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# Open letter to our secular Muslim friends in India - Background to the Karnataka controversy about female students wearing head coverings

Friday 18 February 2022, by [HELIE LUCAS Marieme](#) (Date first published: 18 February 2022).

**The defense of victims of one (majority) religious fundamentalist extreme right should not lead to supporting another (be it minority) one.**



Dear friends,

I am following closely the events in Karnataka university/colleges and the controversy about female students wearing various head covering in class - whether hijab, burqa, etc...

Let me first tell you that I realize everyday how lucky I am to be a citizen of a virtually 100% "Muslim" country (Algeria): we were spared attempting to analyze the hijab/burqa conflict (and other similar conflicts) through the majority/minority lens and Hindu perpetrators/ Muslim victims dichotomy. In our case, there was no 'other' religious majority oppressing us.

Not that I have any doubt about the ugly reality of massacres led by a rising communal Hindu extreme-right majority attacking minorities, including Muslims in India. This unfortunately has been a blatant fact for decades and recent developments under Modi government only confirm the trend.

But the problem you presently face with the hijab controversy cannot be limited to it, nor should it be blurred by it.

In countries with heavily Muslim majorities, whether in North Africa, in the Sahel, in the Middle East, in the Indian subcontinent as a whole or now even spreading at the moment to Southern Africa and other places, we can witness the very same situation of rising political Islam and the promotion of its most blatant flag: the women covering (in increasing order, from hair/head covering to face covering: scarf, hijab, burqa). In other words: "the veil". (I will avoid, for the moment, the issue of our diasporas in the West, in order not to go into more political complexities). It is striking that in most places I know, there appear to be a continuum from the mildest covering towards the fuller one. In other words, the head scarf prepares the ground for the hijab, which prepares the ground for the burqa. Interestingly, in most places, none of these outfits were indigenous, rather they have

been recently imported from specific places in the Middle East. For decades and sometimes centuries, on different continents, people have lived as Muslims without feeling the need to dress as if they were middle-easterners.

Let me just for one minute ponder upon the origin of the head, body and face covering and how it came to represent Muslims worldwide – I am intentionally not limiting its representativity to female Muslims but to the entire community whose identity women bear the burden of carrying; nor am I linking it to Islam itself, for this feminine outfit is highly contested by progressive Muslim scholars as being part of religious requirements.

I kept coming regularly to India for long stretches of time for the past more than 40 years. I am an eye witness to the fact that burqa is a very recent acquisition to Indian female “Muslim” fashion.

In your country - like in mine - women for centuries were wearing traditional outfits other than burqa which was unheard of till a few decades ago.

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I remember flipping with a friend through her before Partition family photo-albums: her grand-mothers, grand-aunts, cousins were all wearing Saris despite being devout Muslims. Women my age and younger were mostly wearing alternatively Saris (for social occasions) and Shalwar-Kurta (for everyday convenience). During our conversation, it became clear that pressure has been mounting on Muslim women throughout the subcontinent – i. e. whether they belonged to the majority community (as in Pakistan and Bangladesh) or the minority one (as in India and Sri Lanka) - to abandon Saris to the benefit of Shalwar-Kurta in a first step, in order to visibly separate religious communities; and then more recently to do the totally alien Middle Eastern Burqa. This trend is equally true in India, in Pakistan and in Bangladesh.

In Algeria, peasant women were wearing colorful dresses with an equally colorful headwear which was perched high on top of their beautiful hair with no purpose of concealing it; and definitely no veil – a far cry from what is now imposed in the name of “Muslim” identity. Meanwhile, urban women did have different forms of veil depending on the geographical area: thin, flowery and transparent, worn openly hanging from the head in the South; black and full body-concealing in the area of Constantine/Ksentina; white, upper body covering but hardly leg covering, with a lace mouth-covering in the region of Algiers; etc...

It is only in the early 70ies, i.e. nearly a decade after independence, that was first introduced in Algeria an “Islamic” outfit consisting at the time of a feet-long beige or grey coat worn with a matching scarf covering hair, head and shoulders, tied under the chin. This outfit was distributed for free to university students by our first openly Islamist groups; they called it at the time: ‘the student’s dress’.

Decades later, it is the black burqa – Iran and Saudi style – which they distribute for free in Algeria.

I remember the first time I saw a tiny little girl who could not have been older than 3 wearing an Islamist outfit in India; it was during the World Social Forum in Bombay (2004) and she was playing with other little girls whose outfits were not identity-laden, at the entrance of the building in a Muslim area where I stayed.

I remember the first time I saw a tiny even tinier little girl in a pushchair wearing a hijab; it was in New York, close to a conservative mosque; the woman who was pushing her, presumably her mother, was burqa clad. That was in year 2000.

I witnessed in the past two decades, the spreading of the black Saudi-style burqa throughout predominantly Muslim areas in Africa and South East Asia, with the progressive disappearance of what used to be women's local traditional dresses. To my utter surprise, it seems no one from our cultural rights advocates has taken the task to defend our various cultures by attempting to preserve saris, boubous, sarongs, etc... as valuable elements of cultural diversity - including Muslim cultural diversity. With Islam spreading on all continents, it seems without doubt that there must be a cultural diversity to acknowledge and defend? No one seems worried about the enforced homogenization of a transcultural Islamist (not Islamic) identity which carries so much of a reactionary political program.

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***In India itself, it seems progressives have been stuck within the fascist Hinduist political program of eradication of minorities and the defense of these oppressed minorities to the point that even suggesting that another reactionary religious political program is also at work within the endangered minority has, so far, not been audible. I have been blasted in New Delhi intellectual progressive circles for decades for doing just that: trying to draw your attention, friends, to the trend I could see easily in your country, for having lived the same process in my virtually 100% Muslim country.***

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I have witnessed the first burqas appearing in the streets of my beloved Nizamuddin "village" in Delhi, and then their multiplication ... My saying so was repeatedly branded as "Islamophobic". It was just an attempt to share my Algerian experience (and beyond) and to alert you on the rise of what such experiences allowed me to see rising in your country ...

Now the question remains: how to defend the endangered Muslim minority against the new Hinduist extreme right without giving-in to the Muslim extreme-right which active political presence within the Muslim community you, friends, have refused for so long to acknowledge?

In India itself, it seems progressives have been stuck within the fascist Hinduist political program of eradication of minorities and the defense of these oppressed minorities to the point that even suggesting that another reactionary religious political program is also at work within the endangered minority has, so far, not been audible.

I do think we have to take a long view and while, of course, protecting and defending the basic

human rights and freedoms of the individuals – for instance the hijab or burqa clad women students' right to education in Karnataka - , one should also firmly refuse to promote women covering either as a religious right (contested unanimously, may I remind you, by all progressive scholars of Islam on different continents, who often paid with their lives their political courage and religious integrity), nor as an individual choice.

Wearing a hijab or a burqa today cannot be seen as an individual choice when we witness the world over how women are induced or coerced into wearing it, and more often than not at the cost of their lives – as was the case in Algeria in the 90ies, more recently in Mali, in Daesh-controlled areas in Syria and Iraq, in neighboring Afghanistan under the Taliban (then and now), and for past long decades in Iran, just to take a few examples. (I do not imply by saying this that burqa clad women in India are aware of the role they are made to play on the global arena. But we must be.)

In all the above-mentioned cases, it must be noted that it is men of their own Muslim community – in fact belonging to an extreme right political force which hides under a Muslim identity – who are pursuing this policy and have become the perpetrators of violations against women's human rights.

For it must be noted that women are in most cases made to wear a covering – something we Algerians have come to identify as the political flag of an Islamist far-right – in the name of the defense of an oppressed identity. But how come this Muslim identity is seen as threatened regardless of whether Muslims are in a majority or a minority or represent 100% of the population? Whether “Muslims” are heads of government? And even when laws are said to be derived from Islamic faith interpretations? How come Islam is seen as in danger the world over and Islamists are seen as its only legitimate representatives?

To me, this clearly points at the fact that the defense of the Muslim minority in India must be linked to the fight for secularism: secular laws i.e. common laws for all, and therefore equal rights, for all citizens of India. A landmark legal end to communalism. The replacement of a community identity by a citizen's identity.

Again, your situation in India makes me realize everyday how lucky I am to be a citizen of a country which inherited from colonialism the best conceptual weapon against communalism: Algeria was colonized by France; you, friends, were colonized by the British. We inherited a different understanding of the concept of secularism.

The French revolution invented the concept of secularism in-so-far as it wanted to free the newly proclaimed Republic from the subjugation to the Vatican and its Catholic Church that had plagued the Kingdom of France. It therefore defined secularism as the total separation of the State from religions: article 1 of the 1905 law on secularism/separation states that citizens enjoy freedom of belief and of practice of their cult; article 2 declares that the State will have nothing to do with private belief systems; it will not officially recognize any religion, nor their representatives, it will not fund them, etc... The State will be totally separated from religions. This legal provision allowed, for instance, to pass laws that the Church disagreed with on the ground that they did not follow (their) god's rules; this allowed laws on personal status to be voted for all citizens, benefitting all; not granting different legal rights to different unequal categories of citizens, according to one's religious presumed affiliation, it allowed for citizens not to be forced into a religious or caste identity; it granted equal rights before the law to all citizens; etc... This is the original revolutionary definition of secularism.

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It is a far cry from the British re-definition of secularism which ultimately aimed at legitimizing the double status of the King/Queen of England as Head of State and as Head of the Anglican Church. It therefore turned the original revolutionary definition of secularism into a situation where the State becomes a sort of arbitrator between religions, which grants equal rights to different religions and keeps the balance between their privileges; not only does it acknowledge and negotiate with self-proclaimed un-elected religious “representatives”, but it funds them, allows them to manufacture un-voted laws of personal status said to be in accordance with the principles of their religion – as interpreted by conservative religious clerics-, and coerces willing or unwilling citizens into a religious and community identity which is declared ‘theirs’ by birth – not by choice.

This is the trap in which far too many progressive people have fallen when running to the rescue of burqa-clad students assaulted by the Hindu right, and more generally all the numerous caste and religion’s victims of rising extreme-right Hindu nationalism. It seems to me that progressives in India could find a way out of the trap in a French-revolution inspired redefinition of Indian – in fact British colonial- secularism.

The defense of victims of one (majority) religious fundamentalist extreme right should not lead to supporting another (be it minority) one.

The battle for secularism is raging in so many countries today, including in France itself, where successive both Left and Right governments slowly de facto abandon the basic principles of separation between religion and state; and where the British re-definition of secularism as equal tolerance by the State vis-a-vis all religions is creeping, with the active support of the European Union. However, so far, de jure, the legal provisions of separation still stand, as defined by the French revolution and formalized in the 1906 law on secularism.

The bigger threat at the moment in France is the attempted appropriation of “secularism” by the French extreme right for communal purposes – an appropriation which is ardently combatted by progressive secularists in France, including political and human rights exiled and migrants who fled Islamic fundamentalist governments in their own countries.

I hope for and look forward to a trans-communal coming together of secularists, both within national contexts and internationally, at grass roots level, to force our unwilling governments to let us make full use of the revolutionary concept of secularism.

Friday 18 February 2022

**Marieme Helie Lucas**

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**P.S.**

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<https://www.siawi.org/spip.php?article27801>

and

<https://sabrangindia.in/article/open-letter-our-secular-muslim-friends-india>

- The writer is an Algerian sociologist as well as an activist for women's rights and secularism. She occupied leadership positions in human rights groups starting in the 1980s.