

# Secular space: bridging the religious-secular divide? - Fundamentalism and the need for a secular state

Wednesday 24 January 2018, by [SAHGAL Gita](#) (Date first published: 11 November 2013).

**One of the goals in a new report on women and Arab Spring by CARE International is to build bridges between religious and secular women [1]. Gita Sahgal says this fails to address the real problem: the rise of fundamentalism and the lack of clarity on the need for a secular state.**

In discussions of the ongoing revolutions in the Middle East, much is made of an opposition between older secular women's organisations and today's youth movements. Far too little attention is given to the importance of secularism as a value for the state and the need for secular space as an important pre-condition for the advancement of human rights.

When I say secularism, I do not mean the absence of religion but rather a state structure that defends both freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief, where there is no state religion, where law is not derived from God and where religious actors cannot impose their will on public policy. A secular state does not simply limit religion, it also maintains the essential right of religious freedom as a duty not a favour. This means that it defends the freedom to worship and the right to maintain churches and temples, unhindered, and also defends minorities from attack.

Religious freedom also includes the right to challenge dominant religious interpretations, to change religions, and to leave religion altogether. These rights are crucial, not only for women, but for religious minorities, and a secular state is necessary to defend them. In fact it is the only kind of state in which religious fundamentalists have a voice that is capable of limiting the inevitable harm they will cause. As the case of Bangladesh shows, a state with a secular constitution on the one hand, and a strong feminist-led civil society on the other, will deliver far better outcomes for development in general [2] and for gender equality [3] than a state ruled by religion.

The divide, therefore is not inherently between the religious and secular, but between the anti-secular and those with secular values. In the UK, a major anti-secular force is the state's promotion of political Islam, along with those who attack secular values from a post-modernist or Islamic feminist standpoint. Those with secular values include many religious conservatives who nonetheless want a separation between religion and the state, along with religious minorities, youth and women's rights activists, free thinkers, and atheists who want a state in which they have the space for their voice, activism and beliefs. The first group are dominant in policy making of both governments and INGOs, while the second are among those voicing their frustrations at NGOisation of civil society and donor attitudes .

CARE International [4], one of the largest humanitarian organisations in the world, has produced a new report on women in the MENA region, called Arab Spring or Arab Autumn? Women's political

participation in the uprisings and beyond. Its Executive Summary lays out five strategic goals:

*Place women's rights at the heart of the new political settlements across the region*

Include women's rights in 'mutual accountability frameworks' between donors and aid recipient governments to regulate political dialogue, aid, trade and wider economic relations

Broaden the support base for women's rights movements, with a focus on engaging new youth activists and women in rural and urban slum areas

Support initiatives to bridge the religious-secular divide on women's rights

Transform development programmes to embed gender equality, women's participation and youth empowerment

CARE's recommendations include the need to treat gender equality seriously, and to reflect some of the views of activists and NGOs about whether the accountability frameworks put in place by donor governments are working. The chief obstacle to all these goals is the rise of fundamentalist movements in the region. But the CARE report does not focus on the dangers these movements bring; instead it wants to "bridge the religious-secular divide."

There is certainly a conversation to be had between religious and secular (irreligious) women, and between those in the youth movement and in the old line NGOs. Indeed they will all find themselves fighting on many fronts simultaneously. In some parts of the region, as in Tunisia [5], the struggle is to hold onto gains made in past regimes. But it is also a struggle to hold on to the existing space for women's activism that exists in customary practices.

We must never make the mistake of thinking of Islamists simply as religious conservatives. While the Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, has certainly made accommodation at various times with conservatives, including dictatorial regimes, their critique of CEDAW in March 2013 [6], shows that they are intent on rolling back existing local norms, not merely opposing international human rights norms that they deem to be 'Western'. For instance, they complain that the Convention will 'Cancel the obligatory authorization of the husband in: travel, work or going out or use (of ) contraception'. In many Muslim-majority countries, women already exercise these freedoms. Grasping this fact, and using it in developing policy and programmes, allows a different set of assumptions to take root about how to maintain and expand secular space.

Even without a secular state, the places in which the religious and non-religious can strengthen their strategies and work together are crucial. Journalists' and bloggers' associations, grassroots development groups, human rights organisations (which are genuinely universalist) and women's networks are important secular spaces. Global networks such Women Living Under Muslim Laws [7] or Musawah [8] are important actors in keeping discussion alive between those who are religious and those who are not.

What these networks do is often misunderstood by international actors. WLUML, for instance, has been valorised for promoting 'value pluralism' by a human rights professor in the US [9] and lauded for separating true religion from corrupt culture by a British academic [10]. Neither of these claims is accurate, and both undermine the careful work on legal pluralism undertaken over many years by WLUML, which has opposed the spread of such dual legal systems as Shari'a courts [11], jirgas and systems to codify customary law. Many thinkers and activists, myself included, rely on understandings built through such networks and reflected in the human rights literature.

Networks by definition have participants with different views. So, for instance, Musawah has

undoubtedly faced difficult discussions about what sort of Muslims are to be part of it - only those who are visibly observant or anyone. Its extraordinary founders, who include the feminist theologian Amina Wadud [12], based in the US, and the Malaysian organization Sisters in Islam [13], clearly understand that they need to operate in a secular space without which they simply would not be able to conduct their feminist interpretations of religion. Sisters in Islam has been attacked by religious extremists, has warned against the rise of fundamentalism and has protested against its government's collusion with the Saudis in the case of Hamza Kashgari [14], the young man who was deported from Malaysia and imprisoned for blasphemy because of his tweets.

The silence of all too many western feminists, whether 'Islamic' or secular, on these matters, speaks eloquently.

It is not surprising that there is such a silence. Like other social theory, much women's rights theory for the last two decades has depended on the notion that fundamental progressive change is not possible. For the past thirty years or so, the dominant trend in the academy has been to assume that religiosity is rising, that the desire for liberty and equality are quaint nineteenth century ideas, and that we must get on with the programme of working within religion and focus on making minute incremental changes.

In the field of security, this has led to the designation of some of the most dangerous and murderous movements of our time as 'moderates'. It is not my contention to argue that all religious fundamentalists are the same. But I do think that the term 'moderate Islamist' is an oxymoron. As the Egyptian journalist Ibrahim Essa [15], who was arrested 70 times under Mubarak, said, 'Under Mr. Mubarak, I was threatened only with prison; under Mr. Morsi, my life was in danger'. As feminist and secular activists mostly from the global south told Human Rights Watch, for many Western powers the coming to power of the Muslim Brotherhood was their Plan B. If not one strong man, then another.

I would be interested to know whether any real 'due diligence' has been done to assess the harm done by the policy of treating the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat e Islami as partners of government at various points in the 'War on Terror'. Indeed, so enthusiastic has the British government been in these partnerships that they awarded the National Health Service post of Muslim Spiritual Care Provision to Chowdury Mueen Uddin [16], founder of the Jamaat-linked Muslim Council of Britain, vice-chair of the East London Mosque, and a leader of the attack on *The Satanic Verses* [17]. Mueen Uddin has just been convicted of war crimes in Bangladesh - in war crimes trials that signal at least the partial defeat of Islamists in Bangladesh [18]. In 1994, I worked with David Bergman and many others to make "The War Crimes File" for Channel 4 television, the first British investigation into Mueen Uddin's activities. To my surprise, the response of the British authorities was to ignore the allegations against him and to entertain both Mueen Uddin and Maulana Motiur Rahman Nizami, then leader of the Jamaat e Islami, at Chatham House.

In Iran, the Islamists won, and the revolution led to a massive backlash against rights in general. Yet as the CARE report shows, Even under the most adverse conditions, women continue to struggle. Some 'Islamic' feminists such as Dr. Ziba Mir Hosseini [19] and others studying Iran found that the gains they made, apparently working 'within' religion were modest. Many feminists went out on the streets to demand democracy in the Green movement and before. Would they have taken the risk of public and secular campaigning if they had found it possible to reform the Islamic regime, fatwa by fatwa?

The Iran example tends to be used to frame as desirable strategies of internal reform efforts which have yielded little, and were actually taken up under conditions of extreme repression, after the brutal defeat of the progressive movement. Iranian feminists working within Iran would not

necessarily see their choices as anti-secular. In fact, they smuggled secular demands into their work, although they did not label them as such. The Million Signatures Campaign [20] to demand justice in family laws was a bottom up approach, using activists to contact ordinary people to create a climate for reform signature by signature. They did not demand justice under Shari'a, or limit themselves to pleading with the Ayatollahs to issue better fatwas.

The CARE report suggests that "prominent religious institutions, such as Al-Azhar, can use their unique authority to espouse moderate views of Islam and the role of women." The assumption that women will get progressive fatwas is rather sanguine; what happens if they get a fatwa which is contrary to the goal of gender equality? [21] Societies where extremist narratives spread and become common currency are not likely to be resilient in handling attacks on rights. Whether in Manouba University or Benghazi, it is mass public disapproval that succeeds - fighting to keep a secular space that is inclusive but free of jihadi influence.

There are rocky times ahead, but reform may still be possible, and it is crucial to look closely at the relationship between religion, the state and civic space - and to get it right. This is why it is so important for international NGOs to be very wary of entering into alliances with fundamentalists, or trying to reform religion. This is not their job, and what they may end up doing is shrinking secular space for both religious and atheist feminist work.

**Gita Sahgal**

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\* Open Democracy. 11 November 2013:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/gita-sahgal/secular-space-bridging-religious-secular-divide>

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## Footnotes

[1] <https://www.care-international.org/news/press-releases/advocacy/arab-spring-or-arab-autumn-for-women-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa.aspx>

[2] <http://world.time.com/2013/07/18/after-much-heartbreak-some-good-news-at-last-for-bangladesh/>

[3] <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/womens-rights-bangladesh-0022138>

[4] <https://www.care-international.org>

[5] ESSF (article 29997), [Tunisia's fight against fundamentalism](#).

[6] ESSF (article 41950), [Muslim Brotherhood Statement Denouncing UN Women Declaration for Violating Sharia Principles](#).

[7] <http://www.wluml.org>

[8] <http://www.musawah.org>

- [9] [http://politics-of-religious-freedom.berkeley.edu/files/2011/06/Danchin\\_ASIL-Rogues-and-Liberals.pdf](http://politics-of-religious-freedom.berkeley.edu/files/2011/06/Danchin_ASIL-Rogues-and-Liberals.pdf)
- [10] [http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/httpNetITFramePDF?ReadForm&parentunid=C6E7ED9E2588C1F6C125765E004C8F66&parentdoctype=paper&netitpath=80256B3C005BCCF9/\(httpAuxPages\)/C6E7ED9E2588C1F6C125765E004C8F66/\\$file/casanophillogo.pdf](http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/httpNetITFramePDF?ReadForm&parentunid=C6E7ED9E2588C1F6C125765E004C8F66&parentdoctype=paper&netitpath=80256B3C005BCCF9/(httpAuxPages)/C6E7ED9E2588C1F6C125765E004C8F66/$file/casanophillogo.pdf)
- [11] <http://www.wluml.org/node/514>
- [12] <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/muslims/interviews/wadud.html>
- [13] <http://www.sistersinislam.org.my>
- [14] [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/saudi-writer-detained-after-tweets-about-muhammad/2012/02/09/gIQApSgW2Q\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.f305c5e86ef4](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/saudi-writer-detained-after-tweets-about-muhammad/2012/02/09/gIQApSgW2Q_story.html?utm_term=.f305c5e86ef4)
- [15] [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/27/opinion/egypts-journalists-still-under-siege.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/27/opinion/egypts-journalists-still-under-siege.html?_r=0)
- [16] <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2013/11/what-will-history-make-of-britains-treatment-of-chowdhury-mueen-uddin/>
- [17] <https://www.amazon.co.uk/The-Satanic-Verses-Salman-Rushdie/dp/0963270702>
- [18] <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/?referral=PM>
- [19] <http://www.wluml.org/node/6869>
- [20] <http://www.learningpartnership.org/iran-oms>
- [21] <http://www.libyaherald.com/2013/10/23/grad-muftis-veil-fatwa-not-compulsory-deputy-education-minister/#axzz2kADwlqJ2>