

# Is it Secular Triumph or Liberal Subjugation?

By Muhammad Bilal Qureshi

On 29th November 2009, Swiss nation voted in favour of a controversial bill which bans construction of mosque minarets.

For the first time in over a century, a constitutional amendment in the country has singled out one community with clear discriminatory essence. This controversial referendum is denounced by Muslims and human rights activists as racially motivated and part of campaign to malign Islam. Amnesty International describes this bill 'breach the rights of country's Muslims.'

Swiss People's Party (SVP), a group dumped by many as a fascist and racist, during this campaign plastered the country with hundreds of thousands of posters showing Swiss national flag as a base for several black minarets, portrayed as missiles, alongside a woman clad in black veil.

Though architect of the campaign is a far-rightist Swiss People's Party, the country's largest party in terms of popular support and membership in parliament, this bill also enjoys support from secular leftists and liberals fiercely critical of Islam.

And when the Swiss Justice

Minister Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf echoed calls for religious freedom from Langenthal Muslim Community and Union of Muslim Organisations in Europe, and shared his fear that the ban could fuel Islamic radicalism & violent protests, an SVP MP Oskar Freysinger compared these warnings of anger in the Muslim world to the arguments used by "appeasers" of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis.

Ever since the demise of Soviet Union, Islam as an ideology has been on the forefront of unprecedented criticism from left and right. Organised propagandist movement, led by US, has been unleashed in mid 1990s in order to demonize and vilify Islam and its adherents. A testimony to this fact is a full-page headline that appeared in New York Times. On January 21st 1996, the New York Times hosted a full-page headline: "The Red menace is gone, but here's Islam."

And after receiving warm reception in the American continent, Islamophobia has now skyrocketed in the European region.

Especially after the events of 9/11 and 7/7, vilification of Islam has intensified and Muslims have increasingly been on the receiving end of a barrage of criticism. Swiss vote is merely one example that reflects the growing anti-Islamic sentiments in

Western liberal societies.

In France, a discriminatory law has been passed since 2004 that forbids women from wearing Hijab (head scarf) in State schools and government offices. On 22nd June 2009, President Sarkozy stated that "the burqa is not a sign of a religion, it is a sign of subservience." His comments were followed by a statement issued by 65 French MPs that Muslim women who cover themselves fully in public undermine women's rights and France's secular tradition.

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In Germany, brutal murder of Marwa al-Sherbani (known as veil martyr) in the courtroom has rocked the headlines in the Muslim World. This racially motivated act of barbarism has indicated to many the growing anti-Islamic sentiment in the European manufacturing heart. MP Maria Bohmer has also floated the idea of an 'integration contract' which

every immigrant wishing to stay in Germany must sign.

In British society, 'Institutionalized racism' is a prominent feature. Anti-terror laws specifically targeting Muslims have been passed which gives law-enforcing agencies a mandate to detain any person merely on the basis of suspicion without any evidence for 4 weeks.

In Sweden, leader of a far-rightist Sweden Democrats Party, Jimmie Akesson, has described Muslims as a 'major threat'.

In Netherlands, there have been calls to ban Quran. In Denmark, the infamous cartoons were first published.

Through these policies and practices, the anti-Islamic sentiment is fuelled and Muslims are deliberately provoked. Suspicion, intolerance and hatred of Islam have now become an essence of liberal democratic societies.

Xenophobia and the inherent assumption of superiority is part of the Europe's tradition. Germany in 1930s and Bosnia in 1990s illustrate the worst of Europe's treatment of minorities.

The current climate of intimidation has also underlined the inherent flaws that exist in the Secular system, a commodity which all of the above mentioned States believe to be as their

richest export.

The illusion that the Secular Europe is some bastion to tolerance now appears ridiculous. Contradictions within the basic ideals of Secularized world also now stand exposed. The licence of 'free speech' is granted to those who fuel propaganda against Islam but denied to those who speak out against western imperialism. In the same breath, Secular system allows liberal fanatics of fascist parties to gain political power by resorting to abuse, insults and discriminatory behaviour, where as minorities are intimidated and deprived of basic human rights. Creation of negative stereotypes is also considered vital, as Secular ideology cannot survive without it.

In the known human history, this secular age of man has been arguably the most bloody. And today, Europe's liberal democracies are finding it increasingly difficult to honour or even accept 'others'.

In this volatile atmosphere, Muslims must not stay silent out of fear or intimidation. Muslims also must not resort to violence or insult other people's belief, rather Muslims should engage in peaceful political and intellectual struggle against the western way of life i.e. Secularism that stands on an irrational and shaky ground.

## INTERVIEW: THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF THE AWARD WINNING MUSLIM MEDIA WATCH

By Ali Shariati

TMP caught up with Fatemeh Fakhraie, the brains behind the award winning blog Muslim Media Watch (MMW).

The blogsite has been going "fairly strong" since its launch in late 2007, Fatemeh began.

From starting off as a "one-woman operation", the site, which is entirely volunteer-based, now has "12 dedicated international contributors (and always looking for more)". As with other media based setups, MMW has its deadlines, schedules, and post assignments; but with "everyone located in different places, we can't all get together every week in a conference room, but we make it work", she tells me.

It might not all be volunteer based for long. The contributors may be happy to know (if they don't know already) that Fatemeh is working towards the direction of paying these hardworking sisters.

"My goal is to make MMW like any other professional magazine or website that pays its contributors."

Since its inception, MMW has "received some very positive feedback from other websites and women's organisations, including those of other faiths and/or with feminist outlooks".

She elaborates: "The most gratifying feedback I've ever received is to know that we're used as a learning tool in university classrooms—universities use MMW in classrooms for both gender and Middle East studies, and it makes me very proud to know that these students are getting an education that I didn't have."

As for the Muslim community, she says that "most of the response" has been "very supportive and encouraging". And if there is dissent, it's usually respectful.

"That's how we try to run things at MMW. But we receive far more support than anything else, and it's that support that we remember."

MMW also won the Brass Crescent Award 2009 for Best Female Blog last month, and it seems like third time lucky for the all female blog crew: "This is the third year MMW has been in the running and the first year that we've won an award (aside from an honourable mention), so I was very excited to hear the news!"

"My writers especially were excited, and I'm very proud of them. I do all the behind-the-scenes stuff, but their work is what keeps MMW going week after week. They're all very intelligent women whose talents MMW is lucky to showcase."

So, what about the most important and impactful story she believes MMW has covered so far: "I honestly can't think of any stories that we've had a huge impact on - it's either humility or just plain-forgetfulness," she says!

As for future plans, Fatemeh tells me to "stay tuned [for an] exciting new development" - a complete MMW redesign, which will be unveiled some time very soon.

Overall, however, her "continual goal is to keep expanding our coverage, keep getting contributors around the world (we need more coverage in continental Europe and the Middle East especially), and make MMW one of the most prominent voices pertaining to Muslim women's media criticism."

With the spotlight firmly on Muslims all over the world, Fatemeh observes: "Sexism, racism and Islamophobia against Muslim women are (unfortunately) not going anywhere, so we have a lot of work to do!"

I'm sure I speak on behalf of all TMP readers and the Muslim community in wishing Fatemeh and her dedicated dozen all the success in the future, aameen!

If you're interested in getting involved with MMW ([www.muslimahmediawatch.org](http://www.muslimahmediawatch.org)), you can email Fatemeh Fakhraie at: [editor@muslimahmediawatch.org](mailto:editor@muslimahmediawatch.org)




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