

## **Why ‘Anti-Sharia’ Protestors in Los Angeles are Concerned about Muslim Women**

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On a sunny Los Angeles afternoon in June of 2017, I was driving to the airport to pick up my cousin who was coming to visit me from Canada for the very first time. As I approached the international terminal I heard loud music interspersed with bursts of chanting and cheering – something that sounded like a protest. Having recently been hit by Donald Trump’s Muslim Ban, Los Angelinos of many races and faiths had taken defiantly to the streets against his punitive ban, and had flooded the international terminal at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) in protest. Like many protests in Los Angeles that have followed Trump’s election, this protest was beautiful in demonstrating a multiculturalism grounded in justice for all and a vision of America that rejects divisive tactics of the state that single out one group as a ‘problem.’ As I circled around the bustling airport on that June afternoon, I called my sister to ask if she could check the news to see if there was a new Trump policy that may have sparked further protests. After a moment of pause she said “Oh no, I heard on the news that today there are going to be anti-Sharia protests in 28 cities across the country. I hope that isn’t what this noise is about.”

I parked my car, made it to the terminal, and came face to face with a scene that I have never, in my 27 years in the U.S., encountered. A crowd of about 40 white men and women, holding up images of Muslim women in burqas, signs denouncing the Prophet Muhammad, banners listing ‘punishments under Sharia,’ and other messaging that somehow tied together human/women’s rights, the American flag, Donald Trump, Sharia and covered Muslim women – all interspersed through the space where travellers exit the international terminal and step out into L.A. Some individuals sang and danced to Tupac Shakur’s song “California” while wearing Donald Trump masks. Many snapped photos of those who stopped to read the signs to create an air of intimidation. Shocked by the transformation of a beloved space where one sees people from the whole world come and go into a space of

thick and painful Islamophobia, I snapped a few photos back, read a few signs in disgust, and began to worry about my cousin walking out into this mess with her head scarf. While I can pass as Indian or Mexican, I worried that she could very well become a target of this display of white supremacist rage that had strangely infiltrated Los Angeles, a city that is majority non-white.

Once my cousin landed we found ourselves face to face with a very white and blonde woman, yelling at us to go back home, making hand gestures to demonstrate an aeroplane flying away while shoving an image of a veiled woman with bold letters declaring that “Sharia kills women” in our faces. Another woman sat in silence holding a poster board entitled ‘crimes under Sharia’ with supposedly corresponding punishments for certain crimes.’ So, for example, the punishment for adultery under Sharia was listed as death by stoning,’ for homosexuality also ‘death by stoning,’ and for the crime of ‘fighting against Muslim jihadists,’ as ‘death by beheading’ – just to mention a few on the long list.

Needless to say I was deeply disturbed because of how decontextualised these images and signs were, in how they collapsed all Sharia law into the most extreme manifestations of its applications, in how they standardise all Muslim societies, interpretive practices, and histories through which Shariacame into being. They deliberately seal sharia as uniform, and then cast it as barbaric and incompatible with Western norms. Variation within schools of jurisprudence, state formations, and the implementation of what are considered ‘crimes’ do not exist at all in such readings. As a feminist of Muslim origin myself, I was also struck by how these protesters and their signs erase the rigorous scholarship of Muslim feminists, progressive scholars, activists, ulema and Muslims in general who critique religion praxis from within. In my own work and life I have been tremendously inspired by the works of feminist scholars such as Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, Zib Mir Hosseini, etc. many of whom have spent their life’s work excavating how patriarchy and power has consolidated in the applications of Islam, and the very real violence these interpretations sanction against those who do not conform to the status quo.

But all of this is taking place within a U.S. that has witnessed a pronounced rise in the Islamophobia movement, which has now evolved into “into a well financed, organised and strategic national movement with a grassroots and legislative agenda....”[1] According to a recent report from the Haas Institute, in 2010 David Yerushalmi, a lawyer active in the Israeli settler movement, co-authored a report claiming that Muslims were trying to impose Sharia Law in American criminal courts. He drafted the American Laws for American Courts legislation, which is a model anti-Sharia legislation. The report notes that “from

2010 to 2016, 194 anti-Sharia bills have been introduced in 39 states, of which 18 have been enacted into law.”[2] Obviously, it isn’t possible to impose Sharia Law on American criminal courts under the Constitution but the successful mobilisation of this campaign thrives on an unfounded fear that Sharia is creeping into U.S. courts. And the effects of these anti-Shari bills and the movement that surrounds it go beyond the legal arena. The inflammatory images and information displayed in anti-Sharia protests like the one I ran into, fan a climate of fear and intolerance toward Muslims that then justify the very real violence perpetrated against them.

What I do know quite clearly is that this is not a movement committed to human rights concerns, Muslim or non-Muslim women’s emancipation, racial or sexual equality. Instead, it denounces violence enacted by some Muslims to legitimise other forms of violence – also against Muslims. If white supremacists were actually invested in combatting sexism against Muslim women, then maybe they would think about forging alliances with Muslim feminists who have been opposing misogyny in their communities, but also oppose racial and imperial violations of a the basic right to personhood, dignity, and life, and with those who critique U.S. interventionism that has historically strengthened militarised Islamist states that enforce the most anti-women laws and policies. Instead these protesters lift up misogyny from Islamic cultures to boost white supremacist nationalist identity and cultural superiority, and to justify the fear of some sort of Muslim invasion. If these protesters were so interested in protecting women and women’s rights then rather than wearing Trump masks and dancing, they would be enraged by his public displays of misogyny, the derogatory remarks he has made toward women, the culture of sexual assault that he himself has normalised through his behavior and comments, and the cuts in funding for the rights of women, racial, and sexual minorities in the U.S.

Being amidst these protests at LAX saturated with disturbing visual and aural assaults manipulating the language of rights and equality in the service of white supremacy was quite disturbing. Here we were, two highly independent Muslim women (one a gender studies professor and the other a professor of computer science) who grew up battling patriarchy within a Pakistan that went through a very regressive era of Islamisation under Zia-ul-Haq in the late 1970s, suddenly surrounded by white men and women (mostly wearing short shorts and tank tops) telling us about the violent oppression of women in Islam. In that interface, I felt rage that electrified this woman’s bright blue eyes, sensing deeply that the police presence might have been our only protection from the impulse toward violence lurking beneath these contemporary forms of Islamophobia that have become so common in the U.S. today.

Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society. “Legalising Othering: The United States of Islamophobia.” A Research Report by Elsheik, Basima Sisemore, Natalia Ramirez Lee. September 2017, Institute, pg. 10. ↑  
Ibid, pg. 8.. ↑