



EX-MUSLIMS  
OF NORTH AMERICA

# BACKSLIDING IN DEMOCRACIES

## *The Erosion of Free Expression*

**Freedom of speech** is a foundational pillar of democratic governance. It enables the open exchange of ideas, holds power to account, and fosters social progress, even when that includes criticism of deeply held beliefs. In recent years, however, efforts to combat bigotry are increasingly conflated with shielding religious doctrines from scrutiny. This conflation is contributing to the slow erosion of core democratic freedoms.

## I. LEGAL ENCROACHMENTS ON FREE EXPRESSION

Governments across Europe are reviving blasphemy-like restrictions to protect religious sentiments, often through hate speech or public order statutes:

### United Kingdom

- *June 2025*: A man was convicted for burning a Quran outside the Turkish Embassy, prosecuted under public order laws.
- A government working group<sup>1</sup> is developing an official definition of “Islamophobia,” a term that equates criticism of Islam and anti-Muslim bigotry.

### Denmark

- *December 2023*: Parliament passed a law<sup>2</sup> criminalizing “inappropriate treatment” of religious texts. Introduced in response to Quran burnings, the law mirrors other statutes against scripture desecration in authoritarian regimes.

### Sweden

- *February 2025*: Iraqi refugee Salwan Najem was convicted of “agitation against a specific group” for publicly burning a Quran.
- *2024–2025*: Salwan Momika, also known for Quran burnings, was charged with hate crimes and later murdered. The government had earlier condemned his protests as “Islamophobic.”

When governments imply that religious dissent is inherently hateful, it fuels hostility toward apostates, especially those who openly criticize their former faith.

## II. THE VIOLENT CONSEQUENCES OF CENSORING DISSENT

Suppressing speech to shield religious sentiments may be intended to preserve social harmony, but it can have the opposite effect—signaling that **threats and violence are effective tools for silencing dissent**:

### 2015 – Charlie Hebdo (France)

Twelve people were killed in an attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* newsroom for publishing satirical depictions of the Prophet Muhammad.

### 2020 – Samuel Paty (France)

A schoolteacher was beheaded after showing *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons in a civics class. His killer was motivated by outrage over the lesson.

### 2022 – Salman Rushdie (United States)

The author was stabbed on stage in New York, leaving him blind in one eye. The attacker sought to fulfill the decades-old *fatwa* issued by Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran over *The Satanic Verses*, a 1988 novel that many Muslims deemed blasphemous.

1. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/06/18/how-us-muslims-compare-with-other-americans-religiously-and-demographically/>  
2. <https://www.lovtidende.dk/api/pdf/240851>

## WHAT CAN POLICYMAKERS AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS DO?

The steady erosion of legal and cultural protections for dissent, especially around religion, poses a serious threat to democratic norms. While combating bigotry is vital, it **must not come at the expense of free expression**.

To safeguard this right, policymakers should:

- **Reaffirm legal protections for speech**, especially criticism of belief systems and religious doctrines.
- **Reject vague or subjective definitions**, like “Islamophobia”, that conflate ideas with identity.
- **Publicly defend** the rights of those accused of offenses against religious sensibilities and state unequivocally that **blasphemy is a non-negotiable right** in free societies.

## DEFINING BLASPHEMY AND APOSTASY

**Blasphemy** refers to speech or actions deemed disrespectful toward religious beliefs, figures, or texts. In practice, blasphemy laws are used to silence dissent and punish religious minorities. Some of these laws criminalize insults to particular religions or religious figures, but most are de facto laws against “hurting religious sentiments.”

**Apostasy** refers to the act of leaving or renouncing one’s religion. In many religious traditions, apostasy is seen as a profound betrayal and can lead to social shunning, threats, or worse.

