

U.S. State Department cites blasphemy, apostasy laws as threat to religious rights

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The U.S. State Department's annual report on religious freedom around the world raises concerns over laws passed by countries that restrict religious freedoms, particularly highlighting measures against blasphemy and apostasy.

In some nations with Muslim majorities, "societal passions associated with blasphemy—deadly enough in and of themselves—are abetted by a legal code that harshly penalizes blasphemy and apostasy," the report states.

The State Department pointed in particular to the 2015 death of Farkhunda Malikzada, an Afghani woman falsely accused of burning a Qur'an by the caretaker of a shrine outside of her mosque after the two argued over charms sold outside, which she believed were un-Islamic. Incited by the accusation, a mob beat Malikzada to death.

"All residents of countries where laws or social norms encourage the death penalty for blasphemy are vulnerable to attacks such as the one on Farkhunda," the report states.

Several men were sentenced to a decade or more in prison in relation to the killing, though others were acquitted, according to news reports.

"The fact that individuals have been held accountable for this horrific crime represents a significant step forward for Afghanistan's justice system, and sends an important message to those who might see allegations of blasphemy as a means to act with impunity against others," the State Department said.

The State Department report, released in August, singled out several countries where governments prosecuted citizens for blasphemy or apostasy in the past year, including Saudi Arabia, Mauritania, and Pakistan. And it took special note of the genocide carried out against religious minorities by the self-proclaimed Islamic State and Boko Haram.

The document, in its 18th year, includes details of how almost 200 countries are faring in protecting the religious liberty of their citizens.

David Saperstein, ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, said 24 percent of the world's countries—in which 74 percent of the world's population lives—have serious restrictions on religious freedom, based on government policies or hostile acts by individual organizations or societies.

He said of the report's emphasis on blasphemy and apostasy laws, "No one region, country, or religion is immune to the pernicious effects of such legislation."

State actions based on blasphemy charges include Iran's executions of prisoners of conscience for their beliefs, Pakistan's arrests of Muslims and Christians, and the fining of an atheist in Münster, Germany, for bumper stickers that challenged Catholic beliefs.

The United States is working with governments and other organizations to press for changes in the laws, Saperstein said. He cited Iceland's dropping of its blasphemy law last year as a model.

But he also credited those outside government for working to protect religious minorities in other ways. For example, he praised Muslims youths who formed human rings around synagogues facing anti-Semitic threats and Muslims who attended mass in France in solidarity with their communities after the recent killing of a Catholic priest.

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