SHARIA LAW IS INCOMPATIBLE WITH HUMAN RIGHTS

Interview with Chris Moos, Pragna Patel and Gita Sahgal on the Victory Against the Law Society

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‘Execution is Itself the Murder of a Human Being’

Manifesto for Secularism

‘Execution is Itself the Murder of a Human Being’

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Maryam Namazie: The Law Society has now withdrawn its Sharia-compliant guidance on wills and issued an apology. Why did you initiate a campaign against it? Was it not a lot of fuss over nothing as some initially said?

Pragna Patel: It is easy to characterise this campaign as a ‘fuss about nothing’. The same was also said about our campaign against gender segregation in universities. What both incidents have in common is the ways in which so-called Sharia laws and values are normalised in public and institutional life as a ‘way of life’. Education and the law are key sites of control that religious fundamentalists and conservatives target. If we allow these forces to capture these sites, it will become impossible for us to challenge gender discrimination and inequality. The Law Society and its supporters argue that the Practice Note merely reiterates the fundamental principle in law that testators are free to leave their property to whomsoever they wish. This misses the point entirely that the Law Society does not exist to maintain discriminatory values in society but to challenge them. Our argument all along has been that it is a key legal institution that should be promoting a rights-based culture within the legal profession and the wider society and not a profoundly discriminatory Sharia-compliant culture.

Chris Moos: Quite to the contrary. We should remember that the Practice Note issued by the Law Society was supposed to “represent the Law Society’s view of good practice in a particular area”. Solicitors know that these Practice Notes will make it easier to account to oversight bodies for their actions.

Had the guidance not been withdrawn, solicitors would have not only felt encouraged, but possibly professionally obliged to advise Muslims to draw up wills that are clearly discriminatory. Unfortunately, some detractors used the initial reporting by right-wing media outlets to diminish this issue by claiming that “the law has not changed” - something we of course never claimed. But this case shows clearly that even without changes in the law, representative bodies like the Law Society can effectively facilitate discrimination against women and ‘illegitimate children’, particularly from minority backgrounds.

Gita Sahgal: At a minimum, the Law Society should ensure accuracy and good practice in a guidance note.
It really shocked me that a professional body could get away with work that was shoddy and inaccurate as well as discriminatory. It is really hard to know where to start with the problems of the Note. What does ‘Sharia-compliant’ mean? The use of that term should ring alarm bells – since it moves the Law Society firmly into the realm of theology. The Centre for Secular Space works with lawyers in various countries in South Asia. Their point was that the Note failed to cite a single, actual law in any country. Family laws in many former British colonies are still governed by religion. But this was not a Note about the personal law system and would have provided no accurate guidance about how to negotiate that system, while finding legal ways to mitigate the effect of discriminatory laws. There are many good lawyers practising in countries which have Muslim personal interpretations of the current state of law. Without a consideration of case law, even a precise description of statutory law would be useless.

**Maryam Namazie:** Part of the success of the campaign was that it took action on many fronts - from protesting on the streets to threats of legal action. Please explain.

**Pragna Patel:** Yes. The combination of legal and political action was very effective in this case and it was very important. The law itself is increasingly become a site of contestation between feminists and religious fundamentalists everywhere, including the UK. We have to use the law where we can, especially equality and human rights laws that have themselves come out of political struggles by women and others. But we also have to be alert to the fact these very tools

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laws (I suspect only fundamentalists pedal the term ‘Sharia-compliant’), who could have provided sound advice on the law (not theology). They certainly did not think this was a ‘fuss about nothing’. I think that in Pakistan and Bangladesh, they were appalled that the Law Society could have promoted the concept of ‘Sharia-compliance’ and the idea that their countries are law-free zones where mullahs are sources of legal advice. In case your readers haven’t studied the Note and other materials with the same attention we have, the Note advises going to the local mosque for advice.

From my legal colleagues, I was also given examples of case law which has an impact on the interpretation of statutory law. Even if the Law Society failed to grasp the personal law system – which is a colonial hangover, but doesn’t exist in Britain – you would think that they would know that all south Asian countries work under systems similar to British common law and depend on case law for their are themselves under threat of subversion by religious fundamentalists when they are not seeking to exclude their application altogether in relation to women and other minorities. But the law cannot of itself help to safeguard or progress human rights. Ultimately transformation can only come about through sustained political pressure. That is why the protests outside the Law Society were important. They helped to make the struggle visible, to publicly shame the Law Society and to hold it to account in public.

**Maryam Namazie:** The Law Society apologised and said its intention was not to endorse discrimination. This is important in that it is usually opposition to Sharia law that is seen as “discrimination” against the "Muslim community". What’s the significance of this?

**Pragna Patel:** The apology was significant for two important reasons: Firstly, it vindicated our stance: if

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the Law Society was right all along in maintaining that it was only reiterating the legal principle that testators are entitled to leave their property to whomever they wish and that the guidance was not in breach of equalities duties, then why issue the apology at all? I suspect that the Law Society fell under immense internal pressure from its members to recognise that its position was untenable in respect of promoting equality legislation and its own policies on equality. It was forced to recognise that the guidance has no precedence in law anywhere in the world. I also suspect that it realised that it had not consulted minority women in particular, whose rights the Law Society was encouraging other lawyers to violate!

Secondly, the Law Society’s apology is highly significant precisely because it is an acknowledgement that what is passed off as Sharia laws are nothing but highly discriminatory codes of conduct that are completely incompatible with human rights. This is the true significance of the Law Society’s withdrawal of the guidance and one which we must emphasise over and over again.

Maryam Namazie: It does feel like the tide is turning what with small victories over the Law Society, against the Universities UK’s guidance endorsing segregation of the sexes, as well as new investigations into Islamist “charities” or Islamist-led schools, which are issues we have been campaigning on for many years. Also with the rise of ISIS, people are beginning to see the distinctions between Islamists and Muslims and acknowledge our argument that Islamists are part of the religious-Right. Would you agree?

Pragna Patel: It does feel like the tide is turning but we must not forget that it wouldn’t be turning without the campaigns that we are waging, often in the face of hostility and opposition from elements of the Left and Right. What it tells us is that we must be eternally vigilant to the need to challenge religious fundamentalists, their apologists and state institutions that seek to accommodate religion in the misguided belief that the right to manifest religious belief can trump other equality concerns. We have a long way to go in ensuring that religion has no place at the public table, even though we have won these small but not insignificant victories.

Chris Moos: Yes, I would agree, but change is taking place slowly. After our victory, I contacted the authors of the articles that had branded opposition to the Practice Note as ”another Sharia scare story” and ”anti-Muslim conspiracy theories”. None of them apologised, or even acknowledged any wrong-doing. This is symptomatic. As many on the Left or the Right still think they are fighting the good cause by branding reactionary Islamist demands as the ”demands of Muslims”, they continue to wilfully conflate and homogenise Islamism, Islam, Muslims, and individual citizens who happen to be Muslim. Given the high profile cases of Universities UK and the Law Society, some are now waking up to finally realise that it is exactly this attitude that contributes to the othering of Muslim citizens, but far too many are not. I recall with horror how feminists like Laurie Penny proudly declared that opposition to gender segregation amounted to ”Islamophobia” and ”an attack on yet another Muslim practice”, while New Statesman and Telegraph communists insisted that they “don’t mind” gender segregation, as it does not affect them. While these voices are becoming quieter, the underlying attitudes undoubtedly still exist.

Gita Sahgal: I think we are creating important examples of the use of human rights to control and contain extremism and fundamentalism. But there is a vast difference between winning the legal argument and achieving full implementation. Still, the widespread condemnation of the Law Society and the fact that they had to back down so comprehensively, should give them brief pause for thought. A lot of people are claiming this victory – including those who did nothing at all. Others were dangerous in saying that they would prefer better Sharia – thus failing to understand anything about the issue and making our lives more difficult. While these victories are

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important, we have to understand that we are facing a huge, powerful and concerted opposition. For every brick we remove from their argument, they will start building a wall. So I don’t think the tide is really turning. But there is a vocal progressive, secularism emerging which also opposes bigotry.

Maryam Namazie: What needs to happen next at various levels in government and public bodies and institutions for one law for all and citizenship rights to become a reality?

Pragna Patel: We need to safeguard the tools that we have to hold state and religious power to account because they are being taken away from us. Our very right to political protest and to access justice are rights that are under threat due to the combined impact of regressive state policies and austerity measures. What this tells us is that we need to connect our struggle against religious fundamentalism with struggles for access to justice, the right to political protest and to a welfare state. These struggles are indivisible. We cannot aspire to equality and freedom in one sphere of our lives alone. As feminists, our struggle has always been about freedom in the family, community and the state.

Chris Moos: What we have been seeing for years is that public bodies have been following a highly contradictory strategy. On the one hand, they are promoting extreme and ultra-conservative expressions of religion through multifaithist policies, for example in the area of faith schools. On the other hand, they are using illiberal measures to crack down on the extreme groups they had helped to flourish in the first place. Supporting non-violent extremists is still seen as an appropriate means of containing more extreme or violent groups. The problems we are seeing will not be resolved until both Conservatives and post-modernists Leftists stop using culture and religion for identity politics. In the end, public bodies will have to realise that secular neutrality in matters of religion and belief will help to address many of the issues that are haunting British civil society.

Maryam Namazie: Sharia law is highly contested here in Britain and elsewhere. Some use concern over Sharia to promote their anti-Muslim and xenophobic agenda - groups from the EDL to UKIP and Sharia Watch. Others oppose the likes of the Law Society’s endorsement of Sharia wills whilst defending “better interpretations” of Sharia law. What’s different in our strategy and principles and why should people be joining us? Also, is it not divisive to exclude some who want to join in the “fight against Sharia”?

Pragna Patel: I see our overall struggle as a struggle for social justice and democracy which includes the struggles against patriarchy, racism, nationalism and religious fundamentalism. If we believe in equality and democracy and the universality of these principles, we cannot then for the sake of political expediency, embrace the political and far-Right that use the struggle for secular laws as a cover for their

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anti-Muslim, racist and anti-immigration agenda. Our version of secularism unlike that of UKIP, EDL and others on the political right, is one that is rooted in wider struggles against inequality, racism and social injustice. However, unlike sections of the Left, we will not prioritise any of these struggles or apologise for serious harms committed against women and other minorities in our communities for the sake of defending so-called religious identities and communities which have come to be defined by illiberal and fundamentalist religionists. It is not us who are divisive and exclusionary. On the contrary, we wish to build a progressive movement that is inclusive of anyone and everyone so long as they share our vision of a just society in which secular human rights law and values prevail in our state institutions and in the public culture of all communities.

Chris Moos: Simply being "against Sharia" does not qualify anyone to be part of the struggle against the religious far-Right. We are fighting for secularism, equality, social justice and human rights. While they opportunistically might use the language of human rights or secularism, the likes of the EDL, UKIP, BNP or Pamela Geller have an agenda that is diametrically opposed to our goals. We also have to acknowledge that secularism is a political ideology. As such, we are moving in a political space where secularism is predominantly opposed by groups and parties on the Right, as well as the post-modernist Left. In today’s Britain, the fight for secularism thus necessarily goes hand in hand with a fight against these groups and their ideology.

Maryam Namazie: What are the next hurdles? Where must we go from here?

Pragna Patel: The hurdles are many and immense but we need to carry on doing what we do by forging wider alliances and solidarity with those that share our politics and objectives here and abroad. This task is easier said than done but we must use every space that is afforded to us to keep shouting and remain visible. By doing so, we can show that a more progressive, alternative world free from greed, violence and injustice is possible and within our reach.

Gita Sahgal: Our definition of fundamentalism and our argument for secularism is much better located in universal human rights than the government’s use of the term ‘extremism’ and the demand to sign up to British values. We have to go on making the positive arguments for secular space to be expanded and to go on limiting the spread of fundamentalist influence. We cannot do this without combating the idea that Muslims are not ethically capable of embracing full human rights and therefore must live within their religion controlled by some religious leader or other. In fact successive governments in Britain have chosen to use religious influence to contain Muslims. The Law Society example shows that the financial interest in making money out of ‘Sharia’ was likely to be a driver in this ridiculous Note. We also need to work further with people in other countries who see Britain as an exporter of fundamentalism and terrorism and not a promoter of freedom.

Pragna Patel is Director of Southall Black Sisters. Chris Moos is a Secular Activist and Gita Sahgal is Director of Centre for Secular Space.
Maryam Namazie: You have been unrelenting in your activism against execution and stoning. In your opinion, what is the significance of the struggle against execution and stoning?

Mina Ahadi: When I was young, I took part in the Iranian revolution. When the Islamic regime took power in Iran, we became witness to a government, which from day one, began executing and stoning to suppress people, to suppress women and in order to consolidate itself.

My life changed when I, as a woman, witnessed a stoning. After seeing and hearing about the first stonings, I was no longer the Mina Ahadi of the day before the incident. I felt if only the world understood what stoning was (which I too didn’t understand at the time; I said to myself what does it mean; what do they do?). By using the most modern tools, they would announce it on the radio and television, and then bring a living, breathing woman, wrap her in a shroud, and then some would surround her and throw stones at her – the majority were men and those linked to the regime - until she was tortured to death. At the time, the question for me was who killed this woman and why such brutality? The answer, in my opinion, was that it was meant to frighten those women who were watching on the sidelines.

The distance between an ordinary woman’s life until the ditch in which she is stoned is very short indeed in an Islamic state and under Sharia law. So it was important for me as a woman if I wanted to defend my own dignity, if I wanted to speak, if I wanted to not be fearful that I would face similar accusations of having a relationship with someone in my own home, if I wanted to defend women’s rights, I would have to struggle against stoning. In many ways, my life has become intertwined with this issue. I have been active against stoning for many, many years. Not only this, but I can hear the voices of those condemned to stoning: their words, their faces, their memories. It must be noted that after many years the struggle has reached a place where the Islamic regime of Iran has been forced to stop stoning de facto.

Also, briefly on the issue of execution. Execution is also an important issue in Iran and countries under Islamic rule and generally throughout the world. I am opposed to execution everywhere but when it comes to Iran and countries like Iran, execution is an important tool to intimidate people, to terrorise them. If we want to defend people, workers, women, youth... we are forced to struggle against execution. At the same time, for me as a human being, it is important to do so. Can you believe that I have the voices of 18 people on death row saved on my phone? When one hears their voices, one cannot remain silent and not act.

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Maryam Namazie: When we look at the situation of executions in Iran, it’s a very clear example of the repugnance of Sharia law and also the very act of execution. Can you speak about this?

Mina Ahadi: When I go to various conferences and speak, many say that executions take place in the United States too. I know that execution in any place is inhuman and brutal and must be prohibited everywhere. But when I compare the judicial system of the Islamic regime of Iran with other countries, then I can say without reservation that Iran and countries like it don’t have courts that properly examine cases.

For example, in certain criminal offences, let’s say when a murder takes place, even before investigating the crime or looking at evidence, they beat and torture the accused. They want a murderer right away; the first person they get their hands on will do. Lawyers don’t have permission to speak. The judge has full say based on Sharia law. I have seen a case where the judge opened Khomeini’s book, looked through it and then condemned the person to death! It is fundamentally a system of suppression. It is a criminal system. In my opinion, very little has been said about this in the world. I personally think we should say that this is fascism, Islamic fascism. And anyone who is brought before the court – be they a political activist, atheist, drug addict, or woman who has committed murder – it doesn’t matter. No one has any rights in those courts. In my opinion, this is an important issue. You know, in Iran, we are dealing with a regime for which killing is the easiest of tasks. It is because of this that we see such high numbers of executions. They have executed thousands of political prisoners, hundreds of atheists merely for not believing in God. They have executed hundreds of drug addicts...

There are many in prison right now who I call the “reserve army”. Whenever the regime feels there is unrest somewhere, they execute ten of these people without it being known why they were even arrested in the first place. I have spoken to and I’m in contact with a lot of families. One says, for example, they stashed drugs in her husband’s shop then arrested him because he was known and well respected in their neighbourhood and an opponent of the regime. This is how the system works.

Maryam Namazie: A number of human rights groups critical of the executions refer to unfair trials and say that the outcome would be different if the trial was fair under the current system - that the person wouldn’t have been executed. Is that how it is? You mentioned how this is not the case, but can you explain further?

Mina Ahadi: In Iran we are faced with a movement which calls itself “reformist”; it has been part of the regime. At times they have had some problems and been pushed out of the government. In my opinion, they have always tried to make justifications for executions, to make it ‘relative’ as the Germans say. They raise the issue of “arbitrary” executions, or the large numbers killed as if execution in and of itself has any legitimacy. In my opinion, execution is a tool for suppression everywhere. Execution is not a response to anything. I’d like to talk here about Reyhaneh Jabbari, the most recent case we are working on. She was 19 years old. Someone wanted to rape her. She used a knife from the house and fled. She didn’t want to be raped. They arrested her and took her to court but first they tortured her and pulled out her toenails in order to get a confession. Then they took her to court and condemned her to execution for premeditated murder. There was no examination into the attempted rape, the manner in which women are treated in society, the society’s role in this incident... They didn’t look into why she went there in the first place – because she was looking for a job to earn money. All these are relevant. They deny society an investigation into the phenomenon and immediately issue execution orders. In this instance, it is an official of the regime who has been killed so it has also become a security matter.
Maryam Namazie: The reality is that you have saved a lot of people from stoning and execution with your efforts in the International Committees against Stoning and Execution. Pressure is effective even in situations where things seem hopeless.

Mina Ahadi: Now that you have given me the opportunity, I would like to defend the type of work we do. Many times when I do interviews, I will be told that we need to struggle in general and fight for the overthrow of the Islamic regime of Iran. They will ask why we focus on specific campaigns like this. In my opinion, a degree of the success of the International Committees against Stoning and Execution has been our focus on specific cases. If you look at London, where we are now, or anywhere else in the world, if you want to get the attention of your neighbour, if you want to move them, you must have a photo; you must be able to show life. You can’t just say thousands have been executed, come protest with me. You can say this but in order to be able to have an impact in this world you must be able to say: look at this picture; it’s someone like you who needs your help in Iran or they want to execute her. We’ve been very successful in this way. In my opinion, what we did was to give a face to those on death row. We defended the dignity of those condemned to execution or stoning in Iran. We tried to bring their cases to the world’s attention and not only their attention but to join their hearts with, for example, a woman in Iran called Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani who was at risk of stoning. I think these activities – the characteristics of which are also very important in today’s world - have had a huge impact in making the world take notice. If anyone wants to look at our work or give us credit, it should be because we created a platform and conditions so that the person who is strolling in a park and has many problems of their own from work and so on, can have an opportunity to intervene when they are saddened to hear that someone is facing death by stoning. With a click, with a demonstration, with a donation, with a protest action, they can share in taking a stand in the worldwide opposition to stoning.

Maryam Namazie: Apart from the important role of saving individual lives, another crucial role that you have played has been to make the fight against execution into a widespread social issue. There is a social movement in Iran which doesn’t necessarily yet exist in many countries like the US. In my opinion, that role is very important. How to do see the social aspect of the struggle against executions?

Mina Ahadi: I think you raise a good point. In Iran, there is very clearly a movement against executions that doesn’t exist in China, for example, even though

“No one, no state, no group has the right to kill a person – whatever the reason. Execution is itself the murder of a human being and must be prohibited. But execution is now a political phenomenon. With execution, they create fear; fascists stay in power via executions. States create a climate of terror.”

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there are many executions there. I say this often. In the streets of London, Paris, or wherever I go, I always see a group of people with placards protesting against executions in Iran. You don't see these types of scenes very often with regards to executions in China or the US.

In my opinion, too, in Iran this is the case because of the widespread executions, the brutality of the Islamic regime, but also because of the existence of an opposition which has focused on this issue. We must close the file on those who claim to defend human beings whilst remaining silent on the daily executions. I often say that you must pull down the shutters of any political party which doesn’t speak about the executions in Iran. We have focused on this issue, have been active, and not just by issuing press releases, which is also important. We have cried with the families, have raced against time with the mothers to save the lives of their loved ones. We have been in direct contact with prisoners themselves, interviewed them, organised international actions. This as well as the fact that people in Iran have become active, including the families, artists... Reyhanéh’s campaign has been very interesting. Iranian artists, in Iran and abroad, have spoken about it. And what has happened now is the “movement for forgiveness”. It’s important.

This morning when I first woke up like every morning, I checked to see how many had been executed. Unfortunately this is a part of my life to see how many they have executed every day. A year ago when I came to London I had to speak somewhere and said that the regime had executed 11 people that day. When I looked at the news today, I saw instead that they had taken 6 people from Rajaieszahr prison to execute them; however, 3 of them were forgiven by the victims’ families at the gallows itself. 2 were given a chance to reconsider. 1 person was unfortunately executed from the 6. This shows that the scaffolds are falling. This is very important. From 6 people! I came happily to this programme because I said to myself, people are moving beyond the gallows.

If anyone wants the Islamic regime to be overthrown, its gallows must be overthrown first. Now, three people from Rajaieszahr prison were forgiven today. This movement for forgiveness is important. As a result of daily experiences, people have seen that executions are pointless. The Islamic regime brings in the families of the victims into the execution process. Now victims’ families are saying "no" to execution. I have contacts in Iran. The families are saying: “if I don’t forgive, people, my neighbours, won’t look at me”. This is what is happening.
Transgender women are calling for changes to the law to enable them to inherit property. Although individuals were granted the right to identify as Hijra and have been recognised as a third gender in law they are still barred from inheriting or even claiming their inheritance under the laws that apply in Bangladesh. It was recommended that if the law was enacted Hijras should be allowed to choose whether or not to inherit as a male or a female, since men are entitled to more than women under Sharia law.

After 5 years on death row, Reyhaneh Jabbari was hanged by the Islamic regime of Iran on 25th October 2014, despite international appeals for a reprieve. She had acted in self-defence when Abdolali Sarbandi attempted to sexually assault her, and that her confession had been obtained under duress. She was 26 years old.

The lives of Iraqi women and girls, many from the minority Yazidi religion, are being systematically destroyed under the advancing Islamic State (or ISIS). IS has used its online magazine to justify the practice of taking slaves saying “One should remember that enslaving the families of the kuffar -- the infidels -- and taking their women as concubines is a firmly established aspect of the Shariah, or Islamic law”. Girls and women who have managed to escape ISIS have explained how their slave trade works.

British Iranian Ghoncheh Ghavami 25 joined a protest in June to challenge gender segregation rules that apply to Iranian sporting events featuring male teams. She was arrested, released and rearrested, moved from prison to prison while she and her family have been kept in the dark regarding the charges against her. Ghoncheh is currently out on bail and staying with family in Tehran, while the campaign continues to have charges against her dropped altogether.

A bill was passed in the Islamic Assembly in Iran allowing paramilitary forces to enforce compulsory Islamic dress codes. The Bill coincides with efforts to introduce legislation protecting vigilantes who take it upon themselves to “correct” fellow citizens' whose state of veiling they regard it as inadequate. The move is believed to be linked to a string of acid attacks on women which have blighted Iranian society recently, and have been the subject of huge public protests on 25th October some of which can be seen here.

The Malaysian Sharia system has traditionally banned men and transgender women from wearing clothes that are considered to be women’s clothing. That ruling has recently been overturned in the appeals court which described the law as "degrading, oppressive, and inhumane". Three transgendered

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women who had been involved in the case were arrested four years ago by Islamic Officers for the crime of cross-dressing.

SAUDI ARABIA

The Shura Council which advises King Abdullah has recommended that the ban on women drivers be lifted, with certain provisos: only women over 30 will be allowed to drive, they must be off the roads by 8pm and, no make up is allowed behind the wheel. Also any woman wishing to avail herself of the new freedom to drive would need to secure the permission of a male relative, and once on the road she would be subject to a range of restrictions regarding any interaction with male drivers or traffic police – in fact a male driver could be prosecuted and sentenced to a month in jail for speaking to a female driver. The ban has been protested in various forms since 1990, when 50 women were arrested and faced legal sanctions including having their passports confiscated for driving. More recently female drivers have been posting footage of themselves taking the wheel on social media.

SYRIA

An area in the North East of Syria which has been under self rule since the outbreak of civil war has issued a 30-point decree declaring “equality between men and women in all spheres of public and private life”. The self-ruling democracy of Jazira province has stated in its decree that, among other things, women have the right to run for office, to work and be paid, to divorce and to inherit.

TURKEY

Recep Tayyip Erdogan has infuriated rights activists in Turkey by claiming that gender equality is against nature. This is not the first time Erdogan has raised hackles among rights campaigners – he has commented on women's unsuitability for some work and his views on motherhood are considered by some to constitute infringements on women’s autonomy over their own lives and bodies.

News stories compiled by Emma Robertson.
A new report by Save the Children titled “Too Young To Wed” has revealed that amongst the many devastating effects of the civil war in Syria is the increase in the number of forced marriages of Syrian refugee girls in Jordan, where the rate of child marriage has doubled from 13% in pre conflict times.

Artwork by the girls created can be seen here.

Photos via Buzzfeed by Rosie Thompson/Save the Children
Join us on 7 February for a day-conference on Sharia Law, Apostasy and Secularism in London. Speakers and attendees will discuss the Law Society win, the struggle against Islamism and the religious-Right, and the ongoing campaigns for secularism, equality, and civil rights.

The conference will include panel discussions and speeches on the situation of ex-Muslims in Britain and internationally, Apostasy and Blasphemy Laws, Islamism and the religious-Right, Sharia in the Law, Educational System and Public Policy, as well as the Veil and Burqa. Speakers will discuss the successful campaigns against the Law Society and Universities UK and how the fight for equal rights and an end to discrimination against ex-Muslims are integral to the urgent fight against Islamism and the religious-Right and for a secular society.

Click here for more information and to register for this event.
The two-day International Conference on the Religious Right, Secularism and Civil Rights held in London during 11-12 October 2014 was a rousing success.

A broad coalition of secularists, including believers, free-thinkers, agnostics and atheists assembled from the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and the Diaspora at the unprecedented and historic gathering to discuss resistance against the repression and violence of ISIS and other manifestations of the religious-Right, including in Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Israel, Libya, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Turkey, Tunisia and Yemen. They also discussed the urgent need to defend secularism, universal values and citizenship rights.

The 250 delegates made an unequivocal stand with the brave women and men of Kobane saying: “Their struggle is ours. Their fight is a fight for us all. We are all, today, Kobane.”

The conference, which was convened by Algerian sociologist Marieme Helie Lucas and Iranian-born Campaigner Maryam Namazie, adopted a Manifesto for Secularism which criticised neo-conservatism, neo-liberalism, communalism and cultural relativism and affirmed the complete separation of religion from the state and
The conference highlighted the voices of the many persecuted and exiled, the long standing resistance against the religious-Right and the depth and strength of the demand for secularism all over the world despite grave risks. It also set the stage for the development of a broad international front for secularism to challenge the religious-Right, racism and all forms of bigotry.

The Conference called on people everywhere to join the International Front for Secularism and strengthen a human alternative to the religious-Right.

Speakers at the conference included philosopher AC Grayling; Aliyah Saleem who spent 6 years in an Islamic school in Britain; Tunisian University of Manouba Professor Amel Grami; social and political analyst and...
commentator Bahram Soroush; French writer Caroline Fourest; secular student activist Chris Moos; Senior Researcher at the International Center for Ethnic Studies in Sri Lanka Chulani Kodikara; Indian labour historian Dilip Simeon; Yemeni writer and activist Elham Manea; Co-Founder of Muslim Women Research and Action Front from Sri Lanka Faizun Zackariya; founder of the Iranian Secular Society Fariborz Pooya; Senegalese International Director of Women Living Under Muslim Laws Fatou Sow; Director of Centre for Secular Space Gita Sahgal; Leader of the Worker-Communist Party of Iran Hamid Taqvaee; One Secular School System in Ontario Campaigner Homa Arjomand; Director of the Afghanistan Human Rights Research and Advocacy Consortium Horia Mosadiq; FEMEN leader Inna Shevchenko; co-founder of Justice for Women Julie Bindel; author Karima Bennoune; writer Kenan Malik; Pakistani-born human rights activist Kiran Opal; Iranian writer -journalist and documentary filmmaker Lila Ghobady; Ex-Muslim Maha Kamal; Libyan president of Hakki Magdulien Abaida; Tunisian filmmaker Nadia El Fani; Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain Spokesperson Nahla Mahmoud; Vice President of the Atheist Coalition in Poland Nina Sankari; Founder member of Women Against Fundamentalism Nira Davis-Yuval; Pakistani nuclear physicist and social activist Pervez Hoodbhoy; Human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell; Southall Black Sisters Director Pragna Patel; founder of the Ex-Muslims of Scotland Ramin Forghani; author Rumy Hassan; Turkish MP Safak Pavey; journalist Salil Tripathi; Iranian/German writer Siba Shakib; Founder of Association pour la mixité, l’égalité et la laïcité Soad Baba Aïssa; co-founder of Survivors Voice Europe Sue Cox; Executive Director of Ain o Salish Kendra in Bangladesh Sultana Kamal; Director of Muslim Educational Centre of Oxford Taj Hargey; Bangladeshi-born writer Taslima Nasrin; President of the National Secular Society Terry Sanderson and women’s rights campaigner Yasmin Rehman.

Acclaimed pianist and composer Anne Lovett; comedians Daphna Baram (AKA MissD), Kate Smurthwaite and Sameena Zehra as well as LCP dance company and singer/songwriter Shelley Segal provided entertainment.
The Indonesian band SIMPONI was announced winner of One Law for All’s Sounds of Freedom award with their entry “Sister in Danger”, a tribute to Indonesian victims of sexual violence.

The Conference was endorsed by Atheist Alliance International; Bread and Roses TV; Children First Now; Center for Inquiry; Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain; Equal Rights Now – Organisation against Women’s Discrimination in Iran; Fitnah – Movement for Women’s Liberation; International Committee against Execution; International Federation of Iranian Refugees; Iran Solidarity; National Secular Society; One Law for All; Pink Triangle Trust; Secularism is a Women’s Issue; The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science UK; and Women Living Under Muslim Laws amongst others.

Videos and more photos from the conference can be found on the conference website.
MANIFESTO FOR SECULARISM

The Manifesto for Secularism was adopted at the 11-12 October International Conference on the Religious-Right, Secularism and Civil Rights. The Conference called on people everywhere to join the International Front for Secularism and strengthen a human alternative to the religious-Right.

YOU CAN ADD YOUR NAME TO THE MANIFESTO HERE

Our era is marked by the rise of the religious-Right – not because of a “religious revival” but rather due to the rise of far-Right political movements and states using religion for political supremacy. This rise is a direct consequence of neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism and the social policies of communalism and cultural relativism. Universalism, secularism and citizenship rights have been abandoned and segregation of societies and “communities” based on ethnicity, religion and culture have become the norm.

The Islamic State (formerly ISIS), the Saudi regime, Hindutva (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) in India, the Christian-Right in the US and Europe, Bodu Bala Sena in Sri Lanka, Haredim in Israel, AQMI and MUJAO in Mali, Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria are examples of this.

For many decades now, people in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and the Diaspora have been the first victims but also on the frontlines of resistance against the religious-Right (whether religious states, organisations and movements) and in defence of secularism and universal rights, often at great risk to their lives.

We call on people everywhere to stand with us to establish an international front against the religious-Right and for secularism.

We demand:

1. Complete separation of religion from the state. Secularism is a fundamental right.
2. Separation of religion from public policy, including the educational system, health care and scientific research.
3. Abolition of religious laws in the family, civil and criminal codes. An end to discrimination against and persecution of LGBT, religious minorities, women, freethinkers, ex-Muslims, and others.
5. Equality between women and men and citizenship rights for all.

CLICK TO SIGN THE MANIFESTO.
A vast secular movement against the religious-Right is never more needed than in the ISIS era - whether it be in Sri Lanka vis-a-vis the Buddhist Right, India versus the Hindu-Right, the Christian-Right in the USA and Europe or against Islamism from Iran, Algeria to Pakistan. This vast secular movement provides a marker, a human alternative and brings hope in the face of fear and unbridled brutality.

The response to the likes of ISIS and the Taliban which recently massacred schoolchildren in Peshawar is not more militarism, which with cultural relativism has created the climate for the rise of the religious-Right. It is not more Iraq-isation of the world into religious, ethnic, cultural communities and societies, dividing people into every imagined homogenous grouping other than human and citizen. The response is not more “wars on terror” and attacks on civil rights or the legitimisation of torture and executions. It is not xenophobia and bigotry. It is not seeking out the “moderates” and appeasement or behind the scene wheeling and dealings with Islamists. It is also not -as the post-modernist Left have done - defending and siding with the oppressors at the expense of real live human beings. The response in the face of unbridled barbarity cannot be more barbarity and inhumanity.

Those on the frontlines know full well that an uncompromising defence of secularism – the separation of religion from the state – and an insistence on equality and citizenship rights are key in the fight against the religious-Right. Secularism is not a western ideal; it is a demand and necessity for people across the globe. It is not only atheists who are secularists. Many believers and nonbelievers in the Middle East, N Africa, Asia and the Diaspora are secularists – even if they don’t call themselves that. In fact, theocracies give little room for the expression of belief, including for many believers, as ISIS’ murder and intimidation of anyone who doesn’t agree with them shows. No one understands the need for secularism than those living under the boot of the religious-Right. A demand for secularism, citizenship rights and universalism is our response to the religious-Right.

Secularism.
Today.
Now.
To the millions of people who followed the fate of this young girl, to the thousands who took to the streets to save dear Reyhaneh, to the thousands of mothers in Iran who shed tears and begged for forgiveness on the media, we sadly have to report that Reyhaneh Jabbari was executed this morning.

This is a horrific piece of news on this bloody Saturday, when people are set to come out on the streets in the cities across Iran to protest against the acid attacks on women. We hope that a magnificent protest by the people today will be a fitting response to this brutal and shameless crime of the Islamic regime in Iran.

The Islamic regime’s ideologues, its professional criminals and murderers, the real killers of Sarbandi (whom Reyhaneh was accused of killing), all banded together and despite an enormous international outcry executed this young woman. They put Reyhaneh under pressure in prison, extracted confessions, filmed the scenes and then killed her. This is the regime of Iran’s ISIS.

The execution of Reyhaneh and the many years of dealing with the judicial system of the Islamic Republic over the fate of Reyhaneh showed to the world the hideousness and viciousness of this regime and its judicial system.

Let everyone see the kind of monsters the people of Iran are dealing with. Let the world see that the one skill the heads of the Islamic regime, from the supreme leader to Rafsanjani, the president Rouhani, the paramilitary force Sepah and the Ministry of Intelligence, have in common is this: murder, lying and barbarity.

Millions of people see this now. The regime lied to the grieving parents of a young girl who for seven years fought to save their loved one; they spread rumours and did everything they could to stop Reyhaneh’s parents from saving their daughter.

Even before telling Reyhaneh’s family that they had killed Reyhaneh, they callously announced the news of the execution through their state media, while Reyhaneh’s mum and dad, sister and grandma were waiting outside the prison gates.

This is the abhorrent regime of the Islamic Republic. This is the regime of Islamic criminals, the ISIS ruling Iran.

If they don’t kill, how are they going to deal with others like Reyhaneh? How are they going to deal with the youth shaking the ground under the feet; those who don’t give a damn for the mullahs, Islamic leaders and the loathsome Islamic Republic?

But the regime in Iran should be certain of this: by killing Reyhaneh, they will only harvest a storm.

The International Committee against Execution calls on all to turn the sorrow and pain of the loss of Reyhaneh to public rage against the foundations of the murderous Islamic regime.
Fitnah – Movement for Women’s Liberation is a protest movement demanding freedom, equality, and secularism and calling for an end to misogynist cultural, religious and moral laws and customs, compulsory veiling, sex apartheid, sex trafficking, and violence against women. We remind the Islamic regime of Iran and Islamists everywhere that the women’s liberation movement is a source of fitnah for their rule alone. We are Islamism’s worst fitnah!

To join Fitnah – Movement for Women’s Liberation, visit here. Click ‘like’ on our Facebook page.

Supporters include: Amina Tyler, Tunisian topless activist; Avijit Roy, Activist, Bangladesh; Chadi Bejjani, Lebanese Atheists, Lebanon; Dya Ahmad, Member of Youth Parliament in Iraq and Secretary of Student and Youth organisation in Iraq; Harold Walter Kroto, Nobel Prize in Chemistry Winner, UK; Imad Iddine Habib, Founder, Moroccan Council of Ex-Muslims, Morocco; Inna Shevchenko, Spokesperson, FEMEN, France; Karl Karnadi, Founder, Indonesian Atheists, Indonesia; Lloyd Newson, Director of DV8 Physical Theatre, UK; Maryam Jamel, Organisation of Women’s Liberation of Iraq; Nadia El-Fani, Tunisian Filmmaker; most recent films “Neither Allah nor Master” and “Our Breasts; Our Arms”, France; Raheel Raza, President, Council for Muslims Facing Tomorrow, Canada; Safia Lebdi, Founder, “Les insoumis-es”, France; Shahin Najafi, Independent Anarchist Artist, Germany; Soad Baba Aissa, President, of Association pour l’ Egalité, la Mixité et la Laïcité en Algérie, France; Soraya L. Chemaly, Writer and Activist, USA; Tarek Fatah, Writer, Canada; Taslima Nasrin, Bangladeshi Writer, India; Waleed Al-Husseini, Palestinian Blogger and Founder of Council of Ex-Muslims of France, France; and Zari Asli, Women’s Rights Campaigner, Canada.