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## **Anti-blasphemy laws in the Arab Spring**

By Azizah al-Hibri

"Huffington Post," (31.05.2012) - The Emir of Kuwait is faced at this very moment with the decision of approving a law that would impose the death penalty against unrepentant Muslims (and varying prison sentences upon others) who exercise their religious freedom of speech in a way deemed blasphemous. So far, this is the most extreme version of such a law in the region, and it is very surprising that it makes its appearance in enlightened Kuwait.

Furthermore, similar though less draconian versions of this law have been recently adopted in Egypt and Tunisia. One year ago, hopes were high for these countries to usher in a new age of freedom, but the Arab spring is being viewed increasingly as an eruption of serious local, regional and global dimensions that will take a long time before its true character and impact is understood. In the meantime, we are witnessing unprecedented excesses, such as these anti-blasphemy laws, that must be addressed thoughtfully and effectively.

It is not sufficient to advise these countries to restrict their anti-blasphemy laws to cases of incitement to imminent violence or national security. In the era of the Arab spring, these criteria are often satisfied. Take the example of the young Egyptian Copt Gamal Abdou Massoud. His religiously offensive comments about Islam on Facebook led to riots in his village that soon spread to neighboring ones. Seven houses were burnt, both Muslim and Coptic, and a high level meeting between Muslim and Coptic religious leaders was convened to calm the situation. The court sentenced him to three years in prison. One could argue that the anti-blasphemy law was justified in this case. In fact, in reaching its verdict, the court in the Massoud case specifically mentioned the twin grounds of incitement to violence and threatening national security.

Thus a demand upon Egypt that it only criminalize speech that incites to imminent violence may help in some cases, but would not change the result in this case. This speech incited riots. The same can be argued for other cases. In dealing with anti-blasphemy laws in this tinderbox, it is not enough to propose our standards. We need to be cognizant of the local circumstances and tailor a more effective solution to the problem. For example, Amba Yisanti of the Coptic Orthodox Church demanded parity of treatment in blasphemy cases, so that the law applies equally to Muslim offenders. That is a demand we American Muslims should vigorously support along with the previously mentioned standard. It is not only fair through the lens of international justice but also through an Islamic one, a fact that is important in Muslim countries.

As to executing offenders, it is wise to remember that the model proposed by the Kuwaiti law was discredited when Socrates was condemned to drink the hemlock. Many centuries later, we are still talking about Socrates and his ideas, not his judges. On a more practical level, an execution in Kuwait may temporarily intimidate potential offenders but will not solve the underlying problems which are political as well as religious. These will continue to simmer before they suddenly erupt, as in Bahrain, causing incalculable

damage to the state. On the political level, draconian anti-blasphemy laws are misguided autocratic responses in a region which is just now attempting to rediscover its democratic roots. On the religious level, they violate various Qur'anic injunctions, such as "there shall be no compulsion in religion."

The problem of offensive speech is not solvable through executions or prison sentences, but through serious multifaceted education about respecting diversity, the opinions and faiths of others, interfaith understanding and collaborative community building. There is a long tradition in the Muslim World for that, although the recent surge of extremist ideology has wiped it from many memories.

It is time to revive this tradition in school education, internet websites, political discourse and community outreach. It is time to say "no" to the extremists loudly and unabashedly. They will not be allowed to steal and disfigure a great heritage. They will not be allowed to destroy harmony in otherwise peaceful societies. Most importantly, they should not be allowed to speak for the silent majority. I can think of no better weapon to defeat them than grass roots education as well as comprehensive and well-reasoned policies protecting all democratic rights, especially free speech.

For angry Muslims eager to protect their religion from verbal attacks, the Qur'an exhorts them to "restrain their anger and forgive others." It is appropriate to remember this important verse at a time when people across the region are rejecting authoritarianism in favor of democracy. It is time to move away from angry authoritarian responses, and adopt the Qur'anic recommendation to let the "common word" be the link among the faiths, which can be accomplished through interfaith education and outreach. We should demand that the young Massoud and others like him receive interfaith education not a prison sentence. This approach is similar to some UN Human Rights Council proposals. More importantly, if anger gives way to forgiveness and education, an older Massoud may become a close friend to his village neighbors instead of a bitter enemy.

**Azizah al-Hibri is a Commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and Professor Emeritus of Law at the University of Richmond. She is writing this article in her personal capacity.**

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## **Kuwaiti sentenced to 7 years for offending Shiites on Twitter**

Los Angeles Times (09.04.2012) - A Kuwaiti writer will reportedly spend seven years in prison for making remarks on Twitter that offended Shiite Muslims, the latest in a string of sentences that have punished Kuwaitis for online talk.

Mohammad Mulaifi was charged with denigrating the Shiite sect and disseminating false information, among other charges, according to news reports Monday. During his imprisonment, he will be required to serve hard labor and pay a fine of nearly \$18,000, the Kuwait Times reported.

"Everyone should know that doctrines are red lines and whoever crosses them will cause internal strife that may have a negative impact on the country and weaken national unity," lawmaker Saleh Ashour told Gulf News.

Before he was sentenced, Mulaifi apologized to Shiites if they felt offended but said he had been misunderstood and had not insulted family members of the prophet

Muhammad in his writings, the Arab Times wrote. It was unclear from news reports what exactly Mulaifi had written.

The Kuwaiti government has prosecuted people for making online remarks that are deemed offensive or divisive to the country. Another Kuwaiti man has been charged with defaming Islam on Twitter, which he denies doing, and is facing calls for his execution, Reuters recently reported. Two others were jailed for three months each for "sectarian remarks" on Twitter, the Daily Star in Lebanon wrote.

"Kuwaitis' prolific Twitter use makes sense in a country known for allowing greater freedom of expression than nearly any other country in the Middle East," Human Rights Watch researcher Priyanka Motaparthy wrote last summer. Yet "recent attacks on people who have done nothing more than express opinions only discredit the government as paranoid, defensive, and woefully out-of-touch with the calls for democratic reform sweeping the region," she wrote.

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