

Government urged to tackle sharia 'courts' and religious tribunals by women's rights and secular campaigners

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Almost 200 signatories, including the National Secular Society and women's rights groups, have called on the Government to tackle the spread of "parallel legal systems" like sharia 'courts'.

In an [open letter](#), the campaigners have called on the Government to take "concerted measures to stop the development of parallel legal systems and to facilitate full and proper access to justice for all citizens" and to protect "one secular law for all".

Before the election the Conservative Party pledged to review the role of sharia 'courts' operating in the UK, in a move [welcomed](#) by the National Secular Society.

The campaigners write: "Over the years, we have witnessed with increasing alarm the influence of 'Sharia courts' over the lives of citizens of Muslim heritage.

"Many abused women from minority backgrounds, for instance, are increasingly forced to either represent themselves in court in what are often complex family legal proceedings or go to 'Sharia courts' that operate entirely outside the rule of law."

The campaigners say that sharia 'courts' are used to "restrict and deny rights" and have a particularly negative effect on "women and children." They add that sharia 'courts' represent an "assault" on civil liberties.

The campaigners are asking the Government to "re-affirm the principle of the separation of religion and the law."

"Opposing 'Sharia courts' is not racism or 'Islamophobic'; it is a defence of the rights of all citizens, irrespective of their beliefs and background to be governed by democratic means under the principle of one law for all. What amounts to racism is the idea that minorities can be denied rights enjoyed by others through the endorsement of religious based 'justice' systems which operate according to divine law that is by its very nature immune from state scrutiny."

The signatories also call for the end of Beth Din arbitration tribunals in "family matters".

Signatories include British Muslims for Secular Democracy, the Quilliam Foundation, Maryam Namazie of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, Muslims for Progressive Values, Peter Tatchell, Sarah Haider of Ex-Muslims of North America, Pragna Patel of Southall Black Sisters, the historian Tom Holland, columnist and writer Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, and dozens of others.

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