



Shrinking Space

How Islamophobia & a Politics of Distrust Affect Muslim Civil Society

"Governance of suspicion" is a democratic problem—not only a Muslim problem.

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What Shrinking Space Feels Like

Interview-based research with Muslim civil society leaders in Sweden describes a daily reality that is less dramatic than a ban, and more corrosive.



Fewer Partnerships

Other organizations hesitate to partner with Muslim associations.



Harder Recruitment

Venues become reluctant, individuals think twice before attaching their names.



Quiet Self-Censorship

Fear of standing next to Muslim organizations contaminates legitimacy.



Risk Attached to Muslimness

Associative stigma spreads—making allyship costly and isolation more likely.

Defining "Governance of Suspicion"

Muslim civic participation is treated as conditionally legitimate, THAT IS accepted only if it performs ideological conformity, cultural transparency, and emotional restraint that the majority rarely has to perform.

This is why the problem can hide in plain sight. It doesn't require a law that says "Muslim organizations are forbidden." Instead, it works through *process*: defunding decisions, vague "values" tests, reputational vetting, and the constant possibility that legitimacy can be withdrawn.



The Civic Contract: From Folkhemmet to Conditional Belonging

1

Universalism as an Ideal

Sweden's democratic self-image tied to *folkhemmet*—a people's home anchored in social solidarity.

2

Neoliberal Governance + Securitization

A quieter transformation underway: universalism gives way to conditionality.

3

Belonging Becomes "Earned"

Civic inclusion becomes something you must continually earn through moral sorting.

In that shift, Muslim civil society becomes an easy test case—because Islamophobia supplies the background assumption:

risk, infiltration, threat-from-within.

When Suspicion Becomes Policy

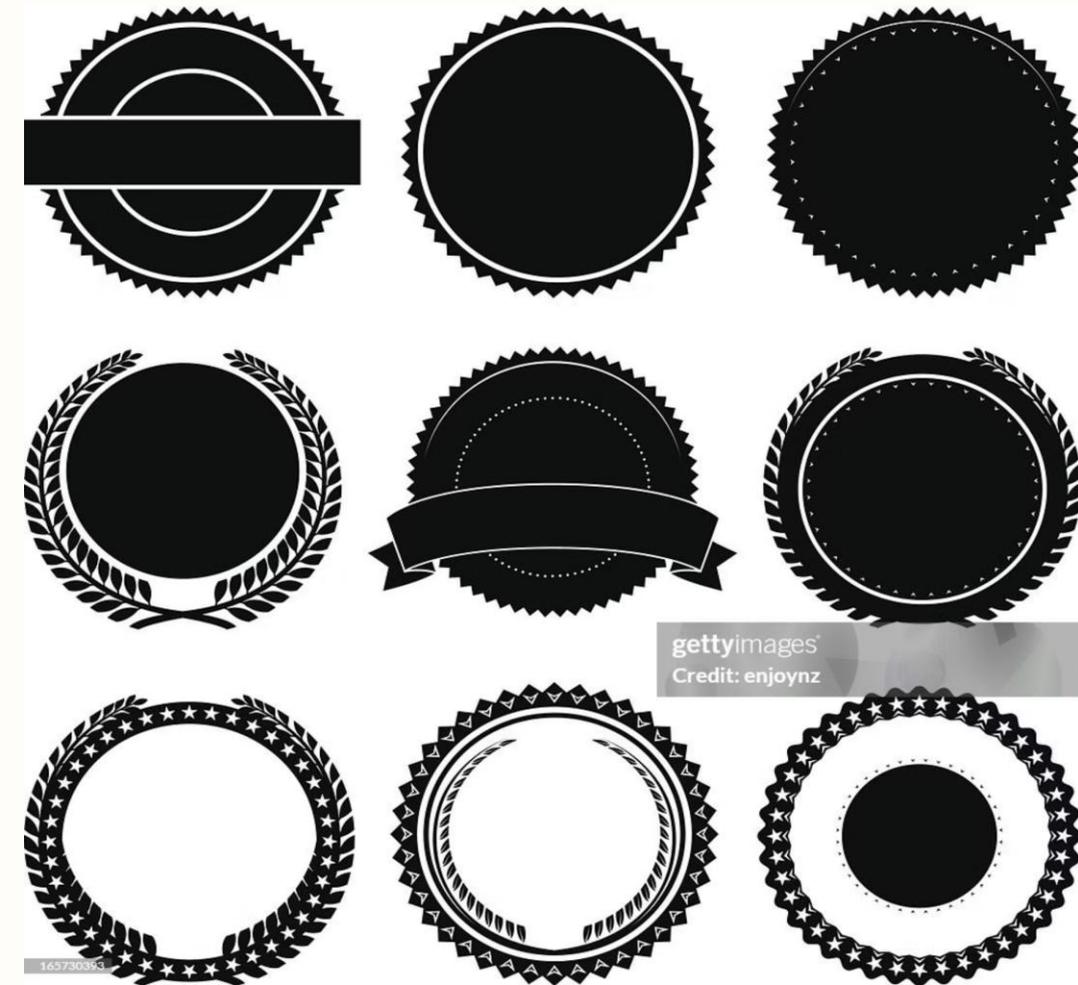
Demokrativillkor (Democracy Criteria) from January 2025

What It Means

- Applies to grants for civil society and faith communities
- "Unified and legally secure"—but high discretion risk
- Democracy criteria can protect the public from anti-democratic organizing

The Key Question

Are criteria applied with equal fairness, evidentiary rigor, and due process—or as a proxy for cultural and political suspicion?



Case Study: Ibn Rushd

The Transformation of *Folkbildning*

Late 2023

Folkbildningsrådet decided Ibn Rushd must repay state funds and submit an action plan.

1

2

3

September 2024

Ibn Rushd announced decision to wind down operations after extraordinary assembly.

2024

Multiple public bodies stopped support; association would receive no government grants for years.

The deeper point: *folkbildning* is being reconfigured from pluralist democratic infrastructure into a mechanism that filters Muslim civic presence through ambiguous tests of acceptable "values."

Case Study: SUM

The Instability of Legitimacy



The Pattern

- Courts had decisions reversed on appeal
- Later decisions required repayments tied to democracy-criteria reasoning
- Legitimacy subject to political winds and ambiguous standards

The Chilling Lesson

Muslim organizations learn that legitimacy is unstable. That instability disciplines behavior, increases self-censorship, and deters participation.

The Discursive Engine

Labeling and "Contagion"

"Islamist"

Label normalizes suspicion as common sense in mainstream discourse and institutional decisions.

"Extremist"

Extends to non-Muslim groups that show solidarity—making allyship costly.

"Undemocratic"

The label does not only hit Muslim organizations. It spreads to allies, increasing isolation.

Research on civil society organizations in Sweden shows how labels like these work their way into mainstream discourse—and then into institutional decisions.

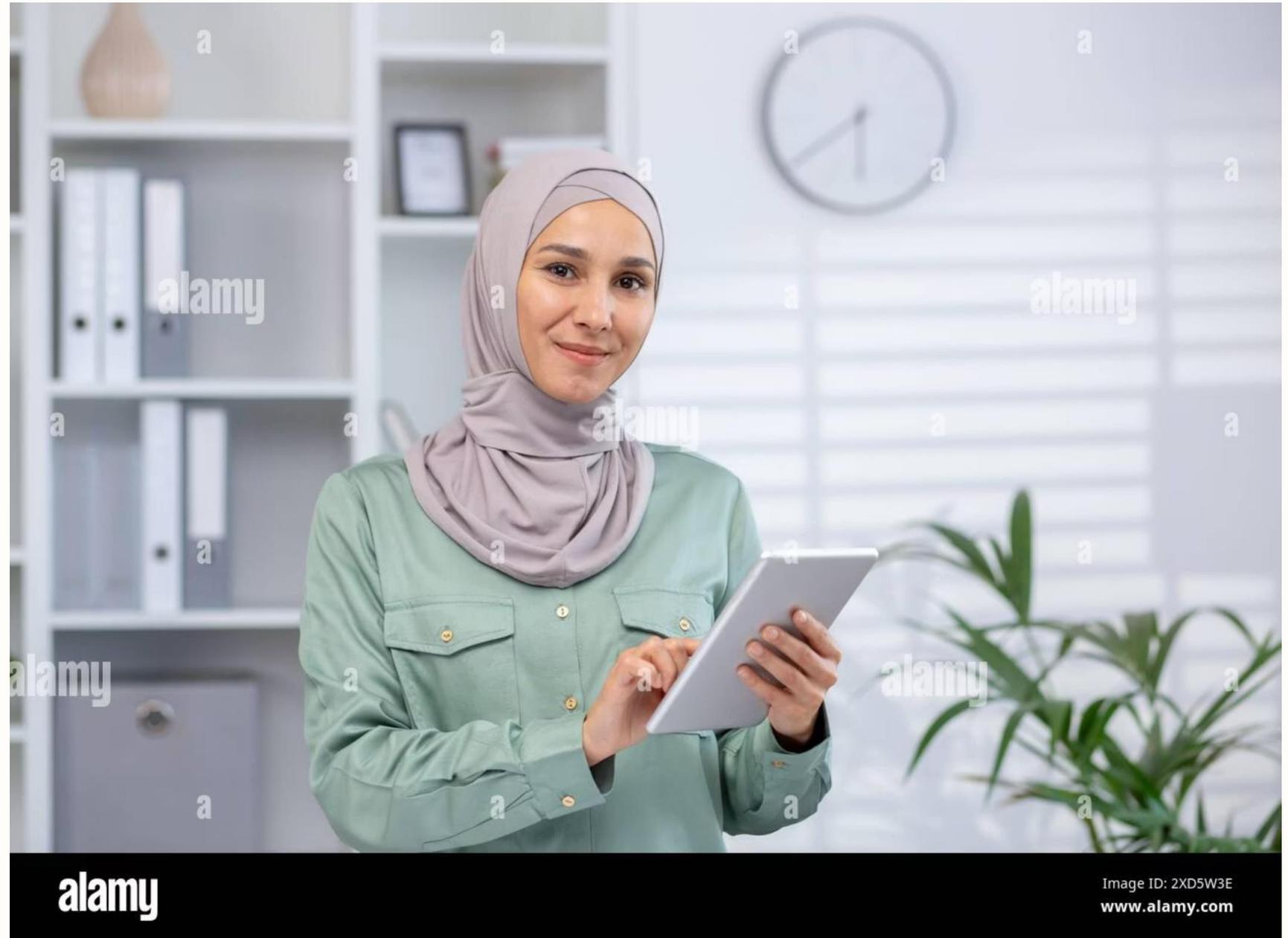
Media, Gender, and the "Acceptability" Test

The Dynamic

Decisions framed as protecting "democracy," "secularism," or "gender equality" can end up excluding Muslim women from public participation—as if Muslim presence itself must be managed.

The Material Reality

Equality Ombudsman's (JO) 2023 report notes jobseekers with Arabic/Muslim names at particular risk of discrimination in recruitment. Muslim women wearing hijab specifically targeted in employment-related complaints.



Suspicion works on two tracks: the cultural story of who counts as a citizen, and the material reality of who gets hired, housed, and heard.

The Limits of Law

When Courts "Individualize" Structural Harm

Rights Exist on Paper

Courts imagined as neutral protectors of civil society.

Islamophobia Becomes Legally "Invisible"

Structural Islamophobia translated into narrow individual "boxes" (religion, ethnicity, public order).

Neutrality Doctrines + Discretion

Unequal outcomes: funding denials, "neutrality" bans on hijab, permissibility of Qur'an burnings, closures of Muslim schools.

Swedish law often makes racialized anti-Muslim harm harder to name—and therefore harder to remedy. The broader tension: high protections for assembly and expression tested in public debate over Qur'an burnings, with courts convicting certain acts as hate speech/incitement in specific cases.

The Democratic Danger

The danger extends far beyond harm to Muslim communities. It strikes at the heart of democratic integrity itself.

When state institutions, political actors, media voices, and civil society partners begin treating one minority's participation as a standing exception to the norm of trust, democracy itself becomes compromised.

"Muslim organizations are not necessarily outlawed, but are made progressively illegible through defunding, moral vetting, and procedural attrition."

Democratic pluralism is not denied outright—it is recast as a continuous examination in which Muslim actors remain perpetually on probation. This is not a side issue. It is a constitutional issue in the deepest sense, because constitutional health depends not only on rights written down, but on whether equal citizenship is actually lived.

A Constructive Path Forward

What concrete steps can strengthen democratic practice and protect civil society?



Conceptual Honesty

Name what is happening. Defining Islamophobia enables informed defense of rights rather than suppressing discussion of Islam.



Clear Standards

Public funding and oversight must be governed by clear evidence, equal standards, and due process—not selective exclusion.



Democratic Partnership

Engage Muslim civil society as a partner, not a problem to be managed. They've been active in education, anti-racism, and countering Islamophobia.



Practical Coalitions

Move beyond symbolic statements to shared platforms, shared defense of associational freedom, and refusal of smear by association.

A Direct Appeal



For Religious Leaders & Civil Society

If you are a bishop, pastor, church leader, theologian, educator, or lay leader in Scandinavia, you face a choice.

Will you treat this as a specialized concern belonging to "the Muslim question"? Or will you recognize it for what it is: a test of whether pluralism is real?

Will you remain politely concerned while Muslim associations navigate suspicion alone? Or will you help widen the democratic circle?

📄 **The core question:** Will the rest of society notice what this pressure reveals? It reveals whether we still believe civil society belongs to all, whether religious freedom includes organizing and appearing in public without stigma, and whether interreligious solidarity is strong enough to resist distrust.



A healthy democracy does not ask one community to live under an interpretive burden that others are spared. It does not ask one faith to be permanently transparent while others are allowed ordinary complexity.

The governance of suspicion is dangerous precisely because it is often clothed in respectable language: democracy, equality, public order, values. But if those words are not governed by fairness, they become instruments of exclusion rather than principles of justice.

No community should have to audition for its humanity before it is allowed to participate in democracy.