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## **Mauritania passes law mandating death penalty for "blasphemy"**

Patheos (17.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2KLCfro> - Mauritania has long been one of the worst countries in the world for freethinkers. Those guilty of "blasphemy" have been threatened with the death penalty, which is disturbing on its own but even more so when you realize how blasphemy is always in the eye of the beholder.

But now that punishment will become mandatory.

The International Humanist and Ethical Union reports:

The National Assembly passed a law on April 27, 2018 that replaces article 306 of the Criminal Code and makes death penalty mandatory for anyone convicted of "blasphemous speech" and acts deemed "sacrilegious". The new law eliminates the possibility under article 306 of substituting prison terms for the death penalty for certain apostasy-related crimes if the offender promptly repents. The law also extends the scope of application of the death penalty to "renegade acts."

The law also provides for a sentence of up to two years in prison and a fine of up to 600,000 Ouguiyas (approximately EUR 13,804) for "offending public indecency and Islamic values" and for "breaching Allah's prohibitions" or assisting in their breach.

That law has prompted a coalition of groups to urge officials there to reverse the law immediately. They also referenced a blogger accused of blasphemy who has been sentenced to death, had his conviction overturned, but still remains in police custody.

Mauritanian authorities should reverse the recent adoption of a law on apostasy related crimes making the death penalty mandatory for "blasphemous speech" and "sacrilegious acts", 21 national and international non-governmental organizations said today. The authorities should also end the arbitrary detention and guarantee the safety of a blogger, Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mkhaitir, whose case appears to be related to the timing of the law. Mkhaitir was convicted of apostasy and sentenced to death in December 2014 before a court reduced his punishment to two years imprisonment. Although his sentence has expired, the authorities continue to detain him.

There's no reason to believe Mauritania will flip on this issue. But their passage of this bill sends an important message to tourists or non-Muslims who may want to visit the western African nation: Don't go. It's not safe.

Visiting Mauritania is now a death trap for anyone with a single critical thought about Islam.

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## **UN experts urge immediate release of detained Mauritanian blogger**

OHCHR (08.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2Nex3hE> - A group of UN human rights experts\* have expressed grave concerns about the continued detention of Mauritanian blogger Cheikh Ould Mohamed M'kheitir on charges which violated his human rights.

Mr. M'kheitir remains in detention, despite being eligible for release on time-served, at an unofficial location reportedly due to concerns for his safety. There are concerns that his conditions of detention have seriously affected his health.

"We have been repeatedly in contact with the Government of Mauritania and are calling on them to release him from arbitrary detention and ensure his safety," the experts said. "It is a matter of grave concern that this young man has now been in detention for four years.

"The charges against him and the previous death sentence for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of conscience and expression clearly contravene international human rights law and the international conventions ratified by Mauritania."

Mr. M'kheitir was arrested on 2 January 2014 and sentenced to death for apostasy in December 2014 after publishing an article online questioning the use of religious justification to legitimise caste discrimination. On 9 November 2017, the Court of Appeals in Nouadhibou quashed his death sentence and commuted it to two years in prison and a fine for blasphemy, rendering him eligible for immediate release on time served. The following day the Prosecutor General appealed the ruling.

"Following the Prosecutor's appeal against the Appeal Court's decision, it is not clear whether or when the case will be considered by the Supreme Court. In any case, we urge that the Mauritanian government comply without delay with the finding of the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention," the experts added.

It is incompatible with international human rights law to criminalise apostasy. The Working Group on Arbitrary Detention adopted an Opinion in April in 2017 calling for Mr. M'kheitir's immediate release and stating his right to seek compensation.

The experts concerns are heightened by the recent amendment of article 306 of the Penal code that reportedly mandates the death penalty for Muslims considered guilty of apostasy.

The experts have written to the Mauritanian Government about the case, received responses to their letters and are waiting for the government to take further action.

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## **Mauritania 'blasphemy blogger' in jail despite serving sentence**

Alaraby (04.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2tKMKVI> - A Mauritanian blogger who was jailed for two years is still languishing in detention despite serving his sentence, activists have said.

Mohammed Cheikh Ould Mkheitir was initially given the death penalty but this was downgraded to a two-year sentence after he repented.

Mkheitir should have been released in November but is still in detention despite growing calls for his release.

He was accused of criticising the Prophet Mohammed in a blog post and originally sentenced to death on December 2014.

Rassoul Ould El-Khal, a senior official in the national rights commission, said on Friday he was "still in administrative detention awaiting the end of the judicial process".

Mauritanian authorities have not commented on his fate since November. An informed source told AFP he was "being held in a secure place in Nouakchott", the Mauritanian capital.

"This administrative detention breaches the law," the blogger's lawyer, Fatimata M'Baye said.

Around 20 NGOs have called on the government to release the blogger.

The death sentence has not been applied in Mauritania since 1987.

Mkheitir was accused of challenging decisions taken by the Prophet Mohammed and his followers during battles in the seventh century.

Mkheitir has spoken against the mistreatment of Mauritania's black population, calling it "an iniquitous social order" with an underclass that was "marginalised and discriminated against from birth".

Modern day slavery still exists, with a "slave" caste forced to work without pay as cattle herders and domestic servants, despite an official ban.

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