

Common Sense Under Attack

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WHEN she arrived in Khartoum four months ago, Gillian Gibbons couldn't possibly have had any inkling that she'd be headed back to England some four months later, following a stint a prison. In a statement issued last Saturday, the incarcerated 54-year-old Liverpoolian said she wasn't keen to leave Sudan and would much rather go back to work. "The Sudanese people in general have been pleasant and very generous," she noted, "and I've had nothing but good experiences during my four months her."

What makes the level of equanimity and goodwill remarkable is that the previous day, following Friday prayers, there were mobs baying for her blood, demanding that the 15-day prison sentence handed down by a Khartoum court be upgraded to death by firing squad. So, what exactly did Gibbons do to inspire such demands for vengeance?

Well, a month into her stint as a teacher at the Unity School, where she was in charge of seven-year-olds, she came up with a device for engaging the kids' interest in one of the designated topics: bears. One of the children brought her teddy bear to school and her classmates were assigned the task of taking the teddy home, one by one, and writing about their experiences.

Before the project got underway, Gibbons asked the kids to choose a name for the cuddly toy. There were various suggestions, including Abdullah and Hassan. A little boy called Mohammed put forward his own name for consideration. The teacher arranged a class vote and Mohammed won hands down. She accepted the democratic verdict. Reasonably enough, the idea that anyone would find this objectionable appears not to have so much as crossed her mind.

Two months later, police arrived at the Unity compound to arrest Gibbons for insulting Islam. The school's director, Robert Boulos, was told that some parents had complained to the ministry of education. It subsequently turned out that the sole complainant was in fact an office assistant at the school, who served as the main witness for the prosecution - or, to be more precise, persecution.

The verdict of 15 days in prison followed by deportation occasioned sighs of relief, given that it could have been worse: six months in prison and 40 lashes. At the weekend, two Muslim British peers were engaged in negotiations with the Sudanese authorities in Khartoum, and they were expected to fly back to London with Gibbons after obtaining a presidential pardon. That's all very well, but the point remains that the only insult in this case - an insult to common sense, if not to Islam - came from those who pursued a vendetta on patently absurd grounds.

It has been argued that Gibbons erred inadvertently, that as a novice in Sudan she was unaware of cultural sensitivities. That's an unnecessarily patronising point of view; I suspect she erred only in failing to make an allowance for the idiocy of some Muslims. It has also been suggested that the Sudanese government stoked the controversy in order to draw international attention away from the monumental tragedy in Darfur. There may be some truth in that, but there's probably more logic in sheeting home the blame to sheer dogmatic blockheadedness.

An example of considerably more egregious judicial malice has, meanwhile, surfaced in Saudi Arabia, where a victim of gang rape has been sentenced to 200 lashes and six months in prison. The

supposed logic behind this punishment illustrates the extent to which the kingdom operates in a different time zone from much of the world - in terms of centuries rather than hours.

The unnamed, recently married 19-year-old, who has been dubbed the Qatif girl in a reference to her mainly Shia hometown, apparently wished to retrieve a photograph of herself from a former male acquaintance before she moved in with her husband, so she arranged a meeting with the young man. While the two of them were in a car, they were accosted by a couple of men armed with knives, who took them to an isolated area. The young woman was violated 14 times by seven men, three of whom also raped her companion.

When the case came before a Qatif court, the judges sentenced four of the assailants to terms ranging up to five years for kidnapping, but also sentenced the Qatif girl and her male friend to 90 lashes each for the "crime" of being in each other's company. Her lawyer, a human rights advocate by the name of Abdul-Rehman al-Lahem, filed an appeal and also brought the case to the notice of the media. He was consequently stripped of his licence, and his client's sentence was more than doubled to 200 lashes plus six months in prison.

There are grounds for assuming that officially sanctioned crimes against humanity along these lines are not exactly a rarity in Saudi Arabia, although they don't always attract international attention. Queried on the subject during his Annapolis trip last week, Prince Saud al-Faisal commented: "What is outraging about this case is that it is being used against the Saudi government and its people." In fact, what is "outraging" about this case is that the victims of an abominable crime have been sentenced to humiliating and painful punishments on utterly frivolous grounds, and that too on the basis of depositions by their assailants.

Such instances make it extremely difficult to take Islamic justice seriously. The Saudi justice ministry has sought to malign the Qatif girl by saying that she has confessed to having an extramarital affair - which, apart from probably being untrue, is neither here nor there.

The only hopeful signs in this context are al-Lahem's endeavours, plus the fact that the Qatif girl's husband has chosen to serve as a pillar of support instead of divorcing her. What's more, at least a couple of Saudi columnists have dared to raise their voices against their nation's system of injustice. Much of the West, meanwhile, continues to court Riyadh as if it were a bastion of sanity and stability in an otherwise turbulent region.

Inanities in the name of Islam are not restricted to Sudan and Saudi Arabia, of course. Pakistan frequently emerges as a venue for all manner of excesses. Recent examples from a few neighbouring countries, however, should suffice to bear out this contention.

In Iran, 27-year-old Dr Zahra Baniyaghoub died while in the custody of the morality and virtue police after she and her fiancé were arrested for chatting to each other in a public park. The authorities claimed she committed suicide, but Baniyaghoub's family doesn't accept this explanation, evidently for very good reasons, and has engaged the services of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi to press for an inquiry. In India, Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen continues to be hounded by Muslims for her supposed blasphemy, while in Turkey Erol Karaaslan, the translator and publisher of Richard Dawkins' atheist treatise *The God Delusion* faces charges of inciting religious hatred.

Karaaslan is about as guilty as Gillian Gibbons. It should be clear to even the meanest intelligence that the dimwits engaged in turning molehills into mountains are doing a monumental disservice to the faith they purport to uphold.

P.S.

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