

International controversy rages over German ban on circumcision

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A court case in Cologne, Germany, has held that circumcision, carried out for religious — as opposed to medical — reasons, is potentially harmful. The decision has, however, been fiercely opposed by religious interests, and this has put pressure on Chancellor Angela Merkel.

The (UK) Secular Medical Forum (SMF), associated with the National Secular Society, has been campaigning against this practice for over two years, raising the matter for example with the British Medical Association and the General Medical Council. Quite separately, the Royal Dutch Medical Association and associated bodies have concluded — like the court — that infant circumcision "can be harmful and that it violates the boy's human rights to autonomy and physical integrity".

The pressure on Mrs Merkel has been led by Jewish campaigners who have gone so far as to suggest that it is the worst attack on Jews since the Holocaust, something particularly sensitive in Germany. The popular press has also strongly opposed the court decision, whereas there is wide public support for the ruling.

Mrs Merkel's instinct has been to bow to the pressure, and she has been quoted as suggesting that the decision will lead to Germany being regarded as "a laughing stock". She has vowed to bring forward legislation to protect Jewish and Muslim communities' rights to circumcision.

The SMF's chairman, Dr Antony Lempert, has [written to Chancellor Merkel](#) (pdf) to dissuade her from such action: "As the leader of a democracy that supports child welfare, we urge you to resist the strong pressure being brought to bear on you to overturn this laudable decision. The judgment is a common-sense verdict reflecting the expansion of human rights in the 21st century and the necessary restrictions that organised groups must have on their rights to practise their beliefs.

"The lesson from the 20th century is not that groups of stronger people should be able to impose surgically their views on groups of weaker people to satisfy their own ideology or theology, but that all people deserve society's protection from cradle to grave. That the first ruling of this kind in Europe should happen in Germany is something of which you can justly be proud."

The SMF is convinced that the court's decision was in accordance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This is a UN Human Rights treaty which Germany, along with another 166 states, has undertaken to uphold.

The NSS's Keith Porteous Wood added: "We hope that the Chancellor has thought through carefully the implications of overriding a court decision, by seemingly reacting to what she regards as populist demands. She may find that in practice this is far more difficult than she imagined. We believe that there are strong human rights arguments to support the court's stance. Human Rights are primarily to protect individuals, and few individuals could be more vulnerable than babies, against the overbearing power of groups. If she seeks to change the law to override the court's decision, she is doing the very opposite: giving groups power over vulnerable individuals. And she is also going to find it very difficult to find wording which permits male genital mutilation, without also permitting female genital mutilation (fgm)."

[The SMF's letter to Chancellor Merkel was referred to in a Reuters report.](#)

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