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## **Burqa ban: No more face-covering when new Canadians take oath of citizenship**

Associated Press (12.12.2011) HRWF (19.12.2011) – [www.hrwf.net](http://www.hrwf.net) - New Canadian citizens must remove any face coverings, such as the Islamic niqab or burqa, while they take the oath of citizenship, the country's immigration minister said Monday.

Jason Kenney said most Canadians have misgivings about Islamic face coverings and said new Canadians should take the oath in view of their fellow citizens. He said he has received complaints from lawmakers and citizenship judges who say it's difficult to ensure that individuals whose faces are covered are actually reciting the oath.

The Conservative minister called the issue a matter of deep principle that goes to the heart of Canada's identity and the country's values of openness and equality. He said women who feel obliged to have their faces covered in public often come from a cultural milieu that treats women as property rather than equal human beings

"I do think that most Canadians find that disquieting to say the least," Kenney said in a telephone interview with The Associated Press.

"Most Muslim Canadian women I know find the practice of face covering in our society disturbing, indicative of an approach to women that is not consistent with our democratic values," Kenney added.

Kenney made the announcement in the French-speaking province of Quebec, which has experienced heated debates over how much Canada should bend to accommodate newcomers.

Kenney said his government would not go further by drafting laws to ban women from wearing veils that cover their faces in public. France became the first country to enact a law designed to forbid face-covering veils such as the niqab or burqa anywhere in public. Violators risk fines or being ordered to take citizenship classes.

"We shouldn't have the state using its power to dictate what people choose to wear in their private lives, but when there are important points of intersection with the state in obtaining state services I think it's entirely reasonable for people to show who they are," Kenney said.

There are no laws banning veils or headscarves in the U.S., though there have been unsuccessful attempts in some states to ban "Sharia law." The sponsor of such a bill in Oklahoma wanted to prohibit women from wearing headscarves in driver's license photos. The Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences in 2010 banned veils that obscure the face for security reasons, but later changed it to accommodate Muslim women.

The burqa is a head-to-toe gown with a mesh-like panel over the face that allows a woman to see and breathe. The niqab is a veil that leaves only the eyes exposed.

The new Canadian rule takes effect immediately. Kenney defended it by saying it has nothing to do with religious freedom, and said when Muslim women make a pilgrimage to Mecca they're required to show their face.

"So, the notion that this is somehow a religious obligation, I don't accept," he said.

Kenney said he raised the issue during a recent meeting of citizenship judges in Ottawa and was told it was a widespread problem.

About 940,000 Muslims live in Canada, about 2.8 percent of the Canadian population. It is the fastest growing religion in Canada. Over the last decade Canada has naturalized between 150,000 and 180,000 new citizens a year.

Ihsaan Gardee, the acting executive director of The Canadian Council of American-Islamic Relations, said the decision will have a damaging effect on Canadian democracy because it forces those who wear the veil to choose between their religious convictions and adopting Canadian citizenship. Gardee said a young, veil-wearing woman, who was scheduled to take part in a citizenship ceremony Tuesday, called his office and was no longer sure if she would attend.

But the Muslim Canadian Congress welcomed the new regulation, urging the Canadian government to go even further and ban the burqa and niqab from all public places in Canada.

The rule also takes effect as the Supreme Court of Canada hears the case of a woman who wants the right to wear a niqab while facing her accused rapists in court. Kenney said the timing of Monday's announcement was a coincidence.

Lawyer David Butt, who represents the woman, said he expects the rule to be challenged in court but he said it puts anybody who challenges it in an impossible situation as it would jeopardize their citizenship.

Butt said Canada's version of the bill of rights protects the right to wear the niqab or burqa.

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