

COMMENTARY

# Understanding the French Ban on the Veil

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**French citizens of migrant Muslim descent, especially women, know what it means to live under the extreme right who use repressive interpretations of religion to rule. They are increasingly labelled as “Muslim” even if they are non-believers. This reactionary trend of ethnicising and religionising social and political problems in Europe and elsewhere needs to be countered.**

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On 11 April, the law that prohibits the full face-covering veil in France came into force. The following day the first two face-covered women were fined €150 – not a small amount of money. One of the women declared that she had travelled about a thousand kilometres from Marseilles to Paris in order to be fined. Another man, who had organised a small group of 20 people at the event where she was fined, stated that they wanted to court arrest and be fined in order to bring the matter to the European Court of Human Rights. For decades, Muslim fundamentalists have mastered the art of using human rights concepts and mechanisms to their benefit.

While the international media focused on protesting “Muslims”, other voices were totally ignored, which may well represent the vast majority of the presumed “Muslims” in France.

## **The Political Actors Involved**

What are the reasons behind the passing of yet another new law by Sarkozy, in response to the growing Muslim fundamentalist demands in France? More than a year ago, progressive members of parliament made public a list of existing laws (in particular those regarding public security) that may have allowed the government to restrict the full face-covering veil, without having to pass a new law. This option was discarded by Sarkozy, who obviously wanted and needed the visibility that a new controversial law would grant him. With the 2012 presidential elections approaching, enacting a law was a straightforward way to court the votes of the extreme right National Front (NF) Party. The recently held regional elections of 20 March amply demonstrated the growing electoral influence of the NF party, making it an indispensable future partner of the right.

In Europe today, the traditional xenophobic far-right parties are fast rising and will play a major arbitration role in any future elections. France, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Austria and Hungary are credited with having at least 15% far-right voters, while in Switzerland and Serbia they already represent more than 30%.

Additionally, there are now new movements rapidly growing in France, on the right of the traditional far-right parties – such as Bloc Identitaire, Resistance Republicaine and Riposte Laïque – which are not satisfied with the ban on the full face-covering veil. They demand more drastic measures to combat “Islam” per se. They demand that “Islam” be outlawed in France, that immigration from Muslim countries be stopped, and that discussions be held with Muslim countries to organise for “French Muslims to migrate to countries where they will be able to freely practice their religion”. One wonders about the extent to which both Sarkozy and the NF will go, in order to grab their votes in 2012.

The new far-right groups organise provocative actions, in response to provocative actions by Muslim fundamentalist groups. For instance, unauthorised street gatherings “with wine and pork” take place in the heart of Paris, at the very location where equally unauthorised public Friday prayers actually block the streets (while there is sufficient empty space in, for instance, the Great Mosque of Paris).

Police authorities pretend not to see either of these illegal occupations of public

space, despite the fact that street prayers have been going on for several years, and that announcements with pomp are made in advance for the “wine and pork” street parties. It is clear that both Muslim fundamentalist groups and these emerging new far-right groups are looking for physical confrontation, which would make their political presence more visible, as well as rally and radicalise their troops.

On the other hand, a very vocal unholy alliance has formed between the left, far-left, human rights and Muslim fundamentalist groups, all protesting against the law banning face-covering, in the name of the human rights of “Muslims”. These protests received full coverage from the international media, whose vision is impaired by identity politics.

This ban and the kind of one-sided coverage it receives, is a gift from Sarkozy to the Muslim fundamentalists. It gives them one more occasion to make the front page headlines and to appear as the voice of the “oppressed Muslims” in “the West”. But what do they actually represent?

A considerable number of migrants into France came from north Africa, and within it, from Algeria (till recently, they constituted the majority of migrants). Algerians had already begun to migrate to France between the two world wars, and this trend increased after second world war, with massive post-war industrialisation plans. These early migrants were generally unskilled workers.

Between the 1970s and the 1990s, “family reunion” was encouraged, i.e, wives of migrant workers came to join their husbands. Their children became French citizens at birth, thanks to the “law of the land” which, till the late 1990s, granted French citizenship automatically to any child born on French territory. The acquisition of French citizenship was made easier for parents of French children. (This explains why there are an estimated 30% of French citizens of foreign origin today.)

These economic migrants had grown deep roots into the political tradition of the French working class struggle, especially through trade unions. Documentary films, directed by their grand-daughters and great grand-daughters as a moving homage to their foremothers, show French working class women of Algerian origin in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s wearing the same clothes as other women of that class and time. These documentary films speak about the strong

will of these women to see their daughters fully educated and capable of earning their living independently. The films also show the struggle of these women against patriarchy (both that of their Algerian husbands and that of the working class French parties and unions); and finally the films testify to the fact that the religious beliefs – if they had any – or religious traditions of the migrants, did not conflict with French secularism.

In the 1990s, there was a different wave of emigration, consisting of artists, writers, intellectuals, feminists, etc, who fled fundamentalist violence in Algeria in order to save their lives, as armed fundamentalists specifically targeted these sections of the population. This latest wave of political emigrants had a firsthand experience of what it meant to live under fundamentalist boot. Exiled intellectuals were rattled to have to face in France the very same political force – the Muslim religious right – that forced them into exile.

Women especially could identify each and every step taken by the rising fundamentalist forces in Algeria being replicated in France. They witnessed in awe and anguish, the progressive forces in France, as well as in the rest of Europe and in Canada, refusing to recognise the extreme right political nature of the Muslim right and supporting their demands in the name of religious, cultural or minority rights.

Among the warning signs of the rising influence of the Muslim right was, of course, the creeping enforcement of new dress codes for women. Although the garment that passes off today as “the Islamic veil” is indeed not a traditional costume in north Africa, but a totally imported or invented one, we are still waiting to hear, in the concert of “progressive” clamours in defence of the so-called Islamic veil, a virtuous voice that would defend north African cultures and traditions of dress from being eradicated by this alien outfit.

### **Where Are the Secular Voices?**

Given the politicised background of Algerian immigration into France, it is no surprise that many French citizens of Algerian descent, especially women, came forward to oppose the full face-covering veil. However, they did not necessarily want a new law. Many would have preferred the use of other means. Supporting the passing of the law banning the full

face-covering veil can be seen as a global endorsement of Sarkozy's rightist social agenda and bending to the far-right xenophobia. Citizens of migrant Muslim descent find themselves in a catch-22 situation, where their clear and repeated demands to stop the rise of the Muslim right in France are either hijacked by racist political forces or scorned by anti-racist ones. But on the other hand, if they do not speak up now, they will be, once again, the victims of the Muslim right.

Similarly, many such voices of migrant Muslim descent had spoken up in 2004 in support of the 1905-06 laws on the separation of "churches" and state that are the founding principles of French secularism. These laws, enacted at a time when the question of Islam was irrelevant in France, are the basis on which children below a certain age are forbidden to wear any sign of religious affiliation inside the premises of state secular schools (be it a head scarf, a cross, a kippah or any other symbol).

Just as with the present law on the full face-covering veil, the then French government, serving its own vested electoral interests, chose to pass a new law rather than to enforce the century old ones. Many women and women's organisations that mobilise citizens of Muslim descent in France were of the view that enforcing the 1906 law would have made a stronger statement in favour of secularism. Passing a new law paved the way for Muslim fundamentalists to claim being victims of a racist law - it is one of their biggest achievements and successes that a law that only mildly reiterated in 2004 the secular principles elaborated in 1906 is now known the world over as "the law against the veil"!

There is no denying, however, that racism and discrimination, especially in jobs and housing, do affect French citizens of migrant Muslim descent. While 10% of the youth in the entire population is unemployed, this is about 16% for French citizens of migrant descent and nearly 50% in poor suburbs around the capital city.

Progressive groups, including women's organisations, in which citizens of Muslim descent are prominent actors, have taken and are taking numerous actions to combat discrimination and racism. But these are rarely reported in the international media, which prefers the exoticism of veiled "Muslimness" to the banality of

secular citizens' struggles.

In the wake of this difficult economic situation and growing racism in France, if this news was indeed reported, it would have amply demonstrated to international audiences that, the vast majority of the French population of migrant Muslim descent still refuses so-called religious solutions to problems that they first and foremost identify as social and political, and that this population still firmly stands for secularism.

Studies by the Institut National d'Études Démographiques (INED) show that 20% of the French population of Muslim descent claim to have no religion (vs 28% in the total population), and among those who declare themselves believers, 21% say they very rarely attend religious ceremonies (vs 15% in the total population). An overwhelming number of citizens of Muslim descent (a much higher percentage than that in the rest of the population) stands for secularism, stating that it guarantees them freedom of belief and practice, while firmly keeping religion out of the political sphere.

The above statistics show that this section of the French population is not different from the rest of the population with regard to religion and secularism. The fact that they are increasingly labelled "Muslims", even if they are non-believers, points at the worldwide trend, massively relayed by the international media, to ethnicise and religionise social and political problems in Europe and elsewhere.

### **Setting the Record Straight**

Today, international media reports claim that fully covered women do not represent more than a few hundred cases in the whole of France. Their implicit conclusion is: Why bother? However, this small figure is not to be taken lightly, as citizens of migrant Muslim descent repeatedly warn the authorities that the Muslim right is advancing its pawns in France, using exactly the same strategies they used in Algeria or in other Muslim-majority countries. The veil is only the flag that makes their political presence very visible - they are working hard at, on the one hand, convincing families to adopt it through their charities and social work, as well as, on the other hand, at coercing

girls through the jobless and hopeless young men they keep under their influence by assigning them a rewarding “morality watch” role over the females in their families. It is not to be taken lightly, as Muslim countries have repeatedly witnessed that targeting women is only the very first step in enforcing the full political totalitarian agenda of the Muslim right.

Is it not time for the international media to give the floor to the section of the French population of migrant descent that knows from within the strategies of the Muslim right and dares to oppose them, even in the very difficult double-bind situation they find themselves in, in Europe? Where in this debate are the voices of secularists (believers and non-believers alike) and where are the voices of the numerous progressive Muslim scholars who argue that veiling is not an Islamic prescription?

The “black and white” simplistic manner of thinking of the international media is efficiently silencing and eradicating the progressive political views of a large and well-informed section of the French population.

Is it not time for human rights groups to amend their one-sided policy of defending the Muslim religious right on the ground that their religious or cultural rights are threatened? What about the freedom of thought and the freedom of expression of secularists of Muslim descent that is daily trampled upon by threatening fundamentalist groups in France even today?

The time has come for left organisations to seize the issue of the growing Muslim fundamentalism out of the hands of the right and the far-right political parties and groups, which exploit it for racist purposes, and to cut the grass from under the feet of the Muslim right by addressing seriously and urgently the social and political discrimination that citizens of migrant descent face.

We also need to confront directly the communalisation of Europe, to start rehabilitating the concept of citizenship (as opposed to “communities”) and to guarantee one law for all citizens.

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