



We need uncensored voices

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Published in: **Comment is Free, Guardian Unlimited, June 28, 2006**

http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/agnes_callamard_/2006/06/we_need_uncensored_voices.html

Rappers like Aki Nawaz and MIA help us understand the issues that really matter in our society.

The threat of two record company executives to resign if rapper Aki Nawaz's album *All is War* is released is the latest instance of a global trend of increasing intolerance towards anything deemed offensive or controversial. The censorship of French rapper Richard Makela, and of Fifty Cents's movie poster; the proposal to banish "lads' mags" to the top shelves; the denial of entry into the United States of Sri Lankan-born rapper MIA; the controversy surrounding the Abu Graib and Basra photos; and the outcry over cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed all have one thing in common: the desire, whether exercised through state law and state power, or through mob violence, to bury or silence controversial voices.

Under this world view, free expression applies only to information and ideas that are favorably received and regarded as inoffensive or as a matter of indifference.

This trend threatens to negate decades of demonstrations and arguments by free speech advocates and hard-won court judgments affirming that freedom of expression is both a fundamental right in its own regard as well as a crucial safeguard for the exercise of all other rights and a critical underpinning of democracy.

That the pluralism, tolerance and broadmindedness without which there is no "democratic society" demands precisely the protection of controversial, offensive, shocking or disturbing statements. That this protection is particularly important, crucial even, in current times when our society is at war with itself, with its own youth and minorities.

ARTICLE 19 has been particularly concerned at the failure of the UK government to reinforce freedom of expression guarantees, and at its decision, instead, to introduce new anti-terror and hate speech measures that threaten to restrict speech far beyond what is permissible under human rights law. Under the legitimate objective of protecting the

public from terrorism, what we have got is censorship, thought control and thought sanitization.

The latest terrorism law, enacted last April, is particularly problematic. Its ban on the "encouragement", "justification" or "glorification" of terrorism has criminalised forms of expression that should be lawful, including statements that seek to initiate debate around the issue of suicide bombers and offensive, insulting or abusive statements by Muslim leaders who are critical of the liberal western way of life. Has this helped safeguard the UK's democratic values? No. Its only effect has been to further marginalise a community that already felt under threat.

A democracy needs vigorous debate on all matters of public interest in order to survive and progress. Suicide bombing is a despicable tactic; but it's not something that is solved by criminalizing its "justification" or pretending that 9/11 or the July 7 attacks occurred within an historical, social or political vacuum.

In order to even begin to put in place truly effective anti-terror measures - and we are talking about something more meaningful than the introduction of yet another criminal offence - we need to understand its causes; and to understand its causes, we need debates. We need to hear uncensored and non-sanitized voices, such as Tamil Tiger-defending rapper MIA declaring "like PLO, we don't surrend-o"; or Aki Nawaz rapping "I'm strapped up cross my chest bomb belt attached - Deeply satisfied with the plan I hatched". Not because they are right or wrong; but because they address the issues that really matter, and bring us closer to understand our multi-layered, multi-colored, multi-shaped societies and the deep sense of injustice and anger felt by too many.