

Amnesty's smoke and mirrors

Amnesty International's "experts" blur the issue raised by Gita Sahgal

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The independent review into how Amnesty vets partners fudges the issue of ideology and its collaboration with Moazzam Begg.

In the wake of the Gita Sahgal/Cageprisoners debacle, Amnesty International appointed independent consultants to conduct a review and recommend changes in the way that Amnesty operates and vets its campaigning partners. Although a little late for Sahgal, perhaps, it is a positive outcome of the fallout as this is exactly what she had been asking the senior management to spell out – the process by which they choose their partners.

It appears that Amnesty alliances had been formed on the recommendations of staff members who used a combination of instinct, experience and knowledge of the field in which they worked. Although many of the staff are highly skilled, this was a policy based on a wing and a prayer – prayer being the operative word given their joint campaigning with the Catholic church and Cageprisoners, both of which operate in a religious ethos that is often contrary to the spirit of human rights.

The review, *Working With Others*, recognises Amnesty did not show “due diligence” in its collaboration with Moazzam Begg. However, there seems to be a fudge at the heart of it. It calls for gender (there is only one full-time post on gender currently) and diversity mainstreaming to be implemented across the organisation; and the creation of a space for staff to discuss “the specific challenge religious fundamentalism poses for AI’s policy of not commenting on ideology” but at the same time concludes that even if all this were in place, Amnesty’s collaboration with Begg may not have been materially different. For a human rights organisation to claim that it does not comment on ideology, when every campaign it wages is de facto a comment, beggars belief.

Apart from the muddle, there is the question of monitoring the implementation of such policies. Oxfam provides a salutary lesson. It has just such a policy, also called *Working with others*, and yet it is currently caught up in a very similar situation in India where its We Can (end violence against women) project is headed by a Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) member, in Uttarakhand state, Meera Kaintura (aka Saklani).

Local NGOs and women’s organisations under the We Can umbrella in the state were shocked to discover this, as the BJP is influenced by a hardline Hindutva philosophy that posits India as essentially the land of Hindus. In the drive to win power in India, the BJP frequently dissembles its true purpose, courts Muslims when it is politically expedient and always has a couple of Muslims in prominent positions to ward off awkward questions – even though it was allegedly involved in the Gujarat massacre in 2002, in which an estimated 2,000 Muslims were killed. When Oxfam was challenged about its bedfellows, the initial response from Mona Mehta, global programme adviser (EVAW) Oxfam GB was: “We respect everyone’s right to have varied and different perspectives and also various political affiliations.”

This position sits uncomfortably with Oxfam’s policy as articulated in their partnership document:

“We must share a desire to work towards a common position on important issues, including a commitment to gender-equality and respect for diverse identities ...” Perhaps in implicit recognition that it would be hard to justify a sustained alliance with individuals associated with the BJP as simply a question of “different political affiliations”, the Oxfam position changed. The national co-ordinator of the We Can campaign, India, denied that Kaintura was a member of the BJP and therefore, saw no need to dissociate from her. This is exactly the kind of smoke and mirrors which bedevils the debate on Begg, except that he admits his directorship of Cageprisoners and proclaims his Salafism, a highly sectarian and anti-woman strand of Islam.

The review has provided the perfect get-out clause for Amnesty when it recommends “creating space for rightsholders to speak for themselves through the development of an AI platform for the voiceless ... There should be no criterion for access to the platform, save a direct experience of a [human rights] violation”. This is a retrospective, theoretical vindication for an ill-considered collaboration in which, as the review acknowledges the “initial clarity of purpose regarding its engagement with MB blurred over time”. In the appendix, outlining the history of Begg’s involvement with Amnesty, is this little gem: “In 2005, MB lights candle at the opening of AI UK’s annual general meeting.” Isn’t that the kind of symbolic act that goes beyond a “platform for the voiceless” and suggests that Begg is the champion of all human rights that lies at the heart of this furore? It’s time for a little honesty.

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P.S.

* Source: The Guardian, Friday 9 July 2010.