Addressing Apostasy and Blasphemy Laws in Muslim Societies
Muslims for Progressive Values
September 14, 2022
Time: 9:30 – 11:30 am
Venue: Rayburn HOB 2060
Format: In person + streaming
(Updated: July 25, 2022)

Summary:

The practice of criminalizing the religious beliefs of others through apostasy and blasphemy legislation violates the fundamental teachings of Islam as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which enshrines the right to freedom of religion, belief, and thought to all individuals. Such legislation also violates the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, to which many Muslim-majority countries are signatories to. Despite being a signatory to these agreements, many of these countries create loopholes and exemptions for themselves with apostasy and blasphemy laws so they can continue to commit egregious human rights abuses, and most often to stifle political dissent.

The rights-violating nature of apostasy and blasphemy legislation is documented in the US Department of States’ 2021 Report on Religious Freedom and the annual reports compiled by the United States Council on International Religious Freedom. Social media has amplified the cruelty in which vigilante mobs commit these atrocities which often go unpunished, like murdering those simply accused of insulting Prophet Muhammad. Recently in Nigeria, the world witnessed the brutal murder of a Christian Nigerian college student by a Muslim mob after accusations of blasphemy were made against her. What is often under reported or regarded as less important is the targeting of Muslim feminist advocates and human rights defenders by members of their own communities and by the very governments meant to protect their human rights.

These Muslim-majority governments, many who have labeled themselves as ‘moderate’, are not doing enough to protect the human rights of Muslim women’s human rights defenders and critics of draconian Sharia laws that violate our rights. In some cases, the governments themselves are behind strategic social media efforts to discredit Muslim human rights advocates as apostates, creating a climate that encourages acts of vigilantism. These governments continue to scale up their persecution of Muslims whose interpretations of Islam deviate from their
definition, which are often suffocating and oppressive and which is rooted in Sharia law, which they falsely claim as God’s law.

Eradicating apostasy and blasphemy laws in Muslim societies can never be achieved until we understand the historical, religious, and political context of its origins. To signify the importance of this context, the first hour of the forum will offer a presentation led by experts on the intersectionality of religion, politics, and human rights.

The second hour is a workshop that will be conducted specifically from the prism of progressive, LGBTQIA+ and feminist Muslims in their work to counter apostasy and blasphemy laws. The workshop will introduce strategies on how to counter social media attack campaigns effectively, how to create an ecosystem conducive to inculcating a culture rooted in human rights in partnership with faith, women and youth leaders, through education and media. The workshop will be led by human rights advocates from Malaysia, Uganda, Pakistan and the U.S. with ample opportunity for active participatory engagement.

Goal

The goal of the forum is to educate policy makers and advocates on best practices to advance the protection of freedom of religion and belief, the establishment of coalitions and partnerships, and to introduce practical steps to countering harmful social media messaging

Objectives

1. Highlight accounts of how religious texts are manipulated and political Islam is deployed to discriminate against and threaten progressive, LGBTQIA+ and feminist Muslims;
2. Establish a clear and concise framework on how to work with faith leaders who want to support those targeted for their expression of religion and belief;
3. Contribute to the discourse on tangible steps that can and should be taken by individuals in power to protect freedom of religion and belief.

Chair

**Ani Zonneveld**, founder and president of Muslims for Progressive Values, and founder of Alliance of Inclusive Muslims

Sponsors: TBD

Speakers

1. **Ambassador Tom McDonald** (MPV, Board of Trustees), Welcoming remarks
2. **Ambassador-at-large FoRB, Rashad Hussein**, keynote speaker, video message
3. **Congresswoman Cindy Axne, Iowa**

Other speakers TBC
**Session I: Laying the foundation**
In order to counter the prominence of apostasy and blasphemy laws in Muslim societies, it is important to understand the social, historical and religious contexts they are rooted in.

**Speaker TBC**

**Session II: Strategies toward Eradicating Apostasy and Blasphemy Laws**

Interactive session on strategic and advocacy efforts in countering narratives of Islamic fundamentalism that not only undergird FoRB, women and rights violations against LGBTQ+ persons, but also provide the discursive basis for radicalism and violent extremism. Panelists will also expound upon strategies for sourcing human rights narratives from within Islam and recommendations.

**Mr. Hisham Muhaimi, Project Officer of Komuniti Muslim Universal**

As Project Officer with Komuniti Muslim Universal (KMU), Mr. Muhaimi will speak to the organization’s work with youth and their advocacy promoting FoRB and women’s rights in Malaysia, highlighting specific rights issues the organization addresses on how to strategically do so from within an Islamic human rights framework.

**Ms. Ashah Mwanga (Executive Director, Alliance of Inclusive Muslims-Africa)**

As the AIM Africa Executive Director, Ashah will present challenges faced by Muslim feminist scholars-activists who argue for gender equality and justice from inside the Muslim tradition. She will amplify the need to build capacity of Imams and all Muslim religious leaders to advocate for Muslim women rights. Ms. Mwanga will highlight the role of Islamic Women’s Initiative for Justice, Law and Peace (IWILAP - Uganda) in advancing Muslim Women rights particularly the role played by legal aid in enabling access to justice for Muslim women given that some countries in Africa don’t have codified Islamic laws and lack formalized Qhadhi courts that would otherwise ease women’s access to justice.

**Pakistan (TBD)**

LGBTQIA+ perspective in addressing the public’s attitude on apostasy and blasphemy laws and the role of media and social media.

**Moderator: Ani Zonneveld**

**Closing Remarks: TBC**