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Sharia Law called racist, CNS News, October 13, 2008

By Kevin McCandless

London (CNSNews.com) – Sweeping legal challenges must be made against the creeping introduction of Islamic law (shari'a) in the United Kingdom, the head of a new body of former Muslims said here Friday.

The Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, a group bringing together former adherents of the Islamic faith as well as humanists, held its first international conference in London. Several speakers decried the rise of what they called "political Islam" across Europe.

In Britain, Muslims increasingly and controversially have turned to religious courts to decide civil matters under religious law.

Since 2006, the largest such body, the Islamic Shari'a Council in east London, says it has handled around 1,000 cases, mostly dealing with divorce.

While most shari'a courts have no binding legal authority, a growing network of arbitration panels applying Islamic law have been set up around Britain since 2007, and their decisions can be enforced by regular British courts.

Proponents of shari'a courts argue that they help preserve the Muslim identity of a minority community and create a protective environment for young and old alike.

Members of the Islamic Shari'a Council said earlier this year that the vast majority of their cases deal with getting women out of marriages that have gone bad, thus enabling them to remarry under Islamic law.

"We try to reconcile, but in cases where a marriage was enforced on a girl against her wishes, against her own opinion, we don't want to negotiate," council president Maulana Abu Sayeed said at the time.

Archbishop Rowan Williams, head of the Church of England, was sharply criticized in February for suggesting that the establishment of shari'a in Britain was "unavoidable."

However, Sadiq Khan, the recently-appointed government minister for "community cohesion," told The Times of London last week that the Muslim community in Britain was not "advanced enough" to have its own system of courts.

Such courts could also enforce a system of discrimination against women, said Khan, who is himself a Muslim.

Maryam Namazie, head of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, told Friday's audience of several hundred that shari'a courts were part of the growing influence felt by politically motivated Islamists.

Namazie, a feminist and communist activist who left her native Iran several years ago, charged that the courts victimize poor, immigrant women, forcing them to remain in situations where domestic abuse was common.

By bowing to political correctness, she said, the British government had abetted a terrible situation.

"Opposing shari'a is not racism," she said. "It's racist to demand backward, medieval laws for people living in the 20th century."

The council wanted humanists and secularists to band together to legally challenge Islamic tribunals, taking their argument to the European Court of Human Rights.

Namazie and other speakers said countries such as Germany and Sweden were becoming more accepting of Islamic law.

Roy Brown, who represents the International Humanist and Ethical Union at the United Nations' Human Rights Council, said influential Islamic countries have been successful at shaping debate in the Geneva-based council.

"We've been told not to mention Islam," he said. "We've been told not to mention shari'a."

Members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), a grouping of Islamic countries, hold one-third of the seats in the 47-member Human Rights Council. The OIC has come under fire for promoting resolutions at the council and other U.N. bodies seeking to outlaw what it calls the "defamation" of Islam.

Brown said the spread of fundamentalism in Britain had been sparked by massive donations coming from Saudi Arabia to fund religious schools and mosques.

"One of the reasons that political Islam has been so successful in this country is because it's awash with Saudi money," he said. "They have been spent literally billions."

Throughout the day, speaker after speaker railed against the British government's decision to increase the number of state-funded faith schools of all religions.

To combat the rise of shari'a, they agreed that humanism should be promoted both in Britain and around the world, sidelining the influence of religion.

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