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Suppression and freedom collide as Denmark bans the burqa

As Denmark bans face-covering in public, critics warn it will limit the freedom of women who wear Islamic face veils. Supporters of the new law say, however, that they are emancipating women from suppression.

From August 1, it will no longer be legal in public places in Denmark to wear a burqa, niqab, or other garment that covers the face. A law passed on 31 May applies to "anyone who wears a garment that hides the face in public." People who violate the rule will face fines starting at 1,000 kroner (USD $157). The legislation permits covering the face for a "recognizable purpose" such as in cold weather, for fancy dress, or when wearing a helmet for safety purposes.

A niqab covers everything but the eyes, while a burqa covers the entire body and face but has a semi-transparent mesh over the eyes. While it was widely reported as a "burqa ban," the legislation does not mention specific items of clothing or forms of face-covering, and the Danish government says the ban is not aimed at any religion.

Read WikiTribune's Q&A with a niqab-wearing Muslim woman

But activists and some Muslim women say the ban has been introduced to limit religion and freedom of expression of those who wear face-covering Islamic garments.

"This is about sending a signal and restricting my religious beliefs and practice," 21-year-old Sabina Bint Yousuf, a practicing Muslim who was born in Denmark and sometimes wears a niqab, told *WikiTribune*.

Naser Khader, a Syrian-born member of parliament for the Conservative People's Party who has opposed Islamic veiling for nearly a decade, disagrees.

He told *WikiTribune* he opposes the niqab and burqa because they are symbols of women's suppression: "It's helping the women in our society to tell them not to wear the niqab and burka."

He says other arguments in support of the ban include that face veils do not fit within Danish society, and that it is important for integration that people can read each other's facial expressions.

"We want to see their faces," he says.

11 Talk Comments
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Women in niqabs exit the audience seats at Christiansborg Palace after the Danish Parliament banned the wearing of face veils in public. Copenhagen, Denmark, 31 May 2018. Ritzau Scanpix/Mads Claus Rasmussen/via REUTERS

The ban underlines the increasingly tense debate in Europe about the role of Islam in culture and society. Some Danes fear an influx of immigrants from non-Western countries threatens secular traditions and gender equality in Denmark. Those fears have promoted tougher immigration laws and opposition to Islamic culture, including burqas and niqabs, which politicians have tried to ban for nearly a decade (*FT*).

But support for legislation has increased in recent years alongside anti-immigration and nationalist sentiments (*New York Times*). All of Denmark's main politician parties backed what they call the "masking ban" in October. Austria, Belgium, and France already have similar bans on face veils, with Germany and the Netherlands maintaining partial bans.

Defending Danish values

Khader's concerns represent a struggle in the country to integrate immigrants, particularly from the Middle East, over the past decade. New policies aimed at integration include regulations on speaking Danish (*thelocal.dk*) in order to get social welfare, and compulsory teaching about democracy, equality, and Danish holidays for children in areas with large numbers of immigrants. Anti-immigration policies have even gone mainstream, *Bloomberg* reports, with the center-left Social Democrats party, recently adopting an anti-immigration stance.

But immigrants there say they are unfairly stigmatized and excluded from mainstream society, with some living in areas officially classified by Danish authorities as "ghettos" – the only country in the world to do so.

The ban on face veils comes as part of defending the "homogenous country," and it reflects Danish society and its view of Muslims, Margit Warburg, a professor of religion and sociology at the University of Copenhagen, told *WikiTribune.*

Women in niqab are pictured after the Danish Parliament banned the wearing of face veils in public, at Christiansborg Palace in Copenhagen, Denmark, May 31, 2018. Ritzau Scanpix/Mads Claus Rasmussen/via REUTERS

Women in niqab are pictured after the Danish Parliament banned the wearing of face veils in public, at Christiansborg Palace in Copenhagen, Denmark, May 31, 2018. Ritzau Scanpix/Mads Claus Rasmussen/via REUTERS

Warburg was commissioned to produce a study by the government in 2009 after proposals for a veiling ban found that no more than 200 women—0.02 percent of Muslim women in Denmark—wear the niqab, and none wear the burqa. The study also found none was forced to wear face veils, she says.

The number of veils is estimated to be equally low elsewhere in Europe where there are bans. According to *Quartz*, studies indicate that the Islamic face veil is worn by 0.03 percent of the Austrian Muslim population, 0.04% of the French Muslim population, and 0.05 percent of the Muslim population in the Netherlands. *(See WikiTribune's previous explainer on veiling bans* *across the world.)*

“Women wearing a niqab is a minority within a minority, within a minority in Denmark,” says Warburg.

A previous proposal for a ban lacked support and was put on hold in 2009, but Warburg says Danish politicians didn’t give up on the idea.

“The politicians that wanted a ban against the burqas…they’ve always thought [it] was a good idea.”

Khader refutes the study, saying that the methods used were not trustworthy. He says the number of women wearing face veils is now “at least 500,” describing what he sees as a rise in Islamism in Denmark since 2009.

“For me it doesn’t matter how many we have, it’s a question of principles. Even if we had only one woman forced to wear a burqa or niqab, it’s the right thing to do to ban it.”

Emancipation and suppression

Instead of empowering women, the ban on face veils will be harmful, says Yousuf. She says it will affect her life “in a very negative way” because the law is “discriminating.”

Yousuf is a member of Kvinder I Dialog (Women In Dialogue), an association of Muslim women in Denmark. She wears the niqab regularly, but not every day.

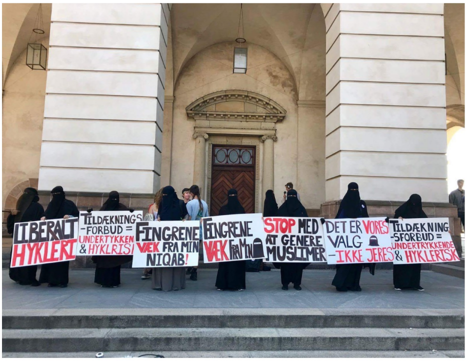
> ‘Things are changing especially because a lot of these bans are pushed by far-right nationalistic parties,’ – Maryam H’madoun

Even so, Yousuf is afraid of the reported rise in hate crimes (OECD) in Denmark against Muslim people and says the ban will exacerbate them.

“One of my friends, a man tried to push her in front of a train at a train station. I have other friends … who have had their hijab or niqab pulled off their faces. “Whenever politicians make these laws … It sends a signal to the population that it’s okay that you may act negatively towards these people.*”*

Yousuf doesn’t think the ban is about helping women.

“What is the logic of helping oppressed women by giving them fines or oppressing them more? It doesn’t make any sense at all.”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A protest by women’s association Kvinder I Dialog (Women In Dialogue) in Denmark against Islamophobia and banning women from wearing face veils. Photo by: Women In Dialogue, used with permission

On the other hand, Khader says: “There’s a difference between emancipating the women and forcing them to be suppressed … Sometimes we have to use the law to help the women … It’s helping the women in our society to tell them not to wear the niqab and burka. Because it’s increased their opportunities in this society. They can get jobs. They can get friends. They can be integrated.”

The Danish Ministry of Justice, which is responsible for the veil ban, has not responded to *WikiTribune*’s request for comment.

The Islamic Society in Denmark’s Imran Shah is concerned about “institutionalized” discrimination against Muslims in Europe.

“It’s quite worrying that at the moment, the nationalistic agenda as taken hold and grabbed hold of the political discussion regarding minorities, Muslim minorities specifically in Europe.”

A ‘turning point’ for Europe

The growing number of regulations mark changing attitudes towards Muslims in Europe, says the Open Society Justice Initiative’s policy officer Maryam H’madoun. who published a report earlier this year on restrictions on Muslim women’s dress in the European Union (EU) .

The report found nearly one-third of all 28 EU states had placed legal restrictions on Muslim women’s dress at a local or national level. It also found that 13 countries had some kind of restriction that wasn’t enacted in law, such as regulations in schools or private businesses.

She says Europe is at a “turning point” in attitudes towards Muslim women’s dress and that the number of countries with restrictions could worsen.

“Things are changing especially because a lot of these bans are pushed by far-right nationalistic parties … The threat is this becomes the norm,” says H’madoun.

She adds that clothing restrictions on Muslim women limits their participation in society.

Despite the small number of Muslim women who will be directly affected by Denmark’s ban, Shah says the impact will be considerable.

“The effects will be irreversible and quite consequential for a little community. Because if the politicians are willing to force the face veil off Muslims, what other things might be in store to force the minorities into their line of thinking?”

Yousuf says Women in Dialogue will be holding a protest in Copenhagen on August 1, the day the ban comes into law.

“Just because they got a majority of votes does not mean we want to accept this … This ban has given us more strength to hold on to our identities and our beliefs.”

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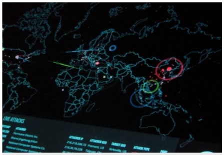

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