

Anti-Islamic measures in Britain threaten democratic rights

Paul Mitchell
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This week five supporters of the Islamic fundamentalist organisation Islam4UK, who chanted anti-Army slogans at a military parade in Luton in March 2009, were convicted of using abusive words. The slogans chanted included “British Soldiers go to Hell”, “British Soldiers Murderers”, and “British soldiers, baby killers.”

The demonstrators were charged under the Public Order Act for using threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress and given two-year conditional discharges and each ordered to pay £500 costs. Their conviction represents an attack on free speech and the democratic right to oppose the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

At the same time, Home Secretary Alan Johnson banned Islam4UK and its “parent” organization, al-Muhajiroun, under anti-terrorism legislation and made membership a criminal offence punishable by up to ten years in jail. Two other offshoots of al-Muhajiroun are already proscribed, al-Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect. Islam4UK cancelled an anti-war march last weekend through Wootton Bassett village, the scene of almost weekly “repatriation ceremonies,” in which hearses carrying the coffins of soldiers killed in Afghanistan drive from a local airbase down the main street to a nearby morgue.

During the hearing of the five demonstrators, lawyers acting on their behalf argued correctly that their action was “a legitimate protest on a matter of important public debate, conducted with the knowledge of the police, and that the defendants were entitled to exercise their fundamental right to freedom of expression.”

They said that the European Convention on Human Rights protected the right of the demonstrators “to say what they had, and that the criminal prosecution was not justified as a proportionate interference with that right.”

During the court proceedings, one of the accused, Shajjadar Choudhury, said, “To shout the truth in a street

is not an insult. We were highlighting the truth.”

Munim Abdul explained, “We chose our words carefully. We did not intend to distress or alarm anyone. The banners were saying they are murderers. We meant the entity of the British Forces are a murdering entity. We meant they are killing people when there is no justification. The war was illegal. Anyone that kills was a murderer.”

Abdul told the court that the human rights organization Amnesty International had recorded many cases of abuse and that the soldiers were called “baby killers” because of the indiscriminate bombing of towns and villages.

Luton District Judge Carolyn Mellanby rejected these arguments, declaring baldly that “I have no doubt it is abusive and insulting to tell soldiers to ‘Go to hell’—to call soldiers murderers, rapists and baby killers. It is not just insulting to the soldiers but to the citizens of Luton who were out on the streets that day to honour and welcome soldiers home.”

The ruling has grave implications. It means that free comment can be declared illegal merely because someone finds it upsetting. Following the verdict, defence lawyer Sonal Dashani quoted Voltaire’s dictum, “I disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it ... If you believe in freedom of speech you have to accept that some things will be said that you will like and some things will be said that you will not like.”

Such elementary democratic principles are now under sustained attack. Socialists do not support reactionary communalist groups such as Islam4UK. But Mellanby’s ruling is part of a far wider effort to censor and criminalise opposition to the imperialist aggression being carried out by the Western powers. Criticism of the role of Britain’s armed forces in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere can no longer be tolerated.

The parades at Wootton Bassett have a pro-war agenda that is barely cloaked behind the grieving of the dead

soldiers' loved ones and support for "our boys". They are aimed not only at silencing criticism of the war in general, but specifically at undermining sympathy for the poverty-stricken and oppressed masses who are the chief victims of neo-colonialism. Their significance is all the greater given that the vast majority of the population is opposed to British involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan and the rising death toll of British soldiers.

Drawing attention to the violent repression being carried out by the United States and the UK is thus unacceptable as far as the ruling class is concerned as it cuts across the attempt to whip up support for greater military deployment in Afghanistan in order to supposedly safeguard British troops already stationed there. That is why Islam4UK has been suppressed and the five Islamists convicted. Those rightly offended and outraged by the illegal occupations of Middle Eastern and African countries and the resulting death and destruction are being warned to remain silent or face prosecution.

That a section of Muslims are attracted to Islamic fundamentalism is a political problem, not a criminal issue. It expresses a politically confused response to the actions of the imperialist powers, exacerbated by the social difficulties and racism faced by young Asians. In the absence of a socialist political movement of working people against war, social inequality and racism, and with a nominal Labour government instrumental in all of these attacks, it has been possible for Islamist reactionaries to portray themselves as a genuine anti-imperialist force.

The orchestrated campaign of Islamophobia waged by the government, the opposition parties and the media can only serve to increase the sense of isolation felt by Muslims and lead to a growing frustration. This situation is made worse by the failure of the liberal media and many civil rights groups to defend the democratic rights of Muslims. *Guardian* assistant editor Michael White writes, "My own prejudice is against bans unless absolutely necessary, but you have to draw the line sometimes, partly to show there is a line."

In similar vein, Shami Chakrabarti, director of the civil rights group Liberty, meekly said that she hoped the government had "very strong evidence" of terrorist links to justify a ban.

It is not, in fact, the "messenger" that these nominal liberals oppose, but the anti-militarist "message" that conflicts with their own support for Britain's imperialist adventure in Afghanistan. That is why some of those who would once have "abused" president Lyndon B. Johnson at the height of the war in Vietnam (or supported such

"abuse") by chanting "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids have you killed today?," now feign outrage over comments in no way dissimilar or less true regarding Afghanistan.

Likewise the liberal press has also hardly commented on the role played by extreme right-wing forces in fomenting anger against the demonstrators. The defence lawyers point out that "the incident also involved other protesters believed to be members of the BNP [neo-fascist British National Party] who were separately dealt with" and the BNP website states, "The Muslims then had to be protected by police as supporters of the soldiers, some carrying Union and St George's flags, turned on them shouting 'Scum' and 'No surrender to the Taleban.'"

The extent of the official xenophobia, interference in cultural and social life, surveillance and repressive measures that are now directed against the three percent of the UK population that are Muslims is unparalleled and outrageous.

It is imperative that working people and all those concerned with the preservation of democratic rights come forward to politically combat the attacks now being waged against Muslims in Britain and throughout Europe. It is a matter of principle that the persecution by the state and the media of religious and ethnic minorities does not go unopposed. And without such a counteroffensive, on a socialist basis, there can be no truly effective struggle against militarism and war and the ongoing encroachment on fundamental civil liberties.



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