



Humanists
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Humanists at Risk: Action Report 2020
Executive summary

Humanists¹ around the world face discrimination, persecution and ostracism due to their non-religious beliefs. At the time of reporting, our organisation has received at least 44 requests for assistance in 2020. Typically, they report feeling trapped by circumstance owing in part to their rejection of conservative religious values, which have placed constraints on their personal lives, education and career prospects. They report having received abuse or been threatened for their beliefs, many have faced ostracism. Many of the women who contact us report being forced into marriages or facing familial pressure to conform. In cases where they identify as female, they often have less access to outside support, or may have only intermittent access to a mobile telephone, for example, making seeking assistance more difficult.

While there is anecdotal evidence that this is a global problem, there is a lack of systematic high-quality research, reporting and attention devoted to the humanist communities around the world.

The Humanists at Risk: Action Report was created by Humanists International to shed light on the human rights situation and treatment of humanists (and other non-religious people) in eight target countries: Colombia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines and Sri Lanka. The eight target countries were selected on the basis of information available and the scope of our presence in order to conduct research. While it is not intended to be a final or conclusive overview of the eight target countries discussed and analysed, it is hoped that it will open up discussion about how much future research, and research funds, are made available to support further investigation.

This report is not intended to minimize or make invisible the experiences of other religion and belief minority groups, or to introduce a hierarchy of experience and discrimination. We fully support the rights of all individuals regardless of their religion or belief. However, as the world's representative body for the humanist movement, Humanists International is best placed to make an accurate investigation of the discrimination against our members and supporters.

¹ <https://humanists.international/what-is-humanism/>

□ Methodology



The main source of information for this report was the personal testimony of the 76 survey respondents from among the humanist community – members and individual contacts in each of the eight target countries – with additional support from other in-country activists and like-minded campaigners. The aim was to keep the questions simple and accessible to people with English as a second language, and open to capture as much qualitative data as possible (see main questions on page eleven).

This report was also compiled with reference to previous research and reporting completed by Humanists International, mainly through the *Freedom of Thought Report*.

Where possible, reputable secondary references, such as local news organizations, have been sourced. This has been impossible in some instances with the ongoing discrimination and stigma faced by humanists in several countries where their activities are not reported on or reports are skewed against humanism.

As a consequence of a lack of high-quality research on the humanist and non-religious communities around the world and the methodology, the level of detail and insight of the entries for the target countries varies considerably.

□ Trends

This study has found a number of common themes affecting humanists and non-religious individuals across the focus countries. The eight countries have all enshrined the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion and/or the right to freedoms of expression, association, and assembly in their Constitutions to some extent. However, in most cases these rights only exist in theory. There exists a range of legal barriers or contradictory provisions in the Constitutions, limiting the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or the right to freedom of expression, association and assembly.

In countries such as Malaysia and Nigeria, there exist parallel religious-based and secular legal systems operating concurrently, as well as education systems with no secular alternative to religious instruction. Furthermore, all countries except for Colombia criminalize “blasphemy” and there exist “apostasy” laws in two of the countries, Malaysia and Pakistan. Repealing “blasphemy” and “apostasy” laws was a clear priority for several of the survey respondents. Many of them also reported that there exists a high degree of social stigma, violence, open hostility, or demonization towards humanists and other non-religious. Some reported about the difficulties with organizing public gatherings for non-religious people.

A lack of separation between state and religion is also a recurrent problem in the eight target countries, including the constitutionally secular countries India and Colombia. In all eight countries we see a privileging of one or some religions by the state, sometimes leading to discrimination in terms of access to public services or positions.

□ Cases

The experiences of some humanists and non-religious individuals and communities are highlighted in all the chapters on the target countries. The cases from **Colombia** depict humanists experiencing a high degree of hostility, demonization and harassment especially when rejecting, questioning or criticizing religion or the participation in rituals (see page 16 to 18 for cases).

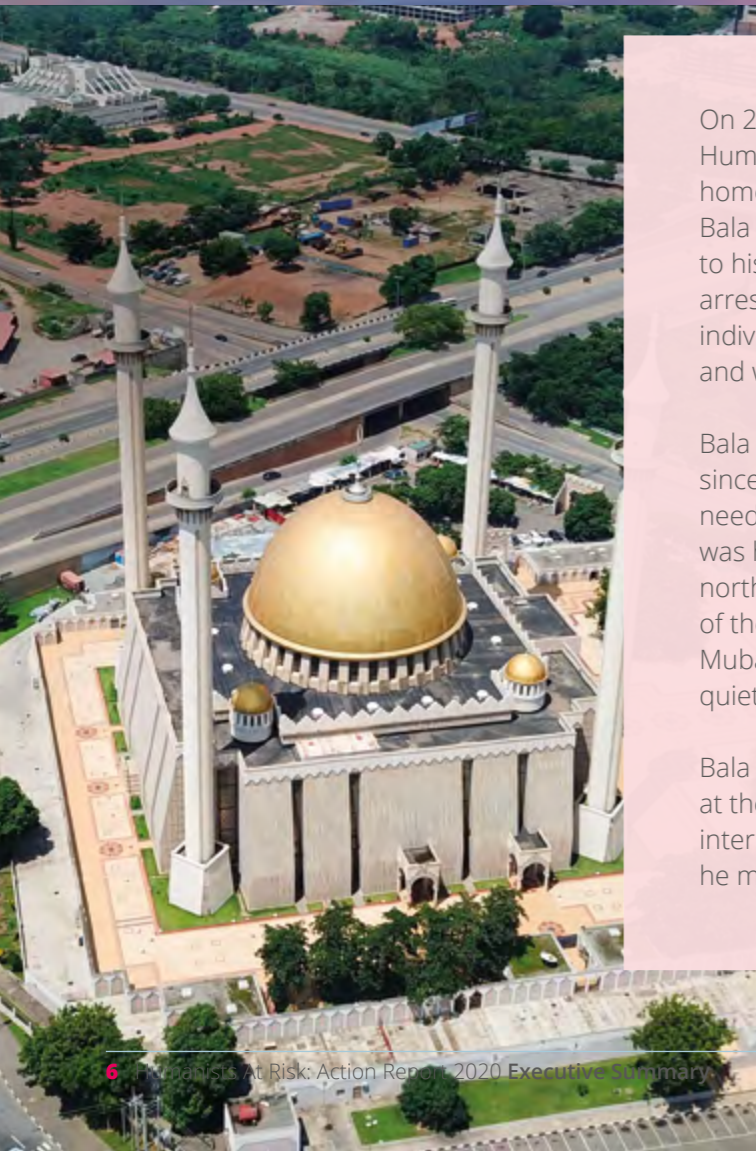
Stories from **India** portray the most brutal form for violence humanists and rationalists face. Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare, M.M. Kalburgi and H Farook were all shot and killed for opposing superstition, criticizing idol worship or religion (read about more cases on page 24 to 26). Failures in the investigation and prosecution of such cases leads to a climate of fear, which may stifle the voices of otherwise outspoken individuals.

For humanists and atheists in **Indonesia**, the case of Alexander Aan is well known and holds great importance as it illustrates how “blasphemy” laws are used to censor critics. Aan, an Indonesian civil servant in the province of West Sumatra, was arrested in January 2012 after being attacked by a mob of Muslim militants. The mob was reacting to statements Aan made on Facebook that criticized Islam and said he had left Islam and had become an atheist. The police charged Aan on three separate counts. On 14 June 2012, a district court sentenced Alexander Aan to two years and six months in jail for “spreading information inciting religious hatred and animosity.” Aan was also reportedly fined 100 million rupiah (US \$10,600). He was released in February 2014.



Humanists and atheists in **Malaysia** are being investigated, arrested and prosecuted for sharing their views on social media. The Kuala Lumpur “consulate” of the online group Atheist Republic was targeted in an anti-atheist backlash, following publication in August 2017 of a photograph from a meetup event that went viral. The government said it would launch a “detailed investigation” into whether any “Muslims” had joined the “Atheist Club”.

A Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department Dr Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki asked that the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (SKMM) should be involved as it involved “the faith of Muslims in the country” and: “if it is proven that there are Muslims involved in atheist activities that could affect their faith, the state Islamic religious departments or jawi could take action. I have asked for Jawi to look into this grave allegation.”



On 28 April 2020, Mubarak Bala, President of the Humanist Association of **Nigeria**, was arrested at his home in Kaduna, northern Nigeria. At the time of writing, Bala had not been formally charged, or granted access to his legal counsel, however, it is believed that he was arrested in connection with a Facebook post, which individuals believed insulted the Prophet Muhammad and was liable to cause public disturbance.

Bala has been the victim of death threats and harassment since he renounced Islam in 2014. 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. Mubarak said that the domestic and international pressure helped to convince his family that he must be free to be and express himself as an atheist.



“Blasphemy” is a recurrent theme in the cases from **Pakistan**. Fauzia Ilyas, the founder of the Atheist & Agnostic Alliance Pakistan, and Gulalai Ismail, a vocal humanist involved in the international humanist youth movement in Asia, were both forced to flee to the Netherlands and the United States of America respectively (see pages 49 to 51 for more cases).

In 2012, the crime of “offending religious feelings” was used to convict Carlos Celdran for protesting the Catholic Church’s opposition to the Reproductive Health Law. Celdran was a performing artist and cultural activist promoting HIV/AIDS awareness and reproductive health. In 2010, Celdran entered Manila Cathedral during mass to stage a protest action against Church opposition to the reproductive health bill.

Celdran dressed as Filipino national hero José Rizal carrying a sign and shouting “Stop getting involved in politics!” He was escorted out by police and later sued by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the **Philippines** for “offending religious feelings”. Following an unsuccessful appeal against his conviction, Celdran went into exile in 2018 where he died of a heart attack, aged 46 on 8 October 2019.



In June 2019, the identity of one of the members of the Council of Ex-Muslims of **Sri Lanka**, Rishvin Ismath, was made public against his will, jeopardizing his personal security. Ismath was summoned by a Parliamentary commission, in front of which he denounced some Islamic textbooks, printed and distributed by the Government, which contained explicit incitement “to kill the apostates of Islam”. Since that day Rishvin has received multiple death threats (read the remaining case on page 60).



□ Recommendations

Based on the assessment made on the eight target countries, Humanists International has put forward recommendations for each country intending to improve the situation for humanists and non-religious people and to protect the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion and the right to freedom of expression, association and assembly. Some of the recommendations are tailor made based on the context, while others are relevant across the board.

Humanists International recommends more research in order to understand the treatment and experiences of humanists and other non-religious individuals and groups, as well as other religion and belief minority groups. All laws and policies which criminalize “blasphemy” should be repealed. Moreover, dialogue between different religions and beliefs should be promoted and supported in order to help aid social cohesion. See the complete list of recommendations on page 66 to 69.



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