

Judge puts hold on Okla. anti-Shariah amendment

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(RNS) Lawyers for the Oklahoma Attorney General's office have two weeks to convince a federal judge to remove a temporary hold on a voter-approved state constitutional amendment that prohibits courts from considering Islamic law.

U.S. District Judge Vicki Miles-LaGrange issued a temporary restraining order on Monday (Nov. 8) after Muslims sued to block the referendum, which was approved by 70 percent of Oklahoma voters on Nov. 2.

Muneer Awad, executive director of the state chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, sued to block enforcement, alleging the referendum violates First Amendment prohibitions against religious discrimination and government-supported religion.

"A state should never approve or disapprove of a religion," said Awad.

The referendum, he argued, "says Islam is so uniquely threatening to the American way of life that it needs to be singled out as dangerous in the Oklahoma constitution. That stigmatizes Muslims in Oklahoma and Muslims all over America."

State Rep. Rex Duncan and state Sen. Anthony Sykes, the two lead Republican backers of the referendum, did not return calls seeking comment about the judge's decision.

In an earlier interview, Duncan described Islamic law, or Shariah, as a threat to the American legal system.

"Shariah law is a competing constitution. It's nothing less than that," Duncan said. "It's just an oppressive, barbaric treatment of women. Any educated woman on Shariah issues would certainly be against it. So we're going to force our courts to rely on the U.S. Constitution and statutes, and state constitution statutes."

The Oklahoma State Election Board, which is charged with certifying the referendum's approval by state voters, is being defended by the Oklahoma Attorney General's office, which also did not return phone calls.

Assistant Attorney General Scott Boughton told the judge that the referendum did not present an imminent danger to Muslims, and that Awad had no legal standing to sue in state courts.

When Miles-LaGrange reconvenes the court on Nov. 22, she will decide whether to let her restraining order expire or to apply a more permanent injunction against the referendum as legal battles continue.