



Use of Blasphemy Laws and Allegations in Commonwealth Countries – Briefing Doc.

Background — info on blasphemy laws worldwide, with focus on the Commonwealth

Blasphemy laws remain operational, in some shape or form, across nearly every continent on the globe. In total, there are seven countries where you can be sentenced to death for blasphemy including Nigeria, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Somalia, Mauritania, and Saudi Arabia.

While they're implemented with varying degrees of severity, often blasphemy laws will be accompanied by infringements on freedom of speech, episodes of violence, and extra-judicial killings.

Focus on Nigeria — How do blasphemy laws work across the country?

Given PSJ UK's focus on Nigeria, we'll tailor the remainder of this brief specifically on the West African country as opposed to the Commonwealth as a whole.

Out of the 72 members of the Commonwealth, 21 states still legally prohibit blasphemy. Yet, from the Commonwealth as a whole Nigeria's legal system is arguably the most punitive on such cases.

In Nigeria, blasphemy is outlawed under both Customary and Shariah law. As a result of Nigeria's dual legal system, 12 northern states introduced Shariah Penal Codes in 1999, which means that Shariah courts are able to carry out extreme sentences extending to potential executions.

Recent incidents in Nigeria – Deborah Samuel, Ahmad Usman, & Mubarak Bala

There have been a number of high-profile cases of blasphemy in Nigeria – two examples of cases which failed to even get as far as the courts are the cases of Deborah Samuel and Ahmad Usman.

In May 2020, Deborah Samuel, a student at Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto, was brutally stoned to death and set on fire after alleged blasphemy on a WhatsApp group. Only

one month later Ahmad Usman was burnt to death by a mob of 200 people in Abuja after he was accused of making a blasphemous remark against a cleric.

Comparatively, the case of Mubarak Bala did reach the courts. Mubarak Bala -- the President of Nigeria's Humanist Association -- was arrested in 2020 following accusations that he insulted the Prophet Muhammad. Since then, there have been multiple campaigns for his release, yet in April of 2022 he was sentenced to 24 years imprisonment.

PSJ UK is concerned that the existence and implementation of these blasphemy laws are a harbinger for the curtailing of the network of liberties in Nigeria and beyond.