

The List of Secular Prisoners 2023

On the occasion of Atheist Day, we are publishing a list of secular prisoners for the first time today. The aim of this campaign, which we will carry out every year on March 23, is to draw attention to the fact that many people around the world are still thrown into prison for professing atheism, criticizing gods and saints or calling for a secular social order. It is not as if such cases do not receive any attention at all. Raif Badawi, who spent several years in prison in Saudi Arabia for pointing out and calling for prospects for secular development in the Arab world in his articles, received worldwide support. The case of Alexander Aan, an Indonesian blogger who had to serve a prison sentence for his Facebook post „God does not exist“, at least achieved some awareness in secular and human rights-oriented circles. But there is, as far as we can see, no one trying to compile these cases and document the fates behind them.

Projekt 48 has now set itself this task. We start with four cases from four countries that show different aspects of the persecution of secular activists. Of course, these are by no means all people who are imprisoned because of their atheist or secular views – in Iran alone, there are very many people affected. Nevertheless, we have decided to focus on five prisoners.

We would like to thank everyone who supported us in compiling the list, especially the *Säkulare Flüchtlingshilfe* und dem *Zentralrat der Ex-Muslime Deutschland*.

Mubarak Bala, Nigeria

Sentenced to 24 years in prison for „blasphemous“ Facebook posts

Mubarak Bala is the president of the Nigerian Humanist Association. In April 2020, he was arrested on a charge of blasphemy. He spent five months in prison without contact with a lawyer and was charged not until after more than a year. Mubarak Bala is accused of Facebook posts in which he is said to have compared the Prophet Muhammad to a Nigerian tele-evangelist or made comments with reference to the coronavirus pandemic: „Allah does not exist, do not pray against Covid-19. Act against the disease“.

He was finally brought to court for „public disturbance“ (Sections 210 and 114 of the Penal Code of Kano State). His Facebook posts are said to have disturbed the public order. The trial took place on April 4, 2022. Mubarak Bala pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 24 years in prison.

Observers such as the well-known Nigerian humanist Leo Igwe – who heads the #FreeMubarakBala campaign – assume that Mubarak Bala was forced into pleading guilty and, after two years in prison, was no longer able to counter the intimidation.

Othman Mohamed Lehib, Mauretania

Imprisoned for three years under accusation of „blasphemy“

Othman Mohamed Lehib was active in the *We Want a Secular Mauritania* movement. Due to his activities and his statements on social media criticizing religious rule in Mauritania, he was arrested and has been in solitary confinement since April 2020. The charge is blasphemy, which is punishable by death under Article 306 of the Mauritanian Penal Code. There is currently no precise information about his current condition.

Mohamed Rusthum Mujuthaba (Rusthum Russo), Maldives Islands

Four months in prison for criticism of Islam

The Maldivian human rights activist Mohamed Rusthum Mujuthaba uses the pseudonym Rusthum Russo to campaign for freedom of religion and belief on social media. This commitment has landed him in prison several times since fall 2019. Most recently, on August 10, 2022, he was sentenced to four months in prison for „insulting Islam“ and possession of „obscene material“ (Sections 617 and 622 of the Maldivian Penal Code). As he had already been imprisoned for six months before the verdict, he was released after the trial.

In November 2022, UN representatives, including the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, wrote to the Maldivian government expressing their concern about the judicial persecution of Rusthum Russo.

Youssef Mehrad & Saadullah Fazli, Iran

Death penalty for „insulting the prophet“

Youssef Mehrad and Saadullah Fazli have been sentenced to death on charges of „Sab al-Nabi“ (insulting the Prophet) for being active on a Telegram channel called *Criticism of Superstition and Religion*. Together with five other participants in the Telegram channel in question, they were arrested in May 2020. In addition to numerous other charges (including forming an illegal association), the men were accused of insulting „sacred things“ and the founder of the Islamic Republic. While five of the defendants were sentenced to several years in prison and fines, the first chamber of the Arak Criminal Court imposed the death penalty on Youssef Mehrad and Saadullah Fazli for allegedly insulting the Prophet in April 2021. The Supreme Court confirmed the verdict in July of the same year. Since then, the two have been on death row, so to speak.

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