

# Canada silent on 'death to heretics'

Steven Edwards, National Post

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UNITED NATIONS -Canada has shown international leadership by working within the UN to focus world attention on Iran's appalling human rights record.

Which makes it all the more regrettable Ottawa bureaucrats dropped the ball this week by letting the European Union speak out first against Iran's latest bid to persecute its people.

The outrage in question is draft legislation to impose the death penalty on men who seek to leave Islam and life imprisonment coupled with "hardship" on women who do.

Witchcraft and heresy would also be capital crimes if parliament approves the draft, as seems likely.

While death for apostasy is already mandated in Iran under shariah law, the EU points out parliamentary approval will formalize the punishment in Iran's criminal code.

"These articles clearly violate the Islamic Republic of Iran's commitments under the international human rights conventions to which Iran is party," the 27-nation bloc said in a statement on Monday.

From Ottawa, silence, even though Canada has distinguished itself since 2003 by driving through annual UN censures of the Islamic republic for human rights abuses.

Those efforts made Canada the point man for applying pressure on Iran's ruling mullahs. They have run as an important parallel to U.S.-and European-led efforts to strong-arm Iran into rolling back its nuclear program.

Maintaining pressure on the human rights front is arguably more crucial than ever. For many experts, the draft law is one of several recent regressive measures -- enforcing the Islamic dress code and press crackdowns are others -- that suggest the mullahs are under more pressure than at any time since Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini replaced the Shah in 1979.

"The question is why now, 30 years after the revolution?" asked Payam Akhavan, a professor at McGill University and co-founder of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre in Connecticut.

"It's a reaction in part to a rising tide of reformism in Iran, where the vast majority of people are 30 years of age and under. They are largely a post-ideological, pragmatic generation that wants economic prosperity, freedom and open society.

"Against this, the hardliners sense they are losing their grip on power. So these various measures -- reinstating the wearing of the hijab for women, cracking down on human rights organizations and now reinstating shariah law with even greater vigour --are part of a desperate attempt to retrench their powers."

Canada took up the torch in 2003 after Zahra Kazemi, 54, an Iranian-Canadian photojournalist, was murdered in a Tehran jail.

Representatives of Canada's 30,000 Baha'is have met Foreign Affairs officials to point out one of the draft law's most worrisome provisions, which they believe targets their coreligionists in Iran.

This prescribes death for anyone claiming to be a prophet and says "any Muslim who invents heresy in the religion and creates a [contrary] sect" is considered an apostate.

According to Baha'i teachings, religious history has unfolded through a series of God's messengers, with Baha'i founder Baha'u'llah the most recent in 19th-century Persia, now Iran.

Islam considers Muhammad God's final prophet.

The Baha'i delegation gave the Ottawa bureaucrats a translation of the draft law. Where is Canada's condemnation?

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