

From the Burqa to the Burkini

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France is as concerned with Islam as Sisyphus with his stone. Barely two months have passed since Andréén, a communist Member of Parliament, and President Nicolas Sarkozy called for a commission to study the rising trend of the burqa in France. And it appears that the debate is set to intensify yet again.

First, according to one report, about 367 women have been identified by the French Ministry of the Interior to be donning the burqa and another report states that most of these women are about 30 years old and recently converted activists.

What is interesting is that these findings are announced just as another episode takes place. This time, attention is on a more sporty relation of the burqa - the burkini.

French responses to the burqa, or niqab - and now the burkini - are based on arguably justifiable concerns. Civil servants face burqa issues in daily life to check IDs. In schools, teachers face the same problem when sending their students off to their burqa-clad mothers. As for the burkini, Carole, the 35-year-old French Muslim, who is coincidentally also a convert, was allegedly banned from wearing it for hygiene reasons.

Furthermore, with an extremist imam being expelled because of his radical preaching in 2003 and several young people being recruited from a poor area of Paris to fight in Iraq in 2004, it is only natural to worry about a possible link between rising Islamist radicalism and the trend of women wearing the burqa.

It is also argued that women wearing the burqa are forced to do so, hence inhibiting their freedom. In an effort to diffuse further problems, Andréén called for the commission, to include Muslims, to study the burqa phenomenon. Ultimately, there is an underlying issue of national integration.

This still leaves open the question, why has there been such a defensive reaction from the Muslim community on both counts?

In part, the reaction in June was because of the failure of President Sarkozy to qualify his remarks. He did not explain remarks that were, for many, derogative and insensitive. The burqa is traditionally worn by many Muslim women, mostly in the Middle East. But in places such as Afghanistan, the burqa predates Islam.

The President's imprecise language clouded the desire of the French community to understand the issue. Unfortunately, Géin's choice of words for the burkini episode was none the better, when he warned that the "fundamentalists" wanted a "world of burqa".

The potential tragedy is that both issues involve very few women, but have the potential to impact a much wider society. The remarks easily provoked a reflexive sense of defensiveness among the Muslim community. The worst effect is that it could produce tension between Muslims and non-Muslims in France.

On the flipside, Muslim extremist groups could take advantage of this opportunity to rally the Muslims against others.

Interestingly, Sheikh Mohammad Tantawi, Egypt's Grand Imam, not only acknowledged that the burqa was not compulsory in Islam, as it is not prescribed in the Koran, but that a head of state had the right to accept or prohibit it. As for the burkini, there is always the alternative choice of using the pools with designated hours for women, which is something readily available in France.

In the modern world words travel in an instant, but meaning and context often never do. In this case, President Sarkozy's remarks are readily available in the English language media across the world, but the context is only available in the French language.

Additionally, few outside of France understand the nation's commitment to secularism.

This tension between secularism and religion is now seen as a French-Muslim conflict, whereas historically the conflict was between Catholics and the state, when France began to develop a legal commitment to secularism. Over time, the changes brought about by the French policies came to be accepted by Catholics, and that may happen with the Muslim community as well.

Several lessons can be learnt from these episodes. Clearly, it is necessary to substantiate any remarks, especially with regard to sensitive issues associated with religious identity.

The French government must also publicize the various avenues available where similar cases to that of Carole's can be presented and solved quietly and peacefully, such as HALDE - The Equal Opportunities and Anti-Discrimination Commission. When such channels are utilized instead of turning to the media, similar incidents can avoid being turned into a spectacle.

Those with perceived grievances must also be more responsible in airing their cases, with consideration for the implications to the broader community. Ultimately, all it takes is a bit more understanding and a lot less name-calling and accusation to preserve secularism in a period of rising religiosity worldwide.

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