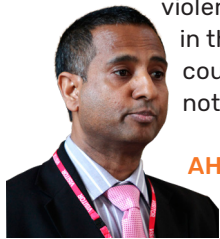


# HUMANISTS IN DANGER

Humanist thinking is now widespread. Humanists International has member organisations in over 60 countries around the world. Throughout much of the world one can live as a humanist without fear of punishment or persecution. However, that is not the case everywhere, and in many parts of the globe being open about one's humanism can put one's liberty, and even one's life, at risk.

'Humanists are the invisible people of the 21st century... While almost everybody is persecuted when they are in a minority, the attacks on humanists are particularly violent when they are exposed to harm in the community that they live, and of course, for many of them, the family is not a safe place.'



**AHMED SHAHEED,**  
United Nations Special Rapporteur  
on freedom of religion or belief

## FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights guarantees human beings **freedom of belief** and **freedom of expression**. Many humanists believe these freedoms are important for individuals and for society. Freedom of expression enables us to make progress because individuals are able to challenge received wisdom and promote new ideas. Freedom of belief is also necessary for people to live fulfilling and flourishing lives of their own choosing, free from persecution.

However, in many parts of the world people are denied these rights. In 71 countries blasphemy (challenging or criticising religion) is a crime – in 7 it is punishable by death. In 18 countries one can be punished for rejecting or leaving the state religion (apostasy) – in 12 of them the punishment is death.

More information about discrimination against the non-religious can be found in Humanists International's Freedom of Thought report.

'The most stark challenge that's faced by humanists around the world is the right to even exist... Apostasy is the idea that by leaving or rejecting a religion you've committed an offence and this deserves to be punished... This is something that's completely against international human rights law. It's something Humanists International campaigns strongly against at the United Nations and around the world, but these laws do exist and we've seen



many examples of people who have been imprisoned, tortured, and sadly killed, all for expressing a right to change or to hold new beliefs.'

**GARY MCLELLAND,**  
Humanists International

**Humanists International** supports humanists at risk in countries where their beliefs are considered to be crimes. They help them to escape and relocate to places where they are no longer in danger, and then put them in contact with a community who is able to support them. **Humanists UK** supports non-religious people seeking asylum in the UK if returning to their country of origin would put their safety at risk.

The President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, Mubarak Bala, was detained in a psychiatric ward on the grounds that he was an atheist. He was rescued but was arrested again for blasphemy and has been held without trial for over a year.

Mob violence has also led to the deaths of many non-religious people around the world. Since 1990 at least 70 people have been murdered in Pakistan after being accused of blasphemy. Mashal Khan was killed by a mob of fellow students at his university campus. He was 23 years old.



### QUESTION:

- What might it be like to live somewhere where your beliefs are considered to be a crime?

## GULALAI

Gulalai Ismail is a humanist and human rights activist from Pakistan. When she was 16, she founded Aware Girls, an organisation that works to empower women and girls in her country. Because of her human rights activism in Pakistan, Gulalai faced persecution and harassment. She has been accused of blasphemy and terrorism, and in 2019 she was forced to flee Pakistan and seek asylum in the USA.

“It’s not easy being a humanist in Pakistan. Very few people are lucky to have accepting families. Most of the time humanists feel trapped because they cannot express themselves openly... They can be disowned by their families. They can be shunned by society. So most of the time humanists have to fake being religious: they fake praying, they fake keeping fast, because it can be life-risking for them to express themselves and tell the world who they are... I had to leave my country to save my life and to be able to continue raising my voice.”



## BONYA

Rafida Bonya Ahmed was born in Bangladesh. She wrote for the first online blogging platform for Bengali-speaking humanists, founded by her husband, Avajit Roy. In 2015, she and her husband were attacked; Avajit was killed. He was one of four Bangladeshi humanist bloggers killed that year. Today she works with humanist organisations around the world to raise awareness about the attacks on non-religious Bangladeshi writers.

“Humanism was actually the basis of my recovery. I know there is a common belief that there is no atheist in the foxhole – that, if you are not a believer, you take shelter in religion during time of trauma or loss, but it was exactly the opposite for me... We have got one life and I have been lucky to choose how I want to live this life... I quit my job four or five months after the attack, and decided to do what I’m passionate about. I started working with all the displaced bloggers and writers in Bangladesh.”



## HAMZA

Following death threats from members of his family and community, Hamza bin Walayat left Pakistan for the UK, where he claimed asylum. Following support from Humanists UK, his asylum claim was accepted in 2019.

“I have believed in humanist values since I was a child, but as I grew up I realised how dangerous it was to share those views in a place like Pakistan... I had to live under a burden. I had to hide my personality... I didn’t have any friends whom I could express my views to... So that’s why I could not be myself.”



## TUTUL

Ahmedur Rashid Chowdhury (known as Tutul) was a publisher of humanist writers in Bangladesh. In 2015 he was attacked with a machete and shot at. He survived: many other humanists in Bangladesh have not been so lucky. He now lives in Norway.

“I see the continuity of humanism in Bengal as part of my heritage and my own humanity. The more I study humanitarian and humanist values across the world, and the more I observe, the more passionate I become about the humanism of Bengal itself. I firmly believe that if people are able to understand each other, without hate, and reflect creatively and empathically with each other, they will be able to live and truly thrive together.”

