

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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August 28, 2020

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL:

The Honorable Samuel D. Brownback
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, accused of blasphemy

Dear Ambassador Brownback:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to urge your office to defend religious freedom abroad by demanding that the Nigerian government release Mubarak Bala immediately. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 32,000 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, Bala was reportedly detained and has not been seen since, nor have any charges been filed against him.¹ Bala's first child was born just six weeks before his arrest, and Bala's wife has been unsuccessfully petitioning the Nigerian government to inform her of her husband's whereabouts, while fearing for her own safety.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom condemned Bala's arrest in May,² but to date the State Department has apparently taken no action whatsoever. 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.

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 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.

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 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 has not been charged with a crime **four months after being taken into custody.**

The worst fear is that Bala may have even been executed, without any semblance of due process, simply for exercising his most basic freedoms.

We are concerned that your office's 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom does not even mention Nigeria's blasphemy laws, or the fact that the law carries a possible death sentence in Nigeria's sharia courts.³ Although the report lists several problematic instances of religious freedom violations, by both the state and outside groups, it begins by stating that Nigeria's constitution "bars the federal and state governments from adopting a state religion, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides for individuals' freedom to choose, practice, propogate, or change their religion."⁴ This opening statement, without an immediate qualifier that the government's laws and practice directly contradict this constitutional mandate, is deeply misleading and is wholly unacceptable. Please correct this gross mischaracterization of the state of religious freedom for nonbelievers in Nigeria.

And please take immediate action to verify Bala's well-being, demand his release and do whatever is necessary to ensure that similar extrajudicial disappearances and arrests for blasphemy by atheists do not occur without instantaneous condemnation from the U.S. government.

Very truly,

Handwritten signatures of Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker in blue ink.

Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker
Co-presidents
ALG/DB:rdj

³ 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Nigeria, *available at* www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/nigeria/.

⁴ *Id.*