



## Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

### **Blasphemy Laws and Censorship by States and Non-State Actors: Examining Global Threats to Freedom of Expression**

Thursday, July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2016

2:00 PM

2322 Rayburn House Office Building

#### **Opening Statement**

Ladies and gentlemen, witnesses and distinguished guests, I now call this hearing to order. This hearing is entitled “Blasphemy Laws and Censorship by States and Non-State Actors: Examining Global Threats to Freedom of Expression.” It will be comprised of three panels.

Recognizing myself for an opening statement –

For over 200 years, the United States and the American people have enjoyed the right to freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press. Enshrined in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, Americans have become so accustomed to enjoying these freedoms that we have come to accept them as indispensable to our way of life. We have also recognized that these same basic rights, which are inextricably linked with the broader right to freedom of expression, should belong not just to Americans, but to all people regardless of creed or nationality. Thus our support for the incorporation of these rights into international legal agreements, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Yet despite our ardent support for such fundamental freedoms and the United States’ prominent role in international affairs, a shockingly small proportion of the

world's population today enjoys the ability to express themselves without fear of persecution.

In fact, the environment for freedom of expression globally appears to be growing significantly worse. According to Freedom House, press freedoms around the world declined to their lowest point in over a decade in 2015, thanks to “political, criminal, and terrorist forces” seeking to co-opt or silence the media in their “broader struggle for power.” The U.S. State Department echoed these concerns, stating in their 2015 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices that in many countries “governments cracked down on the fundamental freedom of expression...by jailing reporters for writing critical stories or sharply restricting or closing non-governmental organizations for promoting supposedly ‘foreign ideologies’ such as universal human rights.”

While the repression of freedom of expression by governments is certainly worrying, it is the rise of non-state actors who through violence and intimidation seek to impose a fearful silence upon their adversaries that has caught the world by surprise. The slaughter of twelve innocent men and women in the Paris offices of the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine on January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015 by Islamist gunmen awoke some in the West to the horrors that could be imposed by fanatics seeking to silence or punish expression they perceive as blasphemous. Sadly, they are horrors that many in other parts of the globe have been acquainted with for decades.

According to the Pew Research Center, as of 2012, 44 countries have blasphemy laws on their books. The majority, 14, are in the Middle East and North Africa. It is in this region, and also in Pakistan, where these laws are enforced most often and in the most severe way. To say that these laws hamper freedom of expression would be an understatement. Not only are they frequently used by government officials as justification for punishing a wide variety of offenses, they also embolden non-state actors to carry out extra-judicial violence, including murder. In November of 2014, a young Christian couple was surrounded by an angry mob of over a 1,000 in Pakistan after allegations that they had committed blasphemy. The couple were thrown into a brick kiln and burned alive.

It is stories like these, as well as the targeting of journalists, writers, and activists, that in large part has inspired us to gather here today to address these concerns. It is my sincere hope that from this hearing, we will leave with not just a better understanding of the challenges we face, but with new ideas, new tools, and a newly kindled passion to stand up for the right to freedom of expression.

With that, I now recognize my distinguished co-chair, Congressman McGovern, for an opening statement.