

France - Fanatics have no right to censor critics. But neither does Emmanuel Macron

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The French president's response to Islam is shot through with hypocrisy and illiberalism.

Letters complaining about newspaper articles are unexceptional. Not so letters from the Élysée Palace. Last week, the *Financial Times* published, after the killing of teacher [Samuel Paty](#) in Paris and of [churchgoers](#) in Nice, an article by its Europe correspondent, Mehreen Khan, critical of French president Emmanuel Macron's policies towards Islam. Macron's desire to "use the state to prescribe a 'correct' religion", she wrote, has "more in common with authoritarian Muslim leaders than enlightenment values of separating church and state".

Macron responded with a [letter-cum-article](#) defending himself and his policies and accusing Khan of "misquoting" him - he insisted he had never talked of "Islamic separatism", as Khan suggested, only of "Islamist separatism". By the time the *FT* published Macron's letter, however, it had removed Khan's article for ["factual inaccuracies"](#). One could read the criticism but not what was being criticised. Newspapers do sometimes excise articles - I'm sure the *Observer* has done so. But they should do so only in truly exceptional circumstances, and then give a full account as to why. The removal of offending articles after criticism is, however, becoming a more acceptable part of our culture.

A few days before Khan's article was pulled, *Politico Europe* published a highly disingenuous op-ed by leading French academic Farhad Khosrokhavar. The reason for Islamist terror, he said, lies in "France's extreme form of secularism and its embrace of blasphemy". Intellectuals who "came out in praise of blasphemy" should have "considered their words more carefully". While French secularists are "fighting for freedom of expression", he wrote, "innocent people are dying", conveniently ignoring the fact that it's not secularists doing the killing. You will have to take my word for all this because, after a barrage of criticism, *Politico Europe* removed the article for not meeting ["our editorial standards"](#). I disagree with Khosrokhavar's article, but I disagree, too, with its removal. This is not how journalism or public debate should work, or can work, especially when engaging with contentious issues.

At the same time, arguments such as Khosrokhavar's must be robustly challenged. The claim that secularism and blasphemy help radicalise Islamists is false and dangerous. France has suffered grievously from Islamist terror - [267 people have died](#) in terror attacks since 2012 - but it is far from a unique target. A week after the Nice killings came an Islamist terror attack in Vienna, with [four people](#) shot dead. Austria, unlike France, has a highly restrictive [blasphemy law](#), which has been used to criminalise [critics of Islam](#). In between the attacks in Nice and Vienna came terror strikes in Kabul and Peshawar, on [university students](#) and a [Qur'an study class](#). The vast majority of jihadist killings are in Muslim-majority countries with obnoxiously tight blasphemy laws. Secularists and

“blasphemers” in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran and elsewhere have long faced murderous assaults, from both [jihadists](#) and the [authorities](#). These are the people betrayed by western critics of blasphemy.

To say this is not to say that one should therefore defend Macron or his policies. For these policies, like much of the French response to Islam and terror, are shot through with hypocrisy and illiberalism. For all its claimed attachment to free speech, France has tough laws against speech deemed unacceptable, from Holocaust denial to [insulting the French flag](#). It has [criminalised](#) those who call for a boycott of Israel. It has banned protests against [Charlie Hebdo](#), and, after the [2015 massacre](#) of the magazine’s staff, dozens of [Muslims were arrested](#) for suggesting sympathy with the killers, including [a boy](#) who posted on Facebook a cartoon mocking the magazine. A proposed law threatens [academic freedom](#) in the name of “the values of the republic”. Another would outlaw any [filming of police](#) in which officers may be identified.

Police brutality against those of North African origin is [well documented](#). There is deep-seated racism in many spheres of social life from [employment](#) to housing, though figures are sparse given French reluctance to collect ethnic data. Being “colour blind” is all too often cover for being blind to racism.

Racism and double standards cannot be challenged by caving in to those who wish to restrict speech or the right to blaspheme. Nor can free speech be bolstered, or terrorism contained, by ignoring double standards, racist bigotry and the illiberalism of much of Macron’s policies.

The struggles for free speech, in defence of secularism, against racism and to counter terrorism are inextricably linked. Self-censorship in response to Islamist threats needs resisting. So does self-censorship in response to the displeasure of democratic leaders.

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P.S.

- The Guardian. Sun 8 Nov 2020 07.59 GMT:
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/nov/08/fanatics-have-no-right-to-censor-critics-but-neither-does-emmanuel-macron>

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