordance with Article 14 of Law No. 1161, Article 122 of Law No. 548,¹⁰ Law No. 070,¹¹ and Article 86 of the Constitution.

Article 86 of the Constitution states that:

"Freedom of thought, faith and religious education, as well as the spirituality of the nations and the rural native indigenous peoples, shall be recognized and guaranteed in the educational centers. Mutual respect

and coexistence among persons of diverse religions shall be promoted, without dogmatic imposition. There shall be no discrimination on the basis of religious choice with respect to the acceptance and permanence of students in these centers.”

Article 3(6) of the Law on Education (Law 070 of 2010) establishes that education is:¹²

“Secular, pluralist and spiritual, recognizing and guaranteeing freedom of conscience, of faith and of religious instruction, as well as the spirituality of the indigenous nations and peoples of rural descent, fostering respect and mutual coexistence between people with different religious options (sic), without dogmatic imposition, and promoting interreligious dialogue.”

By law, religion classes are optional and the school curriculum should teach ethics courses that promote religious tolerance.¹³

Historical Child Sexual Abuse

In May 2023, President Arce reportedly wrote to the Pope of the Catholic Church requesting action to address allegations of sexual abuse and paedophilia on the part of Catholic priests. The president also sought the Pope’s office’s cooperation in accessing all files related to allegations held by the Holy See to facilitate criminal investigations within Bolivia.¹⁴ In tandem, the Ministry of Education stated that it would review its agreements with institutions operated by the Catholic Church to ensure proper safeguarding mechanisms were in place.¹⁵

Family, community and society

Increasing social polarization

According to a report published by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2024, the social transformations provoked by the passage of the 2009 Constitution – including the recognition of indigenous, economic, social and cultural rights, and gender equality, as well as reshaping the State’s socio-economic model – have produced advances in addressing structural issues such as inequality, however, in tandem, they have led to the increasing polarization of society. The report indicates that this increasing polarization has led to increased violence, human rights violations, and a deterioration in trust of democratic institutions.¹⁶

Gender equality and reproductive rights

Abortion is criminalized in Bolivia except when the life or health of the woman or girl is at risk or when the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest.¹⁷

At the end of 2017, Bolivia issued a newly revised Criminal Code expanding the grounds for abortion before the eighth week of pregnancy to a broader range of circumstances. However, the reform was subject to large protests from anti-choice groups throughout the country. One of the key driving forces behind the protests was the Platform for Life and Family (*Plataforma por la Vida y Familia*), whose president described its work as “necessary to defend the four principles postulated by Benedict XVI, since they are completely threatened in the country.”¹⁸ Also backing the call to repeal the new law was the Catholic Church¹⁹ and international lobbying groups such as the Catholic anti-abortion group, Human Life International, and the US based Christian advocacy group Alliance Defending Freedom International.²⁰ As a consequence of the backlash, in January 2018, the Code was repealed in its entirety.

According to Human Rights Watch, 90% of healthcare personnel interviewed in 44 public hospitals did not know the circumstances under which an abortion is legal in Bolivia.²¹

LGBTI+ rights

Bolivia’s Constitution and laws are relatively progressive on the subject of LGBTI+ rights.²² Article 14 of the Constitution bans discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. Article 58 recognizes the right of children to express themselves in a gender identity of their choice as a right “inherent to their development”. In 2016, a Gender Identity Law²³ was approved allowing transgender individuals to change their gender on official documents, and in 2019, Bolivia’s legislature made further progress by passing a law that criminalized hate crimes on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.²⁴

Despite these legal gains, Bolivia remains a relatively conservative country and the public has been resistant to the idea of full marriage equality.²⁵ The Constitution limits marriage to that between a man and a woman.

In December 2020, after a two-year legal battle, a court in La Paz granted two men the right to register a civil union, which activists hope will set a precedent for other LGBTI+ couples to access recognition.²⁶ However, despite this, in 2021 Bolivia’s national civil registry (*Registro de Servicio Cívico, SERECÍ*) discriminated against a lesbian couple by rejecting their application to register their relationship as a union. The registry reportedly claimed it was awaiting the outcome of the Constitutional Court’s review of the aforementioned case before it could register the union.²⁷

In March 2023, the Constitutional Court made public a ruling recognizing civil unions for same-sex couples. The court called upon the legislature to modify national legislation related to LGBTI+ rights in accordance with international standards.²⁸ However, according to Human Rights Watch:

“The ruling did not address the rights of transgender people to enter into civil unions, which is prohibited by a 2017 decision by the same court. The 2017 ruling also denied their rights to adopt children and be elected to public office and curtailed their privacy rights with respect to the gender they were assigned at birth.”

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

The Constitution guarantees freedom of expression and freedom of the press. However, in a highly polarized political environment, some journalists report intimidation and harassment by opponents, criminals, and the ruling party.²⁹

Under Morales’ government, Front Line Defenders reported that activists “who engage on environmental issues have been subjected to intimidation, threats, surveillance, and criminalisation,” that “the defence of indigenous peoples’ rights in the face of development projects is especially stigmatised by the Bolivian government” and that judicial harassment against lawyers who work on environmental and indigenous issues was common.³⁰

During the interim presidency of Jeanine Áñez, the government initiated a violent military crackdown against government protesters, journalists and those guilty of a broadly defined offence of “sedition,” resulting in at least 30 deaths.³¹

Senator Áñez, whose interim presidency was associated with a resurgence of Christian nationalism, also expressed anti-indigenous views publicly and on Twitter, writing “I dream of a Bolivia without satanic indigenous rituals, the city isn’t made for Indians, they need to go back to the countryside!” During her tenure, there was a wave of anti-indigenous sentiment and violence, some involving members of the Church. For instance, a hardline pastor reportedly attacked traditional indigenous beliefs as evidence of “witchcraft” and claimed that “[Under Morales] we were turning into a backwards nation – people wanted to legalize abortion, to legalize gay marriage, they wanted to legalize the *satanistas* [satanists]!”³²

Freedom of assembly

According to CIVICUS, civic space is “obstructed.”³³ Bolivian law protects the right to peaceful assembly. However, many past protests have been marred by clashes between demonstrators and police, as well as physical confrontations between protesters and counterprotesters. Journalists covering protests are frequently attacked.³⁴

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Burundi



Burundi is a landlocked country in the Great Lakes region of East Africa. Historically a Bantu Kingdom that was incorporated into German East Africa, it then came under Belgian rule until independence in 1962. It initially maintained its monarchy which was subsequently replaced by a one-party system. A multi-party system and new constitution was established in 1992.¹

Burundi's history has long been fraught with ethnic tensions and violence between the Tutsi and Hutu ethnic groups. After a period of relative progress following the end of a 12-year civil war, the nation has faced a new phase of political and economic crisis since 2015. Fighting between the army and rebel groups has resulted in hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing to neighboring countries. Widespread human rights violations, persecution of the

political opposition and deep rooted corruption has long kept the country on the radar of the international human rights community.²

Burundi has a population of about 13.2 million.³ It is one of the poorest countries in the world with more than half the population living below the poverty line.⁴

According to the last available census data (2008), 62 % of the population is Roman Catholic, 21.6 % Protestant, 2.3 % Seventh-day Adventist, 2.5% Muslim and 3.7 % belong to Indigenous religious groups. An estimated 6.1 % have no religious affiliation.⁵

Religious groups appear to coexist and interact with few reports of tensions or conflict.⁵

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
		<p>It is illegal to register an explicitly Humanist, atheist, secularist or other non-religious NGO or other human rights organization, or such groups are persecuted by authorities</p>	
		<p>The dominant influence of religion in public life undermines the right to equality and/or non-discrimination</p>	<p>Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom or human rights is severely restricted</p>
		<p>Government authorities push a socially conservative, religiously or ideologically inspired agenda, without regard to the rights of those with progressive views</p>	
		<p>Religious control over family law or legislation on moral matters</p>	

<p>Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general</p> <p>Legal or constitutional provisions exclude non-religious views from freedom of belief</p>	<p>There is state funding of at least some religious schools</p>		
			<p>Concerns that secular or religious authorities interfere in specifically religious freedoms</p>

Constitution and government

The Constitution defines the State as secular.⁶ The law protects religious freedom and outlaws religious discrimination (Articles 13, 22, 31).

Decline in democracy

General Evariste Ndayishimiye has been Burundi's President since June 2020, taking over from Pierre Nkurunziza who favored him as the next candidate for the ruling National Council for the Defense of Democracy – Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) political party. It was Nkurunziza's decision to stand for a third term in office, in violation of the two-term constitutional limit, which led to the violent turmoil in 2015.

In what appears to be a further move to restrict democratic freedom in the country, a new Electoral Code was adopted by Parliament in April 2020. The code makes it more difficult for political candidates to stand for election. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burundi, "this measure appears to be aimed specifically at Agathon Rwasa, the opposition figurehead who was ousted from the leadership of the Congrès national pour la liberté in March 2024, to prevent him from standing in the 2025 elections."⁷

Impunity for human rights violations

According to the report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burundi, the country has experienced "a narrowing of civic space and repression of political opponents, media professionals and human rights defenders". There is a climate of fear and impunity for serious human rights violations. Organizations based outside the country have documented alarming numbers of arbitrary arrests, torture and extrajudicial killings.

"For the period from July 2023 to April 2024, Ligue Iteka reported 591 cases of arbitrary arrest, 43 cases of torture, 415 cases of extrajudicial execution, 25 cases of enforced disappearance and 129 cases of gender-based violence. Between August 2023 and May 2024, Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture in Burundi (ACAT-Burundi) reported 154 cases of extrajudicial execution, 151 cases of arbitrary arrest and 38 cases of torture."⁸

Instrumentalization of religion

President Ndayishimiye is described as a "fervent" Catholic⁹ and, like his predecessor, emphasizes the role of God in politics.¹⁰ He has accused those opposing him as going against the will of God and those who do not believe in his promises for the country as being in the service of Satan.¹¹ During the latest annual celebration organized by the President and his family to mark the anniversary of his inauguration, a preacher reminded those who did not support the President that, "all those who oppose the one chosen by God expose themselves to his fury".¹²

Legal restrictions on the non-religious

According to Article 68 of the law on religious groups, it is against the law for any individual to profess themselves to be God and it is illegal to promote atheism.

Government interference in religion

Although freedom of religion is generally observed by the Burundi government and law, government interference in religion has occurred. The President and numerous other high level government officials have frequently visited a variety of churches and Muslim communities, and are even given opportunities to preach.¹³ In 2019, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi reported that the government was exerting more control over churches to curb political dissent.¹⁴

A revision to the law on religious groups came into force in September 2024¹⁵ with the aim of resolving conflicts within church leaderships. The new law does away with the previous body responsible for regulation and mediation of religious groups and places responsibility directly with the Ministry of the Interior. A framework for dialogue has been established between religious groups and the State.¹⁶ All groups must register with the Ministry of the Interior and report annually on their activities.

The penalty for failing to register or practicing religion if registration is denied, is a prison sentence of between six months and five years, or a fine of up to 1 million Burundian Francs (approx. 344 USD).¹⁷

The new law also stipulates a list of rules that religious groups must adhere to (e.g. the distance to be maintained between places of worship, the academic level of the legal representative of the group etc.) which religious leaders are reported to find restrictive and cumbersome.¹⁸

In April 2023, 61 worshippers of the “World’s Glory Church of Christ” were arrested in Ngozi Province, charged with making noise and worshiping in an unauthorized location. They were detained at a police station in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions.¹⁹

Religious groups are not exempt from tax or eligible for other benefits, however they are entitled to a tax exemption on imported goods if these goods are for social projects or public benefit. The State does not fund the functioning of any religious group but it may support their programs within the framework of a specific agreement.²⁰

Education and children’s rights

The official education program includes religious and moral classes in the curriculum for all secondary and primary schools. The program includes religious classes for Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam, depending to some extent on demand or on local religious backgrounds. Students are free to choose from one of these three classes or attend a Moral education class instead.²¹

Many secondary schools are run by religious groups, predominantly the Catholic Church, under contract to the Education Ministry.²²

The government allows some religious schools to benefit from tax exemptions when purchasing school equipment and materials or investing in infrastructure.²³

Family, community and society

“Moralizing” society

In 2017, President Nkurunziza launched a campaign to “moralize society”, cracking down on cohabiting, unmarried couples. President Ndayishimiye has continued on this trajectory.

Article 554 of the Penal Code²⁴ and Article 42 of the Law on the Protection of Victims of Gender Based Violence²⁵ criminalizes cohabitation of unmarried couples. This is in spite of Article 42 of the Constitution which states that:

“no one may be subjected to arbitrary interference with his or her privacy, family, home or correspondence or to attacks on his or her honor or reputation.”

The 2024 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burundi noted the renewed crackdown on cohabiting couples which has reportedly driven at least 900 women and 3,600 children from their homes in the North of the country.²⁶

“In some cases, women in cohabiting relationships, along with their children, have been sent back to their parents’ homes. In other cases, families have been separated, children have been separated from their mothers and forced to live with their father’s first wife, or men have been forced to live with their first wife.”²⁷

Women’s rights

Discrimination against women in Burundi persists in law as well as practice. Due to customary law, women are typically unable to inherit property.²⁸ According to the citizenship code, a Burundian woman married to a foreign national cannot pass on her citizenship to her husband or children.²⁹

In July 2023, the UN Human Rights Committee expressed concern about persistent violence against women in Burundi and the low rate of reporting and prosecutions.³⁰ In the same year, according to Amnesty International,

“the minister of interior made threatening and derogatory remarks about single mothers, following his earlier drive to prevent the registration of births of children to “unknown fathers”. He called on local administrators in Busiga commune in Ngozi province to beat them until they revealed the name of their children’s father.”³¹

Abortion

The law on abortion in Burundi is reflective of the deeply conservative attitudes prevalent in the country.³² Article 534 of the penal code allows abortion only on the grounds of serious danger to the life or health of the woman.³³ Despite past debates initiated by women's rights groups proposing that the law should be amended to allow abortion in the case of rape, the law has remained unchanged.³⁴

LGBTI+ rights

Article 29 of the Constitution forbids same sex marriages, but "homosexuality" was only made illegal in Burundi in 2009 (Article 590 of revised Penal Code).³⁵ Since then there has been a rise in arbitrary arrests on "homosexuality" charges.³⁶

In February 2024, 24 people were arrested in the capital, Gitega, at a workshop on HIV/AIDS. They, and two others later added to the case, were charged with "homosexual practices and incitement to homosexual practices". In August, seven were found guilty. One of the accused, due to be released, died in custody.³⁷

President Ndayishimiye has used bible references to oppose "homosexuality" and made extreme homophobic remarks, describing "homosexuality" as a "curse". In December 2024, he told journalists at a press conference that "homosexuals" found in Burundi "should be stoned".³⁸

The UN Human Rights Committee has expressed concern about the incitement of hatred and violence towards LGBTI+ people in Burundi, including by those at the highest levels of government. It has called for the abolishment of discriminatory laws and for those responsible for discrimination and violence to be investigated and prosecuted.³⁹

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

Under Ndayishimiye, democratic space in Burundi has been shrinking and an increasingly authoritarian government continues to repress political opponents. Corruption is widespread and there is general impunity for human rights violations.

While freedom of expression is guaranteed in the Constitution (Article 32), press laws place restrictions on journalists.⁴⁰ Defamation and insult are prohibited and may be punished with harsh fines and imprisonment. Journalists have been censored by authorities and have censored themselves as well.

The government dominates the media. Radio is the primary news source for many Burundians, but most privately owned radio stations were shut down in the 2015 crisis. Some private broadcast media outlets still exist, but many Burundians look to social media as a news source. There are over 1.6 million internet users in the country.⁴¹

Burundi ranks poorly on the World Press Freedom Index⁴² and is described as maintaining a hostile environment for the press. The released journalist, Floriane Irangabiye, spent nearly two years in prison between 2022-2024 on charges of endangering the integrity of the national territory after hosting a debate with two critics of the Burundian government.⁴³ Another journalist, Sandra Muhoza, is still held in detention at the time of writing, having been charged with "endangering state security and ethnic hatred". She was arrested following a comment she posted on a whatsapp group for journalists about a story implicating people in the government. She faces a possible life sentence.⁴⁴

Morality laws used to curtail blasphemous expression

While Burundi does not have any specific "blasphemy" laws in place, Article 587 of the Penal Code does criminalize acts that "offend public decency". In April 2022, a young Burundian rapper was detained for almost six months for releasing a video considered to be "blasphemous", featuring himself and a woman dressed in religious attire and dancing erotically.⁴⁵

Stifled civic space

The Constitution provides for freedoms of assembly and association (Article 32), but the government has threatened members of human rights groups that criticize it and subjected them to surveillance. The laws for registering NGOs are restrictive⁴⁶ and organizations face persecution for activity seen as hostile to the government.⁴⁷

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Cyprus

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

The Republic of Cyprus is a sovereign island State in southeastern Europe. Situated in the Mediterranean Sea, it is located close to Turkey (north), Syria and Lebanon (east), Israel (south east), Egypt (south) and Greece (west). The country gained independence from British Rule in August 1960, after the London-Zurich agreements led to the development of a constitution formed by both the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities.¹ The Republic of Cyprus is a democracy that has *de jure* sovereignty over the entire island. In practice, however, the government controls only the southern, largely Greek-speaking part of the island, as the northern area is ruled by the self-

declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), recognized only by Turkey.

According to the US State Department, 89% percent of the government-controlled population is Orthodox Christian, 3% is Roman Catholic, 2% Protestant, 2% Muslim, 1% is Buddhist, 0.5% are Maronite Catholics, and 0.3% is Armenian Orthodox, with small populations of Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Baha'is.² The number of non-religious individuals does not appear to have been documented.

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
			<p>'Blasphemy' is outlawed or criticism of religion (including de facto 'blasphemy' laws) is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence</p>
<p>There is systematic religious privilege</p> <p>Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general</p> <p>State-funding of religious institutions or salaries, or discriminatory tax exemptions</p>			
<p>Official symbolic deference to religion</p>	<p>State-funded schools offer religious or ideological instruction with no secular or humanist alternative, but it is optional</p>		
		<p>No condition holds in this strand</p>	

Constitution and government

Although the Constitution³ does not specifically make reference to secularism, it guarantees freedom of thought, religion and expression. While these are generally upheld and there is no official state religion within the country, there are indications of some special privileges afforded to religious groups, *de facto* blasphemy laws present within the Criminal Code and some reports of societal discrimination based on religious belief.

Article 18 of the Constitution explicitly states that “every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion,” and provides that all religions whose doctrines or rites are not secret are free and equal before the law.

Privileged groups

In spite of this, Article 110 affords the autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus along with the *Vakf*, an Islamic institution, exclusive rights in which neither the legislature, executive or administrative functions of the government are permitted to interfere with their activities. No other religious groups are afforded an equivalent level of societal privilege. These institutions, alongside the three other religious denominations recognized within the Constitution (Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Roman Catholics) are exempt from tax (except when engaging in strictly commercial activities). All receive significant subsidies and financial assistance from the State for cultural and educational matters, including the operation of schools.⁴

Three recognized Christian minorities—the Armenians, the “Latins” (Roman Catholics), and the Maronites—each have one non-voting representative in the parliament. Members of these minority groups vote in special elections for their representatives, as well as in the general elections.⁵

Other religious groups are able to register as non-profit organizations and are granted tax exempt status, but are not eligible for the allocation of any governmental financial support.

Education and children’s rights

Article 20 of the Constitution dictates that, “every person has the right to receive a free school education.”

There are indications of variance in the religious education curriculum dependent on the region in which the children reside. Within the northern region, religious education is only mandatory in primary and lower secondary schools, while in the south, it is compulsory from pre-primary to the end of secondary school. The curriculum is organized in a mono-confessional way depending on cultural identity: Greek Orthodox religious instruction in the Greek Cypriot south, and Sunni Islam in the Turkish Cypriot north.⁶

Greek Orthodox religious instruction is compulsory to all Greek Orthodox students living in government-run areas of the country, however, there are provisions for non-Christian Orthodox individuals to opt-out.

According to the US State Department,⁷

“The government requires Greek Orthodox religious instruction and attendance at religious services before major Greek Orthodox religious holidays in public primary and secondary schools. The Ministry of Education (MOE) may excuse primary school students of other religious groups from attending religious services and instruction at the request of their parents or guardians, but Greek Orthodox children in primary school may not opt out.”

However, while opting out of participating in such activities is theoretically possible, there are reports of societal pressure to participate in religious activities in schools.

Family, community and society

Gender equality

Reports indicate that women continue to face discrimination as a result of patriarchal attitudes.⁸

Article 28 of the Cypriot Constitution guarantees the right to gender equality, guaranteeing “all rights without any direct or indirect discrimination on the grounds of sex.” In the past five years, Cyprus has made significant progressions in the field of women’s rights.⁹ For instance, the National Action Plan for Equality between Men and Women ran from 2019 till 2023 and aimed to promote gender mainstreaming in both education and research. The scheme also introduced new policies and courses for governmental and administrative teams to comply with national and EU legislation on gender equality.¹⁰

LGBTI+ rights

The LGBTI+ community reportedly faces significant discrimination from more conservative sectors of society.¹¹

In May 2023, Cyprus’ parliament passed a landslide bill criminalizing conversion therapy.¹² This decision makes formal amendments to the Penal Code and criminalizes any practice or technique that aims to convert or suppress an individual’s identity.¹³ In cases that aim to convert children the penalty carries a three year prison sentence and €10,000 fine. Furthermore, simply advertising these services can also result in a prison sentence.¹⁴

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

The state provides unrestricted access to the internet, and there is a strong level of political and press freedom. Non-governmental organizations, human rights organizations and trade unions typically operate without impediment or governmental interference.¹⁵

De facto “blasphemy” law

Although Article 19 of the Constitution states that “every person has the right to freedom of speech and expression in any form”, sections 141-142 of the Cypriot Criminal Code seem to contradict this guarantee by enacting a *de facto* blasphemy law in which it is an offense to essentially insult religions:

“Any person who with the deliberate intention of wounding the religious feelings of any person, or makes any gestures in the sight of that person, or places any object in the sight of that person, is guilty of a misdemeanor and is liable to imprisonment for one year.

“...Any person who publishes a book or pamphlet or any article or letter in a newspaper or periodical which any class of persons consider as a public insult to their religion, with intent to vilify such religion or to shock or insult believers in such religion is guilty of a misdemeanor.”

— Articles 141 and 142, Cyprus Criminal Code

Highlighted cases

In September 2020, teacher and painter, **George Gavriel**, was placed under investigation by the Ministry of Education following complaints about his paintings, which some – including Archbishop Chrysostomos – deemed to be derogatory of religion.¹⁶ Some of his artworks, which he describes as anti-establishment,¹⁷ are religion-themed with one depicting a naked Jesus and another a dog urinating on the archbishop.

Maria Stylianou Lottidis, the Commissioner for Administration and the Protection of Human Rights, reportedly agreed with those who object to his paintings stating that Gavriel had “exceeded the limits to which freedom of expression is subject by law, and infringed the rights of others through his art.[...] Because of his unique role of both teacher and artist, Gavriel has failed to take into account the impact of his work, using Christ to shock, provoke and anger a considerable amount of people in Cyprus.”¹⁸ In October 2021, news reports indicate that the case against him had been dropped.¹⁹

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Eritrea

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

The State of Eritrea, a country in East Africa, is a one-man dictatorship under President Isaias Afewerki without a functioning legislature or independent judiciary.¹ There has not been an election in Eritrea since independence in 1993. Afewerki has long used the ongoing war with Ethiopia to justify rampant authoritarianism, human rights abuses, and civil society restrictions. Impunity for rights violations is the norm.²

There are no reliable figures on religious demography in Eritrea; however, it is estimated that the population is predominantly split between Christian and Muslim adherents.³

According to Human Rights Watch:⁴

“Despite being a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council, Eritrea refused to cooperate with key UN and African Union (AU) rights mechanisms, including by denying access to the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea and ignoring African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) decisions.”

Constitution and government	Education and children’s rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
			<p>Expression of core Humanist principles on democracy, freedom and human rights is brutally repressed</p> <p>It is illegal or unrecognised to identify as an atheist or as non-religious</p>
<p>The non-religious are barred from some government offices (including posts reserved for particular religions or sects)</p>		<p>The dominant influence of religion in public life undermines the right to equality and/or non-discrimination</p> <p>Systemic religious privilege results in significant social discrimination</p> <p>It is made difficult to register or operate an explicitly Humanist, atheist, secularist or other non-religious NGO or other human rights organization</p>	<p>‘Blasphemy’ is outlawed or criticism of religion (including de facto ‘blasphemy’ laws) is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence</p>

There is systematic religious privilege

Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general

Legal or constitutional provisions exclude non-religious views from freedom of belief

Some concerns about children's right to specifically religious freedom

Constitution and government

Though the Eritrean Constitution⁵ purports to guarantee the right to freedom of religion or belief, to date the Constitution has not been applied in practice. Many Eritreans face severe restrictions when exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief.⁶

The Eritrean Office of Religious Affairs only officially recognizes four religions: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church (Lutheran Church) of Eritrea. All other religions or beliefs are deemed illegal. Even members of "official" religions frequently find themselves unable to practice their faith because of government interference in their affairs.⁷ To come out as an atheist is legally unrecognizable and would likely provoke arrest and significant social persecution.

Proclamation 73/1995⁸ regulates the operation of religious organizations. The proclamation establishes the separation between religious and political authorities (Article 2). The law requires religious groups to register with the Government or cease activities, and places strict limitations on the parameters of their operations, as well as sources of funding.

Education and children's rights

Education is officially compulsory only between the ages of seven and 13, and in practice even this promise is often unfulfilled, due to insufficient infrastructure, skills shortages, poverty, and social taboos.⁹

The Ministry of Education is responsible for teacher training, setting the curriculum, and the provision of textbooks. The Ministry also recruits teachers, sets standards, provides policy framework, and monitors and evaluates the whole sector.¹⁰

According to UNESCO, most schools are state-owned. Other providers include "community schools" – in which a school is part-funded by the local community – "Awkaf schools" – administered by Awkaf (Islamic religion association) – and "mission schools" – administered by churches (Coptic, Catholic, and Protestant churches).

UNESCO reports that the majority of non-government schools, such as those administered by religious groups, have been converted to community schools, or been closed down or restricted by the government.¹ According to the U.S. Department of State:¹²

"In September, the beginning of the 2022 school year, the last two remaining Catholic schools were closed or converted to public schools. In October, the government allowed one private school to reopen, limited to international non-Eritrean students only."

All schools whether state or non-state must follow the national curriculum.¹³ Reports indicate that non-secular schools can implement their own teachings and curricula upon certification.¹⁴

Family, community and society

Owing to the stringency with which information is controlled, it is difficult to obtain substantive information on the lived experience of Eritreans.

Treatment of religion or belief communities

The Eritrean government only validates four "recognized" religious groups, the Orthodox Church, Roman Catholicism, the Evangelical (Lutheran Church) and Sunni Islam. Despite other religious groups having applied for official recognition since 2002, the Eritrean government has failed to implement the relevant rights established in the Constitution.¹⁵

Members of "unrecognized" religions are arrested and detained for extended periods in vastly overcrowded conditions, and there have been reports that people have been tortured as means of forcing them to recant their religious affiliation. Reports of the harassment and arrest of members of religious minority groups are widespread and frequent.¹⁶

However, reports of harassment of members of recognized religious groups are also increasingly common.

Harmful traditional practice

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), while in consistent decline for the last 25 years, is still practiced in Eritrea. According to UNICEF's research:¹⁷

"In 1995, the Eritrea Demographic and Health Survey reported a prevalence rate of 95% among 15-49 year-olds. Since then, it decreased to 89% in 20022, and 83% in 2010."

According to the study, various cultural, religious, and social factors inform the prevalence of the practice in Eritrea, with the main drivers being to preserve virginity, prevent pre-marital sex, and ensure social acceptance. UNICEF reports that religious approval has reduced significantly over the last decade due to intensive sensitization efforts aimed at religious leaders, which has led some to disassociate FGM and religion.¹⁸

Government authorities, together with international agencies, have adopted a community dialogue approach to seek to challenge social and cultural norms that perpetuate this practice.

LGBTI+ rights

Eritrea criminalizes consensual same-sex relations with up to seven years' imprisonment.¹⁹ It is unclear how readily the law is enforced.

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

The Government maintains tight control over dissent. Arbitrary detention and/or enforced disappearance of dissenters are core to the modus operandi of the authorities. To date, thousands of people remain arbitrarily detained; they include opposition figures, journalists, human rights defenders and others. The widespread and systematic nature of these practices is considered by the UN Special Rapporteur on Eritrea to amount to crimes against humanity.²⁰

The Press Proclamation No 90/1996²¹ (Part II, Section 4) grants the Government powers to censor all mass media. This law requires that the media promotes "national objectives." The state retains a legal monopoly on all broadcast media, and in practice all journalists follow the Government's editorial line. No independent media – be it print or broadcast – has operated in the country since 2001.²²

The passage of Proclamation of 145/2005²³ placed onerous requirements on civil society organizations, having the effect of shutting down the operations of all national and international NGOs in the country. Further to this, the Government also takes steps to curtail the work of human rights defenders working in the diaspora.²⁴

Ban on "disparaging" or "profaning" religion

Eritrea's 2015 Penal Code²⁵ criminalizes at least two types of 'blasphemous' conduct.

Article 196 criminalizes the "Disturbance of Religious or Ethnic Feelings," defined as:

"intentionally and publicly disparag[ing] a ceremony or rite of any lawful religious group, or profan[ing] a place, image or object used for such religious ceremonies or ceremonies relating to any ethnic group."

The offense of "Defamation of or Interference with Religious and Ethnic Groups" is contained in Article 195. This offense is defined as:

"intentionally and publicly assert[ing] fabricated or distorted facts, knowing them to be such, in order to cast disparagement upon any religion or ethnic group, or unlawfully disrupt[ing] or attempt[ing] to obstruct a religious service or assembly."

The penalties for both offenses are possible imprisonment for up to a year. Not enough public information and monitoring exists to determine how often these laws are used in practice.

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Iraq

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Iraq holds immense historical and geopolitical significance. Bordered by Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Kuwait, it has been a focal point of events not only in the region but also on the global stage. Iraq is a member of the League of Arab States (LAS), as well as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

The population was estimated to be 43.5 million in 2021.¹ All numbers and statistics are estimates, as no census has been conducted since 1997.

It is estimated that between 61% and 64% of the population are Shia Muslims, and between 29% and 34% are Sunni Muslims.² It is believed that around 150,000 Christians live in the country, and fewer than 2,000 Baha'is.³

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
			It is illegal or unrecognised to identify as an atheist or as non-religious
State legislation is partly derived from religious law or by religious authorities	Religious or ideological instruction is mandatory in all or most state-funded schools with no secular or humanist alternative	<p>Systemic religious privilege results in significant social discrimination</p> <p>Government authorities push a socially conservative, religiously or ideologically inspired agenda, without regard to the rights of those with progressive views</p> <p>Prohibitive interreligious social control (including interreligious marriage bans)</p> <p>Religious control over family law or legislation on moral matters</p>	<p>Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom or human rights is severely restricted</p> <p>'Blasphemy' is outlawed or criticism of religion (including de facto 'blasphemy' laws) is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence</p>
		There is significant social marginalisation of the non-religious or stigma associated with expressing atheism, humanism or secularism	

Constitution and government

The Constitution⁴ establishes Islam as the official State religion and the foundation of legislation. Article 2 of the Constitution states that:

- “[n]o law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam;”
- “[n]o law may be enacted that contradicts the principles of democracy;”
- And, “[n]o law may be enacted that contradicts the rights and basic freedoms stipulated in this Constitution”

Article 2 further states that the Constitution guarantees the “Islamic identity of the majority of the Iraqi people” and the rights to freedom of religion and practice “of all individuals such as Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaean Sabaeans”, with no mentions of other religions or non-believers. The law specifically prohibits the practice of the Baha’i faith, although this prohibition is not generally enforced. The law takes a more lenient approach to some other minority faiths, such as Wahhabi Islam, Zoroastrianism and Yarsanism, by not banning them outright, however, such groups are still denied official registration status.⁵

Freedom of religion is guaranteed under Article 41 of the Constitution, which reads, “Iraqis are free in their commitment to their personal status according to their religions, sects, beliefs, or choices.” Individuals are “free in the practice of religious rites, including the Hussein rituals,” and “management of religious endowments (*waqf*), their affairs, and their religious institutions”, according to Article 43.

There are 17 religious groups recognized and registered with the government, including Islam, Syriac Orthodox, Seventh-day Adventist, Yazidi and Jewish. The registered groups, with the exception of the Yazidis, have their own personal status courts where marriage, divorce and inheritance issues are addressed.⁶ There are no regulations on how to obtain legal recognition for new groups, except for in Iraqi Kurdistan where religious groups can obtain recognition if they have a minimum of 150 followers, document the sources of financial support and demonstrate that the group is not anti-Islam.⁷

The State is required by Article 10 of the Constitution to maintain the sanctity of holy shrines and religious sites and to guarantee the practice of rituals at the sites.⁸

National identity cards issued before 2016 stated religious affiliation. The national identity cards issued after 2016 no longer visibly indicate the holder’s religion, yet the online application process continues to ask for

this information and the cards’ embedded data chips still contain data on religious affiliation. Religions that may be listed are Christianity, Sabean-Mandaean, Yazidi, Judaism and Islam.⁹

Nine out of 329 seats in the parliament are reserved for religious and ethnic minorities. For instance, five seats are reserved for Christian candidates and one each for Yazidi and Sabean-Mandaean.¹⁰

ISIS

In June 2014, Sunni Jihadists declared the “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria” (ISIS). The forerunner group arose in 1999 and participated in military conflict against US-led forces. The militants eventually carved out significant territory in Iraq, and in 2015 drew increasing numbers of followers internationally. They were known for violent executions, sexual slavery, and the persecution of religious minorities, “apostates” and “blasphemers”, those they accused of homosexuality, and anyone who offered any opposition to their hegemony. They were largely routed by December 2017, with areas under their influence returning to government control.¹¹

Education and children’s rights

Islamic religious instruction is mandatory in public schools for Muslim students, at least in primary and secondary schools (with the exception of Iraqi Kurdistan). Non-Muslim students are technically not obliged to participate. There are continued reports from religious minorities of educational discrimination, and social stigma around ‘apostasy’ or conversion likely hamper free exercise of any opt-out. It is unclear how an attempt to opt-out by a specifically non-religious student would be handled. Christian religious education is offered in at least 255 public schools in areas with higher concentrations of Christians.¹²

Christians and Yazidis have reported on the discrimination in the education system, the lack of minority input on the curricula and the fact that not all schools had incorporated lessons of religious tolerance, as instructed by the Ministry of Education in 2015.¹³

In Iraqi Kurdistan, the Ministry of Education funds religious instruction in schools for Muslims and Christian students.¹⁴

In 2019, thousands of children were prevented from enrolling in public schools because a family member was thought to be affiliated with ISIS.¹⁵

Child exploitation

In September 2022, the Iraqi parliament introduced draft legislation aimed at strengthening child protection measures in the country. If approved, the proposed law would be the first of its kind in Iraq. It seeks to address issues such as child labor, exploitation and abuse. The draft also outlines fundamental child rights including the rights to life, health, education and citizenship. Passage of the law could represent an important advancement in efforts to safeguard the rights of children in Iraq.¹⁶

As recently as 2022, over 2,700 Yazidi women and children remain unaccounted for after being abducted by the Islamic State during the 2014 Yazidi genocide. Available evidence suggests many have been subjected to sexual enslavement or forced labor by their captors. The exploitation of vulnerable children persists as an issue in Iraq, including forced begging and the recruitment of minors into militias.¹⁷

Family, community and society

Religious discrimination

Followers of the Baha'i faith have been persecuted for many years and the practice of the faith is prohibited by law 105 of 1970 and prescribes 10 years' imprisonment for practicing the religion, but this is usually not enforced. The regional government in Kurdistan recognizes Baha'is and the federal prohibition is not enforced in the region.¹⁸ Since 1970, Baha'is have been denied citizenship or other travel documents, such that it has not been possible for them to leave the country.¹⁹

Since ISIS was defeated, Sunnis living in areas liberated from ISIS have been able to practice their religions freely since.²⁰ However, Sunni Muslims report that they face discrimination in public sector employment as a result of "de-Baathification", which is described as a process originally intended to target loyalties of Saddam Hussein's regime which favored Sunnis. Sunnis say the de-Baathification provisions are used to render them ineligible for government jobs and government contracts.²¹

Atheism is very rare in Iraq, but there are reports saying that an increasing number of people are non-believers. According to a poll from 2011, 67% professed a belief, 21% stated they probably believed, 4% said they probably didn't believe in God, and 7% stated they did not believe in a god. Atheism is not prohibited by law, but atheists have been prosecuted for "blasphemy" and other related charges. There is a low social tolerance of atheism which is why many atheists keep their views secret.²²

While importing and distributing alcohol is legal for non-Muslims, it is reported that restaurants and liquor stores face harassment and attacks.²³ Muslims are banned by law from consuming alcohol and are often denied permits allowing them to carry and sell alcohol.²⁴ Christians continue to report fear of importing and distributing alcohol and spirits, despite receiving permits.²⁵

Family Law

According to the Constitution, citizens have the right to choose between a civil or religious court in matters of personal status, like marriage, divorce, inheritance, and custody. Should a religious court be chosen, and one of the parties to the dispute is from an unrecognized faith, Islamic law applies. If the same dispute were taken to a civil court, the court is required to consult the religious authority of a non-Muslim party for its opinion and use it as the basis of its judgment. In Iraqi Kurdistan, there are separate courts used for personal disputes between members of the same religion, while the civil status courts handle all other cases.²⁶

The law allows non-Muslim women – identified as such in official documents – to marry Muslim men, however, Muslim women cannot marry non-Muslims.²⁷

Discrimination against women and minorities

About one in four women between the ages 20 to 24 were married by the age of 18 and forced marriages are common. The laws regulating marriage and divorce favor men over women. Gender-based violence is a widespread problem, but rarely prosecuted.²⁸ According to Human Rights Watch, a husband can legally punish his wife "within the limits prescribed by law or custom" and the law provides for mitigated sentences for various acts, including so-called "honor killings" or extramarital acts.²⁹

The legal system provides some allowances in cases involving alleged sexual and honor crimes. For instance, criminal rape charges can be dropped if the perpetrator marries the victim. The law also does not expressly prohibit spousal rape. Penalty reductions exist in statutes for so-called "honor killings", and prosecutions for such cases are uncommon in practice. Typically involving murders by male relatives of female family members or LGBTI+ individuals, such crimes seldom result in convictions.³⁰

Non-Muslim women have reported that they feel pressured to wear a hijab during Ramadan and other Muslim holidays. Others are harassed for wearing western clothes or not adhering to strict Islamic norms.³¹ Despite advocacy from women's rights groups, Iraq's Parliament has not yet enacted legislation expressly prohibiting gender-based violence.³²

While a prohibition on same-sex sexual relations is not codified, there are several vague provisions that can be used to target the LGBTI+ individuals. According to Human Rights Watch, LGBTI+ individuals in Iraq frequently face acts of violence based on their sexual orientation. Such violence includes killings, abductions, torture, and sexual assault. The recurring nature of these acts indicates a climate where perpetrators are not held legally accountable.³³

In 2023, the Iraqi Parliament discussed a bill that could enact the death penalty or life imprisonment for homosexuals. International human rights organizations expressed concern about legislating “impunity” in cases of violence against the LGBTI+ community. Members of Parliament representing a relative majority in the Iraqi Parliament proposed an amendment to a 1988 law called “Combating Prostitution”. It stipulates the “death penalty or life imprisonment” for anyone “who has engaged in a homosexual relationship.”³⁴

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

“Blasphemy” law

Iraq’s Penal Code³⁵ prohibits “insult” to religious rituals, symbols or sacred persons and objects. Under Article 372 of the Penal Code:

“The following persons are punishable by a period of imprisonment not exceeding 3 years or by a fine not exceeding 300 dinars:

“Any person who attacks the creed of a religious minority or pours scorn on its religious practices.

“(5) Anyone who publicly insults a symbol or person who constitutes an object of sanctification, glorification, and respect to a religious community.”

While there are “blasphemy” laws on the book, reports indicate the law is rarely enforced.³⁶

Converting from Islam to another religion is prohibited under law. Those who do not hold religious beliefs often feel compelled to hide their worldview from others in their society due to the existence of stigma and discrimination.³⁷

Non-Muslims may change their religion to Islam according to Iraqi law, based on paragraph one of Article 26 of the National ID Card Law No. 3 of 2016, which states: “Non-Muslims may change their religion in accordance with the law.”³⁸ However, changing religion from Islam to another religion is not permissible, as established by several decisions of the Federal Court of Cassation.³⁹

Freedom of expression

A report by Human Rights Watch states that, recently, there has been a spike in violations of the right to freedom of expression in Iraq, including the Kurdish region. The authorities have reportedly used vague laws to charge individuals expressing dislike or criticism of the authorities.⁴⁰

In January 2023, the Iraqi government initiated a campaign to censor “indecent content” online, establishing a platform for public reporting of allegedly immoral social media activity. Over 96,000 complaints were submitted within one month, resulting in six prison sentences (now overturned). While the Iraqi constitution guarantees free expression, vaguely defined morality laws like Penal Code 403 that regulates the import of material deemed to violate decency are regularly exploited to target and silence journalists, activists and political rivals through lawsuits and prosecutions; a pattern of weaponizing the legal system to punish dissenting voices and control public discourse, rather than sincerely addressing substantial claims of defamation or criminality.⁴¹

Press freedom

Freedom of media is guaranteed by the Iraqi Constitution, but it is restricted in practice by the threat of violence. The threats against journalists have increased since the anti-government protests began in October 2019. According to Reporters Without Borders, the coverage of religious and political leaders seen as untouchable, can lead to prosecution or media bans for disrespecting “national or religious symbols.”⁴²

Highlighted Cases

Khwanas Wrya (Born 1998), a young Kurdish Iraqi artist and intellectual known for promoting tolerance and free thought, was assassinated on 22 June 2023 by a Salafi individual.⁴³ Khwanas openly criticized extremism and called for intellectual freedom in his social media writing. This stance made him a target for hardline Islamist militants.⁴⁴

On May 2020, the National Security Agency in Iraq’s Dhi Qar Governorate arrested a doctor on charges of “advocating atheism and attacking the Prophet Muhammad, his character, and his family through fake pages on Facebook.”⁴⁵

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Italy

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

A limb of southern Europe stretching out into the Mediterranean, Italy is a nation whose Roman past penetrates deeply into European cultural history, and whose Renaissance prefigured the modern humanist movement. Despite this, the Catholic Church remains a predominant force in the country today.

According to a 2021 study by the independent Center for Studies of New Religions (CESNUR), an estimated 74.5% of the population are Catholic, 4.1% are Christians of other denominations, 3.7% are Muslim, 2.2 % are followers of other religions, including Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, Baha'is, and Sikhs and 15.3% are non-religious.¹ The non-religious are by far the largest “religious” minority in Italy, consisting of 15.3% of the population as of 2019.²

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
		<p>The dominant influence of religion in public life undermines the right to equality and/or non-discrimination</p> <p>Government authorities push a socially conservative, religiously or ideologically inspired agenda, without regard to the rights of those with progressive views</p>	
<p>There is systematic religious privilege</p> <p>Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general</p> <p>There is a religious tax or tithing which is compulsory, or which is state-administered and discriminates by precluding non-religious groups</p> <p>State-funding of religious institutions or salaries, or discriminatory tax exemptions</p>	<p>Some concerns about children's right to specifically religious freedom</p>	<p>Use of Conscientious Objection clauses resulting in the denial of lawful services to women and LGBTI+ people</p> <p>Discriminatory prominence is given to religious bodies, traditions or leaders</p> <p>Religious groups control some public or social services</p>	<p>Blasphemy or criticism of religion is restricted in law and is punishable by a fine</p>
<p>Official symbolic deference to religion</p>	<p>State-funded schools offer religious or ideological instruction with no secular or humanist alternative, but it is optional</p>		<p>Concerns that secular or religious authorities interfere in specifically religious freedoms</p>

Constitution and government

While the Italian Constitution has guaranteed freedom of religion since 1948, it was not until 1979 that the Constitutional Court affirmed the equality of rights for the non-religious,³ and only in 1989 did *laicità* (neutrality of the State with respect to religions) become a Constitutional principle (following a judicial ruling of the Court).⁴

Until its revision in 1984, the Concordat with the Catholic Church (which has constitutional status) implied that Italy formally had a State religion.

A web of accords and concordats, with some notable exceptions

The government keeps a complex system of legal agreements with various religious communities. It gives support to religious communities according to these accords. A lack thereof does not affect someone's rights to believe, but prevents a belief group from receiving many privileges available to other communities.

As of 2024, Italy has established agreements with thirteen religious groups, including the Concordat with the Catholic Church, Orthodox Christians, Jews, Baptists, Lutherans, Hindus, Jehovah's Witnesses and some Buddhist organizations (the last having been approved with the *Istituto Buddista Italiano Soka Gakkai* in 2016).⁵ Muslims comprise the biggest group without an agreement, mostly because of the lack of a unified representative body.

The Union of Rationalist Atheist and Agnostics (*Unione degli Atei e degli Agnostici Razionalisti - UAAR*), a Member Organization of Humanists International, requested an agreement with the State on the grounds that religious beliefs should not earn their adherents more rights than non-believers. However, in 1996 the Undersecretary of State responded that these accords "cannot be extended to other associations that don't have a religious nature". In the same year, UAAR appealed to the President of the Republic, on the basis that several constitutional rulings establish equality between the rights of religious organizations and of non-religious life-stance associations. This appeal was won. Nevertheless, the Council of Ministers (i.e. the executive branch of the government) gave a negative answer in 2003, and the resistance to accepting the equality of non-religious worldviews has persisted, producing a sequence of sentences, appeals, wins and losses that span two decades,⁶ and remain ongoing. In 2016, the Constitutional Court ruled in favor of the government, establishing that it is within the government's prerogatives to arbitrarily pick the organizations entitled to enter into an agreement, which to date has been granted to religious denominations only.⁷

Privileging the Catholic Church

Among the privileged religions, Roman Catholicism is the dominant faith, and by far the most privileged. Its ministers, for example, are present in several institutions of the State, and are funded by public resources; they can be found in hospitals, prisons, military bases, nursing homes and university campuses.⁸ In all these places, representatives of other religions are allowed, although on an unpaid basis.⁹ Secular or non-religious representatives, however, are admitted only in limited cases.¹⁰

The media landscape is overwhelmingly dominated by the Catholic Church. A 2015 study revealed that 95% of the television time dedicated to religious content was allotted to the Catholic Church, encompassing both news and mass-culture programs.¹¹ The Italian state television, *RAI*, has an entire department, *RAI Vaticano*, solely dedicated to the task of promoting Catholic messages.¹² During the spring 2020 pandemic lockdown, *RAI 1*, the most well-known State channel, aired live broadcasts of Pope Francis' holy mass, as part of its popular daily morning show "*Uno Mattina*."¹³ Conversely, the coverage of humanism and non-belief was almost non-existent.

In Italy, the tax system disproportionately favors the Catholic Church. Taxpayers are required to give 0.008% ("*8 per mille*") of their taxes to either a recognized religion or to the State. However, most taxpayers opt for neither, mistakenly assuming that their share will automatically go to the State. Instead, funds from those who do not specify a beneficiary are distributed among all the possible recipients, according to the proportion of expressed choices.¹⁴ Since the majority identify at least nominally as Catholic, most funds ultimately benefit the Catholic Church. In 2015, only 34.46% of the taxpayers showed a preference towards the Catholic Church, but it received 79.87% of the funds.¹⁵ This mechanism has been denounced as inadequate and misleading by the *Corte dei Conti* (Court of Auditors), which has also exposed the discrimination against the religious groups not recognized by the State.¹⁶ Despite the increasing secularization of Italian society, this disparity remains significant: less than 28% explicitly chose the Church as the "*8 per mille*" recipient in 2022, while the Catholic Bishops received more than 69% of the funds.¹⁷

The Italian tax on real estate has long been criticized by UAAR for disproportionately favoring the Catholic Church. Although the details have varied over the years, the Italian Government has historically exempted church-owned schools, hotels and private hospitals from paying this tax.¹⁸ Following a dispute with the European Commission and the European Court of Justice (ECJ), the ECJ appeal judges ruled in 2018 that Italy must recover the arrears.¹⁹ In response, the Italian Government attempted to delay compliance, to avoid upsetting the Vatican, claiming that an ad-hoc law was required. In 2019, the "*Movimento 5 Stelle*" introduced such a law in the Senate,²⁰ however, despite being proposed by one

of the parties in the ruling majority at that moment, the proposal was never discussed. Since then, nearly one law per year has been drafted, but none has been discussed (as of the time of writing of this report), prompting the European Commission to repeatedly call out Italy for its non-compliance.²¹

UAAR has estimated that when the costs of this “religion tax”, the expenses related to religious personnel, and the other privileges of the Catholic Church are combined, the State grants more than 6 billion euros (approx. US\$6.5 billion) to the Church each year.²²

Italian legislation still allows privileged judicial treatment of the Catholic Church.²³ This is likely a contributing factor to the low numbers of prosecutions of child abuse cases within the Church when compared to other European countries. For example, police are required to inform the bishop before undertaking certain methods of investigation on members of the clergy, which could facilitate cover-ups.²⁴

Testing church-state relations and religious privilege: the “Crucifix affair”

The display of crucifixes in schools and public offices, including tribunals, reflects a preferential treatment for Catholicism in the public sphere.²⁵

In 2003, a challenge to the separation of Church and State arose when a member of UAAR, with the support of the association, sought the removal of crucifixes from her son’s school classrooms. The request, grounded in concerns over the State’s religious neutrality,²⁶ was initially denied by the school, and was subsequently addressed to the Regional Administrative Court. In 2005, the court upheld the school’s decision, providing the following rationale:

“the crucifix [is a] symbol of a particular history, culture and national identity [...] and an expression of some of the secular principles of the community”.²⁷

After the Council of State confirmed the verdict, the case was brought to the European Court of Human Rights, since all domestic remedies had been exhausted. In 2009, a first-instance Chamber of the Court ruled that crucifixes should not be present in classrooms, noting that by aligning the schools with a particular religion, such religious symbols may serve as signs of exclusion and marginalization.²⁸ But some members of the Italian government responded with reactionary fervor to the ruling:

“We won’t remove the crucifix. They might as well die, we will not remove it”

— From a 2009 television interview of the then Minister of Defence Ignazio La Russa.²⁹

The government appealed immediately to the Grand Chamber, which, in March 2011, overturned the previous decision, declaring that every European State has a “margin of appreciation” in religious matters, and that the crucifix is a religious, but passive, symbol.³⁰

Another case went before Italy’s Supreme Court in September 2021. High school teacher, Franco Coppoli, had been suspended in 2014 for repeatedly removing a crucifix from the wall of the classroom in which he was teaching. Two courts had previously rejected the appeal against the suspension. The Supreme Court, however, acquitted Coppoli of the suspension imposed on him. The ruling also stated that the crucifix represents, “the lived experience of a community and the cultural tradition of a people” and that, while the symbol is not mandatory, the decision of whether to display a crucifix in classrooms is left to each school.³¹

Nativity scenes are another religious symbol that have caused controversy in recent years. The current government drafted a law in December 2023, still to be discussed in parliament, seeking to prosecute schools who choose not to display the scenes during the traditional Christmas period.³²

Education and Children’s Rights

The preferential treatment of Catholicism in schools remains problematic under the Concordat³³, which mandates “Catholic Religion Teaching” across all levels of education. Teachers for this subject are selected by the Church but funded by the State. This requirement does not extend to universities, although students in Catholic universities must undertake a Theology exam regardless of their chosen field of study, both for entry and during their studies.³⁴

Schools are required by law to offer alternatives to the teaching of religion. These alternatives may include an additional subject, individual study with teacher assistance, independent study, or permission to leave the school premises. The alternative subject varies depending on the available teachers and does not necessarily align with a civic and/or humanist topic.³⁵

Notwithstanding, UAAR reports several accounts of schools that have allegedly discouraged students and parents from exercising their right to refuse the default Catholic teaching, citing reasons of conformism, integration, bureaucratic difficulties and alleged lack of funds. In some instances, students have avoided religious instruction by declaring affiliation with another religion, be it true or not.³⁶

Pastoral visits by clergy and religious ceremonies often take place during school hours. Although mass is formally prohibited during school time,³⁷ some schools “suspend classes” for the duration of the mass, to allow for it. There are reports of blessings taking place inside the

school premises. However, they became a controversial topic after 20 parents and teachers made an appeal to the Regional Administrative Tribunal (TAR) Emilia Romagna for the cancellation of such activities on school grounds during Easter. The issue was handed over to the *Consiglio di Stato* (Council of State), where it was ruled that blessings were legitimate outside of school hours and in extracurricular activities, at the voluntary presence of those who wished to participate. The judges of the *Consiglio di Stato* also added a purely religious reasoning, whereby the rite of benediction only “makes sense if it is celebrated in a specific place, while it would not make sense (or, in any case, the same sense) if it was celebrated elsewhere”.³⁸

UAAR assists families affected by religion-based discrimination and abusive religious activities at school through its “*SOS Laicità*” online service, providing, among other things, legal counseling and templates for legal actions.³⁹

Family, community and society

Religious marriage

Both civil and religious marriages are recognized in Italy. For a religious marriage to be considered valid it must be performed by a Roman Catholic priest who registers the marriage with the civil authorities. In the case of non-Catholic religious ceremonies, a civil ceremony must be performed beforehand to ensure the legality of the marriage.

It is not infrequent that people seeking divorce pursue an annulment from the Church rather than through the Italian legal system. When obtained, it makes the wedding invalid from the beginning (as if it were never in existence) not only on the religious level, but also on the civil one, with relevant consequences: for instance, civil courts have to recognize the religious annulment and revoke the alimony rights for the less well-off partner. However, the Court of Cassation has the final word on the matter, and in several cases it has decided to maintain the alimony.⁴⁰

Unequal treatment of religious belief groups

Humanists left behind

The steady growth of humanist funerals and wedding ceremonies (which still, at the end of 2024, have not been permitted to confer legal marital status) is hindered by municipalities that do not have appropriate places to provide for the ceremony, even though the law says they must provide them (for funerals: Decree of the President of the Republic of 14 January 1997).⁴¹

Frequently, State authorities tend to attribute a higher value to religion and to inflate its significance over secular

worldviews. For example, in a paradigmatic 2010 ruling, the Tribunal of Milan, called upon to decide whether a mother could send her child to church against the father’s will, not only ruled in her favor, but even made a value judgment about her religion over the father’s non-religious views – a “moral evaluation” subsequently censored by the appellate judge as going against the principle of *laicità*.⁴²

Marginalization of Muslims

Although Islam has more members than some religious groups with official status — including Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism, it does not have official recognition.⁴³ Therefore, no Muslim organization may receive public funding from the “*8 per mille*” mechanism. Since 2005, the Ministry of the Interior has established, under different names, representation groups of Italian Islam to foster dialogue, and ultimately a legal agreement, between the government and the Italian Muslim communities reunited under a common umbrella organization.⁴⁴ Muslim organizations and leaders have yet to reach a consensus in order to sign an accord with the government.⁴⁵

The official recognition of Islam has not been the only issue surrounding the marginalization of the Muslim community in Italy. The unwillingness or inability of the government or local administrations to allow the construction of mosques in Italian cities has led to more than 900 unofficial Muslim places of worship being constructed.⁴⁶

For instance, the Islamic association in Pisa appealed to the Tuscan regional administrative tribunal after the Pisan City Council blocked the construction of a mosque and decided to reconvert it into a parking area stating that the land lot was not big enough for such a building.⁴⁷ According to opponents to the project, the main reason for blocking it was the allegedly dubious origin of the funds, and the suspicion of links with the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴⁸

In June 2023, the government introduced a bill that would prohibit religious groups without an accord from using their own or rented properties for religious activities. At a parliamentary hearing Muslim and Christian communities opposed the law as discriminatory and in violation of constitutional principles,⁴⁹ but nonetheless it has already been approved by one of the two parliamentary chambers and it is likely to be approved in the other.⁵⁰

Sexual and Reproductive Rights

Impact of conscientious objection on access to safe abortion

Abortion was legalized in 1978, with a law (known by its number, 194) that allows women to terminate

pregnancies during the first trimester, and after 90 days only if the mother's life or health is at risk or if there are serious fetal pathologies.

Law 194 gives healthcare practitioners the option not to provide services that are specific and necessary to an abortive intervention on the grounds of a conscientious objection.

On average, conscientious objectors among Italian gynecologists amount to just over 70%. In some regions, this figure is higher. In one region in Central Italy, Molise, for example, 93% of gynecologists are conscientious objectors. Sicily and Lazio are among other regions where this number is also over 80%.⁵¹ According to the UAAR, this number continues to grow due to the Vatican's influence on Italian politics and society, which helps maintain a stigma around abortion services.⁵²

Research from 2020 shows that the use of conscientious objection to refuse abortion services by gynecologists in Italy, hampers abortion access at the local level and leads to longer waiting times. The research also found that the negative consequences of conscientious objection has a stronger impact on women living in lower-income regions or those experiencing other forms of economic disadvantage.⁵³

The UN Human Rights Committee has expressed concerns regarding difficulties in accessing legal abortions in Italy due to the high number of conscientious objectors and their distribution across the country,⁵⁴ and on two separate occasions the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR)⁵⁵ found Italy to be in breach of international treaties for failing to ensure the right to healthcare, owing to the deficiencies in service provision caused by health personnel invoking conscientious objection. The ECSR also noted that as a result of the lack of abortion providers, pregnant women are in some cases forced to travel to another region or abroad.

Impact of religious anti-abortion activists on access to safe abortion

It has been reported that a federation of anti-abortion activists, linked to the US religious Right, also have an impact on access to safe abortion in Italy. The federation, called *Movimento per la Vita* ('Movement for Life'), follows a Catholic doctrine and has, since 2013, been in partnership with the US Christian Right group Heartbeat International.⁵⁶ Heartbeat opposes modern contraception, and has been a partner of the ultra-conservative World Congress of Families (WCF) network. The WCF held its 2019 global gathering in Verona, where Matteo Salvini – then Italy's deputy prime minister and leader of the far-Right Lega party – gave a keynote speech.⁵⁷ Members of *Movimento per la Vita* seek out women in hospitals who are considering abortions and try to stop them from making that choice by providing them with false and intentionally scary information, such as abortion causing "post-abortion syndrome" or a 50% increase in breast cancer risk.⁵⁸

According to data from the Ministry of Health, there are only 381 public or private health facilities that provide abortions nationwide.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, the anti-abortion centers in *Movimento per la Vita's* network have grown to over 350.⁶⁰ In April 2024, using an amendment to its European Union post-COVID recovery plan, the Italian Parliament voted in favor of allowing pro-life groups to be present in clinics that offer abortion consultations. The move has sparked a row within the EU with a number of European governments strongly criticizing it.⁶¹

LGBTI+ Rights

Same-sex civil partnerships became legal in Italy in 2016, making same-sex couples equal in law in all areas except adoption. While courts can legally allow second parent adoption, the government has been hardening its stance on same-sex parents by demanding local councils only list biological parents on birth certificates.⁶² In October 2024, the government brought in a law banning couples from going abroad to have a baby through surrogacy.⁶³ Surrogacy was already illegal in the country⁶⁴ and this latest move is considered by many as a further targeting of the LGBTI+ community.

Despite UN recommendations, the Italian government has been fighting against legislation to address hate speech and discrimination against the LGBTI+ community. In 2021, it rejected the so-called "Zan Bill" which addressed hate speech and violence against women, LGBTI+ and disabled people. The Catholic Church had been vocal in its opposition of the bill arguing that it would restrict the Church's freedom of thought.⁶⁵ More recently, the government has rejected similar policy initiatives coming from the EU.⁶⁶

Assisted Dying

In September 2019, a Constitutional Court ruling (242/2019)⁶⁷ declared Article 580 of the Criminal Code unconstitutional, therefore decriminalizing assisted dying in the case of those aiding people suffering from an irreversible condition to die. However, despite the Court's recommendation, the Italian Parliament has not yet passed a law regulating assisted dying.

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

Defamation and 'blasphemy'

Defamation of religion is still a criminal offense under articles 403 and 404 of the Penal Code.

Article 403 punishes the conduct of "offending a religious confession by vilifying those who profess it" with a fine between €1,000 (\$1,186) and €5,000 (\$5,932). The fine is increased to €2,000-6,000 (\$2,373-7,118) if the vilified person is a "minister of worship", namely a clergyman of whatever creed.⁶⁸

Article 404 punishes with a fine from €1,000 (\$1,186) to €5,000 (\$5,931) “whoever, in a public place, or place of worship, by offending a religious confession, vilifies with insulting expressions things which form objects of worship, or are consecrated to worship, or are necessarily intended for the exercise of worship”. The article also specifies a prison term of up to 2 years for “anyone who publicly and intentionally destroys, scatters, deteriorates, renders useless or smears things that are objects of worship or are consecrated to worship or are necessarily intended for the exercise of worship”. The overlap here with criminal damage and inflation of the crime purely for “religious” objects is problematic, but so far it appears that a prison term would not apply except in cases of physical damage to religiously-defined property.⁶⁹

‘Blasphemy’ *per se* also remains an administrative offense under Article 724, and it is punished with a fine between €51 (\$60) and €309 (\$367); it was a penal offense until as late as 1999.

In April 2024, a painting on display as part of an exhibition in Modena which appeared to depict Jesus receiving oral sex, caused public outrage.⁷⁰ The painting was subsequently vandalized and the artist attacked. Religious figures from the Catholic Church sought to diffuse the situation and defended the artist’s freedom of expression.

Also in April 2024, Italy’s advertising standards authority removed a television commercial in which nuns are offered crisps instead of hosts during Mass. The president of the Italian Association of Radio and Television Listeners called for the advert to be banned on the grounds that it was “blasphemous”. The regulator upheld the appeal and reminded the advertiser that their publicity “must not offend moral, civil and religious convictions”.⁷¹

Italian footballers have also been punished in recent years for using “blasphemous” language when caught swearing on the pitch with religious references. The offense has led to the Italian Football Federation imposing match bans on a number of players.⁷²

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Nigeria

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Located on the west coast of Africa, the Federal Republic of Nigeria is characterized by its diverse ethnic groups. According to last available estimates (2015), approximately half of the population are Muslims, about 48% are Christians, and approximately 2% do not belong to a religious group. Many individuals are reported to syncretize traditional indigenous practices with Islam or Christianity.¹

A former British colony, Nigeria’s legal system is a complex blend of English common law, Islamic law, and customary law, which operate to varying degrees across

the 36 states that make up the Federal Republic. A weak judiciary results in inconsistent application of the law.²

While the Constitution guarantees religious freedom, the State endorses numerous anti-secular and theocratic policies. The government and non-state militia – such as Boko Haram – constantly violate the rights to freedom of thought and expression.

Nigeria is a member of the Organization of Islamic States.³

Constitution and government	Education and children’s rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
			<p>‘Blasphemy’ is outlawed or criticism of religion (including de facto ‘blasphemy’ laws) is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence</p>
<p>State legislation is partly derived from religious law or by religious authorities</p>	<p>Religious or ideological instruction is mandatory in all or most state-funded schools with no secular or humanist alternative</p>	<p>The dominant influence of religion in public life undermines the right to equality and/or non-discrimination</p> <p>The non-religious are persecuted socially or there are prohibitive social taboos against atheism, humanism or secularism</p> <p>Government authorities push a socially conservative, religiously or ideologically inspired agenda, without regard to the rights of those with progressive views</p> <p>Prohibitive interreligious social control (including interreligious marriage bans)</p>	

		Religious control over family law or legislation on moral matters	
		It is made difficult to register or operate an explicitly Humanist, atheist, secularist or other non-religious NGO or other human rights organization	
Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general		Some religious courts rule in civil or family matters on a coercive or discriminatory basis	
		Discriminatory prominence is given to religious bodies, traditions or leaders	
Official symbolic deference to religion			Some concerns about political or media freedoms, not specific to the non-religious

Constitution and government

Section 10 of the Constitution⁴ states, “[t]he Government of the Federation of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion.” Additionally, Sections 38 and 39 of Nigeria’s Constitution respectively guarantee the rights of citizens to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change their religion or belief and the right to freedom of expression.

Politics influenced by ethnicity and religion

Nigeria’s political system, both at the federal and State levels, is characterized by political actors capturing State power and using it to advance the well-being of their respective ethnic or religious groups.⁵ Public trust in government and institutions is reportedly low.⁶

In several instances, politicians have been reported to refer to religion when justifying their stance on legislative proposals and in other political contexts. In 2017, the MP Gudaji Kazaure declared himself to be against family planning as it is against Islamic doctrine, and cited Prophet Muhammad’s words “Marry and have children so that I can be proud of you on the day of judgement”.⁷ In 2019, a video began circulating on social media showing Senator Dino Melaye campaigning in his home state and reciting the first chapter of the Quran to a roaring Muslim campaign mob.⁸

According to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies,

“The lack of a coherent national identity in Nigeria and the overarching reliance on ethnicity, religion, and regionalism for political identity has historically accounted for electoral violence and attendant insecurity.”⁹

In February 2023, the presidential elections were marked by violence, reportedly, “involving coercive acts targeting individuals, property and infrastructure, with the explicit aim of influencing the electoral process and outcome”.¹⁰ Traditionally, it has been the convention of parties to ensure a balance of the two predominant faiths on their ticket. However, President Tinubu and the APC Party he represents ran on a Muslim-Muslim ticket that reportedly stoked ethno-religious tensions.¹¹

Since coming to power, President Tinubu is reported to have granted significant subsidies to Islamic religious pilgrimages, in a move seen to be pandering to his religious base.¹² A deeply religious man himself, Tinubu has regularly invoked God in speeches.¹³

Regional variation

Sections 275–279 of the Constitution give constituent states the power to establish their own Sharia courts on civil matters. Abiding by Sharia law is required for Muslims in some states but optional in others and enforcement differs by state. Rulings and procedures are sometimes difficult to find. Christians are not obliged to abide by Sharia law in any of the 12 states. The introduction of criminal law aspects of Sharia, the continued State use of resources to fund the mosque construction, education of *Kadis* (Muslim judges), pilgrimages to Mecca (*Hajj*), and religious instruction in schools, mean that Islam is often regarded, and is in effect, the *de facto* State religion of numerous northern states.¹⁴

Proselytizing in public is illegal in some states, on the grounds that it deters ethnic conflict. Religious groups are required to have permits to build places of worship and to hold public gatherings. Christian and Islamic groups are required to register with the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) to do so. Religious discrimination is prohibited by law, but there are significant inter-religious social tensions.

Education and children's rights

Under Article 38 of the Constitution of Nigeria, it is a requirement for all students in the public education system to receive instruction either in Christianity or Islam, though the Constitution states that institutions cannot subject students to instruction in a religion other than that inherited from their family.¹⁵

The Constitution states:

“Section 38:3 No religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for pupils of that community or denomination in any place of education maintained wholly by that community or denomination.”

In 2018, the Minister also brought forward a reform to the school curriculum, introducing an umbrella subject called ‘Religion and National Values Curriculum’, which includes five subjects, taught separately: Civic Education, Social Studies, Christian Religious Knowledge, Islamic Studies and Security Education. The reform also made Civic Education a compulsory subject.¹⁶

The law requires schools to admit children regardless of their religious affiliation or lack thereof. Christian state schools are required to allow Muslim students to wear a hijab. In Islamic state schools, the hijab is required of all female students, regardless of religion, as part of the uniform.¹⁷ However, Freedom House reports that student admission and faculty hiring policies are subject to political interference.¹⁸

Abuse in the *Almajiris* system

In 2019, a number of Islamic rehabilitation schools (*Almajiris*) across northern Nigeria were discovered to be abusing hundreds of children. The Nigerian police freed more than 1,000 children from these centers in October 2019 alone, but thousands more could be at risk, as some 10 million children are estimated to attend *Almajiris* schools across the country. Then President Buhari ordered the police to search for these abusive centers and disband them.¹⁹

Harmful traditional practices

Customary and religious laws implemented in certain states permit harmful traditional practices, such as child marriage and female genital mutilation, among both Muslim and Christian communities.²⁰

Several northern states have failed to fully implement the Child Rights Act adopted by the Federal Republic, as it relates to the legal age for marriage. Some have cited that the regulation of the age of marriage is contrary to their religion and culture.²¹

Among majority Christian communities, the stigmatization of unintended pregnancy is often used as a justification for child marriages.²²

According to the JISRA consortium,

“When it becomes challenging to educate a girl child due to a lack of financial resources, parents consider arranging their marriage at a very early age, often against the child’s will. Early girl-child marriage and forced marriage are significant problems in the communities [in Kaduna and Plateau states].”²³

Family, community and society

Nigeria is a religiously pluralistic country in which an individual’s ethnicity has a bearing on religious demographics. The Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, which is most populous in northern Nigeria, are predominantly Muslim while the Igbo, a major ethnic group in the south, is predominantly Christian. Meanwhile no single religion is in the majority throughout the country. Muslims, who are in the majority in the north are in the minority in Southern Nigeria. Whilst Christians, who are in the majority in southern Nigeria, are in the minority in the north. Nigeria has a volatile ethno-religious mix and ethno-religious violence often erupts.²⁴

Religious identity can become a source of division and animosity when it is used to define in-group and out-group boundaries, fueling prejudices and discriminatory attitudes, including in the workplace. Individuals are reported to circumvent such discriminatory practices by concealing their religion or belief identity.²⁵ This includes non-religious people living in northern states, who have

consistently reported to Humanists International that they fear violent reprisals from family and non-state actors, as well as the possibility of discrimination in employment.

In 2022, the government announced that it was considering the introduction of a National Religious Harmony Bill. Reports indicate that the National Assembly has not made a draft of the Bill public, and have not consulted with civil society actors. The Bill proposes to establish a National Religious Harmony Commission.²⁶

Insecurity fuelling divisions

According to the analysis of the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development, as of February 2024:

“Pronounced social inequality and the lack of opportunities are causing tensions within society and have contributed to the recurrent violent conflicts that Nigeria has been experiencing. The government has lost control over some regions. [...] Often, social and economic conflict is used as a pretext for pitting ethnic or religious groups against each other.”²⁷

Increased threats to the humanist community

Colleagues in Nigeria report growing tensions and facing increasing threats as a result of their advocacy for humanist values and public support for their colleague, Mubarak Bala, in the wake of his arrest and subsequent conviction.²⁸

Since 2020, Humanists International has received at least 26 requests for help from individuals claiming persecution due to their non-religious beliefs – the majority of whom report residing in northern states, where they are forced to conceal their beliefs and pretend to follow religious teachings if they are to avoid discrimination and violence. The volume of requests has represented the highest in the region year on year.

Many of these people have been outspoken in their support of Mubarak Bala (see Highlighted cases below), or where they were public about their lifestyle, have been tainted by association. Threats against the non-religious in Nigeria are common on social media. Many of them come from Northern Nigeria.

Boko Haram

Violence, particularly perpetrated by Boko Haram and its splinter groups, has displaced more than two million people creating a widespread humanitarian crisis.²⁹

The country has been afflicted in recent years by the terrorism of Boko Haram, with abductions, massacres and bomb blasts in Abuja. Boko Haram has deliberately attacked Christians and moderate Muslims during its armed campaign, along with their respective houses

of worship.³⁰ Reports indicate that religious extremist insurgents have infiltrated gangs and other violent groups in areas throughout the country.

Given the level of violence perpetrated against moderate Muslims and Christians, one could expect that members of the humanist and non-religious community more generally would face equally harsh – if not, worse – treatment at the hands of religious extremists. The very act of identifying as non-religious may be taken as evidence of ‘apostasy’ or ‘blasphemy’, and therefore serve as justification for vigilante violence.

Witchcraft-related persecution

In Nigeria, people – often women and children – face torture, banishment and even extrajudicial killings due to witchcraft accusations. In the last three years, the organization Advocacy for Alleged Witches has documented over 100 cases of violent attacks on those branded as witches.³¹

Interreligious marriage

According to the Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA) Consortium – which includes groups of various religious beliefs – interreligious marriages in Kaduna and Plateau states are often discouraged and lead to violence and discrimination from faith leaders and members of the wider community.³²

LGBTI+ rights

Same-sex relationships were criminalized and LGBTI+ advocacy groups were banned in 2014, when former president Goodluck Jonathan signed the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act.³³ The law made same-sex relationships punishable by up to 14 years in prison. In October 2020, a judge in a Nigerian court threw out a case against 47 men charged with public displays of affection with members of the same sex after the prosecution failed to attend or present evidence.³⁴ The case has widely been seen as a test case for the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act, as the men were the first to face charges under the act.³⁵

LGBTI+ rights are also curtailed by Articles 214, 215, and 217 of the Federal Penal Code.³⁶ Under Sharia law, the maximum penalty is death for those caught. The criminalization of same-sex relationships and activity is reported to lead to discrimination in access to healthcare, access to justice, and employment, and is also reported to have led to increased stigma, arbitrary arrest, harassment and extortion.³⁷

Religious groups are reported to perpetuate harmful practices against members of the LGBTI+ community. In 2020, *Hisbah* operatives – Islamic police who enforce Sharia law – reportedly arrested 15 members of the LGBTI+ community at a party in Kano. Those arrested were reportedly taken to a correctional center for reorientation. Confirming the arrest, a spokesperson for

the Hisbah board reportedly stated, “Islam is opposed to same-sex partners, which is a taboo. As an institution, our responsibility is to correct youths, who are going astray, remind them that devout Muslims should forbid homosexual acts, which will not be tolerated.”³⁸ Multiple similar instances have been reported since.³⁹

Religious institutions are reported to preach homophobic and transphobic rhetoric. In 2021, the Anglican Church in Nigeria issued a statement condemning the LGBTIQ+ community and comparing them to “murderers”.⁴⁰

According to research,

“The social stigma, discrimination, and legal restrictions faced by LGBTIQ+ individuals in Nigeria have a profound impact on their right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, resulting in exclusion, condemnation, and denial of their ability to freely express their beliefs, convictions, and religious practices.”⁴¹

Conversion therapy

Forcing members of the LGBTIQ+ community to undertake so-called “conversion therapy” is reportedly common. Parents are reported to be the instigators of such attempts, while religious leaders are reported to be the main perpetrators, conducting a range of interventions including counseling, physical abuse and exorcism.⁴²

According to The Initiative for Equal Rights’ research,

“Efforts to force sexual minorities and gender diverse persons to heterosexuality and cisgender identity can be traced to the religious teachings which promote the idea that homosexuality is innately evil and unnatural, and to laws introduced to criminalise certain sexual acts and same-sex behaviour and marriages.”⁴³

Abortion

Abortion is illegal unless the life of the mother is in danger.⁴⁴ As a result, many women seek out dangerous, illegal abortions, finding themselves at risk of medical complications. Women who face such complications often do not receive further medical treatment.⁴⁵

Media reports indicate that stigma surrounding abortion is particularly strong in Northern States subject to the Penal Code Act, owing to cultural and religious beliefs that view abortion as morally wrong or as a “sin”.⁴⁶

Southern states operate under the Criminal Code Act of 1960, which allows for broader grounds for abortion, including to preserve a woman’s physical and mental health. However, the interpretation and implementation of these laws reportedly vary, leading to inconsistencies in access to abortion services across the region.⁴⁷

Widowhood practices

Traditional and patriarchal values subject many widows in Nigeria to oppressive and dehumanizing practices that exacerbate their marginalization. Such practices may include compulsory mourning rituals and ritual cleansing, among others. These practices vary from culture to culture, but seem to be particularly prevalent in southern Nigerian communities.⁴⁸ In almost all parts of Nigeria, socio-cultural expectations still demand that widows wear special robes (white or dark dresses) and shave their hair throughout the period of mourning.⁴⁹

Widowhood practices are often enforced by members of the husband’s family. Widows are also treated differently from widowers; men tend to be free from demeaning social expectations.⁵⁰

A bill to amend the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act that would seek to prohibit all forms of widowhood practices, as well as provide remedies for victims, and penalize offenders is reportedly being considered by the government.⁵¹

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

Freedom of expression is guaranteed under the Constitution, however, this right is restricted in practice by both State and non-State actors. A series of laws prohibiting sedition, criminal defamation, and publication of false news are regularly used by the government to crack down on dissent.

In November 2019, Nigeria’s National Assembly considered two draft legislations: Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation and other Related Offences Bill 2019⁵² and the Bill to establish a National Commission for the Prohibition of Hate Speech.⁵³ If passed into law, the bills will give authorities arbitrary powers to shut down the internet, make criticizing the government punishable with penalties of up to three years in prison, a life sentence and a maximum of the death penalty. Following public outcry, the decision to pass the bills was suspended, but the Bills themselves had not been formally withdrawn as of July 2020.⁵⁴

Media freedom

Journalists often face harassment, intimidation and arrest especially when they cover corruption scandals, human rights violations, separatist and communal violence, elections or other politically sensitive topics.⁵⁵

Limits on artistic freedom

According to the artistic freedom NGO, Freemuse, laws targeting defamation, insult and indecency are frequently utilized to curtail artistic expression in Nigeria. Such sanctions have targeted musicians, artists, filmmakers, and broadcasters who air artistic content contrary to public morals and the broadcasting code.⁵⁶

In January 2023, Tiktoker **Murja Ibrahim Kunya** was reportedly subjected to psychiatric evaluation and detention in a Kano State correctional facility, in response to complaints from clerics that she used vulgar language and had corrupted the morals of the society in her videos.⁵⁷ Kunya was reportedly sentenced to a further one week's imprisonment in February 2024 for "immorality" by the Sharia court.⁵⁸

On 30 January 2023, Nigeria's National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) banned Yoruba-language movie, "Osuwon Mi" for "ridiculing religion and encouraging religious discrimination" through the portrayal of a flirtatious and adulterous woman in a Muslim veil. The NFVCB also promised that punishments acting as deterrence of similar acts in future would include a ban of the movie as well as the sanctioning of lead actress Kemi Ofalabi and the movie producer Bisi Obanla.⁵⁹

In July 2024, the NFVCB reportedly reached out to producers of an upcoming film that depicts the portrayal of the *niqab* in a robbery scene, following backlash from members of the Muslim community. A representative of Muslim Rights Concern reportedly called for the film to be banned, describing it as "satanic" and accusing it of depicting Muslim women negatively and inciting public hostility towards them.⁶⁰ At the time of reporting, it remains unclear whether the film has been banned.

One of the principal homes of the Nigerian film industry, Kano state (also known as "Kannywood") reportedly holds particular influence on film production and censorship. In April 2024, Kano authorities reportedly announced that filmmakers that portray violence or cross-dressing may risk imprisonment.⁶¹

In another case, filmmaker **Aminu Nasara** has reportedly faced threats and been placed on a wanted list by the Kano State Censorship Board for allegedly promoting immorality with his film, "Makaranta."⁶² Speaking to the media, Aminu Nasara stated, "My film is not only about sex education, it captures other things such as female genital mutilation and it aims to create awareness about things that are happening, not only in our communities but also in schools, as the name of the film portrays." Moreover, the film was not shot in Kano State.

In a positive development, in 2023, both the Federal High Court of Abuja and the Court of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) both ruled that the imposition of sanctions on radio and TV stations by the National Broadcasting Commission had violated Nigeria's Constitution.⁶³

Blasphemy

Under the Customary system, applicable nationwide, 'blasphemy' is prohibited under section 204 of the Criminal Code.⁶⁴ Section 204, "Insult to religion", states:

"Any person who does an act which any class of persons consider as a public insult on their religion, with the intention that they should consider the act

such an insult, and any person who does an unlawful act with the knowledge that any class of persons will consider it such an insult, is guilty of a misdemeanour, and is liable to imprisonment for two years."

States subject to Shariah courts can and do implement severe punishments for crimes such as 'blasphemy', including execution.

'Blasphemy' accusations often trigger mob violence before authorities even get involved. Nigeria's history is rife with mob killings and deadly riots over alleged 'blasphemy' against Islam.⁶⁵ Haruna Lafiagi, an Islamic scholar at Nigeria's Al-Hikmah University, blames 'blasphemy' killings on politicians' reliance on clerics' electoral support.⁶⁶

According to domestic media reports, at least 300 people have been killed as a result of violence provoked by 'blasphemy' allegations since 1999. Perpetrators of such violent acts face almost complete impunity for their crimes.⁶⁷ In contrast, such killings often receive public support from influential individuals, including Islamic preachers, businessmen and government officials.⁶⁸

In August 2020, **Yahaya Sharif-Aminu**, described by the *BBC* as a little-known Islamic gospel musician, was sentenced to death by hanging by an upper Shariah court in Kano state.⁶⁹ Sharif-Aminu was arrested in March 2020 after allegedly saying that Sheikh Ibrahim Niasse, the Senegalese founder of the Islamic Tijjaniya sect, which has a large following across West Africa, "was bigger than Prophet Muhammad". On 4 March 2020, protestors reportedly burned down Sharif-Aminu's home and demanded that the Islamic police, Hisbah, take action against him.⁷⁰ It is understood that Sharif-Aminu has filed an appeal against his conviction and sentence. The death penalty was reportedly quashed and a retrial ordered. Sharif-Aminu remains in detention pending re-trial.⁷¹

The same Shariah court in Kano state sentenced 13-year-old **Umar Farouq** in August 2020 to 10 years in prison with menial labor for 'blasphemy'.⁷² Farouq was found guilty of offending God, as he had used "foul language" against God during an argument with a friend.⁷³ Farouq has appealed the judgment.

Freedom of association and assembly

International monitor of civil society space, CIVICUS classifies Nigeria as 'repressed' owing to the existence of what it describes as severe civic space restrictions.⁷⁴

Police and other State agencies are reported to have disrupted peaceful public gatherings. Section 69 of the Criminal Code Act concerning unlawful assemblies provides that force can be used to dispel acts that disturb the peace. The law fails to define what would constitute a disturbance of the peace. Police and security agencies have been reported to use excessive force – including live bullets and tear gas – against peaceful protesters on multiple occasions.⁷⁵

Highlighted cases

Nigerian human rights activist and President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, **Mubarak Bala**,⁷⁶ was sentenced to 24 years in prison, reduced to five years upon appeal, in connection with a petition filed by a law firm alleging that Bala had insulted the Prophet Muhammad in his Facebook posts. Bala was held without access to his lawyers until October 2020. Bala has been the victim of death threats and harassment since he renounced Islam in 2014. In June that year, he was assessed as needing psychiatric help because he was “an atheist” and was held against his will at a psychiatric ward in Kano, northern Nigeria. His father, formerly a senior member of the Islamic religious authorities, had orchestrated Mubarak’s detention after Mubarak had refused to keep quiet about his atheistic views on religion. Bala was freed after nearly three weeks due to a strike at the hospital.

The **Humanist Association of Nigeria** was denied registration as an organization for many years. Antagonists linked the group to the promotion of gay rights, presuming this to stand against its merits (and in reality it may well contribute to authorities’ refusal to progress a registration). In 2017, the Humanist Association of Nigeria was eventually granted formal recognition after 17 years of campaigning, together with other humanist/atheist groups, including the Northern Nigeria Humanist Movement, the Atheist Society of Nigeria and Lagos Humanists.⁷⁷

Testimonies

“To survive as an atheist, you cannot act like one. If I ever come out in northern Nigeria to say I am an atheist, it will be an automatic death sentence.”

– Anonymous, as quoted in *Voice of America*⁷⁸

“Your achievements are reduced to nothing if you are irreligious. You are seen as a rebel and as a wayward person.”

– Abosuahi Nimatu, as quoted in *Voice of America*⁷⁹

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Portugal

Const/Govt	Edu/Child	Society/Comm	Expression

Portugal, located on the south-western edge of the European continent, became a republic in 1910, but was soon controlled by an authoritarian one-party regime for almost half a century. Democracy returned to the country in 1974 and a new Constitution was adopted two years later.¹ Portugal has been a member of the European Union since 1986.²

According to a census conducted in 2021, 80% percent of the Portuguese population is Catholic. Other Christian groups make up a further 5% of the population, while Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Taoists, Zoroastrians, Baha'is, and Jews comprise less than 1% together. 14% of the population responded that they did not belong to any religious group.³

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
<p>There is systematic religious privilege</p> <p>Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general</p>	<p>State-funded schools offer religious or ideological instruction with no secular or humanist alternative, but it is optional</p>	<p>Use of Conscientious Objection clauses resulting in the denial of lawful services to women and LGBTI+ people</p>	<p>Blasphemy or criticism of religion is restricted in law and is punishable by a fine</p>
			<p>Some concerns about political or media freedoms, not specific to the non-religious</p>

Constitution and government

The Constitution⁴ and other laws and policies protect freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 41), declaring religious groups separate from the State.

The 2001 Law on Religious Freedom⁵ defines freedom of conscience, religion and worship as the right to hold, not to hold and cease to hold a religion, to freely choose and change one's beliefs, practice or not to practice the worship in public or private, profess one's beliefs, to seek new believers, to proselytize, among other rights (Article 8). It also protects individuals from forced worship, being obliged to take a religious oath, or being questioned by state authorities regarding their convictions (Article 9).

The law reiterates the constitutional principle of secularism, emphasizing that "Churches and other religious communities are separate from the State and are free in their manner of organization and in the practice of their activities and worship" (Article 3) and that "The State does not adopt any religion whatsoever, nor pronounce itself regarding religious issues" (Article 4).

Under Article 51(1) of the Constitution,

"[w]ithout prejudice to the philosophy or ideology that underlies their manifestos, political parties may not employ names that contain expressions which are directly related to any religion or church, or emblems that can be confused with national or religious symbols."

Religious privilege

The Law on Religious Freedom stipulates the relations between the government and religious communities, but doesn't mention any humanist, secular or other philosophical groups. Similarly, the Religious Freedom Commission — an independent body that advises the government on matters pertaining to the application of the law on religious freedom — has representatives from several small religious communities, but no representatives from humanist or secular organizations.⁶ The Commission reviews and takes a position on all matters relating to the application of the law on religious freedom, including proposed amendments.

The law on religious freedom allows each religious group to negotiate their own concordat-style agreements with the government.

Religious groups may register as religious corporations and receive tax-exempt status. Registered groups receive the right to minister in prisons, hospitals, and military facilities; provide religious teaching in public schools; participate in broadcasting time on public television and radio; and receive national recognition of religious holidays. Unregistered religious groups are not subject to penalties and may practice their religion but do not receive the benefits associated with registration. At the time of writing, a taxpayer may allocate 0.5% of their tax payment to approved charities and non-governmental organizations, as well as any registered religious group.⁷

The government maintains a separate agreement with the Roman Catholic Church under the terms of a 2004 Concordat with the Holy See,⁸ which replaced the Concordat of 1940. The Concordat allows the Catholic Church to receive a percentage of the income tax voluntarily allocated by taxpayers to various institutions in their annual tax returns. The Catholic Church and “rooted” religious communities are also exempt from VAT.

According to Article 16(2) ministers of worship “cannot be questioned by magistrates or other authorities about facts and things of which they have become aware by reason of their ministry.” This became especially relevant when the extent of sexual abuse in Catholic institutions was revealed.⁹ An independent commission established to investigate the extent of sexual abuse by members of the clergy of the Portuguese Catholic Church identified that while in previous decades there had been a “systematic cover-up” of sexual abuses – in which the failure to document allegations plays a part. However, since the 2010’s, the Church’s response to allegations of sexual abuse is now more victim-centered.

The State pays for the salaries of chaplains in public hospitals, prisons, the armed forces and the police force. The law permits members of any registered religious group to serve as chaplains. However, in practice, the majority of chaplains are nominated by the Catholic Church.¹⁰

Religious symbols such as crucifixes are on display in many State primary schools and hospitals, and in some municipalities meeting rooms. Priests are invited to many public inaugurations by local authorities and by national authorities.

In August 2023, the World Youth Day was hosted by Portugal and held in Lisbon and Fátima. This week-long global Catholic event was attended by hundreds of thousands of people. The central government and municipalities financially supported the event to the tune of several million euros.¹¹ Public figures including the President, Prime Minister and Lisbon Mayor attended the events, including open-air masses.

Catholic celebrations explicitly sponsored by public institutions, such as universities or branches of the army, are still a fairly common occurrence, according to the Association for Republicanism and Secularism (*Associação República e Laicidade*).

Education and children’s rights

Under Article 43 of the Constitution, “[p]ublic education shall not be linked to a religious belief” and the State “may not programme education and culture in accordance with any philosophical, aesthetic, political, ideological or religious directives.”¹² These principles are reiterated in the Basic Law on Education (as amended).¹³

According to Law 55/2018¹⁴, all schools are obliged to provide Moral and Religious Education as an optional subject within the school curriculum at primary level and all students on the science and humanities track at secondary level (Article 13(2) and 14(5)). The classes should last no less than 45 minutes per week. Reports indicate that the number of students signing up for Catholic Moral and Religious Education halved between 2012 and 2022.¹⁵

Read together with Article 24 of the Law on Religious Freedom¹⁶, religious groups may offer optional religious instruction through State-funded schools, provided there are a minimum number of students of the particular denomination who wish to attend the course. The minimum number is unspecified in the body of the law, but is reported to be 10, according to the Association for Republicanism and Secularism (*Associação República e Laicidade*). The courses and materials themselves are designed by the respective religious group, who are also responsible for training of teachers. The Catholic Church, as well as Buddhist, Bahá’í and Christian evangelical communities have teaching courses approved by the State.¹⁷ While the State bears ultimate responsibility for the recruitment, transfer or dismissal of any such course’s instructor, representatives of the religious denominations are approached to approve such decisions (Article 24(5) of the Law on Religious Freedom).

Under Article 14 of the Law on Religious Freedom, all schools, both public and private, are required to accommodate the religious practices of students, including rescheduling tests if necessary.¹⁸

Female genital mutilation

Since 2015 there has been a law penalizing female genital mutilation (FGM), however it is rarely enforced, despite a growing number of cases being reported every year.¹⁹ In the vast majority of the reported incidents, the mutilation is reported to have taken place during short stays in West African countries.²⁰ A total of 1,076 cases of FGM were detected in Portugal by the end of 2023.²¹ The rise in reported cases (17% increase between 2022 and 2023) may be a consequence of increasing awareness and reporting among health professionals.²² In 2021, a

conviction was made in an FGM case for the first time in Portugal. A young woman was initially sentenced to three years in prison for authorizing genital mutilation on her one-and-a-half year old baby girl. However, this sentence was later suspended following an appeal based on the best interest of the child and the fact that the mother was only 19 at the time and was herself a survivor of FGM.²³

Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals

There are no major restrictions on personal social freedoms. There are no major restrictions on personal social freedoms.

LGBTI+ rights

Portugal legalized same-sex marriage in 2010 and has made significant steps to recognize the rights of the LGBTI+ community over the last decade, including the extension of adoption rights to same-sex couples in 2016²⁴, a new gender identity law in 2018²⁵ to include self determination of transgender people and an amendment to the law in 2024²⁶ to prohibit conversion therapy against LGBTI+ people.

Abortion

In 2007, Portugal held a referendum to remove what had been one of Europe's most restrictive abortion laws. A majority voted in favor of the legalization of abortion during the first 10 weeks of pregnancy.²⁷ According to the law, there is a mandatory reflection period of three days before the abortion can be performed and counseling services must be made available.²⁸

Doctors are granted the right of conscientious objection and the percentage of doctors who refuse to perform abortions based on religious beliefs remains high.²⁹ Recent investigations suggest that around 30% of hospitals do not carry out abortions due to conscientious objection of doctors. The practical obstacles faced by those who wish to have an abortion are numerous, especially outside the main urban centers, and legally established waiting times are often violated as a result of this.³⁰ The problem is particularly acute for women who live in the Portuguese archipelago of Azores, where women wishing to have an abortion must travel to the Portuguese mainland (circa 1,500km away) to access services. Although travel expenses are reimbursed by the State, this can create a serious challenge for staying within the 10-week legal deadline.³¹

Assisted dying

The law on assisted dying³² was approved in May 2023 after several attempts. Previous versions had been either vetoed by the President of the Republic or ruled to be incompatible with Constitutional precepts. However, due to the political crises caused by the resignation of the

Prime Minister in November 2023 and the change in the government to a coalition of the center-right and Christian Democrats, the law is still awaiting implementation. The law faced strong and vocal opposition from conservative politicians and from the Catholic Church.³³

Under Article 21 of the new law, doctors are guaranteed the right to conscientious objection and are not obliged to participate in assisted dying. They can currently invoke this right without needing to provide justification, however there is a growing debate around whether this right should be limited.³⁴

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

The Portuguese Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, freedom of information and freedom of the press, and these rights are generally upheld in practice. However, the continued existence of 'blasphemy' and criminal defamation laws on the statute books runs contrary to international human rights standards.

Blasphemy law

A quasi-'blasphemy' law criminalizes "offending a person in virtue of his religious belief". Article 251 of the Criminal Code³⁵ defines "Insult motivated by religious belief":

"Whomever publicly offends another person or derides that person because of his or her beliefs, in such a way as to disturb public peace, will be punished with a prison sentence of up to one year or with a fine of up to 120 days".³⁶

Article 252 further criminalizes "Hindrances, disturbance or insult to an act of worship":

"Whoever publicly vilifies a religious act of worship or derides such an act will be punished with a prison sentence of up to one year or a fine of up to 120 days".³⁷

The articles do not appear to have been used in recent years.

The conflation of religious offense with the language of "public peace" and "vilification", as well as a lack of prosecutions producing case law, makes it difficult to assess interpretation of this law. We consider it unlikely that sentencing could result in a prison term without some element of hate crime, however the wording on "public offense" and "derision" based on "beliefs" alone is vague enough that the threat of prosecution remains over acts that should constitute legitimate expression about religion and thus constitutes a quasi-blasphemy law.

Defamation

Under Article 180 of the Criminal Code³⁸ defamation is punishable by a prison term of a maximum six months or a fine of a maximum 240 days. If the act is committed through the media, the penalty is increased to imprisonment for up to two years or a fine not less than 120 days (Article 183). The law has frequently been used by public officials to curb criticism, contrary to international standards.

The European Court for Human Rights (ECHR) has regularly ruled against Portuguese authorities for their handling of both civil and criminal defamation cases.³⁹

In a recent high-profile case, Ana Gomes, who is a former member of the European Parliament and ran for President of Portugal in 2021, was fined for calling a well-known businessman a “crook” on X (formerly Twitter) but later saw her sentence overturned by a Portuguese appeal court.⁴⁰ It remains to be seen if this is a sign of change.

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"Quem publicamente ofender outra pessoa ou dela escarnecer em razão da sua crença ou função religiosa, por forma adequada a perturbar a paz pública, é punido com pena de prisão até 1 ano ou com pena de multa até 120 dias."

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"Quem: a) Por meio de violência ou de ameaça com mal importante impedir ou perturbar o exercício legítimo do culto de religião; ou b) Publicamente vilipendiar acto de culto de religião ou dele escarnecer; é punido com pena de prisão até 1 ano ou com pena de multa até 120 dias."

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Qatar is an oil-rich nation on the northeastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula. It has been ruled by an absolute monarch (the Emir) since its independence in 1971.¹ The Emir holds all executive and legislative powers. Qatar’s population is approximately 2.4 million, only 12% of which are citizens of Qatar. Sunni-Islam is the majority religion amongst citizens, with a small Shia community.

Estimates indicate that less than half of the total population is Muslim. The biggest groups amongst non-citizens are Hindus, Roman Catholics, and Buddhists.²

The exploitation of large oil and gas fields since the 1940s helped Qatar become one of the richest countries in the region. The human rights climate remains very concerning. Qatar has had some uneasy relationships with many of its neighbors over regional conflicts of interest.

Constitution and government	Education and children’s rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
		<p>It is illegal to register an explicitly Humanist, atheist, secularist or other non-religious NGO or other human rights organization, or such groups are persecuted by authorities</p>	<p>Expression of core Humanist principles on democracy, freedom and human rights is brutally repressed</p> <p>‘Apostasy’ or conversion from a specific religion is outlawed and punishable by death</p> <p>It is illegal to advocate secularism or church-state separation, or such advocacy is suppressed</p>
<p>State legislation is partly derived from religious law or by religious authorities</p>	<p>Religious or ideological instruction is mandatory in all or most state-funded schools with no secular or humanist alternative</p>	<p>The dominant influence of religion in public life undermines the right to equality and/or non-discrimination</p> <p>Systemic religious privilege results in significant social discrimination</p> <p>Prohibitive interreligious social control (including interreligious marriage bans)</p> <p>Religious control over family law or legislation on moral matters</p>	<p>‘Blasphemy’ is outlawed or criticism of religion (including de facto ‘blasphemy’ laws) is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence</p>

Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general

There is an established church or state religion

Legal or constitutional provisions exclude non-religious views from freedom of belief

Discriminatory prominence is given to religious bodies, traditions or leaders

Constitution and government

Islam is the state religion of Qatar, and Sharia is designated as the main source for legislation. Only Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are officially recognized, and non-Muslim groups are required to register to operate. At least 1,500 members are required for a group to be eligible to register.³

Whilst Qatar's Constitution⁴ and other laws provide for freedom of association, public assembly, and worship, these freedoms are framed within limits based on sharia law and "morality concerns."

Legal, cultural, and institutional discrimination against women and girls, LGBTI+ people, non-Qatari nationals, certain local tribes, and other minorities is prevalent.⁵

The government does not permit the formation of political parties. Restrictions on workers unionizing are in place. Only the General Union of Workers of Qatar is allowed to operate, non-citizens are entirely restricted from unionizing, as are government employees and household workers.⁶

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) require government approval to function, and their activities are routinely monitored. Independent activists are vulnerable to State harassment.⁷ One example is Najeeb al-Nuaimi, a human rights lawyer who has been subject to a travel ban since 2017.⁸

Judicial system

The Judiciary is not considered independent by Freedom House; many judges are foreign nationals on annual contracts. The Emir ultimately appoints the judges.⁹

Qatar's judicial system is based on both secular and Sharia laws, depending on the type of crime committed. Secular law covers issues relating to finance for instance, whilst Sharia is generally applied to laws pertaining to family law, inheritance, and several criminal acts,¹⁰ and mainly applies to the Muslim population.¹¹ Shia interpretation of Sharia can be implemented upon request of the involved parties.¹²

The government often commutes the harsher punishments mandated by Sharia.¹³ Charges for crimes such as alcohol consumption or extramarital sex, carry Sharia punishments that in some cases call for flogging. The death penalty is permitted, but no executions have been carried out since 2003.¹⁴ Muslims who have been convicted of a crime may be allowed to have their sentence reduced by a few months if they can learn the Quran by heart whilst in prison.¹⁵

Law enforcement is involved in issues related to morality and religious obedience, such as sexual relationships between consenting partners and the ability to eat and drink during Ramadan.

Article 267 of the 2004 Penal Code states that, anyone who eats or drinks in public during the daytime in Ramadan can be punished with up to three months in prison or be given a fine of 3,000 Qatari Riyals (820 USD).¹⁶ Restaurants outside of hotels are not allowed to open during the daytime in Ramadan.¹⁷

Article 281 of the Penal Code criminalizes consensual sex outside marriage with sentences of up to seven years in prison. Article 285 can be understood to criminalize same-sex sexual acts.¹⁸

Status of religious groups

Very few religious groups are currently officially registered in Qatar; the only registered groups at the time of writing are Sunni-Islam, Shia-Islam, and eight Christian denominations. Unregistered religious and belief groups are restricted from operating, and cannot open bank accounts, solicit funds, worship in private spaces legally, hire staff, apply for property to build places to worship, import religious texts, or publish religious newsletters or flyers.¹⁹

Non-Islamic houses of worship must be approved by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in coordination with the private office of the Emir. Displaying religious symbols, worshiping in public, and advertising religious services are not allowed for non-Muslims.²⁰

The government regulates the import and distribution of religious publications. Any import of religious or belief materials requires approval from the Ministry of Culture and Sports first.²¹

Individuals have reported practicing self-censorship on religious topics. Proselytizing is criminalized for non-Muslims, carrying a punishment of up to 10 years in prison. However, the government's response to such proselytization is usually deportation rather than legal action. Possession of written or recorded missionary materials can lead to two years' imprisonment and a fine of 10,000 riyals (2,700 USD).²²

Recent reports have suggested that some deportations and denial of renewed residency permits for long-term residents have been linked to the religious activities of those residents.²³

State Control of Religious Narrative

Qatar has strict control over the religious narrative in the country. The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (MEIA) controls mosques, provides spokespersons for media appearances, and heavily invests in online presence. Qatar fosters high-profile political Islamists and funds Islamic projects around the world.

All mosques and Islamic institutions in the country must be registered with the MEIA, who assigns imams to the mosques and provides them with thematic guidelines for Friday prayer. The sermon speech focuses mainly on Islamic rituals and social values, with restrictions on political topics. The government can take legal action against those who deviate from the guidance.²⁴

Education and children's rights

All schools have compulsory Islamic instruction, and non-Islamic religious education is prohibited. In 2019, private schools were mandated to teach Islamic studies and the Arabic language, starting from pre-school. Qatari history was made the third compulsory subject in schools.²⁵

According to the Ministry of Education, "Non-Muslim students should be introduced to the Islamic religion, values and ethics through awareness embedded in other subjects (i.e. Qatar History) and school activities."²⁶

In a report looking at the school curriculum between 2021 and 2022, the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se) observed:

"IMPACT-se's latest review of the Qatari curriculum evaluates changes made in fall and spring semester textbooks for 2021-22. IMPACT-se's August 2020 report analyzing the Qatari curriculum found problematic content, namely hate toward Jews and extremist messaging. Over the last two years, Qatar's textbooks have slowly improved with adjustments made toward moderation, including lessons on tolerance and racial discrimination. Significant progress was observed in removing antisemitic and anti-Christian content as well as examples of violent jihad. While the curriculum still disproportionately focuses on Israel, the hostile tone is lessened. Other problematic content remains, including

antisemitic material, violent interpretations of jihad, hateful material against infidels and polytheists, demonization of Israel, and rejection of Arab-Israeli normalization."²⁷

The report pointed out that the Qatar curriculum continues a trend of slow improvement by removing additional disturbing and unacceptable passages previously criticized in IMPACT-se's reports. However,

"passages that demonize Jews, praise martyrdom, and blame holy faiths for corrupting holy texts remain. Although some changes are suggestive of positive movement, a great deal of improvement is necessary to align the curriculum with international standards of Peace and Tolerance."

Family, community, and society

Family Law and the position of women

The unified court system applies Islamic law in family cases and has jurisdiction over both Muslims and non-Muslims. Non-Muslims have recourse to civil law for some personal status cases but cases of child custody are judged under Islamic law.

Many personal status and family laws specifically discriminate against women. The 2006 family law²⁸ discriminates against women in marriage, divorce, nationality, inheritance, and freedom of movement. For example, a woman's testimony is worth half that of a man in certain types of cases. Inheritance laws discriminate against women: a female heir receives one-half the amount of an equivalent male heir. Women require the consent of their male guardians to get married. Only men can marry out of the Muslim faith, in which case, children are required to be Muslim. Marital rape is not a crime, although the law forbids husbands to hurt their wives physically or morally.

According to Article 69 of the family law, a married woman is not entitled to marital support if she is considered "disobedient," i.e.:

"(1) If she refuses to surrender herself to the husband or to move to the marital home without legitimate reason. (2) If she leaves her marital home without legitimate reason. (3) If she prevents the husband from entering into the marital home without legitimate reason. (4) If she refuses to travel with her husband when moving to another dwelling without legitimate excuse or if she travels without his permission. (5) If she works outside the home without the permission of her husband, unless he is abusing his right in preventing her from working."

Violence against women

The Protection and Social Rehabilitation Center shelter reported receiving 277 cases of physical violence against women and children and 155 cases of psychological violence in 2019.²⁹

On 6 May 2020 during an interview on the Al Jazeera network, Dr. Ahmad al-Farjabi, a Sharia expert of the ministry of Islamic affairs, stated that when a man suspects his wife might become “disobedient” and “rebellious,” he should take the measures prescribed by the Quran, which include beating her. Al-Farjabi added that even Western psychologists have said that wife-beating is “inevitable” in the case of women who had been beaten while they were growing up and for women who have no respect for their husbands. He affirmed that “these kinds of women must be subdued by muscles,” and that “some kinds of women may be reformed by beating.” Al-Farjabi also indicated that women at his lectures asserted that it is preferable to beat one’s wife than to allow her to ruin the home and lose her children.³⁰

Incitement of hatred and violence against minorities and belief groups

On 16 May 2020, during an interview, Dr. Abdul-Jabbar Saeed, a department chair in the Sharia faculty at the state-run Qatar University, cited a hadith in which the Prophet Muhammad said that Judgment Day will not come until the Muslims fight the Jews, who will hide behind rocks and trees, which will in turn call upon Muslims to kill the Jews hiding behind them. Saeed said that victory would only be achieved through sacrifice of all that is precious and through the “blood of the martyrs and over the skulls of the enemies.”³¹

The role of Islam Web

Islam Web is a website directly employed, funded, and managed by the government. It promotes the Salafi literalist school of Sunni-Islam, a radical interpretation of Islam considered incompatible with the promotion of co-existence. Between its establishment (by the Ministry of Islamic affairs) in 1998, and 2019 the site provided 245 thousand *Fatwas* (religious decrees by scholars, based on interpretations of religious text) and addressed 191 thousand inquiries on topics related to culture, family, and the youth. The website preaches in six languages: Arabic, English, French, Spanish, German, and soon Indonesian. According to official statements, the website receives two million visits every day.³²

Trimming beards, professionally playing football, living in the West are topics that are frowned upon or prohibited. The website also condemns congratulating Christians on Christmas calling it a “dangerous trend” that is promoted under the pretext of “coexistence of religions,” “diversity of civilizations.”³³

Multiple *fatwas* on Islam Web are clear that insulting the prophet must be punished by death, often without giving them a chance to repent.³⁴ Fatwa NR 8520 on apostasy says that apostates from Islam are to be killed after being offered a chance to return to Islam. The *fatwa* uses poetically derogatory language to insult the apostates and devalue them as human beings.³⁵

Fatwa NR 469283 calls for death to LGBTI+ men based on quotes from the prophet. It states that,³⁶ “the crime of sodomy is the most heinous, ugliest and dirtiest of crimes, it’s against the natural disposition.”³⁷

Discrimination in citizenship and systemic racism

After a visit to Qatar in 2020, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, expressed “serious concerns” about structural racial discrimination against non-nationals in the country, specifically affecting South Asian and sub-Saharan African migrants.³⁸

Roughly 71% of the population is comprised of low-income migrant workers. Government figures in December 2019 counted a total of 1.9 million migrant workers in Qatar, of which 1.77 million were men. The majority come from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Philippines, Egypt and Pakistan. Labor laws in Qatar create a power imbalance and climate of fear which stops migrants from raising complaints about labor violations.³⁹ In February 2021, *The Guardian* newspaper revealed that 6500 workers died in Qatar since it won the bid for the 2022 World Cup.⁴⁰

Long-term residents working and living in Qatar do not have a clear path for citizenship. The Qatari authorities are known to revoke or deny citizenship on an arbitrary and punitive basis, in doing so denying those individuals access to fundamental rights such as education, employment, housing, health care, property, and marriage.⁴¹

In August 2021, a new election law was introduced which divides the population into three groups. Only “original” Qataris with roots in the country stemming from around 1930 are allowed to run for elections. Qatari citizens with a grandfather born in Qatar are allowed to vote only. First or second-generation naturalized citizens cannot vote.⁴²

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

Provisions of Qatar’s Penal Code are inconsistent with international human rights law and Qatar’s obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) – which it ratified in 2018.⁴³

According to the 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices by the US State Department, the government implements a policy of reviewing, censoring, or banning newspapers, magazines, books, and films for objectionable sexual, religious, and political content. Journalists and publishers practice self-censorship regarding material the government might consider contrary to Islam.⁴⁴

In June 2020, the authorities interrogated several social media users about tweets that were perceived to be critical of the government. Some signed pledges to not post similar content while others had their Twitter accounts deactivated. In April that year, a lawyer was charged with disrupting the public interest for a video he posted criticizing Central Bank policies.⁴⁵

On 4 May 2021, Malcom Bidali, a Kenyan security guard who blogged about migrant workers' conditions in Qatar was detained and then charged with "offenses related to payments received by a foreign agent for the creation and distribution of disinformation within the state of Qatar."⁴⁶ Migrant-rights.org stated that "he was held in solitary confinement and interrogated without legal counsel for nearly four weeks."⁴⁷ Bidali has been released but can face up to 10 years in prison and a \$4,000 fine if found guilty as charged.

Media freedom

The ruling family, and its allies, influence much of the media in Qatar and its messaging.⁴⁸ The media is perceived to be subject to censorship.

The *Al-Jazeera* network is one of the biggest media outlets in the Middle East. *Al-Jazeera* is privately held but the government has reportedly financially supported its operations since it was established.⁴⁹ Former *Al-Jazeera* employees alleged the government influences its content.⁵⁰

According to Freedom House, "all journalists in Qatar practice a degree of self-censorship and face possible jail sentences for defamation and other press offenses."⁵¹ For example, in December 2020, a columnist and social media influencer, Faisal Muhamad al-Marzoqi, was sentenced to three months in prison, a fine, and had his Twitter account confiscated for a tweet criticizing public figures.⁵²

Between 2016 until 2020, the independent English-language website *Doha News* was blocked for allegedly not having an operating permit. The outlet changed ownership in 2017 and again in 2020 before it resumed full operations. The original *Doha News* staff and leadership left it, arguing that it had been stripped of its independence by the government.⁵³

Articles by *Doha News* had covered topics not picked-up by state-affiliated media. These include "What it's like to be gay and Qatari"⁵⁴ and an article written by a Qatari citizen who was denied permission to marry

a non-Qatari by the government.⁵⁵ Both pieces were published in the months leading up to the blocking of the site.⁵⁶ Around two months before the block, *Doha News* wrote an article⁵⁷ criticizing the cybercrime law effect on journalists demanding it must be changed. In contrast, an article⁵⁸ published in 2021 from *Doha News* celebrated press freedom in Qatar.

Expression online and cybercrime laws

In 2014, in what was widely considered a significant setback for freedom of expression in Qatar, a new cybercrimes law criminalizing the spreading of "false news" on the internet was introduced.⁵⁹ The new law allows the authorities to ban websites that they consider threatening to the "safety" of the country and punish anyone who posts or shares online content that "undermines" Qatar's "social values" or "general order". The meaning of these terms is not defined by the new legislation.⁶⁰ It also provides for sentences of up to three years in prison and a fine of 500,000 Qatari Rial (roughly 140,000 USD). It prohibits online activity deemed to be threatening to the safety of the state, general order, local or international peace. The judicial authorities can order internet providers to block content.⁶¹

In January 2020, Qatar further strengthened its Penal Code⁶² with Article 136 bis under "Crimes against Internal State Security" stating:

"[...], whoever broadcasts or publishes or republishes rumors or statements or false or malicious news or sensational propaganda, inside or outside the state, whenever it was intended to harm national interests or incite public opinion or disturb the social or public order of the state [...] shall be punished by imprisonment for a period not exceeding five years and a fine not exceeding (100,000) one hundred thousand riyals, or by one of these two penalties. The penalty is doubled if the crime is committed in wartime."

Article 134 states that:

"The penalty of imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years shall apply to any person who challenges by any public means the exercising by the Emir of his rights or authorities, or criticizes his person. The same penalty shall apply to any person who commits any of the previous offences on the deputy Emir or the Crown Prince."

Expression of humanist values and critical thinking

"Crimes Related to Religions and the Violability of the Dead" is a chapter in the Penal Code containing articles 256-267. These articles provide a set of laws that can be used to severely limit critical thought.⁶³

Article 259 criminalizes doubts in Islamic teaching and those who favor critical thinking.⁶⁴ It states, "Whoever

opposes or doubts any of the basics or tenets of Islam, or calls upon, or favors or promotes another religion, cult or concept shall be punished with imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years.” Notably the English version omits some specifics like mentioning “methods” which can be a school of thought within Sunni-Islam, instead the English version mentions “cults.” The article has additional content that was dropped in translation. It perhaps is due to the Arabic text utilizing vague language, and concepts that aren’t that easily defined. This article can be used against anyone who is seen to deviate from an orthodoxy that is left undefined. We have been unable to verify the use of this article.

‘Apostasy’ laws

Leaving Islam is a capital offense punishable by death in Qatar. However, since 1971 no punishment for apostasy has been recorded.⁶⁵

Qatar’s Law 11 of 2004 incorporates Sharia law into various offenses, including apostasy. Article 1 states:⁶⁶

“The provisions of Islamic law for the following offenses are applied if the defendant or victim is a Muslim:

1. The *hudud* offenses related to theft, banditry, adultery, defamation, alcohol consumption, and apostasy.
2. The offenses of retaliation (*qisas*) and blood money (*diyah*).”

Blasphemy law

The Penal Code criminalizes blasphemy, including insulting the “Supreme Being.”⁶⁷ The defamation or desecration of Islam, Christianity, or Judaism is punishable by up to seven years in prison.

Article 256 of the Penal Code states:

“Whoever commits the following acts shall be punished with imprisonment for a term not exceeding seven years:

- 1- Insulting Allah through writing, drawing, gesturing or in any other way or through any other means.
- 2- Offending, misinterpreting or violating the Holy Quran.
- 3- Offending the Islamic religion or any of its rites and dictates.
- 4- Cursing any of the divine religions according to the regulations of Islamic law.
- 5- Insulting any of the prophets through writing, drawing, gesturing or in any other way or through any other means.
- 6- Sabotaging, breaking, damaging or violating sites or their contents if they are made to perform religious rites for one of the divine religions according to the regulations of Islamic law.”

Article 263 prohibits the circulation or production of symbols, slogans or drawings that might offend the Islamic religion:

“Whoever produces, sells, exposes for sale or circulation, or possesses products, merchandise, prints or tapes, including drawings, slogans, words, symbols, signals or anything else that may offend the Islamic religion or other divine religions according to the dictates of Islamic law, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term not exceeding one year and a fine not exceeding one thousand Qatari Riyals (QR 1.000). The same penalty shall be imposed on any person who uses disks, computer programs or magnetized tapes to offend Islam or other divine religions according to the dictates of Islamic law.”

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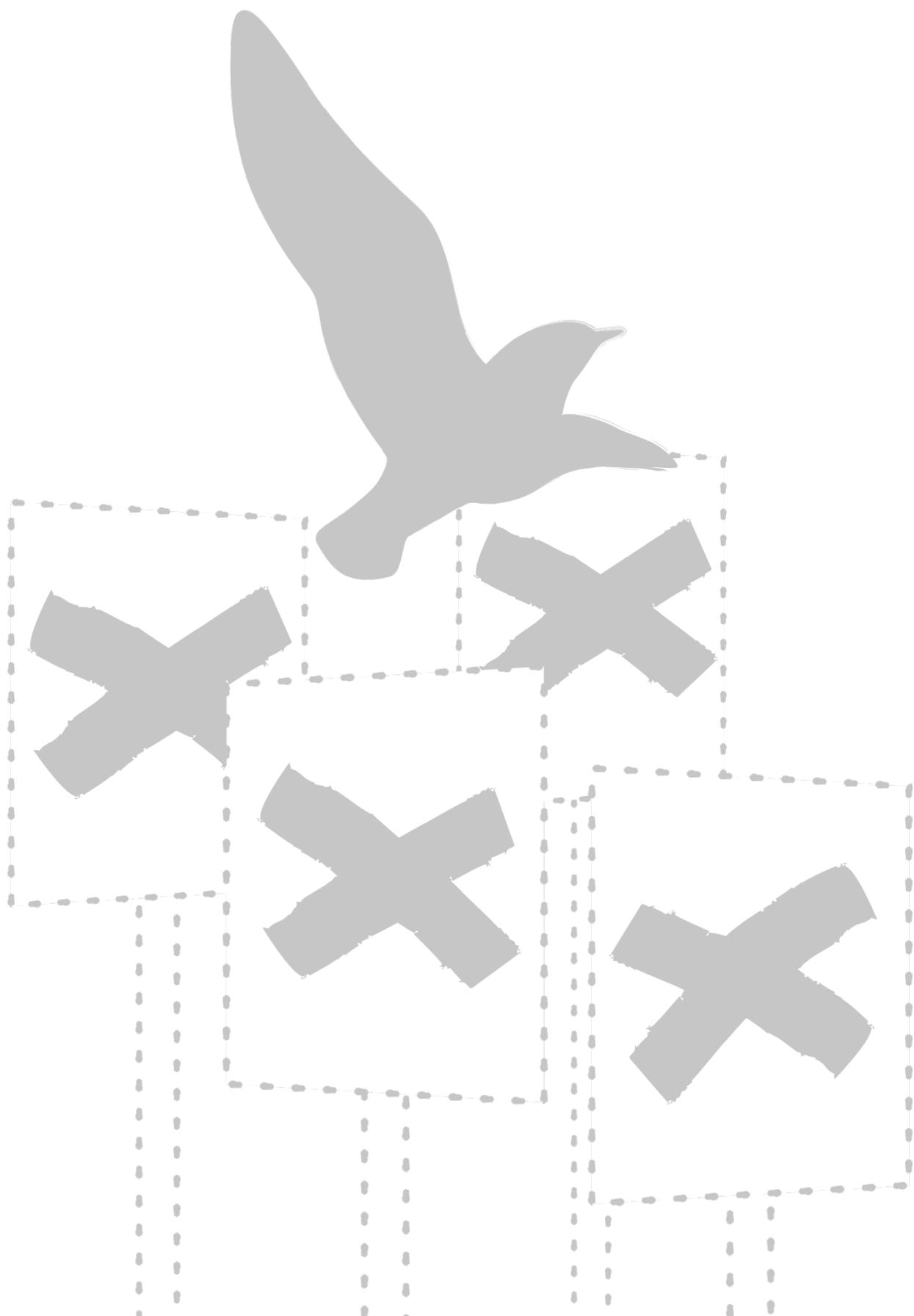
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