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Spain rejects ban on burqas in public

WWRN (20.07.2010) / HRWF Int. (20.07.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Spain's Parliament on Tuesday rejected a proposal to ban women from wearing in public places Islamic veils that reveal only the eyes.

However, the Socialist government has said it favors including a ban on people wearing burqas in government buildings in an upcoming bill on religious issues to be debated after parliament's summer vacation break.

Following a lower chamber debate, 183 lawmakers opposed the ban, 162 voted for it and two abstained.

The nonbinding proposal had been put forward by the leading opposition Popular Party, which portrayed it as a measure in support of women's rights. The ruling Socialist Party opposed the ban.

"It is very difficult to understand how it is that our troops are defending liberty in Afghanistan and the government doesn't have the courage to do so here, in Spain," said opposition spokeswoman Soraya Saenz de Santamaria in Parliament.

The opposition's proposal followed discussions in several other European countries on possibly banning face veils that show only a woman's eyes, or their eyes through a knitted mesh.

Nations like France, Belgium and Switzerland have struggled to balance their national identities with growing Muslim populations with cultural practices that clash with their own.

In Spain, the PP had put forward the proposal "in defense of the dignity and equality of all women" and to prevent Muslim women from being forced into wearing unwanted garments such as veils by their husbands.

Some analysts had interpreted the proposal as an opposition ploy to build their party's strength amid the economic turmoil and dismal growth prospects that have dogged the government of Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero.

None of the opposition spokesmen consulted had been able to cite a place in Spain where women routinely wear face-covering veils.

However, a handful of Spanish towns and cities have banned the wearing of burqas and niqabs in municipal buildings, including in the country's second-largest city of Barcelona in June.

Of Spain's 47 million inhabitants, about 1 million are Muslims, most of whom have arrived in recent decades mainly looking for employment from northwest Africa, where the burqa is not common.

"This has been used politically in a search for electoral support," said Mansur Escudero, president of the Islamic Commission of Spain. He said he last saw a woman wearing a burqa in Spain 10 years ago in the southern city of Marbella, where Saudi Arabia's royal family and other wealthy Arab clans own large homes and estates.

Escudero said the woman could have been a tourist. The only woman he knew who regularly wore a burqa had lived in the southern city of Cordoba and died about a decade ago.

The issue nevertheless remains an emotional touchstone, and Justice Minister Francisco Caamano said that such garments were "hardly compatible with human dignity."

Caamano said in June the government would begin debating a ban on women wearing burqas in government buildings which would include courts, ministries and employment offices as part of the religious issues bill.

But the government opposes legislating a ban in public spaces, as that could force women who wear such clothing to make difficult choices: Go out in public and break the law, or stay home all the time.

"We want to avoid putting women who live in this kind of situation in a dual jail," said Eduardo Madina, secretary general for the ruling Socialist Party in the lower house of parliament.

Barcelona's burqa ban

AP (14.06.2010) / HRWF Int. (21.06.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Barcelona is to become the first major Spanish city to bar the use of face-covering Islamic veils in municipal buildings.

City Mayor Jordi Hereu announced the measure on Monday but insisted it was not specifically religious. He says it is aimed at all dress that impedes identification, and thus includes motorcycle helmets and ski masks.

Lleida, also in the Spanish region of Catalonia, last month became the first Spanish city to regulate use of body-covering burqas or face-covering niqab garments.

Authorities in several European countries have been debating regulating the use of burqas in recent months.

Barcelona town hall said the measure was largely symbolic given that it is unusual to see women wearing burqas or niqabs in the city, which has a population of 1.5 million.
