

Obama in Cairo: The Religionizing of Politics

Sunday 7 June 2009, by [BENNOUNE Karima](#) (Date first published: 4 June 2009).

While President Barack Hussein Obama clearly aimed to strike a blow against Islamic extremism with his speech in Cairo today, it often seemed that he was actually capitulating to parts of the social agenda of those very movements to do so. Perhaps more than anything else, his address was a stark reminder that secular space shrinks daily, especially in political discourse where religion claims more territory all the time. While the President's speech was courageous in attempting to reach out to parts of the world so alienated by the illegal policies of the Bush administration, and in taking on a number of crucial issues like terrorism, torture, the Iraq war and Israeli settlements with a certain amount of laudable frankness (for which he is sure to be unfairly criticized all around), his embrace of a confessional view of the world is very worrying.

In the President's construction, those who live in Muslim-majority countries seem not to be citizens or Asians or Arabs or Africans but simply "Muslims." The diverse global population of over a billion people of Muslim heritage is seen as some sort of bloc made up of those who are first and foremost defined by their presumed religious identity and beliefs, ironically the very emphasis of the notion of *umma* so championed by fundamentalists. Such a view reverberated throughout the U.S. television coverage of the event which focused on "*the* global Muslim population," seemingly some sort of organized, unified entity.

The President quoted religious texts repeatedly, citing the Koran alone at least four times (as well as the Talmud and the Bible). According to the President, "God intended" for there to be peace in the "Holy Land." The "world we seek," the "new beginning" the President champions are to be found in scriptures. "The people of the world can live together in peace," *because* it is "God's vision." This rhetoric is deeply worrying and harkens back to the ways in which both Presidents Bush (W) and Clinton deployed religious arguments. So much for change. Is this what contemporary political discourse has come to? What kind of meaningful separation of church and state will be left if this is our political lexicon? How can we possibly make an effective stand against diverse religious fundamentalists - whether Al Qaeda of which the President spoke today or the murderer of U.S. abortion provider Dr. George Tiller- if we repeatedly concede the primacy of religion in public and personal and political life.

Most disturbing to me was the President's use of the issue of the regulation of headscarves, a subject he mentioned repeatedly. He reduced this complex problem to a scenario in which "Western countries... imped[e] Muslim citizens from practicing religion as they see fit... by dictating what clothes a Muslim woman should wear." This is remarkably one-sided as the President made no mention whatsoever of the pressure, coercion and even violence sometimes employed within some Muslim populations and families to get women and girls to wear - and believe they are required to wear - the hijab and other "modest" gear. Moreover, whether or not such garb is indeed a religious requirement is highly contested among people of Muslim heritage. I have just published research conducted among the many people of Muslim, Arab and North African descent in France who support that country's 2004 law banning religious symbols in public schools which they see as a necessary deployment of the "law of the republic" to counter the "law of the Brothers," an informal rule imposed undemocratically on many women and girls in neighborhoods and at home and by fundamentalists.

The President's most misguided utterance on this topic was that he "reject[s] the view of some in the West that a woman who chooses to cover her hair is somehow less equal..." Indeed, as many feminists throughout the Arab world, South Asia and in Muslim diaspora populations have noted, gender subordination is often deeply implicated in the emphasis on women covering their bodies. It is true that this issue has been misused and has mingled dangerously with post 9/11 discriminatory attitudes about Muslims and Islam. And it is laudable that Mr. Obama is concerned with such prejudice. However, that is not the only relevant factor here. Gender equality is central to this discussion. In fact, some Muslim majority societies, like Turkey also ban the headscarf in certain educational settings in the face of pressure on women and girls to wear such garments and in light of some of the meanings of those coverings.

I was grateful for the words of Peter Daou on the *Huffington Post* who asked of the President's rhetoric about the headscarf, "Is this a joke? With women being stoned, raped, abused, battered, mutilated, and slaughtered on a daily basis across the globe, violence that is so often perpetrated in the name of religion, the most our president can speak about is protecting their right to wear the hijab?" It seems that Mr. Obama is attempting to build political bridges by taking a more socially conservative stance, a common - but mistaken - tack in the struggle against fundamentalism and terrorism. Perhaps this explains his vague reference to the "offensive sexuality" that the Internet and television are bringing into homes in the era of globalization. Does he mean exploitive images of women? Or could this also be easily misinterpreted to include depictions of homosexuality, especially in a country like Egypt which has prosecuted men for being gay in grossly unfair trials in recent years? This may also be the reason that the President felt compelled to stress his respect for "women who choose to live their lives in traditional roles," rather than say referencing the critical struggles of the Egyptian women's movement. Welcome to the new cultural relativism. We're not going to deal with human rights problems in your part of the world, because we want your extremists to stop blowing us up. Only such a stance could explain the fact that the President's only reference to the repressive Saudi regime was a complimentary nod to "King Abdullah's interfaith dialogue."

I believe that the President went to Cairo with the best of intentions, to reach out a much-needed hand of friendship. For that, I salute him. But I also believe that the potential consequences of how this "new beginning" is constructed need to be weighed carefully. As the U.S. prepares to witness the funeral of Dr. Tiller on Saturday - a memorial which is likely to be picketed by our own Christian Taliban - it is a crucial moment for weighing the costs of further religionizing politics. While this is put forward as a tool in the battle against religious extremism, it is instead a significant concession to their very agendas.

P.S.

* Karima Bennoune is a Visiting Professor at the University of Michigan Law School. Her most recent article, The Law of the Republic Versus the "Law of the Brothers": A Story of France's Law Banning Religious Symbols in Public Schools, appeared in HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY STORIES (Deena Hurwitz et al. eds., 2008) and is available at <http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers....>.