

German Left Party opposes religious circumcision

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9 October 2012

Some three months after a German court declared illegal the religious circumcision of boys on the grounds that it constituted bodily harm, sparking a fierce debate, the Justice Ministry has presented a new draft law in which the practice is expressly declared to be legal. The draft bill will be agreed by the federal cabinet and then presented to the Bundestag (parliament) for approval.

Opposition to laws that explicitly permit a religious practice that has been carried out for thousands of years and is not banned in a single country in the world comes not only from the extreme right, but also from the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens and the Left Party.

The dispute regarding circumcision was provoked by a verdict of the Cologne State Court against a Muslim doctor. The judges declared that the consent of the parents did not justify the carrying out of the medically unnecessary but religiously prescribed circumcision of their under-aged son, and that the procedure was therefore a criminal act. The lower court had seen the matter differently, leading the public prosecutor's office to lodge an appeal with the state court.

Given that the circumcision of infant boys is a component of both the Jewish and Muslim religions; that the practice is regarded as generally beneficial by many organizations, including the World Health Organisation; and that approximately a third of the world's male population is circumcised, the judgment caused outrage among Jews and Muslims and surprise internationally.

In the US, the American Academy of Pediatrics recently declared that the preventive health benefits of elective circumcision of male new-borns outweigh the risks of the procedure. The guidelines issued by the German Society of Paediatric Surgeons list the main risks of the procedure as post-operative bleeding or swelling, which can be treated without difficulty. The association does not oppose religious circumcision, but calls for it to be carried out exclusively under medical supervision.

Of course, every operation carries a risk of complications, if only a small one. This does not justify banning operations under threat of legal action. Nor is there serious evidence of risk of psychological trauma resulting from circumcision.

Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that Germany should not be the sole country in the world in which Jews were not permitted to conduct their rituals. This would make us a "laughingstock", she said. In July, the Bundestag passed a resolution declaring that the circumcision of boys should not be punished. Those voting against were a majority of the Left Party and sections of the Green Party.

At the end of September, a draft law was issued by the Justice Ministry. Basically, it is an extrapolation of the legal situation that had existed before the verdict of the Cologne State Court: parental custody rights include the right to consent to circumcision, even if this is not medically necessary, as long as it is carried out following a consultation and according to proper medical procedures (which include effective pain treatment).

In a joint statement, the children's policy spokespersons of the SPD, Marlene Rupperecht, the Left Party, Diana Golze, and the Greens, Katja Dörner, rejected the draft bill presented by the Justice Ministry and, in the name of upholding the rights of children, spoke in favour of banning the circumcision of boys.

"Children are the bearers of their own rights", the statement declared. "Their rights cannot be called into question, either on religious grounds or any other. However, this is the case in the present draft bill. It is appalling that the right of the child to physical integrity clearly plays a subordinate role in the considerations of the federal government."

The Left Party was the only parliamentary grouping to defend the verdict of the Cologne State Court and reject the decriminalisation of the circumcision of boys. In

justifying their abstention on the vote, the Left Party demanded a “social debate” regarding the banning of the circumcision of boys up to the age of 14. (For Jews, circumcision is prescribed for eight days after birth, for Muslims, it is usually carried out between the ages of 7 and 10, and by 13 at the latest.)

Socialist Alternative (SAV), which is active within the Left Party, half-heartedly opposes a ban on circumcision. However, they adopt the arguments of those who do oppose it and try to present them as progressive by claiming that an “educational campaign against circumcision” would place in question the “pillars of bourgeois society”—the family and religion.

In fact, ever since the verdict of the Cologne State Court, a “social debate” about circumcision has raged, or rather, a campaign against it. This has absolutely nothing to do with education, let alone placing in question bourgeois society.

It is mainly being carried out by representatives of the academically educated middle classes and is characterised by a very aggressive posture on the part of those who advocate the criminalisation of circumcision. Although conducted under the banner of education, secularism and the rights of the child, the anti-Semitic and Islamophobic undertones are unmistakable. Hardly a week goes by without a talk show commentary or newspaper article directly or indirectly charging Jews and Muslims with torturing, disfiguring or traumatising their children.

The arguments of those advocating criminalisation are always the same, and, in the end, primitive: circumcision means that a piece of sensitive skin is lost forever, which is why, since it cannot be justified on grounds of urgent medical necessity, it constitutes bodily harm. “Whittling away at the genitals of young boys” on grounds of religious custom is barbaric, they say. Not infrequently, religious circumcision is compared to corporal punishment, female genital mutilation or sexual abuse.

That circumcision means the irrevocable loss of a few millimetres of skin cannot be denied. But this is precisely why the procedure is undertaken. Raising this fact does not answer the question whether it is damaging, but merely poses it. The removal of tonsils or moles also means that a part of the body is irrevocably destroyed, without the consent of the affected child and often without any urgent medical justification. But this does not mean such procedures constitute the criminal infliction of bodily harm.

The argument regarding physical integrity would apply more readily to ear-piercing than to circumcision. Unlike

circumcision, it has no medical benefits, only health drawbacks, including a high risk of infection and complications. Virtually none of the proponents of the criminalisation of circumcision call for the banning of ear-piercing.

At a stroke, a basic religious observance of Jews and Muslims is to be declared barbaric and criminal. As the WSWS has written, this demand exposes the link between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. (See, “German court bans circumcision on religious grounds”)

Even bourgeois newspapers have noted that the “circumcision debate” has provided an impetus to anti-Semitism, and that this has taken place above all among the educated middle classes. For example, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote: “It is not the tremulous readers’ letters that shock, written by those who now say that the Jews themselves are responsible for Auschwitz, since, as they are circumcised, they could so easily be selected [for the gas chambers]. Rather, what shocks are the well formulated letters, written with impeccable grammar, which declare that the Jews believe there are special rules for them, whether it’s about their sons or about the West Bank—but one just can’t mention this.”

With their campaign against a widespread and elementary religious observance of Jews and Muslims, the Left Party and the Greens are providing an impulse to this new outpouring of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia—this time under the cover of children’s rights instead of women’s rights.



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