

NSS urges government to review its language on blasphemy laws

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The National Secular Society has asked the government to review its stance on blasphemy laws amid concern that ministers only criticise their "misuse" rather than their existence.

In recent months several ministers have condemned the "misuse" of blasphemy laws in Pakistan in parliament without condemning the existence of the laws.

Last month Foreign Office minister Tariq Ahmad responded to a question in the Lords by [saying](#) the government "regularly" raises its "concerns about the misuse of the blasphemy laws" with Pakistan's government.

The question concerned the treatment of Shaghuftha Kausar and her husband, who have been sentenced to death on blasphemy charges in Pakistan.

Other ministers who have used similar language include [Mark Field](#), also on behalf of the Foreign Office, and [Susan Williams](#) and [Liz Sugg](#) of the Department for International Development.

In a letter to Ahmad, NSS chief executive Stephen Evans called for a review of the government's public statements on the matter.

"Blasphemy laws and religious restrictions on speech are incompatible with a genuine commitment to human rights.

"Around the world blasphemy laws continue to be used to target religious and political minorities. Responses that criticise only the 'misuse' of blasphemy laws suggest there may be legitimate uses for blasphemy laws.

"We urge the government to review its language to ensure a more robust approach to the defence of fundamental human rights. The best way to champion the rights and freedoms of people like Shaghuftha Kausar, Asia Bibi and the many others who live in fear of religious persecution in Pakistan and elsewhere is to demand the repeal of blasphemy laws, without apology or qualification."

Asia Bibi was a woman sentenced to death for blasphemy in Pakistan in 2010 who spent eight years on death row before [being freed](#) last year. The NSS [named](#) her lawyer, Saif ul Malook, as its Secularist of the Year for 2019 in May.

Official data has [shown](#) that more than 1,500 people were accused of blasphemy in Pakistan between 1987 and 2018, with religious minorities heavily targeted.

In 2017 a [report](#) from the US Commission on International Religious Freedom [found](#) laws restricting freedom of expression on religious issues in 71 countries. Most countries which had the laws punished blasphemy severely.

Free expression is a universal human right enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Read more: [Why won't the government condemn the existence of Pakistan's blasphemy laws?](#) – NSS blog by Chris Sloggett.

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