

Australian media seizes upon Muslim cleric's comments to whip up xenophobia

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2 November 2006

The Australian media, working hand in hand with the Howard government and the opposition Labor Party, has seized upon a sermon delivered last month by a Sydney-based Islamic cleric to escalate its hysterical campaign against Muslims.

Last Thursday, the *Australian* published translated excerpts from a sermon delivered by Sheik Taj Din al-Hilali last month, in which the Muslim cleric appeared to blame rape victims for their plight. "She is the one wearing a short dress, lifting it up, lowering it down, then a look, then a smile, then a word, then a greeting, then a chat, then a date, then a meeting, then a crime, then Long Bay Jail, then comes a merciless judge who gives you 65 years," he said. This was an apparent reference to the extraordinarily harsh sentence imposed on 20-year-old Bilal Skaf for gang rape convictions in Sydney six years ago.

Hilali quoted an Islamic scholar who said that rape victims should be imprisoned for life because "if she hadn't left the meat uncovered, the cat wouldn't have snatched it". He then continued, "If she was in her room, in her house, wearing her hijab, being chaste, the disasters wouldn't have happened".

The position that women are responsible for rape—which is, by definition, non-consensual—is backward and reactionary. The current political and media campaign against Hilali's comments, however, is entirely hypocritical. It has nothing to do with a principled opposition to sexual violence against women. The banner of women's rights and sexual equality is being cynically paraded by the most right-wing and chauvinist forces in order to advance their own agenda.

"I don't think there is any doubt that [Hilali] was not expressing Australian values," Prime Minister John Howard declared. "I can say without fear of contradiction that what he said is repugnant to Australian values."

In fact, the conception that some rape victims had "asked for it" by their behaviour or dress is widespread in contemporary Australian society. In the legal sphere, for example, only a small percentage of rape allegations result in conviction, largely because defence lawyers are permitted to aggressively cross examine victims and insinuate that they had encouraged the assault because of their sexual histories, or what they were wearing, drinking, or doing.

Moreover, the biblical-based motif of the sinful female temptress is a central aspect of Christian theology. Many

Christian churches and other religious organisations openly instruct their female followers to dress conservatively to avoid provoking male lust. The government, with the full support of the Labor Party, has actively courted such layers and promoted their intervention in political and cultural life.

An instructive comparison can be made between Howard's reaction to Hilali's sermon and his defence of the Exclusive Brethren, a Christian cult. The well-funded organisation, which has sponsored right-wing political campaigns in Australia, New Zealand, and the US, prohibits its members from voting and going to university. Married women in the cult are not permitted to work, while unmarried women are barred from any position in which they have authority over men.

"I've met a lot more fanatical people in my life than the Exclusive Brethren," Howard said last month after he admitted having discussions with the sect. "They have a different, a more disciplined, perhaps some would say a more narrow interpretation of the Christian religion than others, but I respect their right to have it."

The prime minister's scapegoating of Muslims is aimed at provoking fear and division and diverting attention from the real social, economic, and political issues facing ordinary people. This is the only way in which the Howard government is able to implement its deeply regressive agenda, which advances the interests of an ultra-wealthy minority at the direct expense of the wages and living conditions of the majority of the population.

The ceaseless media coverage of the Hilali affair and the daily statements issued by various politicians contain within them a definite element of desperation. As opposition to Canberra's foreign and domestic policy agenda deepens and mounting economic and social contradictions emerge, the thoroughly artificial and frenzied character of the anti-Muslim "Australian values" campaign is becoming ever more apparent.

The Murdoch-owned *Australian* has led the barrage, with Hilali dominating the front-page, and whole sections of the newspaper, including editorials and op-ed pieces, devoted to the issue. Every other newspaper, including the nominally liberal press, has followed suit, while frothing radio talkback "shock jocks" have had a field day. In a stunt exposing the hypocrisy of the media's claim to be upholding respect for

women, Channel Nine's "A Current Affair" hired a teenage model and paraded her in a revealing dress in front of Muslim men in Sydney's south-western working class suburb of Lakemba.

Following initial media reports of his sermon, Hilali issued a statement insisting that he had been misinterpreted. He said he did not condone rape and defended the right of Australian women to wear whatever they wished. The media, however, immediately denounced these remarks as evidence of the Muslim cleric's duplicity and pressed ahead with its campaign. Various Muslim spokespeople and "community leaders" were mobilised to denounce Hilali and demand his resignation.

The cleric has long been a target for his criticisms of the "war on terror". While condemning acts of terrorism against civilians, Hilali has defended Muslims engaged in "jihad" in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Palestinian Occupied Territories. He further enraged the media last week when a journalist asked him if he would resign and he replied, "After we clean the world of the White House first".

The Howard government hopes to exploit the controversy over Hilali's rape comments to install a new layer of more complicit Islamic leaders in order to intimidate Muslims and silence criticism of the "war on terror" and the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. Hilali, who has heart problems, was hospitalised on Monday after he collapsed in Lakemba Mosque. He has since announced that he will be taking indefinite leave from his position in the mosque.

The Australian ruling elite is promoting the idea that there exists a morally and culturally superior "West" facing an unenlightened and fundamentalist "Muslim world". The Danish Mohammad cartoon provocation initiated the international campaign more than a year ago, and various incidents in countries including Britain, France, Germany, and Holland have been seized upon to whip up the controversy.

The purpose is to justify the US-led occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq and divert domestic opposition to war and militarism by advancing a "clash of civilisations" against an undefined Muslim enemy. This also serves as a pretext for implementing far reaching "anti-terror" laws which dismantle long established democratic rights and constitutional norms.

The *Australian's* publication of Hilali's sermon came just days after it had published an editorial calling for a British-style "debate" on Australians wearing the Muslim veil. After this failed to gather much steam, Hilali's remarks—which he made in the Lakemba mosque a month ago—suddenly emerged. While it remains unclear how the *Australian* received a recorded copy of the sermon, a definite possibility is that the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) supplied it. If this is the case, it would again demonstrate both the intimate collaboration of the media with the state, and the extraordinary extent to which a section of the Australian population is being monitored by police and informants.

The Labor Party has played a vital role in the Hilali affair.

Again demonstrating its determination to outflank the Howard government from the right on the "war on terror", the opposition called for the Muslim cleric to be prosecuted on incitement or terrorism charges.

Every senior Labor figure rushed to condemn Hilali and several encouraged his prosecution. "You can't simply sound hairy-chested about Sheik Hilali's comment on one hand and then leave unanswered the question of whether he's breached Australia's criminal law," thundered foreign affairs spokesman Kevin Rudd.

Prosecuting Hilali for his sermon would represent a gross violation of free speech and would create an ominous precedent for criminalising "un-Australian" remarks. Demands for Hilali's deportation, raised by several MPs in Canberra, are similarly reactionary. There is no legal basis for the deportation of Hilali, who is an Australian citizen, and such a move would amount to a provocation designed to intimidate Muslims throughout the country.

Labor's deputy leader Jenny Macklin, together with Arch Bevis, Labor's homeland security spokesman, demanded that anti-terrorism charges be considered on the basis of Hilali's defence of anti-occupation resistance forces in the Middle East. Macklin's call for the implementation of Australia's anti-terror legislation highlights the police-state nature of the laws, for which both of the major political parties are jointly responsible.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned when the legislation was drawn up, anyone who defends the right of resistance for occupied peoples, and anyone who opposes Australian military interventions, now faces the threat of prosecution. Labor's demand for Hilali's prosecution on terror charges serves to create a climate for the victimisation and eventual prosecution of antiwar and socialist opponents of Australian imperialism.

There is now an inescapable necessity for all those opposed to militarism and war, and committed to the defence of democratic rights, to develop an independent political opposition to the xenophobic campaign being directed against Muslims. No faction of the media or political establishment has any opposition to the drive to militarise society under the banner of "Australian values", and all are complicit in the cultivation of anti-Muslim communalism.



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