

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 › MADISON, WI 53701 › (608) 256-8900 › WWW.FFRF.ORG

December 21, 2021

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL:

The Honorable Rashad Hussain
Ambassador At Large for International Religious Freedom
U.S. Department of State
2201 C St., NW
Washington, DC 20520

Re: Please demand that Nigeria release Mubarak Bala, charged with blasphemy

Dear Ambassador Hussain:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to urge your office to defend religious freedom abroad, and reaffirm your strong history of condemning anti-blasphemy laws, by demanding that the Nigerian government release Mubarak Bala immediately. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 35,000 members across the country, including members in every state. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

Mubarak Bala, an atheist, is the head of the Humanist Association of Nigeria. Three days after criticizing the prophet Muhammad on Facebook on April 25, 2020, Bala was reportedly detained.¹ Bala's first child was born just six weeks before his arrest, and now after more than a year, Bala has finally been formally charged. Bala reportedly faces "10 counts of causing a public disturbance in connection to Facebook posts he is alleged to have made over the course of April 2020, which are deemed to have caused a public disturbance due to their 'blasphemous' content."²

Ambassador Hussain, we appreciate that in the past you have written that "blasphemy bans violate human rights and undermine the objectives they seek to

¹ Outspoken Atheist, Arrested in Nigeria for Blasphemy, Hasn't Been Seen Since, *The New York Times* (Aug. 25, 2020), available at www.nytimes.com/2020/08/25/world/africa/nigeria-blasphemy-atheist-islam.html.

² humanists.international/2021/08/nigeria-kano-state-high-court-brings-formal-charges-against-mubarak-bala/.

achieve.”³ Bala’s case is a perfect example of harmless conduct by a marginalized religious minority that, based on an anti-blasphemy law, has been met with outrageous, excessive governmental force. Demanding his immediate release is an opportunity to reiterate your stance on this important issue and to use your prominent position to work toward the essential goal of ending blasphemy prohibitions globally. The U.S. Congress shares this goal, having passed bipartisan resolutions to that effect last year.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom condemned Bala’s arrest in May of 2020,⁴ but to date the State Department has apparently taken no action whatsoever. We wrote to your predecessor last year, but still saw no action. Please stand up for religious freedom, and freedom of speech and conscience, by publicly condemning this victimless crime and demanding that the Nigerian government release Bala immediately.

As you know, nearly 70 countries have blasphemy laws, with more than a third of those countries located in Africa. These laws violate our most essential human rights: the freedom of thought, freedom of religion and freedom of speech. This instance of a state-enforced blasphemy law is particularly egregious because the accused was not charged with a crime **until well over a year after being taken into custody.**

Please take immediate action to demand Bala’s release and do whatever is necessary to ensure that similar extrajudicial disappearances and arrests for blasphemy by atheists and other dissidents do not occur without immediate U.S. condemnation and pressure to release such persecuted individuals. Thank you for your commitment to fighting this massive global threat to free expression and religious freedom.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker

Co-presidents

ALG/DB:rdj

³ Aswad, Evelyn and Hussain, Rashad and Suleman, Arsalan M., Why the United States Cannot Agree to Disagree on Blasphemy Laws (July 1, 2013). Boston University International Law Journal, Vol. 32, 2014, at 149, Available at SSRN: ssrn.com/abstract=3465893.

⁴ USCIRF Condemns Arrest of Prominent Nigerian Atheist, Mubarak Bala (May 8, 2020), *available at* www.uscirf.gov/news-room/press-releases-statements/uscirf-condemns-arrest-prominent-nigerian-atheist-mubarak-bala.