

The burqa debate: “The right to wear a burqa”

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I must start by stating that I’m not pro-burqa but my argument is simple. No one has a right to tell a person how to dress- not their family nor the State. I oppose the law banning the burqa for the same reasons I would oppose being told to wearing one.

By making it a State law against something, you impose just one interpretation and deny freedom to all others. In France it started with the 2004 law banning all religious apparel in schools but which in spite appearances mainly targeted the hijab that muslims girls wear. And last year the Parliament voted on banning burqa style Islamic veils. The French have been disingenuous about what their intent is and have banned what they call “covering of the face”. The women who defy the ban will be charged a €150 fine. It’s safe to say that the French have taken their hypocrisy and concept of “laïcité” a bit too far.

I fail to see why a law needs to be passed in a country of many millions, which will apply to only about 2000 people in France, and in Belgium’s case a total of 30. How does a few women wearing burqas hurt anyone or impinge on anyone’s culture??? The ban on the burqa has exposed France’s growing intolerance towards Islam. It is not rooted in French concerns over protection of its culture or oppression of women (we know how the French treat minorities). Sadly it is deeply rooted in politics and Nicholas Sarkozy’s desire to appease the right. It’s nothing short of a witch-hunt instigated by Islamaphobia. Maheen Usmani gives good insight into the politics behind it all in her article.

Given Europe’s horrific past of oppressing religious and ethnic minority the current political trends give Muslims and other minorities a cause to worry. It makes you wonder whether burqa is the first in line for other similar laws in the future. What next?

If a society truly values diversity and freedom, then one must accept that there will be people who are different and may wish to express this through clothing or other items. A society that tries to prevent such differentiation is essentially intolerant and conformist.

Many of my friends argued that it was ridiculous of me to oppose the ban since the burqa has become a symbol of oppression in Muslim society and has no place in the 21st century.

For me it's not about what a burqa represents, it's about what you are saying to a minority in your country about their freedom of expression. When looking at this issue I try and keep my personal feelings and prejudice out of it.

While I agree that burqas reduce women to be seen as objects- things to be owned and kept hidden away. They restrict not only movement but interaction and are used throughout the Muslim world to subjugate and repress women. What some have called a "mobile prison". I think we often view things from a personal lens and forget that it may not mean or represent the same to those who choose to wear them. We also have to look at what the ban is trying to achieve and whether it makes sense.

One friend wrote and I quote "western countries have countless laws which impose such similar restrictions but are conveniently forgotten. I just can't understand what the big fuss is about when most people agree that burqa is not part of Islam and just a cultural tradition. If you think something is appalling then let the state ban on no matter whatever the political thinking behind the action. Would the same people who oppose this ban on burqa oppose the ban on nudity and obscenity? Why have different response to what are essentially the same laws."

I find that any ban or enforcement on clothing items (or lack thereof) from a State is oppressive, even if they are trying to get rid of the oppressive elements within a society. It is counter intuitive and counterproductive. It serves no purpose in these communities and will end up further alienating those who were forced to wear one. Sadly these women will now be forced into permanent house arrest. In fact a study suggests that many women in France adorn the burqa out of choice.

It's a gross restriction on the liberties of a minority. Banning anything is never the solution unless it causes public harm (physical or health risks- i.e. violence, cigarettes and pollutants). Look at it this way, I am a Muslim woman living in Belgium though I don't wear a burqa the fact that I don't have a choice in the matter makes me feel like a second class citizen especially in a country that supposedly advocates equal rights and freedom for all.

Some of my friends made the case for security risks that may ensue with people failing to disclose their identities giving example of how criminals may use the burqa. I think a few people misusing it doesn't give the State a carte blanche to criminalize it and I disagree that it poses a security risk, given it hardly has been misused in last 3 decades why would it all of a sudden now?

A few cited the case of Turkey having implemented such a ban in 1997 which it then made amended in 2008 to make it more lenient. However I feel that in Turkey the implications were different- they are a muslim majority country and while I don't support a ban there either it doesn't impinge on a minority's personal freedom. There are more effective ways of dealing with such issues rather than bans, one example would be an intelligent, targeted public awareness campaign.

I think as Muslims we get too caught up with emotions and what we associate the burqa with. We forget to look at things objectively. Yes I do acknowledge that the growing rate of burqas and niqabs in muslim countries is a cause for alarm but we are fighting the battle on the wrong continent and are doing a disservice to the muslim minorities residing in Europe. Let's get rid of the burqa where it poses problems- where it's used as a tool to oppress women. Let's take the battle to where it ought to be fought- South Asia and the Middle East, but not by passing laws but by creating a space for public discourse.

France's stance is illiberal and against the principles *liberté, égalité, fraternité* that France upholds as its most fundamental values. As Viv Groskop stated in her recent article "liberty means allowing others to get on with their lives, even if you don't approve of their wardrobe choices."

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P.S.

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