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Human Rights Council: ARTICLE 19 and CIHRS Condemn Adoption of Resolution on Combating Defamation of Religions

ARTICLE 19 and the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) condemn the adoption of a resolution on “combating defamation of religions” by the 10th session of the UN Human Rights Council on Thursday 26 March.

The resolution is the latest in a series on the subject of “defamation of religions”. The first was adopted in 1999 by the UN Commission on Human Rights. ARTICLE 19 and CIHRS are extremely concerned that the cumulative effect of these resolutions serves to undermine established international human rights guarantees on the right to freedom of expression but also on the rights to freedom of religion and to equality.

“This is a blow for freedom of expression,” says Dr Agnès Callamard, ARTICLE 19 Executive Director. *“It is shameful and disappointing. Unfortunately, it is also unsurprising given the way this issue has unfolded in the UN over the last decade.”*

“‘Defamation of religions’ is a blunt instrument which betrays human rights principles and values, and the international human rights community needs both stamina and refined strategies in order to ensure that human rights, especially freedom of expression, freedom of religion and equality, are not eroded,” continues Dr Callamard.

ARTICLE 19 and CIHRS are concerned that, although this most recent resolution makes a number of modifications to previously adopted resolutions on religious defamation, it does not address the inherent problems associated with them. The concept of “defamation of religions” is inconsistent with the right to freedom of expression, and the resolution will be ineffective in promoting equality. Instead, it is likely that states may abuse the concept of religious defamation in order to stifle criticism of religions and religious institutions.

According to Moataz El Fegiery, Executive Director of CIHRS, *“‘Defamation of religion’ is a concept commonly used by authoritarian and repressive governments throughout the world to violate civil liberties and discriminate against minorities. It has no place in the work of the Human Rights Council.”*

References made in the draft resolution to recent initiatives of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and established international law on freedom of expression which attempt to place the concept of defamation within the legal paradigm of international human rights is highly misleading.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- To view ARTICLE 19's Statement, which analyses an earlier draft of the resolution that was eventually adopted see: <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/press/human-rights-council-article-19-calls-on-hrc-members-to-vote-against-propose.pdf>
- The results of the vote on the resolution were as follows: **In favour (23)**: Angola, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Cameroon, China, Cuba, Djibouti, Egypt, Gabon, Indonesia, Jordan, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Qatar, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, and South Africa. **Against (11)**: Canada, Chile, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Slovakia, Slovenia, Switzerland, Ukraine, and United Kingdom. **Abstentions (13)**: Argentina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Ghana, India, Japan, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Uruguay, and Zambia.
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- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.
- CIHRS is an independent, regional NGO based in Cairo, Egypt, with offices in Paris and Geneva. CIHRS attempts to analyze and address the legal and cultural challenges to implementing universal human rights standards throughout the Arab region.