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France's Burqa Ban: French Secularism or Colonial Mindset?

By Vinay Kumar Pathak

Synopsis

The burqa/niqab ban, which was enforced this month by the French government, is worn by fewer than 2,000 of the five million Muslims in France. Is the government reimposing republican values or seeking political gain?

Commentary

A 28-YEAR OLD woman became the first person to be charged in France this month under a newly-enforced legislation that has banned the wearing of the full-face veil donned by some Muslim women. Under the law promoted by President Nicolas Sarkozy, Muslim women wearing face veils are not allowed in all public places. Women in the burqa (full-face veil) or the niqab (a veil that only exposes the eyes) on the streets of France will risk a Eu150 (S\$270) fine or lessons on French citizenship. Since then scores of Muslim women have courted arrest by going out to public places wearing full face veils in defiance of the law. Some niqab-wearers – many of them French Muslim converts – vowed to continue going out and to take their cases to the European courts of human rights if stopped by police.

France's Experience with the Veil

Although the veil debate also rages elsewhere in Europe, the ban on veils is enforced only in France where the niqab is worn by fewer than 2,000 women among its five million Muslims. A Muslim activist, Samy Debah, head of the French Collective against Islamophobia, says the niqab law is a pretext to reduce the visibility of Muslims in public places. The Guardian quoted him as saying that the ban exposes an old French colonial reflex that Arabs and blacks "only understand force and you can't talk to them".

Historian Joan W. Scott argues that how France deals with its own insecurities and imagery of its own Muslim community is a reflection of its past. It is a past that is represented by "racism, postcolonial guilt, fear, and nationalist ideologies, including republicanism, secularism, abstract individualism and especially French norms of sexual conduct taken to be both natural and universal".

According to Scott, the French have constantly targeted specific symbols, like the veil, which has come to be overwhelmingly associated with Islam. Firstly it is an attempt to assert their authority over the country's Muslim population and to further their own nationalistic and political aspirations. Secondly, as scholars of colonial literature on the veil have highlighted, the exotic and erotic representation of the veil by colonial ethnographers registers the colonisers' own fears, insecurities and shortcomings.

They were unable to assert any form of control over the women whom they never got to know nor see, these scholars argue, but these women were constantly watching them from behind their veils. This in fact empowered the women and it angered the colonisers who reacted by trying to unveil the women upon whom they had no “control”.

Politicising the Garment

There have been instances in French colonial history where the French publicly unveiled Algerian women as a show of their new-found freedom and ‘acceptance of modernity’. It was also a way to discredit women who continued to veil and had begun to join the revolution against the French.

Post-colonial France’s experience with the veil continues today through its interpretation of republicanism and secularism. To the French, its republican values are the sacred laws that protect everything French. They have to be adopted by all at the expense of their own customs, traditions, cultures, languages and even religion if they want to be French. It was such republican values which prompted President Sarkozy to say: “The burqa is not welcome on the territory of the republic, we shouldn’t be afraid of our values, we shouldn’t be afraid to defend them.”

Sarkozy has been accused of stigmatising Muslims to boost his support among far-right voters. Recently the interior minister Claude Gueant suggested that the growing number of Muslims in France was a problem. France has a strict separation of church and state and banned headscarves and all religious symbols in schools in 2004.

Post Colonial France and Immigrants

Social historians have pointed out that immigrants in France, despite their French nationality, are treated as outsiders simply because of their faith. The double standards of French society and their continued colonial mentality raise questions of their own concepts of republicanism and laicite (the role of the state to protect its citizens from religion). The French government’s declarations to fight discrimination and work towards integration of “immigrants” are muted when rightwing elements of French society seek solace in concepts of republicanism and laicite.

In the process they further alienate the Muslim community and force even those who do not wish to don the niqab or burqa to veil themselves -- both as a sign of resistance and defence of their community under attack. As pointed out by social scientist Norma C. Moruzzi: “Islamic cultural constructions were equated with religious oppression and Western social practices were defined as the secular emancipatory norm.”

She says it is imperative for the good of the global village that European countries like France relook their Orientalist agendas and stop dictating terms and conditions for acceptance into French society. That is because they should believe in their own ideals of democracy and liberty that is supposed to be all-encompassing and accepting of cultural, historical and religious differences.

Scott asserts that “the case of the French headscarf law is not just a local story but allows us to think more broadly about the terms on which democratic polities (including our own) are organised”. She adds: “It also allows us to analyse critically the ways in which the idea of a ‘clash of civilisations’ undermines the very democracy it is meant to promote.”

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