

## **This House believes France is right to ban the face veil**

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### **Introduction**

France is home to Western Europe's largest Islamic community with a Muslim population of between five and six million.

On 14<sup>th</sup> September 2010 a law banning the wearing of a full face veil in public was approved by the French Senate.

French MPs voted overwhelmingly in support of the bill with 246 votes for and 1 against. There were 100 abstentions. The proposed measure was already backed by the lower house of parliament, the National Assembly, in July.

The bill is now with France's Constitutional Council watchdog, which has a month to confirm its legality. If it's not overturned, the ban will come into force in six months time, making France the first European country to impose such a law.

Although the legislation does not specifically refer to full-face Islamic veils, it would make it illegal for women to wear garments such as the niqab and the burka in public. Women who break the law will be fined 150 euros ( *approximately 196 USD*) and men who force their wives to wear the face veil will face a fine of 30,000 euros ( *approximately 39,111.00 USD* )and a one-year jail term.

It's estimated that a maximum of 2,000 women wear the full face veil in France.

### **Background to the law**

In a major policy speech in June 2009, President Nicolas Sarkozy addressed the issue of women wearing the full face veil. He said "We cannot accept in our country, women who are prisoners behind netting, cut off from all social life, deprived of identity." Speaking at a special session of parliament in Versailles Mr Sarkozy went on to say "The burka is not a sign of religion, it is a sign of subservience. It will not be welcome on the territory of the French republic," But he stressed that France "must not fight the wrong battle", saying that "the Muslim religion must be respected as much as other religions" in the country.

Mr Sarkozy also gave his backing to the establishment of a cross-party parliamentary commission to investigate the prevalence of the face veil in France. The commission's main recommendations included the following:

- Parliament should pass a resolution denouncing full face veils
- Ban the veil in all schools, hospitals, public transport and government offices
- Bar foreign women from obtaining asylum or French citizenship if they insist on veiling their faces in state buildings
- In asylum requests take into account the coercion to wear the full veil as an indication of a wider context of persecution
- Create a national school of Islamic studies

The committee's report also said requiring women to cover their faces was against the French republican principles of secularism and equality. The commission called on parliament to adopt a formal resolution stating that the face veil was "contrary to the values of the republic".

### Laicite in France

The French concept of *laicite* is an important factor in the face veil debate. Its closest approximation in English is *secularism*.

*Laicite* signifies the strict separation of Church and State. It underpinned the French Revolution, and has been an integral part of France's heritage. In 1905 the principle of *laicite* was set down as a law, the main terms of which were:

- No religion could be supported by the state, either by financial aid or political support
- Everyone had the right to follow a religion, but no-one had an obligation to do so.
- Religious education at school was strictly forbidden
- No new religious symbols could be placed in public places, including graveyards.

It was this same concept that was invoked in 2004 to ban pupils wearing conspicuous signs of religion - including Islamic headscarves – in public schools. The young women expelled from their schools because of their refusal to remove their headscarves, argued that their freedom was being restricted. However, in France, personal freedom, though important, comes second to preserving the strict neutrality of the state, leading many critics to argue that secularism should become more encompassing as the make-up of French society evolves.

For further information about the face veil across Europe see  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/5414098.stm>