

Premier Mike Baird's backing for 'besieged' Islamic community

Sharri Markson, The Australian, 12:00AM July 7, 2016



More Muslim girls are wearing the hijab at a younger age, some in response to perceived persecution. Tsabita, 5, and Jameela Swandari, 4, who are visiting Australia with their mother Swestika from Indonesia, joined Eid celebrations in Sydney yesterday. Picture: Renee Nowytarger

NSW Premier Mike Baird has endorsed remarks from a senior Muslim leader who, in an emotional speech, said his community was under siege from Islamophobic Australians and racism. At a celebration to mark the end of Ramadan, the Lebanese Muslim Association president, Samier Dandan, gave a forceful address in front of 40,000 Muslims in which he attacked the media and the political elite for encouraging the rise of far-right political parties and "hate preachers" in federal parliament.

The leader of one of the country's largest Muslim organisations used the religious occasion to lament how "vulnerable" the Australian Muslim community had become in the face of "bigotry and hatred". "The continued rise of Islamophobic discourse in the public in addition to a number of divisive and toxic policy decisions have only exacerbated negative sentiments towards the Australian Muslim Community," Mr Dandan said. "We are witnessing the growth in far-right hate groups and political parties, as proven by last week's election. Their increasing influence is a reflection of the critical mass of support public Islamophobia is currently enjoying."

Mr Dandan also referred to the "dehumanising of Muslims" and the misunderstanding of Islam in Australia.

Speaking after Mr Dandan, Mr Baird failed to condemn the community leader's inflammatory remarks about "divisive and toxic policy decisions" and instead joined in the chorus denouncing racial vilification in the Muslim community.

Mr Baird spoke of his trip to the Middle East during the year, where he visited a refugee camp on Israel's west bank. "Friends, I had the opportunity this year to go to Palestine and I met with the next generation and some young kids, and what was clear was their yearning for peace," Mr Baird said.

"We must do more to promote peace and come together. And as we just heard from Samier, we must stand up against any form of racial vilification. We must stand up, where we see intolerance we must respond with tolerance."

Organisers estimated about 40,000 people gathered in southwest Sydney to mark Eid-ul-Fitr, the end of Ramadan, but none of the speakers mentioned the rise in Islamic State or the issue of radicalisation.

NSW Deputy Premier and Police Minister Troy Grant told The Australian he did not think Islamophobia was a bigger issue than Islamic terrorism. None addressed the issue of radicalisation, focusing instead on Islamophobia and racism.

Mr Baird refused to condemn Mr Dandan's remarks when contacted after the ceremony. "There were a number of other speakers but the Premier won't be doing any commentary on their contributions," his spokesman said.

Asked why he spoke about racial vilification towards the Muslim community but did not use the opportunity in front of 40,000 people to discuss radicalisation or terrorism, Mr Baird's spokesman said "there were many subjects the Premier did not mention in his remarks, which occupied less than three minutes".

Federal Labor MP Tony Burke, whose electorate of Watson sits in south west Sydney, also spoke about Islamophobia and hatred in his speech, which did not touch on radicalisation or terrorism. "There will be some people over the next three to six years who will try to respond with hate and there will be people who try to divide our community," he said in his speech, while promoting the multicultural face of modern Australia. When asked why he raised Islamophobia but not radicalisation as an issue, Mr Burke said his speech was directed at "anyone who is trying to cause division or hatred".

He said both issues were a problem in Australia. "My speech today was against all forms of hatred, whether it be people who seek to radicalise the community or people who promote prejudice," he said. "Radicalisation involves fewer people with much more extreme consequences. Prejudice doesn't have the same extreme consequences but can often involve more people. Both are wrong and both need to be opposed."

NSW Opposition Leader Luke Foley addressed the crowd and also spoke about the "preachers of hate", with a reference to One Nation leader Pauline Hanson. He had a similar message about - racism, xenophobia and the need for cultural diversity in Australia. "The likes of Pauline Hanson who seek to spread ignorance and hateful bigotry, we reject you," Mr Foley said, adding he visited Lebanon two months ago where he met with the Grant Mufti to discuss co-operation between Muslims and Christians in the middle eastern country.

By 6am yesterday, Lakemba Mosque in south west Sydney, which was hosting the religious celebrations, was full to capacity. Lakemba Mosque imam Sheikh Yahya Safi said some Australians

wanted Muslims to “react in a bad way” but that the religion was one of peace. “We love each human. We love the good for each person, especially here for the Australians here in Australia,” he said. “We never see Muslims that has hatred in his heart because it is against Islam. It is against Islam.

“We see in our days people want us to react in a bad way in order to show that Islam is not love, is not mercy, but we need ... to show you that Islam indeed in reality is a religion of peace, a religion of mercy, a religion that likes for others what it likes for themselves.”

On the jumping castles at the Eid-al-Fitr celebrations yesterday, children were playing, with some wearing hijabs, following a global trend where the hair-scarfs are being worn by children who have not reached puberty.

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