

Islamic Women's Council calls for transparency from inquiry into New Zealand terrorist attack

Tom Peters
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More than one year after the March 15, 2019 terrorist attack, an official inquiry into the mass shooting that killed 51 people and injured 49 in two Christchurch mosques has still not released any information to the public.

The Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Attack on Christchurch Mosques had been due to deliver its final report to the Labour Party-led government at the end of July, but its deadline was extended for a third time until November 26. This prevents the report from being a topic of public discussion in the lead-up to the September 19 election.

The commission's website says it is investigating "what state sector agencies knew about [fascist terrorist Brenton Tarrant's] activities before the attack, what, if anything, they did with that information, what measures agencies could have taken to prevent the attack, and what measures agencies should take to prevent such attacks in the future."

The proceedings, however, have been kept secret, including more than 1,000 submissions from individuals and organisations. Even when the commission finally delivers its report, the government will determine how much information is made public.

The media has largely ceased to discuss what led to the attack, after Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern urged media companies not to focus on Tarrant. The state banned possession of Tarrant's fascist manifesto, which revealed the gunman's support for US President Donald Trump and the similarity of his anti-immigrant views to those of capitalist parties in New Zealand and internationally.

There are growing demands for transparency from the Royal Commission, including for the release of an

interview the commissioners conducted with Tarrant. The gunman's unexpected guilty plea in March means he will not face any public questioning in a trial.

Muslim Association of Canterbury general secretary Feroze Ditta, who was injured in the shooting at Al Noor mosque, told Radio NZ on June 29 that he wanted to know the gunman's motivations and to "get to the bottom of what actually happened and how he managed to execute this." Tony Green, a spokesperson for the mosque, also said the interview should be shared widely.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Anjum Rahman from the Islamic Women's Council (IWCNZ), which last month made public its full submission to the Royal Commission.

Rahman explained that the IWCNZ was concerned that the decision on releasing the Royal Commission's findings would be a "political" one, "which is why we released our submission. One, because we knew that the royal commission would not be able to put it in full into their report, but secondly to say this is the kind of transparency we need."

The submission argues that the Christchurch terrorist attack was preventable. At a press conference on July 7, the IWCNZ's Aliya Danzeisen said they had warned the government for years about rising Islamophobia, including harassment and threats against women and children, and the activity of white supremacist movements.

Most strikingly, Danzeisen revealed that on February 20, 2019, she received a message via Facebook from someone threatening to burn a Koran in front of the Hamilton mosque on March 15, the date of the Christchurch attack. The threat appeared to originate

from a Facebook user in Christchurch. It was reported to police the next day.

Danzeisen told the media: “We believe that had our concerns been taken seriously, there would have been a national system that would have warned communities and would have warned the police around the nation, and there would have been extra patrols and likely people on the steps of our mosque on March 15, in a position to prevent the attacks.”

Rahman told the WWSWS that Tarrant’s interview with the commission should be released because it could shed light on “whether he was involved with anyone else and whether there are other people that need to be charged.” There were “a lot of questions” including how he obtained a gun licence and was able to travel internationally and donate to far-right extremist groups.

Tarrant donated thousands of dollars to the Identitarian movement in Austria and France, and was in contact with the white supremacist Lads Society in Australia, which tried to recruit him. He was reported to Australian police in 2016 for threatening to kill someone on Facebook. In 2017, NZ police dismissed a complaint about racist and violent discussions at the gun club near Dunedin where Tarrant was a member.

Rahman pointed out that “for the Muslim world, we have a whole list of organisations that we are not allowed to donate money to, and if we do we will come to the attention of the authorities. Yet he was able to donate and not come to the attention of the authorities.”

She added that knowing what influenced the gunman’s thinking could help prevent future attacks, “particularly given that he grew up in Australia, which had a very harsh anti-Muslim media as well as politicians who used the Muslim community for scaremongering.”

Speaking about the broader political context of the attack, Rahman told the WWSWS that it had followed decades of war, including the US-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, which successive New Zealand governments participated in.

Rahman noted that the Iraq war was based on lies that Saddam Hussein’s regime had “weapons of mass destruction” and links with Al Qaeda terrorists. “It absolutely destroyed the infrastructure in Iraq, it decimated the economy and led to sectarian violence... We had incidences like Abu Ghraib where we know

that outside forces in Iraq were committing atrocities against the people in that country.”

These wars and the war in Syria were accompanied by the demonisation of Muslims by the media and political parties internationally, including in New Zealand. In December 2015, then-Prime Minister John Key and the Security Intelligence Service (SIS) made inflammatory statements, without any evidence, that women had travelled from NZ to Syria to become “jihadi brides” for Islamic State.

The claims were part of the National Party government’s propaganda to justify sending troops to Iraq, and the strengthening of New Zealand’s spy agencies as part of the US-led Five Eyes intelligence network.

Rahman said Key’s statements “threw our community to the wolves, basically, without any concern for the safety of Muslim women who were put under the spotlight as to whether we might turn into ‘jihadi brides’ or not. It was absolutely appalling.”

Rahman also stressed that “hostility to migrants is not the domain of any one political party,” and that prior to the 2017 election, the Labour Party and its ally the Greens had campaigned against foreigners owning houses. Following the election, these parties formed a coalition with the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party, which has a long history of demonising Muslims, Chinese people and other immigrants.

As another election approaches, migrants are once again being scapegoated by the major parties for the economic crisis triggered by the coronavirus pandemic.

Rahman said she feared that “a lot of people are going to be made to leave and it’s not going to be pretty at all. These are people who would have gone into significant debt, who have moved everything to this country in the hopes of a better life, who have invested in this country, in terms of contributing to their workplaces, being part of the community, who will be kicked out.” Rahman said none of the major parties were speaking for these vulnerable people.



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