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Groups mobilize as circumcision ban moves closer to ballot

by dan pine, staff writer

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Jewish groups are gearing up for a fight against an initiative to criminalize circumcision in San Francisco, which is now one step closer to the Nov. 8 ballot.

Activists behind the so-called "Male Genital Mutilation" initiative gathered more than the required 7,168 signatures. Signed petitions were submitted to the San Francisco Department of Elections on April 26.



Daniel Sandman

According to their Facebook page, organizers submitted 12,265 signatures to the department, which has 30 days to verify and certify the petitions.

If passed by the voters, the measure would ban in San Francisco routine circumcision on any male under the age of 18. Some medical exceptions would be permitted, but none for religious purposes, meaning the Jewish ritual of brit milah would be outlawed, punishable by a \$1,000 fine and/or prison.

The initiative's latest progress has roused segments of the Jewish community, who plan to organize a campaign to defeat the measure. Muslims and the medical establishment are also expected to fight the measure.

"The proponents will have an uphill battle," said Abby Michelson Porth, associate director of the Jewish Community Relations Council. "Not only legally, but because [circumcision] is not viewed as genital mutilation, but in the Western world as a useful and widely acceptable practice."

The JCRC plans to join forces with other organizations throughout the interfaith and medical communities to fight the initiative. Jewish groups Porth said were already on board include the Anti-Defamation League, the Northern California Board of Rabbis and the American Jewish Committee.

Porth said the campaign to defeat the measure would be waged on religious, constitutional and cultural grounds. Because the anti-circumcision measure provides for no religious exemption, that means "this ordinance targets religion," according to Porth. "That's what this measure would do if it passes."

Daniel Sandman, the regional director of the Central Pacific Region of the ADL, views it as an infringement on basic rights. "Certainly the right to freely practice religious rituals that have been widely accepted for many years," he said. "You also have issues of privacy, where the state is trying to impose decisions upon parents."

Said Porth, "There are significant legal implications of a city government targeting religion." The measure "will be seen by the interfaith community as a direct attack on religion and a direct attack on parents' rights to make decisions about the religious upbringing of their children."

Iftekhar Hai, founding director of United Muslims of America, and a member of the San Francisco Interfaith Council, predicted Muslims would ally with Jews to fight the bill.

"I don't think it's right," he said. "It's an assault on people's religious beliefs. I

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Marilyn Milos
photo/James loewen

think it will be a good idea to get inter-religious support [to oppose it] — Jews, Muslims and Christians.”

Lloyd Schofield, who spearheaded the ballot measure, could not be reached by press time. A fellow activist, Marilyn Milos, founder of the anti-circumcision group National Organization of Circumcision Resource Centers, known as NOCIRC, said her group did not directly push for the citywide ban initiative or work to collect signatures, but that she “wants to protect babies by any

means.”

She stressed that her group focuses on public education rather than legal action, such as pressing for a ban. But she shares the bill’s goal of ending circumcision.

“It’s assault and battery,” she said of the procedure. “Do parents have a right to amputate parts of their baby’s bodies?”



Abby Porth

At the same time, she said she understands how Jews and Muslims would have serious objections to a ban.

“I get that this is not easy,” said Milos, who is not Jewish. “It’s not my place to go into a Jewish community and say you shouldn’t be doing this. I do think Muslim and Jewish boys have every right to their wholeness of their bodies.”

Sandman wouldn’t speculate on the measure’s chances of success in November, but he does feel it makes “a mockery of the [political] system.”

“This targets parents’ rights to decide what’s best for their families,” he said. “This measure seeks to criminalize, with possible jail time, what has been one of the most sacred traditions in the Jewish and Muslim faiths. This is a time for different faiths to come together, for people who believe the government should stay out of the circumcision business and say, ‘Enough.’ ”

Comments

What about religious freedom for Jewish children?

Posted by Kelev
04/28/2011 at 06:56 PM

Many Jews are leaving our sons whole, leaving the decision up to them whether or not they want to be circumcised and how they want to practice their faith. That is an individual’s right, not a parent’s to make for their child, at least not in this day and age. Jewish males can, and should, decide for themselves when they are adults whether or not to be circumcised. That is their right and we should protect their religious freedom to make that choice.

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Equal Rights for Everyone

Posted by MisterEquality
04/28/2011 at 09:43 PM

How can ensuring the equal rights of both male and female children be anti-semetic? The First Amendment not only provides the freedom of religion and expression, but it also protects people FROM religion, such as others forcing their religion on them. The First Amendment, as well as the right to security and bodily integrity is supposed to be universal rights that are equally applied to all. The 14th amendment provides equal protection under the law, and the fact that we even HAVE a female genital cutting bill is flat out unconstitutional. If circumcision is such an important part of your son’s life when he becomes an adult, he will be more accepting of his rite of passage, rather than having it forced upon him at the request of his parents. Everybody in this country is protected and is allowed to freely express their religion, and having someone else’s religious beliefs forced upon them in the form of genital surgery violates their right to freedom of religion. The First Amendment also protects people from religion. There’s also the separation of church and state. The fact that we protect Jewish parents and their “right” to circumcise their son, and deny a Muslim the right to circumcise his daughter, we’re infringing upon human rights left and right. Aren’t men allowed the same human rights, and freedoms as females? The female genital cutting bill can be considered anti Islamic, but the congress ruled that protecting anyone under the age of 18 from unnecessary bodily surgery is not in violation of the first amendment. If we truly are a land of equality, under the 14th amendment, Jewish boys can also choose be circumcised if he so chooses. How is preserving your son’s own choice in his own religion and faith being anti-semetic?

They made a similar law to this; it’s called the FGM Bill of 1996. Nobody here screamed for Islamic rights, nor did they object. If anyone circumcises their daughter, regardless of their religion, yes, they would be thrown in jail. In fact, a man was sentenced to 10 years for doing that, and in some states you have to register as a sex offender. If the girl died, he would have

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been charged with murder. And, before people start up with the "it's not the same thing" or "it's done to reduce pleasure" please stop now. I refer you here

http://www.thepatrioticvanguard.com/article.php3?id_article=3752

A Muslim woman defends female circumcision, and how we as Americans have demonized female circumcision, and that it is offensive to Muslim women. And I quote:

"Thus far, the negative medical or health claims about various forms of FC have been disputed as grossly exaggerated by several independent medical researchers and practitioners. The claims that various forms of FC reduce or eliminate sexual desire and feeling in women have also been disproven by affected women themselves, the researchers who relentlessly question them and medical doctors who examine and treat them. We can provide ample references for anyone who is interested in any of this work.

That FC was designed by men to control women's sexuality is a western feminist myth constructed in a disturbing dismissal of African gender models of male and female complementarity and of our own creativity, power and agency as adult women in the social world. The assertion that FC violates the rights of children falters in the face of WHO's promotion of routine neonatal male circumcision (MC) to protect against HIV infection in Southern African. Incidentally, circumcised African women also have some of the lowest rates of HIV infection among women in the world, so why the double standard?"

Now, over 100 boys die in our country every year due to complications from circumcision, and are his parents charged with murder? No, of course not... It's a parent's choice to cut off part of their child if it's a boy, but a federal offense if it's a girl. Really, you're just being hypocritical by talking about "your religion" and "your rights" when you're infringing upon your son's religion and rights, not to mention, his body.

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