

Stripping Shamima Begum of British citizenship a vindictive crime

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Last Wednesday, a Special Immigration Appeals Commission upheld the decision of former Home Secretary Sajid Javid to strip Shamima Begum of her British citizenship.

Begum travelled to Syria from London in 2015, aged just 15, with two friends who were all groomed to become a bride of an Islamic State (IS) fighter. She is currently in the al-Roj refugee camp in the country, with 2,000 others. In 2019, Javid ordered that she be deprived of her citizenship using powers in the British Nationality Act 1981.

Javid's decision and its sanctioning by the courts is a gross violation of democratic rights designed to advance a stupefying demonisation of Muslims, preventing any questioning of the role played by world imperialism in fomenting Islamist terror.

The British Nationality Act 1981 allows the removal of citizenship if the affected person has acted "in a manner which is seriously prejudicial to the vital interests of the UK" and if there are "reasonable grounds for believing that the person is able, under the law of a country or territory outside the UK, to become a national of such a country or territory". In other words, the person cannot be rendered stateless.

But this is exactly what the government has done, relying on the technicality that Begum could apply for Bangladeshi citizenship through her parents. Under Bangladeshi law, Begum could apply for citizenship at any time up to her 21st birthday. But before Javid made his decision, Bangladesh made very clear that it would refuse any such application and that Begum would face the death penalty if she entered the country. In any case, she is now 23 years old—long past the deadline.

In effect, the UK government has punished Begum for an act carried out as a minor by making her a permanent refugee, denying her any rights or services afforded by any country on the planet. This was done without any

public accountability whatsoever, let alone a trial.

Defending his decision in parliament in 2019, Javid considered it adequate to state, "Whatever role they took in the so-called caliphate, they all supported a terrorist organisation and in doing so they have shown they hate our country and the values we stand for." Speaking on the issue again in 2021, he told journalists cryptically, "I'm not going to go into details of the case but what I will say is that you certainly haven't seen what I saw. If you did know what I knew... you would have made exactly the same decision."

Last Wednesday's ruling underscores the gross injustice done, referring to the case made by Begum's lawyers that she was the victim of grooming, child trafficking and sexual exploitation. Married to an IS fighter immediately upon arriving in Syria, she gave birth to three children, all of whom died young—one of pneumonia while she was in the refugee camp.

One of her school friends, Kadiza Sultana, died in May 2016 in an airstrike, aged 17, while planning to escape. The whereabouts of the other, Amira Abase, is not known, but her husband is dead.

The court's judgement reads, "In the Commission's opinion, there is a credible suspicion that Ms Begum was recruited, transferred and then harboured for the purpose of sexual exploitation." These were "matters which were simply ignored by the Secretary of State."

But a deeply authoritarian ruling by the Supreme Court in 2021, secured by the government to prevent Begum returning to the UK to fight her case, effectively prevented the Commission from overturning Javid's decision.

The Supreme Court chastised an earlier ruling initially giving Begum the right to return with the extraordinary criticism that it had "mistakenly believed that, when an individual's right to have a fair hearing of an appeal came into conflict with the requirements of national security,

her right to a fair hearing must prevail,” and “mistakenly treated the Secretary of State’s extraterritorial human rights policy as if it were a rule of law which he must obey, as opposed to something intended to guide the exercise of his statutory discretion.”

Moreover, by ruling that the home secretary’s assessment was not given “the respect which it should have received, given that it is the home secretary who has been charged by parliament with responsibility for making such assessments,” the Supreme Court tied the Special Immigration Appeals Commission’s hands. It was essentially required to limit itself to asking whether Javid had lawfully exercised the extremely broad powers of the British Nationality Act 1981, under which he is entitled to ignore virtually all other considerations by citing “national security.”

The Commission noted February 22, “Reasonable Secretaries of State could lawfully apply different policies to the exercise of the section 40 function [in the British Nationality Act]. It is possible to envisage a perfectly lawful policy that precludes the decision-maker from depriving children at all, or from depriving them without deciding whether they were or may have been trafficked. But that is not the policy that this Secretary of State implemented.”

As Birnberg Peirce, the law firm representing Begum, explained in a statement, the Supreme Court judgment renders the legal appeals process pointless: “The commission’s hands, it considers, are tied by the alteration by the supreme court of its role—it is no longer allowed to come to its own decisions on the merits of a case as a whole. On the key issues, it must defer to the secretary of state. Once that is accepted, it is hard to see what part an appeal against this draconian decision can play.”

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer immediately backed Begum’s continued persecution, telling the BBC that the Court’s judgment was “the right decision.” The former Director of Public Prosecutions declared, “National security has to come first. The court’s reached its decision; it’s looked at all the evidence. I support that decision and as I say, national security has to come first.”

The vindictive treatment of Begum, an exploited child who was presented as nothing more than a dangerous and irredeemable monster, is intended to stop any deeper questioning of the details of the case which would expose the intrigues of British imperialism and its allies. Last September it was revealed that Begum was helped to Syria by a Canadian state intelligence asset; British

intelligence knew she was being groomed online.

The court made vague reference to these facts in its judgement, writing, “It is also arguable... that there were State failures, and possible violations of the corollary protective duty, between December 2014 and February 2015.”

Begum’s is thus one of many cases in which figures who become associated with terror groups, including some who have gone on to commit terrible atrocities, are shown to have been known to the intelligence agencies. These are windows into the covert activity of the imperialist powers, who routinely use Islamist proxy forces against their geopolitical opponents, as most recently in Syria and Libya.

Nor does the government want to allow any consideration of the social conditions of contemporary capitalism which move some people to support the barbaric ideology of Islamic State, including young women who are particularly oppressed. Government-sponsored Islamophobia and anti-migrant rhetoric, conditions of social exclusion and poverty, and the relentless dehumanisation of the enemy abroad—in recent years largely in the Middle East—and desensitisation of the population to violence and cruelty all play their part.

A play exploring these issues specifically in the context of Begum and the two friends she travelled with, *Homegrown*, was shut down by the police and the National Youth Theatre in 2015.

The Begum decision also has dangerous implications. The ruling class routinely pioneers massive assaults on democratic rights with the initial targeting of a demonised individual or group. Through this case, it has secured vast, virtually unchecked powers for the home secretary, currently the right-wing xenophobe Suella Braverman, to use against the working class.

Begum’s treatment is seen as a weapon not primarily against terrorist groups, but in the wider attack on democratic rights—including the rights to strike, protest and free speech. In the time her case has been ongoing, the government has already strengthened its right to remove citizenship through the Nationality and Borders Act, removing the requirement to notify the affected person.



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