



What rising anti-Muslim bias could mean for the future of religious freedom

When you don't apply religious freedom protections evenly, you undermine them for everyone, legal experts said.

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SALT LAKE CITY — On Thursday, if the weather cooperates, Asma Uddin and her family will celebrate the Fourth of July where they always do: along the banks of the Potomac River just outside Washington, D.C.

They'll enjoy a picnic dinner and wait for the sun to set. Then, just before the fireworks begin, Uddin will walk over to a familiar willow tree to pray.

The prayer timing isn't negotiable; sunset is one of five daily prayer times for observant Muslims. But the location is. She chooses the tree instead of the riverbank because the branches at least partially conceal her.

"Those precise movements are something that have invited a lot of alarm in the past," she said.

In recent years, people have called the police on Muslims for praying on a railway platform or on a plane. They've responded to an unfamiliar act with aggression, rather than seeking to learn something new.

"If you want to protect (religious freedom) in the long run, you can't be selective about it."

Asma Uddin

For Uddin, an attorney and religious freedom advocate, such incidents are more than just frustrating. They also represent America's failure to live up to the promises of the First Amendment, which offers protections for people of all faiths and none.

"Being publicly Muslim ... is limited by this constant threat of both physical (harm) and the sense that we don't really have the legal protection of judges on our side," she said.

It's a depressing reality, but it's also not surprising, said Steven Waldman, author of "Sacred Liberty: America's Long, Bloody and Ongoing Struggle for Religious Freedom." Throughout history, Americans have forced unpopular faith groups to prove they mean democracy no harm.



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"One of the key themes when a religion is under attack is that it's not a legitimate religion," Waldman said.

In her new book, "When Islam Is Not a Religion," Uddin explores why efforts to limit which religions are protected are dangerous. When the government can play favorites, it puts all people of faith at risk.

"If you want to protect (religious freedom) in the long run, you can't be selective about it," she said.

Religious freedom for all?

As Waldman noted, it's not new for Americans to selectively apply religious freedom protections. Although America was founded as a place of refuge for persecuted faith groups, its citizens often attack members of minority faiths.

For example, until the late 20th century, Catholic politicians, including John F. Kennedy, were routinely accused of being more loyal to the pope than American values. Similarly, the first member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to be elected to the U.S. Senate, Reed Smoot, had to endure a legal battle over whether he was fit to serve.

" Most people don't know how religious freedom works and what it affords us. "

Kevin Singer, co-director of Neighborly Faith

To this day, many Americans' understanding of religious freedom changes depending on the faith group they're asked about, as the Deseret News reported earlier this year.

Around 1 in 5 U.S. adults say American Muslims do not have the same rights as other citizens, according to a 2017 survey from the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center. Pew Research Center recently found that nearly half of Americans (44%) say there's a natural conflict between Islam and democracy.

"Most people don't know how religious freedom works and what it affords us," said Kevin Singer, co-director of Neighborly Faith, an initiative that aims to build bridges between evangelical Christians and Muslims.

Confusion about the First Amendment justifies a variety of harmful actions against Muslims, which Uddin highlights in her new book. They fuel anti-Muslim hate crimes, efforts to block the construction of new mosques and claims that America should never have a Muslim president.

To some, these injustices are troubling but not that big of a deal. After all, Americans eventually warmed up to Catholics and Latter-day Saints. Why can't Muslims just be patient? Or hire good lawyers?

The problem with that response is that it overlooks how anti-Muslim bias can influence what happens in courtrooms, Uddin said. Just a few years ago, she had to listen to nearly a week of arguments over whether Islam is actually a religion.

"Judges aren't robots. There's no reason to think they're unaffected by this," she said.

And because the Trump administration has spread harmful stereotypes about Muslims in the past, the situation will likely only get worse, Uddin added.

"This is something we have to take seriously now because there are accelerating factors," she said.

Focusing on self-interest

Uddin acknowledges that her calls for change often fall on deaf ears. In interviews to promote her book, she regularly comes face-to-face with people who think Islam doesn't deserve protection.

People associate Muslims with global terrorism or the suppression of women's rights. And they rarely interact with people who could prove those assumptions wrong, Singer said.

" Our emphasis is on the idea that before you speak about Muslims, you need to speak to them. "

Kevin Singer, co-director of Neighborly Faith

"Generally, the people speaking about Muslims or caricaturing Muslim life have never met a Muslim," he said.

Neighborly Faith is Singer's effort to address that. The organization has started a podcast to encourage interfaith dialogue, and it trains young evangelicals on how to reach out to Muslims on their campus.

"Our emphasis is on the idea that before you speak about Muslims, you need to speak to them," Singer said.

Uddin supports work like that, but, in her own public engagement, she appeals to people's self-interest rather than their compassionate impulses. She argues that protecting religious freedom for Muslims leaves all Americans better off.

"If you see (religious liberty) as essential to yourself, your country and your church, then you need to understand what I'm saying here," Uddin said.

Put another way, any limit on Muslim practices can eventually be used to harm non-Muslims. For example, Christians are affected by the legal precedents set in lawsuits over mosque-building projects when they have to fight to construct a new church.

"The basic point people should understand is that if religious freedom only applies to your group that's not actually religious freedom," Waldman said.

Capitalizing on people's self-interest in order to protect Muslims may not feel as good as appealing to their civic duty or human decency, but it fits with America's religious freedom history, he added.

Catholics weren't fully respected until there were so many living here that they had the "raw political power to start asserting their rights," Waldman said. Latter-day Saints weren't accepted until it became politically expedient to admit Western states to the union.

"I wish I could say it was the triumph of law or democracy," he said. Instead, these shifts depended on cooperation becoming slightly more appealing than oppression.

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