

Don't be silenced by extremists

A plea from 11 Canadian Muslim academics and activists:

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A curtain of fear has descended on the intelligentsia of the West, including Canada. The fear of being misunderstood as Islamophobic has sealed their lips, dried their pens and locked their keyboards.

With hundreds dead around the world in the aftermath of the now infamous Danish cartoons, Canada's writers, politicians and media have imposed a frightening censorship on themselves, refusing to speak their minds, thus ensuring that the only voices being heard are that of the Muslim extremists and the racist right.

Emboldened by the free rein they have received, Canada's Muslim extremists and their supporters flexed their muscles at Queen's Park last week, with speakers promising to drown the Danish people "in their own blood".

A protestor carried the sign "Kurt Westgaard - countdown to justice has begun ... it's just a matter of time."

Elsewhere, in Pakistan, a Muslim woman was pictured carrying a sign, "God Bless Hitler," and a Muslim cleric placed a \$1 million reward for the murder of a Danish cartoonist. Embassies were burned, churches ruined and hundreds died in different Muslim countries.

Undoubtedly, Muslims were angered by the insulting cartoons. But the overblown reaction was partly due to their pent-up frustrations, and partly the result of orchestrated mischief by certain Islamist leaders.

Islamic societies, run by variances of autocratic regimes, are in turmoil. Ravaged by rampant corruption, a widening gap between rich and poor, and suppression of dissent, the people in these societies have lost hope in their own futures.

The U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, the unending occupation of the Palestinian territories and the quagmire of the Kashmiri dispute, have led many Muslims and non-religious peoples of Islamic origin, to view the West as the source of their countries' problems.

The growing popularity of the extremists in Muslim societies, the electoral success of the likes of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran, Shia radicals in Iraq, and Hamas in the Palestinian territories, rather than signifying the growing religiosity of the peoples of the Middle East, reflect political despair in the region.

In the West, people of Muslim origin, be they religious or secular, are facing growing racism, Islamophobia and discrimination reflected in immigration policies and anti-terrorist legislation.

The cartoon crisis was the straw that broke the camel's back.

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The Muslim extremists seized the opportunity and added fuel to fire. The calculated role played by the two Danish Muslim extremists, backed by Islamic fundamentalist regimes, is a case in point. They not only aggravated an already inflammatory situation, but added their own infuriating images, never published in the West, as they took their case to clerics in the Middle East.

Both, Imam Abu Laban and Ahmad Akkari have escaped the attention and scrutiny their acts deserved. These two men, who now sit in the comfort of their homes in Denmark, should be held accountable for their criminal actions.

For too long the media have created an image that portrays communities from the Muslim world as a monolith entity, best represented by extremists.

The media have created a false dichotomy that pits these Muslim extremists against the West. The fact is that in all Muslim countries, progressive citizens are trying to break loose from the tyranny of the autocrats and clerics and wish to develop a civil society where citizenship is based not on inherited race or religion, but the equality of all, irrespective of faith, race, sexuality or gender.

In Tehran today, the city's bus drivers are on strike. Thousands have been arrested; entire families have disappeared. Yet, this has not made a blip in the western media.

If the same bus drivers were burning books or embassies, this would certainly be on the evening news. This is an appalling example that only outrageous, violent expressions of faith by Muslim extremists are taken as the aspirations of people from Islamic societies.

It is time for Canadians to stand up for the hard-won democratic values that the Muslim extremists oppose.

By rejecting the agenda of the extremists, Canada's intelligentsia would be standing shoulder to shoulder with the Muslims and secular individuals from the region who reject both Islamophobia and Islamism. Islamism is not the new revolutionary movement against global forces of oppression, as a section of the left in this country erroneously perceives.

Today, the religious right and autocracies in the so-called Islamic world are united in their call for passing legislation to make any discussion on religion a criminal offence.

This, at a time when many writers in Jordan, Iran, Yemen, Pakistan and Afghanistan are rotting in jails, facing charges of apostasy and blasphemy.

We call on Canadian politicians and intellectuals to stand up for freedom of expression.

Our democratic values, including free speech, should not be compromised under the garb of fighting hate.

To fight Islamophobia and racism, we do not need to sacrifice free speech and debate.

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