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# GLOBAL NEGLECT OF EX-MUSLIM RIGHTS: A LEGAL AND HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

- Chetanya Akhilesh Verma<sup>1</sup>

In the 21st century, while much of the world champions diversity, pluralism, and freedom of belief, one community continues to face systemic neglect, legal limbo, and physical danger for exercising the basic human right to change one's faith. These are the ex-Muslims—individuals who have chosen to leave Islam, often in pursuit of personal freedom, rational inquiry, or alternative spiritual paths. Their stories are marked by fear, exile, violence, and silence.

Despite protections enshrined in Article 18 of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), apostates from Islam endure varying degrees of persecution across much of the Muslim-majority world and within certain diaspora communities. While some countries legally sanction apostasy with imprisonment or even death, others ignore the crimes perpetrated by non-state actors who justify violence through radical Takfiri interpretations of Islamic texts.

Ex-Muslims in regions like South Asia face unique challenges. Ostracized by families, labeled dishonorable, and marked for violence, many are forced to live secret lives. In India, where the Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience under Articles 25 and 26, societal enforcement of religious conformity continues to prevail over constitutional ideals. Law enforcement agencies frequently dismiss apostasy-related threats as domestic issues, leaving victims vulnerable and unsupported.

Digital spaces have become equally unsafe. Online platforms are rife with calls for violence against ex-Muslims, doxxing campaigns, and coordinated takedowns of their content. The lack of robust digital protection protocols exacerbates the problem, forcing ex-Muslims into self-censorship or anonymity. While many may think the internet is a place of freedom, for ex-Muslims it often becomes a digital prison where constant vigilance is necessary for survival.

To understand the scale of the issue, one must consider the vast demographic and geopolitical landscape of the Muslim world. With over 1.9 billion Muslims globally, concentrated heavily in

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Asia, even a small percentage of apostates represents a significant number of individuals. Yet there is a glaring absence of safe channels for exit from the religion. Unlike other faith communities, where conversion and departure are relatively normalized, Islam—particularly in its more conservative interpretations—places severe doctrinal and communal restrictions on apostasy.

The situation is further aggravated by religious extremism. The Takfiri ideology, which permits declaring other Muslims as unbelievers, has empowered jihadist groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda to target ex-Muslims with brutal consequences. High-profile assassinations of ex-Muslim bloggers and human rights defenders in countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan underscore the reach and resolve of these extremist networks.

Ex-Muslim voices are also marginalized in broader human rights discourses. Many international bodies are hesitant to engage with the subject out of fear of offending religious sentiments. However, this reluctance inadvertently aids the suppression of dissent and reform within Islamic societies. The right to critique, reinterpret, or leave a religion must be protected as an essential part of intellectual and spiritual freedom.

Given this grim reality, it is imperative that both international and national bodies recognize the specific vulnerabilities of ex-Muslims and take urgent action. I have formally submitted a letter to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) detailing the global nature of this crisis and requesting the following:

1. A global thematic study on apostasy-based violence and legal persecution.
2. Interpretative guidance that apostasy laws violate ICCPR obligations.
3. Emergency relocation and visa frameworks for at-risk individuals.
4. Legal reform advocacy and digital platform accountability.

**In addition to these, the following measures are critical:**

- Establish a UN working group specifically focused on religious freedom violations involving apostasy.
- Encourage data collection and academic research on the mental health impacts of forced secrecy and persecution.
- Promote the creation of independent, secular support organizations within vulnerable countries.

**Nationally, India must also take initiative by:**

- Establishing fast-track courts and specialized police units to handle apostasy-related violence.
- Funding shelters and safe relocation programs.
- Training law enforcement to recognize and act upon religiously motivated threats.
- Including apostasy-related violence within national hate crime tracking mechanisms.
- Ensuring that school and university curriculums address religious freedom and human rights, thereby building awareness from an early age.

Furthermore, civil society and media must break the silence. More platforms must be created where ex-Muslims can share their narratives without fear of retribution. Mainstream media must amplify these voices rather than marginalizing them under the pretext of neutrality or religious sensitivity.

The silence around this issue must end. Apostasy is not a crime. It is a human right. If the international community truly upholds the values it proclaims, protecting ex-Muslims must become an urgent priority.

The time for statements is over. It is time for structural safeguards, legal clarity, and institutional empathy. Only then can we truly claim to defend freedom of thought and belief for all.