

H.E. Ambassador Masood Khan
Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the United Nations
Pakistani Mission to the United Nations
8 East 65th Street
New York, NY 10065

Re: Pakistani government censoring accounts and posts on Twitter

Dear Mr. Ambassador,

We, the undersigned organizations, represent hundreds of thousands of ex-Muslims, liberal religious believers, secularists, humanists, atheists, and agnostics across the United States, Canada, and Britain who are dedicated to safeguarding the universal human rights for freedom of religion, belief, and expression.

We were deeply disturbed to learn that government officials at the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) have, based on the country's blasphemy laws, demanded that the social media service Twitter censor both user accounts and individual posts that they have deemed to be offensive to religious feelings of Muslims in the country. This is a violation of basic human rights.

As you are no doubt aware, Article 18 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) provides that "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." Article 19 of the UDHR provides that "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

These rights are also outlined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Pakistan signed in 2008 and ratified in 2010. Article 18 provides that "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching." It also provides that "No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice." Article 19 provides that "Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference," and that "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice."

In 2011, the UN Human Rights Committee, which is tasked with interpreting and tracking implementation of the ICCPR, issued a commentary (General Comment 34) that strongly condemned laws restricting freedom of thought. The Committee's commentary

noted that, “Parties should put in place effective measures to protect against attacks aimed at silencing those exercising their right to freedom of expression” (paragraph 23); that “Prohibitions of displays of lack of respect for a religion or other belief system, including blasphemy laws, are incompatible with the Covenant ... Thus, for instance, it would be impermissible for any such laws to discriminate in favour of or against one or certain religions or belief systems, or their adherents over another, or religious believers over non-believers. Nor would it be permissible for such prohibitions to be used to prevent or punish criticism of religious leaders or commentary on religious doctrine and tenets of faith” (paragraph 48); and, lastly, that “Restrictions on the right of freedom of opinion should never be imposed.”

Most recently, in 2012, the UN Human Rights Council – which Pakistan serves as a member of – overwhelmingly approved a landmark resolution (A/HRC/20/L.13) affirming “that the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online, in particular freedom of expression, which is applicable regardless of frontiers and through any media of one’s choice, in accordance with articles 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.”

By censoring social media interactions, Pakistan is in clear violation of the UDHR, the ICCPR, and the recent Human Rights Council resolution. However, it is also denying one of the most basic elements of modern human civilization: communication. As a consequence, Pakistan is only serving to hamper its own development as a society. Islamic civilization during the 9th and 10th century practiced tolerance for dissenting ideas, including ideas that would currently be condemned. We call for renewed value for this practice. The rights to follow one’s conscience, to express one’s beliefs and values, and to exchange ideas with others are foundational to human well-being, and must be granted to all for a society to advance. The proper response to speech that one finds offensive is not censorship, which leads to suppression and civil violence, but more speech. The ability to think freely, to have doubt, to investigate doubt, and to arrive at new conclusions, advances our shared communities. To survive and flourish, we must learn to civilly discuss important matters, including and especially religion. True political and economic stability depends on openness, and falls quickly in the face of censorship.

We call upon the Islamic Republic of Pakistan to honor its treaty obligations and immediately move to allow full and open communication on social media.

We respectfully ask you to relay our concerns – which are shared by many Americans, Canadians, and Britons – to Pakistani government officials. Thank you for your attention to this letter.

Sincerely,

American Atheists
American Humanist Association
Atheist Alliance International
British Humanist Association

Camp Quest
Center for Inquiry
Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain
Council for Secular Humanism
Ex-Muslims of North America
International Humanist and Ethical Union
Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science
Secular Coalition for America
Secular Student Alliance
Society for Humanistic Judaism

cc: H.E. Jalil Abbas Jilani, Ambassador of Pakistan to the United States;
Wajid Shamsul Hasan, High Commissioner of Pakistan to the United Kingdom;
Mian Gul Akbar Zeb, High Commissioner of Pakistan to Canada.