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Sweden: Far-right has created a climate of racism, Islamophobia and fear

‘Swedish left opposes Quran burnings, sometimes through direct action’

Sunday 22 October 2023, by [BLOMQVIST Håkan](#), [SULEHRIA Farooq](#) (Date first published: 22 October 2023).

Two Swedes were shot dead in Brussels on October 16 on their way to a football stadium to watch Sweden play Belgium. Another Swedish citizen was fatally injured.

Their assassin, Abdesalem Lassoued — shot dead the next morning by the Belgian police at a café — reportedly sympathised with Islamic State (ISIS). In a video message he posted on social media soon after the incident, Lassoued claimed to have killed the Swedes.

The Swedish authorities and media have portrayed these killings as efforts to avenge *Quran* burnings in Sweden.

Sweden has been making global headlines owing to a litany of *Quran* burnings earlier this year. Angry protesters in Baghdad burnt and ransacked the Swedish embassy in July while Iraq expelled the Swedish ambassador. Elsewhere in the Muslim world, agitation was recorded against the burnings of the *Quran* in Sweden.

Sweden raised its threat level to four (out of five) last August after threats from al-Qaeda and ISIS. While drawings of the Prophet Muhammad by visual artist Lars Vilks raised a global storm in 2007, it was seen as an isolated event. However, *Quran* burnings in Sweden have assumed a regular frequency since last year. What explains this?

According to **Håkan Blomqvist**, the formation of a right-wing government with the support of the far-right party, Sweden Democrats, has created the conditions for a flurry of *Quran* burnings in recent months.

Blomqvist is an associate professor in history at Stockholm’s Södertörn University, and author of several books on the Swedish labour movement. He has been active in the left since the late 1960s.

He explained what is behind the incidents of *Quran* burnings in Sweden in the following interview with *Green Left’s* **Farooq Sulehria**.

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Farooq Sulehria : What do you think suddenly led to this flurry of *Quran* burnings in Sweden — a society and country otherwise known for liberal values and tolerance?

Håkan Blomqvist : That image is not very accurate. Sweden has changed. We have for a long time had right-wing extremists, sentiments and organised groups opposing immigration, foreigners from other cultures and Islam.

A right-wing populist anti-immigration and anti-Muslim party, the Sweden Democrats, which had its first electoral breakthrough in 2010, is now the second-largest party in Sweden (next to the Social Democrats).

After the so-called “refugee crisis” in 2015, Sweden has almost closed its borders to refugees — both by the non-socialist as well as social democratic governments.

In the latest general elections held in 2022, right-wing liberal parties formed the government with the support of the Sweden Democrats. That has radicalised right-wing currents who were already growing.

It was a right-wing activist who advised the Swedish-Danish extremist Rasmus Paludan to start burning the *Quran* during Easter in 2022. The example has been followed by others, both by the right-wing extremists and anti-Islam actors.

What has been the response of the Swedish left, particularly the Left Party and some of the key far left organisations?

The general reaction from the left has been an urge to stop burning of *Quran*. On certain occasions, the left activists resorted to direct action (by physically trying to stop the burners or acting as pretended fire fighters). Otherwise, the left has demanded to invoke the “law of incitement against ethnic group”.

In Sweden, one is not allowed to publicly wear a badge with a swastika or a picture of the Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, since it is considered antisemitic. Many spokespersons of the left (as well as the chairperson of the Social Democratic party) think that the abovementioned law should be invoked also in this case.

Recently, a man in a small Swedish town was prosecuted and sentenced in line with that law. However, the court made it clear that it was not only because of the burning but also the “circumstances” (the convicted person played —at the same time — threatening Nazi, anti-Muslim music).

What has been the trade union movement’s response to these events?

In general, the Swedish trade union movement is against such provocations that risk splitting working class members. A big part of the Swedish working class consists of immigrants, many with a Muslim faith. But I don’t think the union movement as a whole has any proposals for the legislation.

The leadership of the trade union umbrella called Lands Organisationen or LO (like the Trade Union Congress in the UK), usually has the same opinion as the Social Democrats (since they are a part of its leadership). I have seen that there is a debate within the union movement around the same questions as in other milieux about freedom of expression versus a ban on incitement.

How has the present coalition government reacted? Is there a debate about changes in freedom of expression laws?

The incumbent right-wing coalition government avoids the available law on incitement. Instead, it tries to make the burning of *Quran* a question of national security. That is, if the police (and courts) consider a planned burning of *Quran* a threat to national security, such actions should be considered illegal, hence, prevented. The government in this manner avoids confronting the anti-Muslim opinions held by the Sweden Democrats, thus turning the issue into an issue of national interest instead of discrimination.

This debate is definitely difficult. On the one hand is the question of free expression. On the other, Islamophobia. How would you balance the two?

To me it is not that terribly difficult. A society, at least of the Swedish type, always draws limits. Not everything is allowed, even in the case of the right to free expression.

You are not allowed in Sweden to propagate for pedophilia, Nazi genocide or hatred against different ethnic groups. You are allowed to criticise and even ridicule beliefs and religion as well as atheism, but not to spread hate against nationalities or ethnic groups.

Previously, Sweden had a law called "*trosfrid*" – "peace for religions". According to *trosfrid*, insulting religion was illegal. But that law was abolished in 1970. The reason was the secularisation of the society and the very strong opposition from artists, writers and others who were prosecuted according to that law for criticising religion.

Sweden was for hundreds of years (since the 16th century) a protestant country with a very strong and authoritarian state-church. To criticise Christianity and the church often led to prison in the late 19th century (and earlier, to a death sentence).

However, during the 20th century, the grip of the church loosened as democratic development became stronger. In 1951, the right to leave the state-church without joining another religious faith was granted. From 1960, Christian prayers in the schools were no longer compulsory and, from 1970, it was allowed to freely criticise religion.

In 2000, the state and the Protestant church were separated, and we no longer have a state-church. One's faith and congregation is a private affair.

But the freedom of religion and expression is not the same thing, in my view, as allowing hate-agitation against the believers, religious and ethnic groups.

Sweden Democrats, the far-right party, has been defending the *Quran* burnings in the name of free expression. Yet, the present government has been bent upon cutting subsidies to the media that will hurt the radical press. How would you analyse these contradictions in the stated viewpoints of coalition partners?

To them that is no contradiction. Their defence of the freedom of the press is purely rhetorical. They defend anti-Islamic actions in most areas since they think Islam is alien to Swedish nationality and should be reduced to a minimum in Swedish society. Hence, they object to any restrictions against Islamophobia. Instead they are now – in line with the agenda of national security – turning also the *Quran*-issue into an anti-immigrant theme. They propose that burners of *Quran* should be expelled from Sweden.

Regarding the withdrawal of subsidies to the press – radical or liberal – which oppose Islamophobia, it is wholly in line with that orientation.

After threats from al-Qaeda, the threat level was raised to maximum in August. Do you think, there are real threats of al-Qaeda attacks?

Yes. On Monday (October 16), two Swedish football supporters in Brussels – where the Swedish team played against Belgium – were killed (and one wounded) by a terrorist claiming to be a member of Islamic State (ISIS). The assassin explicitly targeted the Swedes. So yes, that might be a real threat, perhaps even stronger since the Swedish right-wing government is such a strong supporter of the Netanyahu's war against Gaza, cutting Swedish aid to Palestinians and trying to

withdraw the Swedish recognition of the Palestinian state.

P.S.

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<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/sweden-far-right-has-created-climate-racism-islamophobia-and-fear>