

## **Full-body veils are “not welcome” in France**

It is easy to see that a woman's human rights are violated when a government requires her to wrap her body and face in an all-concealing veil, as the Taliban used to do when it ran Afghanistan. It should be just as easy to see the violation when a French parliamentary panel recommends, as it did on January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010 barring women who wear such veils, the burqa and the niqab, from using public services, including schools, hospitals and public transportation. Already Muslim head scarves have been banned from public school classrooms since 2004.

People must be free to make these decisions for themselves, not have them imposed by governments or enforced by the police.

Instead of condemning the recommendation, President Nicolas Sarkozy seems determined to outdo it. He already has declared that full-body veils are “not welcome” in France. His party's leader in Parliament wants to pass a law that bans women wearing burqas and niqabs from the streets. The Taliban would be pleased. The rest of the world should declare its revulsion.

Unfortunately, French politicians seem willfully blind to the violation of individual liberties. With regional elections scheduled for March, Mr. Sarkozy and his allies are desperately looking for ways to deflect public anger over high unemployment and failure of his economic and social policy. It is hard to produce jobs and far too easy to fan anti-Muslim prejudices.

France has more than five million Muslim residents, the most of any Western European country. Fewer than 400 are said to wear full-body veils, posing no obvious threat to French identity or security. But because they are so few, they make a temptingly cheap electoral target.

Muslim-bashing has been a potent vote-getter for French far-right politicians, most notably Jean-Marie Le Pen. In a clear bid to peel off some of those votes, Mr. Sarkozy's center-right government has spent months promoting a sometimes foolish, sometimes menacing “national debate” on French identity. No political gain can justify hate-mongering.

And so a fractured panel of French legislators on January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010 endorsed the idea of a ban on full facial veils in government offices, public hospitals and mass transit, but Parliament remains deeply divided over the effectiveness and constitutionality of such a law.

After six months of hearings, the panel of 32 legislators came up with a 644-page report covering proposals reinforcing republican ideas of secularism, but in the end barely a quarter of the members voted to submit their work to Parliament for consideration. They prevailed in part because the 11 members of the opposition Socialist Party boycotted the vote. The result is far short of the idea that inspired the creation of the panel: the demand for a ban on the full veil anywhere in public. Parliament will now have to debate whether to adopt the nonbinding resolution suggested in the report, stating that the full veil was “contrary to the values of the republic” and asserting that “all of France is saying no” to the veil. Then Parliament will decide what if any legislation should be passed.

Of course, no action is expected until after regional elections in March.

Since 2004, head scarves and other signs of religious affiliation have been banned from public schools by a government determined to enforce France's tradition of strict secularism amid fears of growing fundamentalism among France's five million Muslims.

When the panel discussed a generalized ban on wearing the full veil in public, the talk was dominated by criticism from legal experts, Muslim leaders and the police.

Further, the Interior Ministry says only a small fraction of France's Muslim women wear the full veil, between 300 and 1,900, so a broader ban would mostly affect wealthy tourists from Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf nations, who help keep up the retail economy here. According to the police, most of the 1,900 are young, two-thirds are French citizens and a quarter are Muslim converts.

The center-right government of President Nicolas Sarkozy has been deeply concerned about the rise of Salafism, a more conservative form of Islam, especially among converts. Mr. Sarkozy has said that the veil is "not welcome in France because it is contrary to our values and contrary to the ideals we have of a woman's dignity." But he stepped back from pushing the broader ban, concerned about its constitutionality and the possible offense of Muslims all around the world.

Instead, with an eye on the coming regional elections, he and his prime minister, François Fillon, said Parliament should debate the issue and vote on a nonbinding resolution before trying to pass legislation. But we can be sure that after the regional election of March 2010, the subject of a legislation will come back on the table.

Those who oppose the veil call it a symbol of the repression of women, but many of those who wear it say that they do so voluntarily as an expression of their faith. Their backers say that a ban would deny Muslim women freedom of expression and stigmatize them.

The whole discussion has made many Muslims uncomfortable or angry. Muhammad Moussaoui, the head of a national coalition of Muslim organizations, told The Associated Press that "it's very difficult to talk about the liberation of women through a law that constrains." But in some public accommodations, "where identification is necessary," he said, it was legitimate to ask women to show their faces.

Guy Geoffroy, a legislator from Mr. Sarkozy's party, said he favored a clear statement that "the burqa is contrary to a woman's rights, contrary to public order and security." But he said a law should be limited and applicable. "The worst thing is a law of significant ambition, and even as we vote for it we know we won't have the means to put it in place."

Various polls show that a varying majority of French, when asked, favor a ban on the full veil. And the French media have had great fun with the topic.

But it is difficult to tell how much the French really care about the whole debate. On Monday 25th, January, Mr. Sarkozy had a prime-time, two-hour television program in which he answered questions from 11 citizens with a variety of concerns and grievances. Mr. Sarkozy, who is masterly at this kind of theater, was asked about the ongoing government-inspired "debate" about national identity. He responded by soothingly talking of the need for families to discuss all issues. Strangely, the veil did not even come up.

**N.ZAMMIT Ph.D**