

# IT'S TIME TO SPEAK UP FOR FREE SPEECH

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Let's take Finnish MP Räsänen's words to heart: "Now it is time to speak. Because the more we are silent, the narrower the space for freedom of speech and religion grows."

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Censorship often goes unnoticed because to detect it requires an awareness of what is not being said. We have to work to hear the voices being silenced and the opinions being oppressed. What's more, most of us tacitly accept subtle censorship in our day-to-day life. It takes courage and vigilance to defend the fundamental right to free expression.

Today, one such defender, Finnish Member of Parliament Päivi Räsänen, celebrates the one-year anniversary of her momentous free speech victory at the Helsinki District Court in March 2022. The prosecution had charged her with 'hate speech' for sharing her deeply held Christian beliefs on marriage and sexuality in a 2019 tweet, during a 2019 radio debate, and in a church pamphlet she wrote almost 20 years ago. But despite the judges' unanimous decision to acquit her of all charges, stating that "it is not for the district court to interpret biblical concepts," the battle isn't over. The prosecution appealed the 'not guilty' verdict and Räsänen faces another trial this summer.

Räsänen has great resolve. She has endured over 13 hours of police interrogations, months of waiting for court proceedings, an onerous and invasive trial, and a multitude of lies spread by the media. All for the mere act of a tweet. Although she has been burdened, Räsänen isn't cowed. She understands what's at stake: the right to speak freely about one's faith.

Despite the court's clear ruling, the Finnish state has relentlessly continued their censorship campaign against Räsänen. Why pursue a criminal conviction for something as innocuous as a tweeting Bible verses? The answer is simple—they want to make an example of her. The process becomes the punishment. Onlookers beware! If this is what happens to your elected leaders, imagine how they will silence the rest of us. Such trials aim to intimidate those who share similar beliefs. But it's not just Christians and those concerned with the defense of free speech who suffer.

Finland has the fewest numbers of police officers per capita in Europe. Yet the state has poured enormous resources into prosecuting Räsänen's peaceful speech, during which time they have been unable to investigate and prosecute actual crimes.

## Global threat

The struggles of a Finnish Christian might seem far away but attempts to censor certain beliefs deemed disagreeable are underway in many countries. This month, parliament passed the first '[thoughtcrime](#)' in modern British history into law. By rolling out nationwide censorship zones around abortion facilities, the new Public Order Bill prohibits any form of 'influence,' including silent prayer and consensual conversations, within a 150-meter radius of abortion clinics in England and Wales. At least three people have come under fire for simply standing and silently praying on the public streets.

In Mexico, Congressman Gabriel Quadri was convicted as a 'political violator against women' for expressing concern that men who identify as women have taken spaces in congress reserved for women. This took place despite a Mexican law which requires 50/50 representation of men and women in congress. He made the point that it is an injustice for males to take advantage of the law to gain access to political positions designated for women. The tweets contained no foul language, named no particular person, and in no way amounted to an incitement to violence. But for standing up for women's opportunities, he was convicted and could now suffer egregious personal and professional consequences.

Perhaps the most extreme example of this global silencing and sanctioning trend is in Nigeria. In 2020, Sufi musician Yahaya Sharif-Aminu was sentenced to death for 'blasphemy.' He was convicted after posting song lyrics that he had composed to WhatsApp in which Yahaya spoke about a 19th-century Imam revered in his particular tradition of Sufi Islam. Yahaya then was accused of blasphemy for allegedly placing the Imam above the prophet Muhammad. He has appealed to the Supreme Court of Nigeria and is challenging the constitutionality of the Sharia-based blasphemy laws, with support from the human-rights group ADF International. He remains in prison, his life hanging in the balance.

Few are the corners of the world spared the winds of censorship. From Twitter to WhatsApp messages to silent prayer on public streets, the fundamental human right to pray and think in accordance with one's convictions is under attack. Let's take Räsänen's words to heart: "Now it is time to speak. Because the more we are silent, the narrower the space for freedom of speech and religion grows."