

Swell of clergy rallies around Ga. death row inmate

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(RNS) As a federal appeals court in Denver considers whether Oklahoma voters had the right to ban Islamic law in state courts, a coalition of Muslim groups say they don't want to live under Shariah law in Michigan or anywhere else.

An umbrella group called the American Islamic Leadership Conference recently announced its support for a proposed Michigan law that would forbid state judges from enforcing foreign laws, including Shariah, when they violate the U.S. Constitution.

The statement said the group recognized that people of faith had the right to religious arbiters so long as their decisions didn't conflict with American law.

At the same time, the groups said the Michigan bill would protect "Muslims and non-Muslims alike from extremist attempts" to use Shariah to institute a "highly politicized and dangerous understanding of Islam" in the West.

Said Manda Ervin, one of the nine signatories and head of the Maryland-based Alliance of Iranian Women: "Many of us fled the Muslim world to escape Shariah law. ... We do not wish these laws to follow us here."

While many Muslim organizations have called the anti-Shariah laws discriminatory and unnecessary, the statement said such bills "protect and integrate our communities into the fabric of this great nation, by strengthening our accountability to the laws of the land, and the constitutions of the various states in which we live."

Many mainstream Muslim leaders and Shariah scholars warn that such bills dangerously create the impression that Muslim Americans are demanding that judges give Shariah precedence over the Constitution, when they are not.

"It's fearmongering and it's reckless," said Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, an Islamic law professor at Emory University in Atlanta. "It's ridiculous that state legislatures are wasting time on a law that tells judges to do what they are already constitutionally bound to do anyway."

Michigan and Oklahoma are among more than 20 states that are considering laws to ban Shariah in courtrooms. Zuhdi Jasser, executive director of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy and one of the statement's signatories, said the group supported the Michigan law because it only mentioned foreign laws. The group did not support similar bills in states like Arizona and Oklahoma that singled out Shariah over other religious laws.

"Once you identify one religion, it becomes a quagmire because you have to identify all the religions," said Jasser, a leading Muslim conservative.

Jasser said he did not oppose Shariah per se -- his own marriage contract and will were drafted after he consulted several imams, he said -- but opposed the institutionalization of Shariah in U.S. courts. "We believe the majority of the imams in America who would be issuing decisions under this system are not ready for modernity," said Jasser.