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NIGERIA: Sufi musician Yahaya Sharif-Aminu in prison for blasphemy

Against Nigeria's blasphemy laws

No one should be killed over their beliefs

By Kelsey Zorzi

The Critic (03.12.2022) – <https://bit.ly/3XU1MoF> – In Nigeria, you can be put to death under the law for the “crime” of blasphemy. Sufi musician Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, currently imprisoned for blasphemy, has petitioned the Nigerian Supreme

Court to put an end to his criminal case, which centres on his sharing religious lyrics on the popular messaging platform WhatsApp. For exercising his fundamental rights to free expression and religious freedom, Yahaya's life is on the line. This potentially landmark case could abolish once and for all Northern Nigeria's Sharia blasphemy law – an urgently needed step for the peaceful coexistence of faiths in the country.

In March 2020 Yahaya shared song lyrics via WhatsApp that others viewed as insulting to the Prophet Muhammad. His house was burned to the ground by a mob, and he was promptly arrested and charged with blasphemy under the Sharia Penal Code of Kano State. Without legal representation, he was tried, convicted and sentenced to death by hanging by a local Sharia judge.

Innocent of any crime, Yahaya now has appealed to the Supreme Court for justice. He filed his notice of appeal this month, following a decision by the lower courts to issue a retrial after an initial overturning of his conviction. If retried, Yahaya would more than likely be unjustly convicted again, landing him back on death row. It is thus imperative, and urgent, for the Supreme Court to hear his case and bring much needed legal clarity to end the abomination of blasphemy laws in Nigeria.

In a split country, everyone stands to lose under these laws

In accordance with Nigeria's own constitution, the Supreme Court should rule decisively in favour of Yahaya's rights to free expression and religious freedom. International law – including international treaties to which Nigeria is a party –

also demands that the Court uphold Yahaya's fundamental freedoms.

Blasphemy laws are not unique to Nigeria. Approximately 40 per cent of countries in the world have blasphemy laws in some form, and there are currently at least seven countries where a conviction for blasphemy can result in the death penalty. This is a crucial moment for Nigeria to step out as an international leader on the abolishment of blasphemy laws and serve as a model for other countries looking to end this grave human rights abuse.

Blasphemy laws have greatly exacerbated religious tensions in Nigeria. The criminalization of blasphemy perpetuates societal violence, giving fodder to existing tensions by sanctioning violence with a seal of legal approval. It breeds a climate of censorship, silencing individuals with the fear of breaking the law for sharing their faith. As exemplified by Yahaya's case, such laws punish the innocent who dare to express themselves.

Nobody should be punished, much less killed, for their religious ideas. Any person of faith or no faith at all can be sanctioned, and even killed, as a result of a blasphemy accusation. In a country of over 200 million, split nearly evenly between Christians and Muslims, everyone stands to lose under these laws. Their abolishment would dramatically improve the prospects for human rights in Nigeria.

Christian student Deborah Yakubu was stoned to death

The reality of religiously motivated violence on the ground in

Nigeria is grim. In the period between January 2021 and March 2022, over 6,000 Christians were targeted and killed. In May of this year, Christian student Deborah Yakubu was stoned to death and her body burned in Sokoto State, Nigeria, after classmates deemed her WhatsApp messages blasphemous. Following this tragedy, Rhoda Ya'u Jatau, a Christian woman from the northeast, is now on trial for blasphemy for sharing a WhatsApp message condemning Deborah's brutal killing. Earlier this year, humanist Mubarak Bala was sentenced to 24 years in prison for social media posts critical of Islam.

The international religious freedom community has united in calling for urgent action to end the violence in Nigeria. In the United States, advocates repeatedly have called for the Biden administration to reinstate Nigeria as a "Country of Political Concern" on the State Department's list of the world's worst religious freedom violators.

The UK recently joined 17 other countries, as the chair of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, in "unequivocally" calling for the end of the use of the death penalty for allegations of blasphemy, apostasy or religious insult. Last week at a parliamentary debate on the persecution of Christians, MP Fiona Bruce, the UK Special Envoy for freedom of religion or belief, gave an account of the "multiple atrocities happening in Nigeria". Earlier this year, she raised Yahaya Sharif-Aminu's case specifically in Parliament as an example of the application of the death penalty for blasphemy occurring in Commonwealth countries.

With a judgment expected in the spring of 2023, all eyes are on the Nigerian Supreme Court as we await justice for

Yahaya and, ultimately, the abolishment of blasphemy laws in Northern Nigeria. Progress for Nigeria is contingent on fostering the robust freedom of expression and religion needed for a society to thrive. As Yahaya appeals not only for his own life, but for the rights of all Nigerians, let us stand with him and declare without reserve: everyone has the right to express their opinions. In a free society, all should be able to express their beliefs without fear.

Photo: www.ex-muslim.org.uk

Further reading about FORB in Nigeria on HRWF website

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