



EX-MUSLIMS
OF NORTH AMERICA

PERSECUTION
TRACKERY
SUMMARY
REPORT

2023

“We know that there can be no progress without the freedom to question, a freedom that’s long overdue within Islam. ”

*Muhammad Syed
President of EXMNA*

WHAT IS THE PERSECUTION TRACKER?

Ex-Muslims of North America (EXMNA)'s Persecution Tracker catalogs global incidents of state prosecution and vigilante violence resulting from accusations of blasphemy against and apostasy from Islam.

"My family has been on the run from the time I was implicated in this false charge and arrested by the police under mob pressure."

- Haroon Shehzad, Pakistani accused of blasphemy in 2023

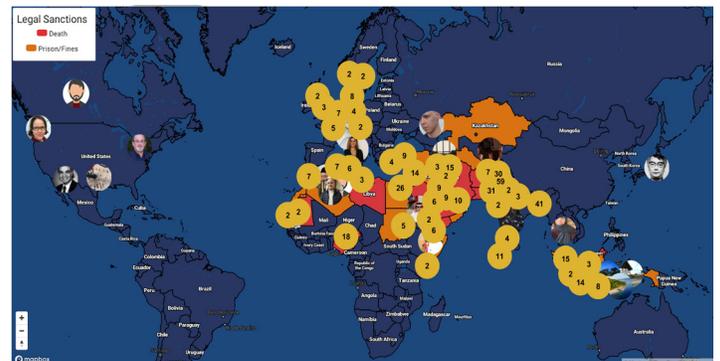
Designed to provide a more holistic understanding of the true impact of apostasy and blasphemy accusations, the Persecution Tracker captures acts of persecution perpetrated by both state and extrajudicial actors. Incidents cover arrests, fines, prison sentences, death sentences, execution, death threats, kidnapping, torture, and murder and are cataloged by date, country, and victim name, when available. Each incident must be verifiably documented or reported from a reputable news outlet to be entered into the Tracker.

Some noteworthy Persecution Tracker statistics include:

- 455 total incidents cataloged from 1989 to present
- 50 new incidents added in 2023
- 42 of these instances occurred in 2023. The remaining 8 occurred in years prior
- 17, or almost half, of the incidents from 2023 occurred in The Islamic Republic of Pakistan
- Additionally, 121, or almost a third, of all incidents in the tracker occurred in Pakistan

Other countries with more than one recorded incident in 2023:

- Iran (5 incidents)
- Bangladesh (5 incidents)
- Turkey (4 incidents)
- Nigeria (3 incidents)
- Indonesia (2 incidents)



NOTEWORTHY INCIDENTS IN 2023 From USCIRF Countries Of Particular Concern

Iran: Ali Akbar Roz and Hasan Khalkal Zard

Since the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody last year, Iran has shown an increased willingness to execute political prisoners on charges of treason, dissent, and in at least a few cases, blasphemy. Human rights organizations including Amnesty International have characterized the regime's behavior in 2023 as an "execution spree."¹ Earlier in 2023, Yousef Mehrdad and Sadrollah Fazeli Zare, two men charged with blasphemy, were executed by the regime.²

In October 2023, Iranian blogger and activist Soheil Arabi posted a message on Instagram indicating that Ali Akbar Roz, a resident of Tehran and father of two, had been arrested in June 2023 after being charged with blasphemy. In the message, Roz reported he had been arrested and charged with treason and blasphemy due to a post he made to his personal Instagram page criticizing the sociopolitical situation in Iran.³ The post also included a video showing official documents of Iranian authorities' charges against Roz.

Soon after, Iranian human rights group *Hengaw Organization for Human Rights* and London-based Persian news outlet *Iran International*⁴ reported that Roz faced charges related to "corruption on earth, collusion against the regime, insulting the ayatollah, and blasphemy." During a phone call with family members, Roz indicated that he had been "tortured, harassed, and psychologically pressured during his detention" in order to obtain a forced confession that would allow Iranian authorities to file a case against him.⁵ In December 2023, *Iran International* posted to Twitter/X that Roz had been transferred to the "punitive quarantine cell" of Evin prison which placed him at imminent risk of execution.⁶

During the same time, *Iran Human Rights Monitor (Iran HRM)* reported that protester Hasan Khalkal Zard was also at risk of execution following an arrest on charges of insulting the Prophet Muhammad. According to *Iran HRM*, he was detained in October 2023 and has been jailed since.⁷ *Iran Wire* reports that Zard, a motor courier from Galikesh, had his motorcycle stolen from him, and upon reporting it to the authorities was arrested and detained for online posts "in which he occasionally shared his frustrations with the policies of the Islamic Republic." He was charged with "insulting the holy tenets of Islam, insulting the leader of the Islamic Republic and blasphemy."⁸

Pakistan: Muhammad Waris and Syed Zeeshan

In February 2023, *Reuters* reported that Muhammad Waris, a Pakistani man "in his early 20s," was murdered by a mob who accused him of desecrating the Qur'an. According to the news outlet, police took him into custody but an enraged mob stormed the police station, overwhelmed security forces and captured Waris dragging his naked body through the streets. Members of the mob then beat him with metal rods until he died.⁹

Syed Zeeshan was first arrested in October 2021 after being charged with "insulting religious beliefs" and the Prophet Muhammad after sharing "blasphemous" content over WhatsApp.¹⁰ In March 2023, Zeeshan was tried and convicted. *Dawn* reported that he was sentenced to death alongside multiple concurrent prison sentences, and he was additionally fined roughly \$4,300 USD.¹¹

Pakistan is extremely aggressive in prosecuting blasphemy cases. Pakistani news outlet *The News* reported that in 2023, 19 children had been arrested in the province of Punjab on blasphemy charges, with six currently jailed.¹² Additionally, vigilante incidents and lynchings directed at those accused of blasphemy are common. Recent examples include that of Muhammad Waris; the killing of a 22-year-old English teacher in August¹³; the murder and burning of a "disabled" man last year¹⁴; and the 2021 lynching of Sri Lankan factory superintendent Priyantha Kumara.¹⁵

Nigeria: Rhoda Jatau

In May 2022, a Nigerian Christian woman named Rhoda Jatau was detained on blasphemy charges. A resident of Bauchi State in Nigeria's Muslim-majority north, Jatau made an online post speaking out against the lynching of another Christian woman named Deborah Yakubu. Ms. Yakubu had been murdered earlier in the month due to blasphemy accusations.

After more than 18 months in detention, Jatau was released on bail in December 2023.¹⁶ However, there are no reports indicating that the charges against her have been dropped, which puts Jatau at continued risk of a punitive prison or death sentence in the Islamic courts of northern Nigeria.

Authorities in the states of Nigeria's Muslim-majority north have shown a repeated pattern of weaponizing blasphemy laws to quash religious dissent or perceived slights against Islamic doctrine. They have also shown a willingness to detain blasphemy suspects for unreasonable lengths of time without trial. This is evidenced by cases such as that of atheist activist Mubarak Bala, who was arrested in 2020 and spent two years in detention before finally being sentenced to 24 years in prison in 2022.¹⁷ As of the end of 2023, he remains imprisoned.

NOTEWORTHY INCIDENTS IN 2023 From Special Watch List Countries

Indonesia: Lina Lutfawati

In March 2023, Indonesian TikTok star Lina Lutfawati uploaded a TikTok video of herself eating pork rinds, invoking the name of Allah before doing so. She was subsequently investigated by Indonesia's Ulema Council, charged with blasphemy, and tried. In September, she was convicted and sentenced to two years' imprisonment, along with a fine of roughly \$16,000 USD.¹⁸

In Indonesia, vigilante incidents related to blasphemy accusations are relatively rare, and the government does not prosecute blasphemy cases with the same aggressiveness as many other Muslim-majority countries. However, in recent years, blasphemy arrests and convictions in the country have not been unheard of. In 2020, in a case similar to Lutfawati's, TikToker Kenneth William Saputra was arrested for adding music to a video that depicted a mosque.¹⁹ Further examples include the 2023 arrest of Panji Gumilang, a preacher and head of an Islamic boarding school who faced backlash from religious conservatives after allowing women and men to pray alongside each other, which is considered taboo according to mainstream Islamic doctrine.²⁰

Turkey: Ezgi Cebeci and Bilal Gabra Kisa

In August 2023, Turkish model Ezgi Cebeci and photographer Bilal Gabra Kisa were arrested in connection with photos taken in and around an Ankara mosque which Kisa then uploaded to social media. *Turkish Minute* reported that both were charged with "denigrating religious values" as Cebeci was shown in the photos wearing revealing clothing. The same outlet reported that while Kisa had initially deleted the photos from social media due to public outrage, they had already caught the attention of authorities.²¹

While blasphemy prosecutions in Turkey are not as pervasive as in many other Muslim-majority countries such as Pakistan, they are still common. In 2023, two teenagers were arrested on blasphemy charges stemming from social media posts,²² and a 19-year-old was given a suspended prison sentence for posting an image to Reddit of alcoholic drinks inside a mosque.²³ Although Turkey's blasphemy laws do not mention Islam in particular, they are rarely used to prosecute blasphemy against religions other than Islam.

Malaysia: Ahmad Feisal Kamil

In January 2023, 61-year-old Ahmad Feisal Kamil was arrested on a charge of blasphemy in connection with a Facebook post he had made. According to the Malaysian outlet *Daily Express*, he pleaded not guilty in November 2023. His lawyer said that he is his family's only breadwinner.²⁴

Local news outlet *Malaysiakini* reported that the Facebook post for which Kamil was arrested merely summarized his thoughts on attitudes toward homosexuality throughout Islamic history.²⁵

Blasphemy prosecutions in Malaysia are not as pervasive as in many other Muslim-majority countries, but they are not uncommon. In 2022, 26-year-old comedian Siti Nuramira was arrested on a charge of insulting Islam over a joke in which she discarded religious garments on-stage to reveal more casual clothing underneath.²⁶ In 2023, she was fined for the performance.²⁷

NOTEWORTHY INCIDENTS IN 2023 From Other Countries

Bahrain: Al-Tajdeed Society

In March 2023, three members of a Bahraini religious society were sentenced to a year in prison on blasphemy charges. The men are members of the *Al-Tajdeed (Renewal) Society* which is dedicated to the "open discussion" of Islam and its tenets. Group members belong to Bahrain's Shia majority while the ruling elite in the country are Sunni, although the accusations against the society originate mostly from Shia clerics in the country. Members of the society said that the blasphemy allegations have led to violence against its members.²⁸

In November 2023, *Gulf Daily News* reported that two of the accused—one, a founding member of the organization and the other, its leader—lost their final appeal in the case.²⁹

Internationally-reported blasphemy prosecutions in Bahrain are relatively uncommon in comparison with neighboring countries, although they are not unheard of. In 2016, journalist Faisal Hayyat was accused of blasphemy over the content of a Twitter post and jailed for three months; during his detention he claims he was tortured.³⁰

Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) notes that the Sunni government of Shia-majority Bahrain "closely monitors religious discourse" within its borders in order to ensure that the discourse does not become "problematic" in its view.³¹

Mauritania: Mariya Oubed

In July 2023, 19-year-old Mauritanian student Mariya Oubed was accused of writing blasphemous comments regarding the Prophet Muhammad on a school examination paper. An image of the exam paper went viral on social media after being posted by a teacher who initially did not reveal the student's name. Protestors demanded that the student's name be published and that the student be prosecuted. As a result, Oubed was arrested, detained, and charged with insulting the Prophet and Islam.³¹

Oubed's family said she suffers from mental health issues which caused her lack of judgment. Her family belongs to the minority Haratin ethnic group, who frequently suffer discrimination due to being descendants of historically enslaved Sub-Saharan peoples.³³

While blasphemy prosecutions in Mauritania are relatively uncommon, its blasphemy and apostasy restrictions are among the harshest in the world. Blasphemy is punishable with death, and a "clause allowing offenders to escape death if they show remorse" was recently removed from the legal code.³⁴

Bangladesh: Titu Roy and Ishrat Jahan

Titu Roy, a Hindu, was first accused of posting blasphemous content to Facebook in 2017. The initial accusation “led to a mob assaulting the houses of Hindus in Rangpur, burning and pillaging several of them.” In May 2023, he was convicted of the crime and sentenced to ten years in prison plus a fine of just under \$500 USD. His lawyer claimed he is illiterate.³⁵

Ishrat Jahan, a college student, was first arrested in November 2020 following complaints to the police alleging unspecified “sacreligious comments [against] Prophet Muhammad.” In May 2023, a judge ruled that if she confessed to committing blasphemy, her sentence would be her time already served in pretrial detention: two years and seven months. As a result of this pressure, Jahan confessed.³⁶

Over the last decade, a crackdown on vigilante violence has reduced the number of blasphemy-related lynchings and murders in Bangladesh. However, they have not been eliminated. In June 2023, a mob tried to lynch Mohammed Sohel, a man accused of blasphemy. The *Union of Catholic Asian News* reported that more than 2,000 arrests resulted from the ensuing street violence.³⁷

Additionally, prosecutions under the *de facto* blasphemy laws against “wounding religious feelings” and desecrating religious objects remain common. Violation of these laws can result in imprisonment of up to two years plus fines.^{38, 39} The Digital Security Act passed in 2018 provides for much more punitive sentences when blasphemy is carried out online, including prison sentences of up to ten years.⁴⁰ The country’s blasphemy laws are rarely used in defense of religions other than Islam.

APPENDIX

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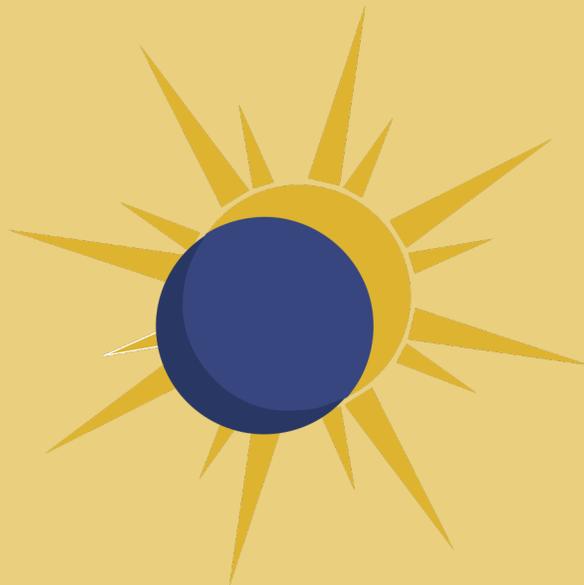
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