

Why France's banning of the abaya in schools is a symptom of an identitarian panic

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France is withdrawing into itself, writes Mediapart's co-editor Carine Fouteau in this op-ed article. The latest manifestation of its post-colonial obsessions is the ban now introduced on the wearing at school of the abaya, a loose-fitting, full-length robe worn by some Muslim women. It translates into a generalised suspicion towards Muslims, more precisely female Muslims, but also into the defeat of France's principles of secularism and the right of pupils to control their own bodies.

As the new school term began this week in France, there were so many issues worthy of public and political attention. There are children who, like their parents, go without enough to eat; there is a shortfall in the numbers of teachers because, despite assurances to the contrary, those who have left the profession have not been sufficiently replaced; there are parents who struggle to meet the cost of school stationary items, while overcrowded classes suffer under the heatwave.

The return to school could have, and should have, been a moment to focus on the real issues at stake for families, those of learning and the transmission of knowledge, that of the explosion of inflation, the deepening of inequalities in society, and the effects of climate change.

But no, for more than two weeks political debate and media commentary has been centred on a piece of clothing.

This year, there were more than 5.7 million children who returned to France's secondary schools. Education minister Gabriel Attal, responsible for issuing a ban on the wearing of the abaya within schools, reported on Tuesday that out of the total number of schoolgirls returning for classes across France, 298 turned up at school gates wearing abayas, and 67 of them refused to change out of their attire. For more than two weeks, the country has been torn apart in a row over the length of the garments of young women and which concern a few hundred cases, and this to the detriment of the pupils concerned (whose opinions have been little heard), and notably those who have been sent home rather than being allowed to take up their studies.

A woman wearing an abaya in a street in Nantes, north-west France, on August 31st 2023. © Loïc Venance / AFP

This excessive controversy reveals once more the panic surrounding the notions of national identity of which only post-colonial France has the secret. Above all, this excessive fixation barely hides an implicit message sent to the whole of society; one can believe, given the 'fruits' of this prohibition, that the controversy is but a pretext. A pretext for telling Muslims that they must remain well behaved, that they are under control, that their every move is examined and judged by the rest of the national community - a manner of telling them, once again, that they are not part of it. Or rather, "if you want to be a part of it, prove it, change your practices, abandon your roots".

Because, despite the denials, it is well and truly Muslims who suffer from the insinuations made in the increasingly rancid political and media arenas. To cite just one: interviewed on September 4th on the YouTube channel “Hugo décrypte”, President Emmanuel Macron, explaining the context of the government’s decision to ban the wearing of the abaya in schools, found it necessary to evoke [the beheading](#) by an Islamic extremist of schoolteacher Samuel Paty in the Paris suburb of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine in October 2020. “We live in our society alongside a minority of people who, hijacking a religion, challenge our republic and secularism,” Macron said. “And I’m sorry, but that has sometimes led to the worst. One cannot go about things as if a terrorist attack and the murder of Samuel Paty has not happened in our country.” He then insisted that “I’m not making any parallel”, which was a bit rich given that he had himself just done so.

But there was a time when the president was more concerned with deconstructing the prejudiced opinions put about in defence of secularism. In 2016, when he was campaigning for election, he gave a long [interview to Mediapart](#) in which he denounced the Islamophobia of those who exploited the concept of secularism, a founding principle of our republic, set into law in 1905. The previous year, Islamic terrorists had carried out a series of murderous attacks in Paris.

“I believe in the 1905 law,” he told Mediapart. “Secularism is a freedom. The battle is not lost. If the secularists win next May [*editor’s note, in the 2017 presidential election*] I could tell you that I will have lost this battle, but I think it’s not lost. Because, in the end, it’s not secularism that people are talking about. In doing so, they’re talking about their relationship with Islam.”

“The question is how do we get out of that?” he continued. “We get out first by distinguishing between the issues. Very often, in the debate we have about Islam everything is mixed up.”

Video: Emmanuel Macron interviewed by Mediapart in November 2016. © Mediapart

Emmanuel Macron has lost the lucidity he showed in the past. The vision of secularism to which he has now become close is not that of a freedom of conscience limited only by the respect of the conscience of others, but rather that which is defensive, which excludes and represses, as notably championed by the [Printemps républicain](#) movement which uses secularism as a discriminating, anti-religious – not to say anti-Muslim – tool.

How does Macron not also see another bias, which is sexist, in the controversy that he shamelessly fans? Because, more than Muslims as a whole, it is Muslim women who are being targeted. After the wearing of the headscarf (in schools, universities, workplaces, local council meetings and public spaces), after the wearing of the burkini (on beaches), and after the focus on bandanas, and long robes, it is now a garment deemed to be too covering that is the subject of a national fixation. This catalogue of controversies is giddy, and each time the same obsession is repeated – that of banning women from wearing clothing that is imposed upon them by others, whether these be a religion, husband or community.

What is once again the major topic across the French airwaves is a choice of dress, and the bodies of Muslim women, made out to be a threat to the “values of the French republic”. Whether they are in favour or not of the wearing of the abaya, they find themselves collateral victims of a generalised suspicion. While their social invisibility is the norm, and while their relegation to the most insecure employment bothers no-one, they are again subjected to national opprobrium.

An arbitrary state

Beyond the controversy and its consequences, it is a prohibition introduced by the state which poses

a problem. By decreeing what is religious and what is not, the supposedly secular French state oversteps its role and traps itself. While there is debate over the religious or traditional nature of this garment, and while individual situations are inevitably complex and entangled, the executive powers have made their decision. They put themselves into the heads of young girls and decide in their place over a question that concerns a cultural attachment, the wish to protect oneself from the eyes of others, a religious belief, a provocation, and so many other aspects. Paradoxically, by essentialising this garment, the executive places the adolescents who wear it in a univocal interpretation.

It is true that the state has reacted to a request by certain head teachers. “There is no clear framework, we don’t know precisely what is religious dress and what is not,” commented the national secretary of the head teachers’ union, the SNPDEN-Unsa, speaking before the new school year began. But the arbitrary ban will clarify nothing, and runs the risk of leading head teachers into the trap of the executive.

According to a French law, promulgated in March 2004, items of insignia and dress can only be prohibited within schools if the pupil wearing them demonstrates in a conspicuous manner their attachment to a religious faith. In an online commentary on the banning of the abaya in schools, the independent association [Vigie de la laïcité](#) (roughly translatable as “the watchdog of secularism”), which was created by members of a now-dissolved government-appointed advisory group, noted that: “A pupil who systematically wears headgear to cover their hair and replace a headscarf or turban can be punished under the terms of the 2004 law. In the same manner, the wearing of a covering dress which some describe as being an ‘abaya’ can be banned if it is systematic and opposes, for example, the wearing of clothing which is adapted for physical and sports training or practical work.”

The association went on to argue that “a general ban, without taking into account behaviour that indicates a religious adherence, on every covering robe which could be commonly worn by pupils outside of any religious significance, would amount to the perfectly counter-productive policing of clothing, prompting provocations by pupils and leading to a reaction of greater withdrawal.”

Otherwise put, secularism is a living practice, one that proceeds on a case-by-case basis, one that is supposed to understand the sense that pupils give to what they wear, and to give an appreciation of what is “manifestly ostentatious”. Its application implies above all a dialogue and exchange of views - which was held in the vast majority of schools this week. The ban, as laid down by the government, will inevitably lead head teachers to take decisions *a priori*, without taking into account what pupils have to say. How will they go about differentiating between an abaya and an ordinary long dress? They run the risk of referring themselves, more or less consciously, to the idea they have of the religious identity of the young women, of the colour of their skin or the sound of their names, which could result in discriminatory practices.

The executive has entered into an infernal spiral, by which each new prohibition leads mechanically to others. Initially conceived as a “law of freedom”, secularism is becoming a tool for humiliation, control and exclusion. The judicial translation of the ban was swift in coming. In a circular addressed to the country’s public prosecution services, dated September 5th, justice minister justice Éric Dupond-Moretti demanded “a firm, rapid and systematic” response to serious breaches of the abaya prohibition in schools.

Emmanuel Macron, who in his 2016 interview with Mediapart cited Aristide Briand, who as a then Member of Parliament initiated the 1905 law separating the Catholic Church from the state, should have re-read the latter’s warnings. The question of clothing was already an issue at the time. Briand opposed a ban on the wearing of the priest’s cassock outside of churches, arguing that the 1905 law

should not “prohibit a citizen from dressing in one manner or another”, and he considered that the result of such a ban would be “more than problematic”. For if the soutane was banned, he said, one could count on “the combined ingenuity of the priests and tailors” to create a “new garment”.

As the association Vigie de la laïcité underlined, “the most effective manner of fighting against any withdrawal into communitarism resides in the urgent reinforcement of a social and cultural mix within schools”, adding: “In each establishment where this has been reinforced, the attacks on secularism have fallen drastically.” By wrongly using secularism against pupils of Muslim faith, the executive risks making them doubt the values of freedom and respect that the notion contains, sowing confusion and reinforcing the most radical movements.

To effectively fight against religious integrism – which feeds off discrimination, racism and police violence – the school system, instead of fanning the fire, should fully play its emancipatory role, by promoting values of solidarity, of equality, notably between women and men, of justice and of social mixing.

Acceding to the demands of the far-right, notably the mayors of the southern towns of Perpignan and Béziers, the relay that has been made between the abaya ban and the floated experimental introduction of school uniforms speaks volumes. As is often the case, the orders given out concerning one minority or another serve as a laboratory before being extended to the entire population. By placing in question the fundamental freedom of pupils to own their bodies, to live their diversity and invent their plurality, young people as a whole may become the next victim of a government seeking to regain authority. Could it be that this is the only lesson the French president has learnt from the revolts that snowballed through working class districts earlier this summer following the shooting dead of a teenager by a police officer, at point blank range, in the Paris suburb of Nanterre? To put young people in step by wrapping them in a uniform?

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P.S.

• MEDIAPART. 7 September 2023 à 22h08 :
<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/070923/why-frances-banning-abaya-schools-symptom-identitarian-panice>

The original French version of this op-ed article can be found [here](#).

English version by Graham Tearse

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