

American Shariah? That's news to American Muslims

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(RNS) Oklahoma state Rep. Rex Duncan expects his "Save Our State" referendum to keep Islamic law out of state courts to pass easily on Nov. 2. He's less certain a similar measure could pass in Michigan.

The reason? Muslims have already established a foothold in and around Detroit, and wield enough political power to stop it, he says.

"I don't believe anybody who would spend five minutes looking at the landscape and the political dynamics of Dearborn, Mich., would for one minute entertain the idea that they could pass a preemptive strike to keep Shariah law out of the courts," said Duncan, a Republican.

Duncan and other conservatives -- including tea party favorite Sharron Angle in Nevada -- ominously warn that Muslims are hell-bent on imposing Shariah law on the U.S. legal system.

When opponents of a proposed Islamic center near Ground Zero rallied at the site last month (Sept.), many carried signs that depicted "SHARIA," dripping in blood. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich got a standing ovation at September's Values Voter Summit when he called for "a federal law that says Shariah law cannot be recognized by any court in the United States."

The funny thing is, no one in Oklahoma, Michigan or anywhere else is calling for Shariah -- including and especially Muslims.

Instead, Muslim American leaders say Duncan's referendum is a concrete example of fanning hysteria about the myth that they want to impose Shariah, which many Americans associate with misogyny, religious intolerance, and cruel punishments.

"This is another right-wing fantasy that started on the hate blogs and worked its way into the mainstream media," said Ibrahim Hooper of the Council of American-Islamic Relations in Washington D.C. "Where is the evidence of the takeover?"

Perhaps the most frequently cited example comes from New Jersey, where a Moroccan Muslim immigrant who beat and raped his wife was acquitted by a local court that ruled the husband was acting according to his religious beliefs.

The ruling was reversed by an appellate court in July, and many Muslim Americans say they found the initial New Jersey court ruling as absurd and cruel as non-Muslims.

What they do want, however, is protection for reasonable constitutionally protected acts, like wearing a headscarf, or praying at work.

"Accommodating a Muslim employee's request to wear a religious headscarf at work in no way imposes religious law on the workplace, any more than when employees wear a Latin cross or a Star of David," said Daniel Mach, director of the ACLU's Freedom of Religion and Belief program.

"Somehow, basic religious exercise by Muslims is viewed as imposition by that group of its own faith on others."

Frank Gaffney, president of the conservative Center for Security Policy in Washington D.C., disagreed.

"The principle difference is that Shariah calls for the destruction of our country; Jewish law does not," said Gaffney, whose institute released a 177-page report last month called "Shariah: The Threat to America."

Examples of "creeping" Shariah infiltrating American society cited in the report include Muslims building mosques, using Islamic financing to buy homes, and depositing money in Islamic banks, which forbid interest and avoid investments in products like alcohol and tobacco.

"So when you're talking about saying, 'Well it's just another religious court system that is operating kind of like the Jews do,' it's completely different, it's sedition," Gaffney said.

Muslims say such views reflect either bigotry or ignorance about Shariah, which means "path" in Arabic and is based on the Quran and the recorded teachings of Islam's Prophet Muhammad.

Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, an Islamic scholar at Emory University, argues in his 2008 book, "Islam and the Secular State," that Shariah is meant to be followed as a personal religious code, not imposed as a public legal system covering all citizens in society.

"The moment the state imposes Shariah, it stops being Islamic,"

An-Na'im said.

Other Muslims acknowledge that some Islamic countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, have legal systems based on strict interpretations of Shariah. That doesn't mean, however, that Muslims elsewhere desire the same thing. In fact, they condemn it.

"Assuming all Muslims follow medieval Islamic rules today is like assuming that all Catholics follow ninth-century canon law," wrote Sumbul Ali-Karamali, a Muslim woman raised in California and author of "The Muslim Next Door: The Quran, the Media, and that Veil Thing," in a recent Huffington Post column.

Gaffney, whose report called Shariah the "preeminent totalitarian threat of our time," dismissed alternative interpretations of Shariah as inauthentic. "There is only one interpretation of Shariah law," said Gaffney.

While anti-Shariah legislation may never be introduced in Michigan, Duncan believes other states will follow Oklahoma's lead and pass similar legislation to ban Shariah.

"There are other states, I believe a dozen or so, maybe more, who are currently in discussions with me," Duncan said, "and watching what we're doing."