Religious populism and the enforcement of anti-blasphemy laws have a long and complex history in many countries around the world. In Pakistan, for example, blasphemy laws were introduced during the colonial era and were subsequently expanded by various military and civilian governments as a means of consolidating power and controlling dissent (Ahmed, 2018). These laws have been used to target religious minorities and political opponents, and have been criticized by human rights groups and international organizations for their repressive and discriminatory nature (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Similarly, in some other Muslim-majority countries, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, blasphemy laws have been used as a tool of repression and authoritarianism. In Iran, for example, blasphemy laws have been used to silence dissent and stifle political opposition, particularly among religious minorities such as the Baháʼí (Hoseini, 2019). In Saudi Arabia, blasphemy laws have been used to justify the persecution of dissidents and critics of the ruling regime, including religious scholars and human rights activists (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

The relationship between religious populism and the enforcement of anti-blasphemy laws is complex, and can vary depending on the specific context and political dynamics of a given country or region. However, as noted earlier, there is often a clear link between the two, as religious populism can be used to legitimize and justify the use of blasphemy laws to suppress dissent and maintain political power. This can lead to the repression of free speech, the curtailment of religious freedoms, and the persecution of marginalized groups.

Religious populism and the enforcement of anti-blasphemy laws with historical details.

Blasphemy laws are legal provisions that prohibit speech or actions that are deemed to be contemptuous of God or of people or objects considered sacred. Blasphemy laws have a long history in various religious traditions, but they have also been used by political and religious authorities to silence dissent and marginalize minorities. In this paragraph, I will provide some historical details on how religious populism and anti-blasphemy laws have been intertwined in different contexts.

One example of religious populism and anti-blasphemy laws is Pakistan, a Muslim-majority country that has the world's second-strictest blasphemy laws after Iran. Pakistan inherited its blasphemy laws from British colonial rule, but they were expanded and enforced by successive military regimes and civilian governments that sought to appease Islamist parties and mobilize religious sentiments among the masses. Since 1986, blasphemy has been punishable by death for insulting the Prophet Muhammad, and in 2023, the law was further extended to cover insults to the prophet's companions, which could target Shiite Muslims who are critical of many early Muslims. Blasphemy laws have been used to persecute religious minorities, such as Christians and Ahmadis, as well as secular activists, journalists, academics and artists. Blasphemy accusations have also triggered mob violence and extrajudicial killings by vigilantes who claim to defend the honor of Islam (Villa, 2022; Kuru, 2023).

Another example of religious populism and anti-blasphemy laws is Italy, a predominantly Catholic country that has one of the harshest blasphemy laws among non-Muslim-majority countries. Italy's blasphemy law dates back to 1930, when it was introduced by the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini as part of a concordat with the Vatican. The law prohibits any public offense to the "Deity" or to any religion admitted by the state, and carries a maximum penalty of two years in prison. Although the law is rarely enforced, it has been invoked by populist politicians and conservative groups who claim to protect Italy's Christian identity and values from secularization and multiculturalism. Blasphemy laws have been used to target comedians, singers, writers and activists who have criticized or mocked the Catholic Church or religion in general (The Conversation, 2017).

These two examples illustrate how religious populism and anti-blasphemy laws have been connected in different historical and cultural contexts. Blasphemy laws are not only a matter of religious doctrine or personal belief, but also a tool of political power and social control. Blasphemy laws violate the human rights of freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief, and they can fuel intolerance, discrimination and violence against those who hold different or dissenting views.

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