



Submission in Response to “Call for Inputs: Secretary General  
Minorities Report 2025: Rights of Persons belonging to National or  
Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities

April 2025

This submission is made by **Humanists International** (NGO with Consultative Status at UN ECOSOC)

Humanists International is an international non-governmental organization (NGO) and the global representative body of the humanist movement, uniting a diverse community of non-religious organizations and individuals. Inspired by humanist values, we are optimistic for a world where everyone can have a dignified and fulfilling life. We build, support and represent the global humanist movement and work to champion human rights, equality, and secularism. We campaign on humanist issues and defend humanists at risk of persecution and violence. We work to promote human rights priorities based on humanist values at international institutions, including the United Nations. Our Members and Associates include humanist, rationalist, secular, ethical culture, atheist, and freethought organizations from all over the world. Our community also includes many individual supporters who share our vision and values.

1. This submission by Humanists International is a response to the Call for Input on the Secretary General's Report on Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, pursuant to General Assembly resolution 78/211.
2. The call for input has requested contributions "on activities undertaken by Member States, the Office of the High Commissioner, the Special Rapporteur, relevant United Nations entities and other relevant stakeholders to enhance the implementation of the Declaration and to ensure the realization of the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities."
3. This submission will touch on three thematic areas, underlying the above request. Firstly, it will outline the rationale for the inclusion of humanists, atheists, and the non-religious broadly under this thematic area. After that, and with specific reference to the non-religious, it will address a select number of activities which have been undertaken by civil society organizations to enhance the implementation of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (hereinafter "the Declaration"). Finally, it will point to some examples of where Member States have actively undermined the rights set out in the Declaration, as they pertain to the non-religious.

#### **The inclusion of the non-religious**

4. In 1992, General Comment 22 of the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) was adopted. It notes that, Article 18 of the ICCPR "protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief".<sup>1</sup> That document also repeatedly refers to Article 27, and highlights the cross-over between those two articles.<sup>2</sup>
5. The Recommendations of the Forum on Minority Issues at its sixth session in 2013 outlined the following: "The term "religious minorities" as used in the present document ... encompasses a broad range of religious or belief communities, traditional and nontraditional, whether recognized by the State or not, including more recently established faith or belief groups, and large and small communities, that seek protection of their rights under minority rights standards. Non-believers, atheists or agnostics may also face challenges and discrimination and require protection of their rights".<sup>3</sup>
6. In 2020, the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues discussed the inclusion of atheists and humanists as minorities at length, with the following paragraph worth highlighting: "The Special Rapporteur agrees that, although the term "religious minority" is theoretically inclusive of those of no religious belief, discussions on religious minorities frequently result in non-religious or non-theistic minorities being overlooked. Persons who are non-believers in a religious faith, such as agnostics, humanists and atheists, would not necessarily identify themselves as members of a

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<sup>1</sup> CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4, General Comment No. 22. (General Comments), para. 2  
<https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/hrc/1993/en/13375>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, para 9.

<sup>3</sup> A/HRC/25/66, para. 8. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/25/66>

“religious” minority. A more inclusive and accurate wording, which would fully encapsulate the scope of this category, would be to refer to “religious or belief minorities.” The Special Rapporteur has concluded that, henceforth, activities and documents under the mandate and United Nations agencies should, whenever possible, use the expression “religious or belief minorities” to more properly encapsulate the scope of minorities this category refers to.”<sup>4</sup> The Special Rapporteur’s Report concluded with a formal recommendation to this effect.<sup>5</sup>

7. The Special Rapporteur followed up his 2020 comments in his end of mandate Report, with the following: “It is also finally clear that religious or belief minorities in the United Nations system can be made up of persons who belong to non-hierarchical or non-formalized religions or beliefs ... or of non-believers and new faiths (atheists ...)”.<sup>6</sup>
8. Against this backdrop, the additional consideration of being included for consideration in this, according to OHCHR “...is a numerical one. A minority in the territory of a State means it is not the majority. Objectively, that means that an ethnic, religious or linguistic group makes up less than half the population of a country.” 2012 research from the Pew Research Center therefore sees the non-religious as potentially amounting to a majority in only 5 countries.<sup>7</sup> This research, however, broadly referred to the “religious unaffiliated” and encompasses several groups, including humanists, agnostics, and atheists, who do not, in and of themselves, reach the 50% threshold. We therefore argue that humanists, atheists, and the non-religious, however they self-identify, should not be excluded on numerical grounds from this thematic item.
9. In echoing the Special Rapporteur’s recent recommendation, and in looking to over 30 years of explicit recognition of the rights of the non-religious as they pertain to both the right to freedom of religion or belief and the rights of minorities, **we request the Secretary-General explicitly recognize the rights of the non-religious, including atheists and humanists, under this item, as those rights pertain to the Declaration, and in this present Report.**

#### **Activities by Civil Society in 2024**

10. Annually, Member and Associate Organizations of Humanists International meet in-person to network, share ideas, discuss shared matters of concern, pass policies, elect the Humanists International Board, and to strengthen the global humanist community. In 2024, this took place in Singapore.<sup>8</sup> Such meetings can be seen as furthering Article 3(1) of the Declaration, as members of a minority act in community with other members, and Article 2(5) of the Declaration, maintaining contacts across frontiers with citizens of other States to whom they are related by national or ethnic, religious or linguistic ties. It can also be seen to be in furtherance of General Assembly Resolution 78/211, as attendees share knowledge of their rights and challenges to their

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<sup>4</sup> A/75/211, para 53. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/75/211>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, para 76(b).

<sup>6</sup> A/78/195, para.56. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/78/195>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-unaffiliated/>

<sup>8</sup>

<https://humanists.international/2024/09/humanists-international-elects-new-board-members-and-welcome-s-new-organizations-in-singapore/>

rights under the Declaration.

11. A group of European humanists worked in 2024 in furtherance of Article 2(3) of the Declaration - “Persons belonging to minorities have the right to participate effectively in decisions on the national and, where appropriate, regional level concerning the minority to which they belong or the regions in which they live, in a manner not incompatible with national legislation”. To this end, we highlight the Humanist Pledge, which advocated for humanist values at a European level in the context of the European Parliament elections.<sup>9</sup>
12. In 2024, NGO and associate member of Humanists International, Atheists in Kenya Society successfully appealed to the High Court of Kenya to ensure its registration was not revoked.<sup>10</sup> The need for this appeal came from the challenge it faced to its registration as an organization and the difficult context in which it operates. In 2016, it became the first non-religious society to be registered in Kenya under the Societies Act (CAP108) in February 2016 after its initial rejection. Such a judgment emphasises the importance of their activities, in furtherance of Article 2(4) of the Declaration.
13. In 2024, in Peru, separate initiatives by two organizations affiliated with Humanist International, saw success in furtherance of Articles 2(1), 2(2), 2(4), 2(5), and 3(1) of the Declaration. Secular Humanist Society of Peru launched a series of Young Humanist meetings and space, seeing young humanists meet and act in community with others in Peru,<sup>11</sup> while the Peruvian Atheist Association held regular cross-regional meetings on issues of concern related to their rights as religious and cultural minorities.<sup>12</sup>
14. In the Philippines, the Humanist Alliance Philippines, International (HAPI) conducted training, aimed to cultivate leadership skills and promote the values of humanism among young leaders from various HAPI Chapters.<sup>13</sup> General Assembly Resolution 78/211 highlights the “fundamental importance of human rights education, training...”.
15. The above examples serve to highlight just a small number of the activities taken by the non-religious in 2024 in furtherance of their rights under the Declaration. The activities above highlight a cross-regional set of examples, seeing humanists and atheists acting in community to protect and advance their rights as minorities, as well as deepening their own and their wider community’s understanding of their issues of concern.

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<https://humanists.international/2024/05/humanists-international-launches-humanist-pledge-for-2024-european-elections/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://humanists.international/2024/12/kenya-court-ruling-a-boost-for-secularism-in-the-country/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://humanists.international/2024/05/young-humanists-drive-change-in-peru/>

<sup>12</sup>

<https://humanists.international/2024/03/peruvian-atheist-association-leads-secularism-through-collaboration-and-advocacy/>

<sup>13</sup>

<https://humanists.international/2024/05/philippines-hapis-youth-training-program-completes-successful-run/>

## **Activities by States undermining the Declaration in 2024/25**

### *The right to identity*

16. The right to identity, and by extension to the right to identify as a member of a minority community, is outlined in Article 1 of the Declaration. In examining this right, the Report of the Special Rapporteur to the 58th Session of the Human Rights Council recommended the protection of “The right not to be assigned a religion which does not correspond to their own belief, and the right to have their religion properly acknowledged and recognized.”
17. In the last 12 months, we have seen this right undermined. The Indonesian Constitutional Court ruled that there is no right to have one’s atheism on their identity documents where it says “religion.”<sup>14</sup>
18. Indonesia’s Court decision means it joins other countries with similar policies, like Iran, which have policies regarding ID cards that undermine the rights of the non-religious (and other religious and belief minorities).<sup>15</sup>

### *Additional repression*

19. In addition to the specific example above, it is noteworthy that numerous countries have continued their discrimination against and persecution of the non-religious.
20. In 15 countries, it is illegal or unrecognised to identify as an atheist or as non-religious.<sup>16</sup> Indonesia recently affirmed its position with the decision of the Constitutional Court confirming that one is not allowed identify as non-religious or atheist.<sup>17</sup> Such explicit persecution highlights the need for UN programmatic and political intervention, due to the obvious contravention of international law, norms, and standards.
21. Moreover, we note that ‘blasphemy laws’ are often used as a tool for the suppression of the legitimate rights of religious minorities, including the non-religious. Our research shows that ‘blasphemy’ laws exist in 89 countries across the globe as of December 2024.<sup>18</sup> In seven countries, a convicted ‘blasphemer’ may be sentenced to death, and simply being accused can put

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<sup>14</sup> <https://verfassungsblog.de/godly-constitution-and-divine-enlightenment/>;  
<https://humanists.international/2025/03/humanists-condemn-indonesian-court-ruling-on-non-religious-rights-at-united-nations/>

<sup>15</sup>

<https://iranhumanrights.org/2020/01/bahais-unrecognized-minorities-in-iran-must-now-hide-religion-to-obtain-government-id>

<sup>16</sup>

[https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1DHbP\\_FmNPqm0EuFrBFaBu8y621eUICXPp7tZ9hZJg0w/edit?gid=1498068920#gid=1498068920](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1DHbP_FmNPqm0EuFrBFaBu8y621eUICXPp7tZ9hZJg0w/edit?gid=1498068920#gid=1498068920)

<sup>17</sup> <https://verfassungsblog.de/godly-constitution-and-divine-enlightenment/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://fot.humanists.international/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/FOTR-PAGE.pdf>

your life at risk long before any trial.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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, and they serve to undermine the rights of religious minorities, including the non-religious. Such laws have been criticized by multiple UN officials including the Secretary-General,<sup>21</sup> and they undermine the rights of minorities, pursuant to the Declaration.

- a. In January 2021, the far-right Christian portal, *vasárnap.hu* in Hungary published an article about Gaspar Békés - a member of the Hungarian Atheist Association - claiming he offended religious sensibilities and was a blasphemer because he shared memes in closed Facebook groups dedicated to political satire and argued in favour of banning baptisms. Békés subsequently received more than a dozen death threats and was fired from his job at Budapest City Hall.<sup>22</sup> Then Deputy Prime Minister, Zsolt Semjén, leader of the Christian Democratic People's Party also demanded he be fired. More broadly, reports from Humanists International's members in Hungary describe that the promotion of certain types of education in the country, especially those that promote critical thinking, have been labelled as blasphemous.
- b. In Nigeria, the President of Humanist Association Nigeria, Mubarak Bala, was arrested in April 2020 for alleged "blasphemous content" on his Facebook page.<sup>23</sup> In April 2022, he was sentenced to 24 years in prison.<sup>24</sup> The Facebook posts were an expression of his belief under Freedom of Religion or Belief and his rights under the Declaration. As such, the use of blasphemy laws to criminalise such speech is actually infringing on his right to Freedom of Religion or Belief as well as his rights under the Declaration.

## **Conclusion**

22. In conclusion, we request the Secretary-General acknowledge the long established case for the inclusion of the non-religious under the activities of the UN related to the Declaration.
23. We also highlight the consistent work being done by atheist, humanist, and non-religious civil society activists and organizations in furtherance of their rights, and the rights of many, under the Declaration.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*; see examples of extrajudicial violence against those accused of 'blasphemy': <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-53582578>, <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-police-killed-blasphemy-suspect-shootout-26eb1fa565e894063e88cd8d38ffd0a>, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/30/iraqi-man-who-burned-quran-in-swedish-protests-shot-dead>

<sup>20</sup> <https://fot.humanists.international/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/FOTR-PAGE.pdf>

<sup>21</sup>

<https://humanists.international/2024/11/humanists-international-submission-cited-by-united-nations-secretary-general/>

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<sup>23</sup> <https://humanists.international/case-of-concern/mubarak-bala/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://humanists.international/case-of-concern/mubarak-bala/>