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DENMARK: "Translation Law" vs. Religious Liberty

Protestants and Roman Catholics are protesting a new law that would compel all religious bodies to translate into Danish and publish in advance their sermons.

By PierLuigi Zoccatelli

Bitter Winter (30.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3pC5wcE> - Here we are again. Concerns about Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism lead to introduce legislation that reduces the religious liberty of all religions. The mother of all such laws is the **Russian statute against "religious extremism,"** introduced as a weapon to combat Islamic radical groups, and in fact used to ban the Jehovah's Witnesses and other peaceful communities whose proselyting activities disturb the majority Russian Orthodox Church. The new French law on the defense of the Republican principles was also presented as necessary to combat Islamic "separatism" and extremism, but ended up creating problems for all religions.

Now, the same process is at work in Denmark. **A new law,** which had broad support in the Parliament and the public opinion, would request all religions to have their sermons published and put at the disposal of the authorities. If they are in languages other than Danish, they should be translated.

It may seem a good idea to allow the police to check the sermons delivered, often in Arabic, by some firebrand Islamic imams, but as usual the law cannot target one religion only, least it meets with intractable Constitutional problems. The result is that the same provisions will apply to all religions.

A first problem is that in Greenland and the Faroe Islands, which are part of the Kingdom of Denmark, most religious services are in the local languages rather than in Danish. Yet, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen **has indicated** that she "cannot guarantee" exceptions for the Faroe Islands and Greenland.

More generally, there are in Denmark German-speaking minorities, which have used German as language for their religious services for eight centuries, and immigrant religious communities, which would be placed under a heavy economic burden if all sermons should be translated. And religious groups also have the unpleasant feeling that they are **"placed under general suspicion by this law,"** in the words of the General Secretary of the Nordic Catholic Bishops Conference, Sister Anna Mirijam Kaschne.

Evangelicals are also complaining that it would be the poorer congregations that would face the more serious problems. The Council of Churches of Denmark called the law "discriminatory and ill-considered." And Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, President of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe, **in a statement published by the Vatican**, said that the law "could impede the fundamental right to freedom of religion." Once again, media hype and emotion caused by the presence of radical Islam is leading to ill-advised legislation restricting the freedom of all religions.

UN expert warns counter-terror policies led to 'further stigmatisation' of Muslims

UN Special Rapporteur Ahmed Shaheed said Islamophobia has reached 'epidemic proportions' across the world

UN expert Ahmed Shaheed said Muslim women face the triple threat of discrimination due to their gender, ethnicity, and religion (AFP)

By Areeb Ullah

Middle East Eye (05.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3rIFPsg> - A United Nations expert has warned that counter-terrorism policies adopted by countries after terrorist attacks done in the name of opposing radical Islam have led to the further stigmatisation of Muslims.

Ahmed Shaheed, UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, told the Human Rights Council on Thursday that more needed to be done to tackle Islamophobia, which he said had reached "epidemic proportions" across the world.

"Islamophobia builds imaginary constructs around Muslims that are used to justify state-sponsored discrimination, hostility and violence against Muslims, with stark consequences for the enjoyment of human rights including freedom of religion or belief," said Shaheed.

"In such climates of exclusion, fear and distrust, Muslims report that they often feel stigma, shame and a sense that they are 'suspect communities' that are being forced to bear collective responsibility for the actions of a small minority."

His report at the UN Human Rights Council highlighted how Muslims, when a minority in a given country, are frequently targeted based on visible characteristics such as their name, skin colour, clothing and religious attire, notably headscarves.

He also warned that Muslim women face threefold discrimination based on their gender, religion and ethnicity.

The report emphasised that critiques of Islam should never be conflated with Islamophobia, adding that international human rights law protects individuals, not religions.

"I strongly encourage states to take all necessary measures to combat direct and indirect forms of discrimination against Muslims and prohibit any advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to violence," the UN expert said

Last month, UN Special Rapporteur Fionnuala Ni Aolain released a report stating that many Muslim communities worldwide are being "hyper-regulated" due to counter-terrorism policies.

She voiced concern over the "construction" of the Muslim family within counter-terrorism policy in certain countries and how the "Muslim home" is viewed as a site of risk, resulting in blame, pathology and state hyperregulation".

She added that in some instances, the "good mother" within a Muslim household "is one who partners with the security state in preventing and countering violent extremism programmes, even as such programmes may stigmatise, marginalise and make her a frontline target within her own political context."

Sri Lanka to ban burqa, shut more than 1,000 Islamic schools

Minister for public security says decision has been taken on 'national security' grounds; activists decry announcement.

ALJAZEERA (13.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3vpMzxd> - Sri Lanka's government says it will ban the wearing of the burqa, a full-body veil that covers the face as well, and close more than 1,000 Islamic schools, the latest actions affecting the country's minority Muslim population.

Separately, the government on Saturday announced using a controversial anti-terror law to deal with religious "extremism" and gave itself sweeping powers to detain suspects for up to two years for "deradicalisation".

Minister for Public Security Sarath Weerasekera told a news conference he had signed a paper on Friday for cabinet approval to ban the burqa – an outer garment that covers the entire body and the face and is worn by some Muslim women – on "national security" grounds.

"In our early days, Muslim women and girls never wore the burqa," he said. "It is a sign of religious extremism that came about recently. We are definitely going to ban it."

The minister said he signed documents outlawing the burqa, but they need to be approved by the cabinet of ministers and Parliament where the government has a two-thirds majority to see its bills through.

Weerasekera also said the government plans to ban more than 1,000 Islamic schools that he said were flouting national education policy.

"Nobody can open a school and teach whatever you want to the children," he said. The government's moves on burqas and schools follow an order last year mandating the cremation of COVID-19 victims – against the wishes of Muslims, who bury their dead.

This ban was lifted earlier this year after criticism from the United States and international rights groups.

Shreen Saroor, a Sri Lankan peace and women's rights activist, said the moves come "at a time when the Muslim community has been constantly targeted".

"It's part of the Islamophobic reaction in Sri Lanka," Saroor told Al Jazeera from the capital, Colombo.

"The compulsory cremation policy was revised, and now we hear so many other measures to some form of punishing the Muslim community," she added, noting that Muslims in the country were not consulted in advance.

Citing the fact that the wearing of the mask has been made compulsory in the country during the coronavirus pandemic, Saroor said the burqa "looks [like] a very political revenge move".

The wearing of the burqa in the majority-Buddhist nation was temporarily banned in 2019 after the Easter Sunday bombing of churches and hotels by armed fighters that killed more than 250 people.

The move drew a mixed response, with activists saying it "violated Muslim women's right to practise their religion freely".

Prevention of Terrorism Act

Meanwhile, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who was elected president in 2019, after promising a crackdown on "extremism" promulgated regulations allowing the detention of anyone suspected of causing "acts of violence or religious, racial or communal disharmony or feelings of ill will or hostility between different communities".

The rules, effective on Friday, have been set up under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which local and international rights groups have repeatedly asked Colombo to repeal.

"Anybody can be arrested for saying anything," said Saroor, calling PTA "very problematic".

Sri Lanka's previous government, which was defeated by Rajapaksa at the 2019 elections, had pledged to repeal the PTA after admitting it seriously undermined individual freedoms, but failed to do so.

Muslims make up about 9 percent of the 22 million people in Sri Lanka, where Sinhalese Buddhists account for some 75 percent of the population.

A former defence secretary, Rajapaksa is immensely popular among the Sinhala Buddhist majority, who credit him with ending the island nation's 26-year civil war in 2009.

Critics, however, say during the war he crushed the dissident Tamil Tigers with little regard for human rights, allowed abductions and gave consent to extrajudicial killings. He has rejected all the allegations.

Photo : Danish Siddiqui/Reuters
