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'Omar's law is unknown in Sweden': Swedish historian tells Imran Khan

Saturday 7 July 2012, by [BLOMQVIST Håkan](#), [SULEHRIA Farooq](#) (Date first published: 5 July 2012).

Sweden and northern Europe had very little contact with and knowledge of the Muslim world or the Caliph Omar a hundred years ago. The strength of a broad labour movement built from below, together with the fact that Sweden didn't participate in the European wars of the 20th century, were the central preconditions for the Swedish welfare state. During that period there were almost no Muslims in the whole of Sweden and Scandinavia and Islam didn't have any influence on the process

Speaking during a press conference in Islamabad recently, Imran Khan said there was no concept of welfare states in Europe and that they had taken this concept from the Muslim world. "They formed all the Scandinavian states based on this concept. They call it Omar's law there. We need to bring our culture back to our own land," he added.

To verify Mr. Khan's claim, *Viewpoint* interviewed Dr Håkan Blomqvist, a noted Marxist historian and activist. "This is all news to me," he reacted in shock.

Born in 1951, Dr Blomqvist is a Swedish labour historian and director of the Institute of Contemporary History at the Södertörn University in Stockholm. He is a well-known lecturer on historical and labour issues both in academic contexts and in labour adult education. He has written several books on the history of the Swedish labour movement and biographies of labour leaders. Among his publications are: "The threat and promise of communism: the Swedish labour movement in the shadow of the Soviet Union" (2003), "Nation, race and civilisation within the Swedish labour movement before Nazism" (2006), "After the Golden Age - the labour movement and the end of Fordism" (2012). Read on:

Farooq Sulehria - Pakistani cricket-star-turned-politician Imran Khan says there was no concept of welfare states in Europe and that they had taken this concept from the Muslim world. "They formed all the Scandinavian states based on this concept. They call it Omar's law there. We need to bring our culture back to our own land." The Swedish model is considered a pioneering experiment. Are you, being a leading historian of the Swedish working class, aware of any such inspiration? Were Islam or Caliph Omar any role model for Swedish model?

Håkan Blomqvist - With the risk of disappointing Pakistani politicians I must say that this was all news to me. Sweden and northern Europe had very little contact with and knowledge of the Muslim world or the Caliph Omar a hundred years ago.

It was during that period, in the beginning of the 20th century, that the popular movements made their breakthrough in Sweden and Scandinavia. These movements had begun to develop from below in the mid-19th century as Sweden and Scandinavia began to industrialize. In Sweden there were the so-called free churches that, from radical Christian Lutheran perspectives, challenged the Swedish

monolithic state church. The free churches often preached social equality and self-education in opposition to the hierarchical state church. There was also the Temperance movement against the wide use of alcohol among the poor and working classes. And there was the labour movement that through class struggle fought for better salaries, living conditions and citizens' rights for the working class. The labour movement with its trade unions, cooperatives, self-education and, from 1889, a political party declared itself socialist.

This socialism had originally been inspired by Christian ideas.

When the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 was translated into Swedish language the words "Proletarian of all countries unite" were changed to "The words of the people are the words of God". The meaning was that human beings and the working class were all created by God and should be treated as such. From the 1890s the Swedish socialist labour movement became Marxist and grew into a mass movement intertwined with the Temperance movement and, although secular, inspired by the free churches activity from below of self-education and self organisation independent from the establishment and the state.

This labour movement in the first decades of the 1920s grew into the strongest political force in Sweden. Through strikes, demonstrations and mass organization it won broad layers for its vision of full citizens' rights for the working class and a socialist welfare state.

In 1921 together with the liberals it won equal universal suffrage for men and women and the eight hour working day. In 1932, in the midst of the depression and hard class struggle where striking workers were shot and killed by the military, the labour movement gained power through elections. Together with the Farmers Party it introduced a crisis program with public works against unemployment, with housing programs for workers, union rights, two weeks of paid vacation for all, maternity benefits and support for small farmers. That is, the first steps towards the welfare state were taken, but the outbreak of World War II stopped the reforms.

Sweden however, was not dragged into the war but stayed neutral. That meant that when peace returned to Europe in 1945, the Swedish society and industry was intact. Sweden thus had a favorable economical position after the war. With the social democratic labour movement in power together with the Farmers Party often supported by the communists the welfare state was built during the economic boom in the 1950s and the 1960s. The compulsory health- and social insurance systems, equality between rich and poor as well as between boys and girls in the education system, a generous pension system, the building of one million modern homes, extended vacation, and diminishing of the work week were products of those decades. During the years of left wing radicalisation in the 1970's many of the pro-labour reforms when it comes to job security, influence and working conditions were carried through. Here were also many reforms to gain equality between men and women, such as child-care, equal pay, abortion rights and individual taxation.

Through the Social Democratic Workers Party, the Swedish labour movement held political power uninterrupted for 44 years — between 1932-1976. Those were the years of building and development of the Swedish welfare state. The strength of a broad labour movement built from below, from unions, cooperatives, self-education and a whole network of working class organisations in almost every area of life, together with the fact that Sweden didn't participate in the European wars of the 20th century, were the central preconditions for the Swedish welfare state. During that period there were almost no Muslims in the whole of Sweden and Scandinavia and Islam didn't have any influence on the process.

Haroon-ur-Rasheed, a leading columnist who is also considered an ideologue of Mr Imran Khans Justice Party (PTI), in his recent columns has been saying the same thing. He says

Swedish press often writes about Omars law. You are also a keen observer of the Swedish press. Do you find this claim credible?

I am sorry to inform you that "Omars law" is not known in Sweden, at least not outside the Muslim congregations. Islam, although a growing belief system in Sweden, is still a small religion here. Out of a little more than nine million inhabitants, there are between 200,000-300,000 Muslims in Sweden (the figures are debatable), that is less than five percent. I think it is necessary that Swedes learn more about Muslim beliefs and traditions since we now have Muslim citizens and live in a globalised world where we must learn to know and understand each other better. But as yet the law of Omar is not known and was if possible even less known in the beginning of the Swedish welfare project. In the beginning of the 1930's there were only 15 Muslims in the whole of Sweden.

Can you tell us why the Swedish model came into being at a particular moment in history? Do you think it was inspired by the Russian revolution? Was it possible without communist, social democratic, and anarchist movements gaining ground in Sweden?

The revolutions in Russia 1917 and in Germany, Austria and Hungary 1918-19 together with the social upheavals in almost all the European continent in the years following after World War I of course had tremendous effects even on the developments in Sweden. In April, May, and June 1917 Sweden was on the brink of a revolution against hunger and lack of citizens' rights. Strikes, hunger riots, demonstrations and local upheavals took place all over the country. Conscripted soldiers joined the workers' demonstrations, and workers' councils were set up in the cities as well as in small rural towns. It was under the pressure of this huge movement of workers and poor people together with the revolutions in Europe that the conservatives lost their power and what we called the "democratic breakthrough" was gained the first years after the war. That breakthrough didn't mean that equality and social security was obtained for the broad layers of the population. It took a further 30-40 years to obtain important reforms in that direction.

The communists were never really strong on a national scale in Sweden, but were important in certain industrial unions and in some regions. In different periods they pushed the social democrats to the left and mass mobilised for important welfare reforms.

The existence of the Soviet Union had a dual impact on the Swedish development and the Swedish labour movement. On the one hand the communist vision of a classless society and the Soviet development with at least many formal social rights, created a framework where almost all political forces had to say they were against social inequality. Social equality thus became a political goal that was very difficult for bourgeois forces to negate. That made it easier for the labour movement to argue and act for social reforms.

On the other hand the repression and dictatorship in the Soviets effectively barred the Swedish communists from getting the upper hand within the labour movement. The social democracy could keep its majority among the working class as what seemed to be a more peaceful and democratic alternative.

What really is the social welfare system? Does it mean employment, joblessness allowance, free healthcare and education alone? We have that in Saudi Arabia too. Is Saudi Arabia a welfare state too? Or does "welfare state" also mean equal rights for women, religious minorities, political freedoms, right to organize and freedom of expression?

I am not an expert on the welfare systems in Saudi Arabia, but to the European labour movement and Europeans in general social welfare is closely tied to citizens' rights in every field, such as political freedom, freedom to worship and believe, the right to organise, to express your views and

fight for change. In Sweden the fight for democratic and social rights were two sides of the same coin. It started, as I said, as a fight for religious rights in the mid 19th century, and developed into the struggle of all oppressed: the workers and the women, the small farmers and others. It is interesting that in Sweden, the democratic breakthrough in the 1920's meant both workers' rights and women's rights.

The same year that workers got 8 hours work week in 1919, the legal system of prostitution that had turned so many poor women into sex commodities for the middle and upper class men was abolished and women gained the right to vote. Democratic rights were about the ordinary workers' and citizens' right to fight for his and her well-being and for a society which takes a common responsibility for all of its inhabitants. That society was in Sweden called "folkhemmet" - the peoples home, where no one should be neglected or ill-treated and all of the "family members", that is the people living in the society, would be treated as equals.

Today, since twenty years, this whole welfare state system and its ideology has been intensively and brutally attacked by big capital and neo-liberals. Much of it has been destroyed and many of the reforms have been lost. But still the vast majority of the population wants to keep and defend it. To be able to do that, all the oppressed and neglected have to stand together like they tried to do in Sweden when the welfare state was only a vision for the future. To obtain it the activists of those days realized that it had to become a goal for the broadest and strongest social force that was inclusive of all the oppressed. It had to become an issue not only for the industrial male workers but for the women in the households, for the low paid civil servants, the small farmers, the immigrant minorities and others. Different religious beliefs and differences of culture could not be allowed to split that struggle, because it demanded the unified effort of the broadest masses. The generations that fought for democratic rights and social welfare and won so many, that are now threatened and in many cases even lost, of course made many mistakes and could not always live up to their broad perspectives. But I think their main lessons have to be learnt and relearned today if we are to defend or win a social welfare for the coming generations.

P.S.

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<http://www.viewpointonline.net/omars-law-in-unknown-in-sweden-swedish-historian-tells-imran-khan.html>

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