



PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release – 6 March 2008

UK: ARTICLE 19 commends vote to repeal blasphemy

ARTICLE 19 welcomes the overwhelming vote yesterday by the UK House of Lords to abolish the common law crimes of blasphemy and blasphemous libel. While blasphemy laws have long fallen into disuse in England, their continued presence casts a shadow on free expression in the UK and sends a signal to other countries that such laws are acceptable.

ARTICLE 19 has long called for the repeal of the UK blasphemy law, along with similar laws in other countries, on the basis that rules limiting criticism of religion are incompatible with basic democratic ideals, as well as international guarantees of freedom of expression. The crime of blasphemy is simply not necessary; the need to prevent religious violence and discrimination is better served by carefully crafted hate speech laws. On the other hand, blasphemy laws have historically been abused to protect religions, and often religious leaders, against legitimate criticism.

Although blasphemy laws are rarely applied in modern democracies, they are enforced in other countries. The existence of blasphemy laws in countries like the UK provides justification for other countries that use their own blasphemy laws to stifle free expression. While ARTICLE 19 believes the criminalisation of blasphemy can never be justified, the fact that English blasphemy laws only protected the Anglican Church and not other religions made the English law particularly offensive to democratic principles. The House of Lords is to be commended for abolishing them.

ARTICLE 19 now calls on Parliament to repeal the similarly outdated offences of criminal defamation and sedition. Like blasphemy, these ancient offences offend modern principles of democratic free speech and provide moral support for repressive laws around the world. Like blasphemy, the time has come for these laws to be repealed in the name of freedom of expression.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- For more information: please contact Sejal Parmar, sejal@article19.org, +44 20 7278 9292.
- 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.