

The List of Secular Prisoners 2025

For the third time, we are publishing a list of secular prisoners on the occasion of Atheist Day. Our aim is to draw attention to the fact that many people around the world are still threatened with prison or imprisoned for professing atheism, criticizing gods and saints or calling for a secular social order.

With regard to the cases we have presented in recent years, there is very good news: On August 19, 2024, Mubarak Bala, President of the *Humanist Association of Nigeria*, was released from prison after more than four years. He has been living in a safe place ever since. Lina Lutfiawati was also released in November 2024 after serving two thirds of her two-year prison sentence.

Shakila Monfared, on the other hand, is still in prison and has more than ten years to go. HRANA, the *Human Rights Activists News Agency*, lists her in the *Comprehensive List of Female Political Prisoners in Iran* published on the occasion of International Women's Day. Eduard Sharlot will also be imprisoned for some time to come. Initially, *Radio Free Europe* reported in July 2024 that he had been placed on a list of terrorists and extremists. In December, it was then reported that Sharlot had been sentenced to five and a half years in prison for "rehabilitating Nazism", which he would have to spend in a prison camp. The fact that Sharlot apologized to Patriarch Cyril for his actions in a letter and in court suggests that he is under extreme pressure.

The case of filmmakers Tan Meng Kheng & Khairi Anwar Jailani is still in limbo. At the beginning of March, the Supreme Court of Malaysia refused to dismiss the case. In doing so, the court confirmed the legality of Section 298 of the Malaysian Penal Code, which prosecutes offences against the religious feelings of others. It can be seen as a glimmer of hope that the court also emphasized that it is now up to the prosecution to prove beyond reasonable doubt that Khairi and Tan intentionally hurt the religious feelings of others.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have helped us again this year with information.

Ratu Thalisa (Ratu Entok), Indonesia

Prison sentence for joke on TikTok

Another case has been reported from Indonesia in which a harmless joke can lead to several years in prison if it even touches on religious content. Ratu Thalisa, who goes by the name Ratu Entok on TikTok, has a fan base of over 440,000 followers as an influencer. At the beginning of October 2024, the Muslim trans woman spontaneously responded to a hateful comment during a livestream. A user had asked her to cut her hair to look more 'masculine'. Ratu Thalisa then took a cheesy picture of Jesus on her cell phone and addressed "Jesus": "You shouldn't look like a woman. You should cut your hair so you look like his father [i.e. the comment writer's father]."

As a result, several Christian groups filed charges of "blasphemy". At the beginning of March, Ratu Thalisa went on trial and was convicted. Because her quick-witted comment disturbed "religious harmony" and "public order" in the eyes of the Medan District Court, the influencer was sent to prison for two years and ten months. She was also fined the equivalent of around 5,600 euros (if she is unable to pay this, her imprisonment will be

extended by six months). The court therefore fell short of the prosecution's demand, which had pleaded for four years and six months. As in the case of Lina Lutfiawati [2024], the conviction was based on the Electronic Information and Transaction Law (this time Article 45A).

Shahriar Bayat, Iran

Death penalty for "insulting the prophet"

64-year-old Shahriar Bayat is on death row in Evin Prison. The retired employee was arrested in September 2022 during the *Women, Life, Freedom* protests and initially sentenced to ten years in prison by the Revolutionary Court in Shahriyar for several offenses (including founding a virtual association with the aim of disrupting national security). These social media activities were followed by a second trial in which Bayat was accused of posting certain images that were deemed insulting to the Prophet and desecrating Islamic sanctities. In February 2024, Bayat was sentenced to death by Branch 13 of the Tehran Criminal Court. His lawyer has appealed against this and the case is now (for more than a year) before the Supreme Court.

Bayat's daughter had already pointed out early on that the confessions had been forced out of her father with beatings. Due to his poor state of health, Bayat had been temporarily released twice for medical treatment before the death sentence. At the end of January, HRANA reported that his health had deteriorated further due to a lack of medical care.

Junaid Hafeez, Pakistan

In custody for twelve years on blasphemy charges

On March 13, 2013, university lecturer Junaid Hafeez was charged with blasphemy. Since that day, he has been behind bars, more than ten years he spent in solitary confinement. The trial was opened in 2014. After a few weeks, Hafeez's lawyer, a representative of the *Human Rights Commission of Pakistan*, was shot dead. The trial dragged on, partly because it was difficult to find judges willing to hear the case. The verdict was only handed down in December 2019: Hafeez was found guilty on all charges: The defendant was sentenced to ten years in prison for "willfully and maliciously" offending religious feelings (Article 295A), life imprisonment for desecrating the Quran (Article 295B) and the death penalty for making derogatory remarks about the Prophet (Article 295C). In addition, a fine of around 2,000 euros was imposed. The time Hafeez had already spent in prison was not counted towards the prison sentence, as the court saw no reason to show leniency in the case of blasphemy.

According to a report in the online newspaper *The Friday Times*, the background to the proceedings is a targeted campaign. Student supporters of *Jamaat-e-Islami*, an Islamic right-wing organization that opposes Pakistan as a secular state, are said to be behind it. Due to his criticism of conservative social norms, Hafeez had been identified as "liberal". In order to prevent his permanent employment at Bahaduddin Zakariya University, a hate campaign was launched against him. Among other things, it was alleged that Hafeez had posted blasphemous flyers on a notice board at the university and made blasphemous remarks in a seminar. He was also said to be responsible for two Facebook groups in which blasphemous content was allegedly posted. Hafeez denies all allegations.

On March 19, the Supreme Court of Lahore was to decide on the appeal against the death

sentence. However, shortly before the date, Hafeez's lawyer was informed that the case would not be heard on that day. No reason was apparently given, nor was an alternative date given. Pakistani observers regard the proceedings as "extremely worrying".

Yahaya Aminu Sharif, Nigeria

Death sentence for song lyrics

Yahaya Aminu Sharif is a singer and belongs to the Tijaniyya Sufi order, which is considered heretical by Islamic orthodoxy. In February 2020, the then 22-year-old shared a song on WhatsApp in which he expressed his admiration for a Sufi religious leader. As this was perceived by the Islamic right as a disparagement of the Prophet Muhammad, there were demonstrations against Aminu Sharif, as a result of which his house was burned down. He was arrested in March and sentenced to death by hanging by an Islamic court in Kano state in August. In January 2021, the Kano State Court of Appeal overturned the death sentence and ordered a retrial on the grounds that the accused had not been able to defend himself properly at the trial. Since then, the case has been before the Supreme Court of Nigeria and the defendant remains in custody.

In May 2024, independent experts from the United Nations called for Yahaya Sharif-Aminu to be released immediately and unconditionally. In February 2025, the European Parliament also adopted a resolution in support of the singer. It called on the Nigerian authorities to "release Yahaya Aminu Sharif immediately and unconditionally, drop all charges against him, guarantee his safety and his right to a fair trial".

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