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France says only 6 women fined for wearing forbidden veil in 8 months since law passed

Associated Press (02.01.12) / HRWF (19.01.12) - France's interior minister says that since a ban on face-covering Islamic veils took effect in April only six women have been convicted and fined.

Claude Gueant said in an interview with the daily Le Monde published Monday that no woman has been sent to a citizenship class — another potential punishment.

Controversy surrounded the law. Muslim leaders, most of them opposed to burqa-style veils, say the it stigmatizes all followers of Islam.

Gueant says police cited a total of 237 women but only six were convicted. He expressed surprise that nearly a quarter of the women police questioned had converted to Islam. Backers say the law is aimed at ensuring France's secular values and gender equality and nipping radical Islam in the bud.

French court acquits 2 Opus Dei followers accused of forcing disciple to work

Associated Press (24.11.2011) / HRWF (28.11.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - A French court has acquitted two Opus Dei followers and an association closely linked to the conservative Catholic group of charges they forced a disciple to work.

A spokeswoman for Opus Dei welcomed the decision. A lawyer for the plaintiff said she would appeal.

The trial was based on a complaint by Catherine Tissier, who says she worked for more than a decade for little or no pay as a "numerary assistant" at a hotel school linked to Opus Dei.

Defense lawyers had portrayed the case as one about labor law. But the trial drew attention to practices of the secretive group, portrayed in Dan Brown's bestseller "The Da Vinci Code" as a murderous, power-hungry sect. The group vigorously protests this view.

French court cancels permit for Marseille mega-mosque

By Anne Beade

AFP (27.10.2011) / HRWF (08.11.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - A French court Thursday cancelled a construction permit for a mega-mosque in the southern city of Marseille that had been touted as a potential symbol of Islam's growing place in France.

The city's administrative tribunal ruled the project, which had already been under suspension for 18 months, would have to be cancelled because of failures to meet urban-planning requirements.

It raised particular concerns over the project's failure to finalise a deal for a 450-place parking lot and to reassure planners that the mosque would fit with the urban environment.

The tribunal noted "a lack of graphical material permitting the evaluation of the project's integration with neighbouring buildings, its visual impact and the treatment of access points and land."

Critics of the project were quick to praise the court for its ruling.

"It's the culmination of a long struggle for the people who live and work here, and who simply wanted for this project to fit in harmony with the neighbourhood's economic and social fabric," said Pierre Metras, a local butcher who led the neighbourhood campaign against the mosque.

The project was granted a permit in September 2009 but construction was suspended following complaints from local residents and businesses.

The 22-million-euro (\$31-million) project would have seen the Grand Mosque, boasting a minaret soaring 25-metres (82-feet) high and room for up to 7,000 worshippers, built in the city's northern Saint-Louis area.

Originally scheduled to open next year, it would have also hosted a Koranic school, library, restaurant and tea room.

Muslim leaders in the Mediterranean city had hailed the approval of the project as a key step in recognising the importance of Marseille's large Muslim community.

France's second city is home to an estimated 250,000 Muslims, many of whom flock to makeshift prayer houses in basements, rented rooms and dingy garages to worship.

The project's architect, Maxime Repaux, said after the court ruling: "I find it pretty amazing that they've cancelled our construction permit because of a parking lot when what we are trying to do is to bring Islam out of the garage and to stop prayers in the streets."

Home to Europe's biggest Muslim minority, estimated at between five and six million, France has for years been debating how far it is willing to go to accommodate Islam, now the country's second religion.

France in April became the first country in Europe to apply a ban on the wearing of full-face coverings, including the Islamic niqab and the burqa.

The decision triggered a political storm, with rights activists accusing President Nicolas Sarkozy of targeting of one of France's most vulnerable groups to win back votes from the resurgent far right.

A French court in September slapped the first fines on two women for violating the ban.

Two Opus Dei members tried in French court

Dorothee Moisan

AFP (22.09.2011) / HRWF (26.09.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Two members of the powerful Roman Catholic organisation Opus Dei went on trial in a Paris court on Thursday accused of subjecting a disciple to years of abusive working practices.

The case comes after a nine-year probe and centres on Catherine Tissier, who says that as a teenager she was forced to work 14-hour days, resulting in charges of inadequate remuneration and illegal employment.

Claire Bardon de Segonzac, the head of the Dosnon School attended by Tissier, and Agnes Duhaul, head of the Couvrelles International Meeting Centre connected to the college in northern France, are defendants at the trial.

The University and Technical Culture Association (ACUT), which runs the school, is also a defendant, but has said it has no more than a "cultural link" with the conservative Opus Dei group.

Tissier joined the school in 1985, aged only 14, and says she only later discovered it was run by associates of Opus Dei, which in Latin means "Work of God" and so is often referred to simply as "The Work".

She said she was forced to take vows and made to work as a domestic servant for virtually no pay. Opus Dei has insisted it was "not involved in the charges being brought" and had "nothing to be guilty about."

The accused are charged with having "obtained from young students of the Dosnon School or those in an obvious state of psychological fragility... unpaid services or those paid with no respect for the work done."

Tissier said the group compelled her to take vows of obedience, poverty and chastity and for the following 13 years gave her jobs with organisations that her lawyer Rodolphe Bosselut said were linked to Opus Dei.

She said she was made to work 14-hour days, seven days a week, cleaning and serving. Staff paid her a salary and then reclaimed money from her by making her sign blank cheques, supposedly to pay her room and board, she alleged.

The salary "went into my bank account, but left of its own accord," Tissier told the court. "I never saw the money. The management took the money back."

"After 15 years, I had 10 euros in my account," she said.

Defendant Duhail said: "She was paid, all the social security payments were made... She always did what she wanted."

"Everyone was paid and did what they wanted with the money. She's the only one saying these things," said Bardon de Segonzac.

"I'm the only one who dared lodge a complaint," said Tissier. "I know people who got out and who say exactly what I say. Some of them still tell me: 'I have nightmares at night. I'm afraid.'"

Staff accompanied her wherever she went, including on visits to the doctor, she said. On these occasions she said she was taken to see an Opus Dei doctor who prescribed tranquilisers that left her "senseless".

"I went to my parents' doctor urgently in January 2001," Tissier told the court. "He told me that I was heavily drugged, with anti-depressants."

Tissier weighed only 39 kilograms (86 pounds) when her parents rescued her from the group in 2001. Lawyers first took legal action that year alleging "mental manipulation" among other charges.

Other witnesses who appeared in court Thursday denounced the tight grip that the sect exerts over many of its members.

"The sectarian dimension is obvious to me," said Blandine Dumont who worked as a secretary at Donson's hotel management school.

"We give everything that we earn to God via Opus Dei," she testified, after recounting her work days that started at six in the morning and ran to ten at night, filled with nothing but prayer and work.

Some 15 other witnesses are expected to testify at the trial.

The organisation, which is branded a secretive sect by some critics, came to wide attention after being portrayed as a secretive and violent cult in the blockbuster novel and film "The Da Vinci Code".

Opus Dei strongly objected to its portrayal in the film.

The group -- which has a chiefly lay membership estimated at 80,000 -- was founded in 1928 by Jose Maria Escriva de Balaguer, who was canonised in 2002 with support from the late pope John Paul II.

Muslim women flout French ban of veil

By Elaine Ganley

AP (22.09.2011) / HRWF (26.09.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Paris, France - Kenza Drider's posters for the French presidential race are ready to go, months before the official campaign begins. There she is, the "freedom candidate," pictured standing in front of a line of police — a forbidden veil hiding her face.

Drider declared her longshot candidacy Thursday, the same day that a French court fined two women who refuse to remove their veils. All three are among a group of women mounting an attack on the law that has banned the garments from the streets of France since April, and prompted similar moves in other European countries.

They are bent on proving that the ban contravenes fundamental rights and that women who hide their faces stand for freedom, not submission.

"When a woman wants to maintain her freedom, she must be bold," Drider told The Associated Press in an interview.

President Nicolas Sarkozy strongly disagrees, and says the veil imprisons women. Polls show that most French people support the ban, which authorities estimate affects fewer than 2,000 women who wore the veil before the ban.

Drider declared her candidacy Thursday in Meaux, the city east of Paris run by top conservative lawmaker and Sarkozy ally Jean-Francois Cope, who championed the ban.

"I have the ambition today to serve all women who are the object of stigmatization or social, economic or political discrimination," she said. "It is important that we show that we are here, we are French citizens and that we, as well, can bring solutions to French citizens."

Two other women arrested wearing veils in Meaux — while trying to deliver a birthday cake to Cope — were fined in court Thursday, one euro120, the other euro80.

They want to push their case to the European Court of Human Rights.

"We cannot accept that women be punished because they are openly practicing their religious convictions. We are demanding the application of European rights," said one of those convicted, Hind Ahmas.

With Islam the second religion in France and numbers of faithful growing, there are worries that veiled Muslim women could compromise the nation's secular foundations and undermine gender equality and women's dignity. There are also concerns that practices like wearing full veils could open the door to a radical form of Islam. Lawmakers banned Muslim headscarves in classrooms in 2004.

Few Muslim women in France cover their faces. Most who veil themselves wear the "niqab," a filmy cloth attached to the headscarf that covers all but the eyes. The law also affects the burqa, with just a mesh covering over the eyes, worn largely in Afghanistan.

Belgium passed a similar face veil ban that took effect in July, and the Netherlands announced Friday it has drawn up legislation to outlaw Muslim face veils. A draft law has been approved in Italy.

In France, the veil ban was also seen as a political maneuver by the unpopular Sarkozy's conservative UMP party, which Cope chairs, to entice deeply conservative and far-right voters.

Flouting the French measure outlawing face veils in all public places can lead to a fine of euro150 and, in some cases, citizenship classes. However, thus far there have been few legal consequences.

According to the Interior Ministry, 146 women have been given citations by police but only a handful have reportedly been forced to take the next step — appear before a judge for a possible fine. The Justice Ministry says figures are not yet available.

"I tried to understand this law and what I understood is that this is a law which puts us under house arrest," Drider said, referring to women who choose to stay home rather than remove their face veils, or risk arrest.

What the law has done, she says, is give citizens the right to insult veiled women.

Drider and others say that many women who refuse to remove their veils become shut-ins rather than go outside and risk a citation, or insults. One woman in a long black robe was seen recently in a chic Paris neighborhood wearing a surgical mask on her face — one of several tricks developed to get around the ban.

Drider, 32, who has worn a face veil for 13 years, hasn't shirked from denouncing the ban in the past. She was the only veiled woman to testify before an information commission of lawmakers studying a potential ban before the law was passed.

With four children, Drider says she goes about the southern city of Avignon, where she lives, facing down insults but left alone by police.

Ahmas, 32, from Aulnay-Sous-Bois, a northeast Paris suburb, looked for trouble when she tried to deliver an almond cake to Cope, the mayor of Meaux, with another veiled woman. The gesture was not without a touch of humor: in French, "almond" sounds like "fine."

The women, while intent on showing the power behind the veil, have a male backer. Rachid Nekkaz, a wealthy businessman revolted by the street ban, has promised to pay fines for women sanctioned for breaking the law. With his association, Don't Touch My Constitution, he heads Drider's support committee for the presidency.

For Nekkaz, the Meaux case will be the first in France in which a conviction for veiled women could stick. He wants to see an appeal eventually go to the highest French court, then on to the European Court of Human Rights and calculates that this could happen in 2014.

Drider has obstacles to overcome, too, like getting 500 mayors to back her candidacy, a requirement for anyone running for the presidential elections in April and May. With more than 36,000 mayors in France, she thinks this is doable — despite her status as a lawbreaker.

Both women insist that neither Drider's candidacy for the presidential race nor the Meaux court case are a provocation because their aim is to set aright a measure they say has skewed French values and compromised women's rights.

"My candidacy is to say the real problem in France is not us ... The real problem in France is really women's freedom ... whatever their religion," she said. "So let's not focus on what I wear. Let's deal with the real problems. My candidacy is really for that, to say don't stop at what I wear but go much deeper."

Towards Jehovah's Witnesses chaplains in prison

The Paris administrative court of appeal has paved the way to such a development

HRWF (06.06.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - The Paris administrative court of appeal has summoned the penitentiary administration which refuses to accept chaplains of Jehovah's Witnesses to reexamine the requests of this religious community.

In three decisions released on 30 May 2011, the court laid the blame on the penitentiary administration which has refused to grant the status of prison chaplain to religious ministers of Jehovah's Witnesses. Three individual requests had been sent in 2008 to the inter-regional direction of the penitentiary services of Paris but had met each time with a refusal.

The administrative court had first condemned these refusals and asked the Chancellery to revise its position. The Ministry of Justice had appealed the judgment but the magistrates have now confirmed the decision taken in first instance and summoned the penitentiary administration to re-examine the requests within two months. A fine of 100 EUR per day of delay is provided by the court decision.

More than 30 complaints have been lodged all over the country. Courts have released a positive decision in a dozen cases but it is the first time that a court of appeal has released a final decision.

The Chancellery can still appeal the decision at the Council of State.
See press coverage in French at <http://www.droit-tj.fr/spip.php?page=suivi>

Prayer groups now under surveillance of MIVILUDES under the pretext of "risk of sectarian deviation"

By Willy Fautré

HRWF (13.05.2011) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - When no crime is committed by so-called sects or sectarian groups and no concrete case of sectarian deviations can be found, the notion of "risk of sectarian deviation" is very convenient for MIVILUDES and anti-sect organizations. This concept is an open door to unfounded suspicions, rumors and denouncements in total impunity. The persistent semantic deviation of the anti-sect terminology and discourse is becoming a source of serious concern from a human rights point of view. When and where will the intrusion of MIVILUDES into the private lives of French citizens stop? At the time of the Soviet Union, hundreds of believers were arrested and sent to jail for holding "illegal" religious meetings in private homes or detained in psychiatric hospitals because of their "delirious beliefs". China is still implementing such a policy towards non-registered house churches the members of which gather in private homes. Where is France going with its sect-hunting policy implemented by MIVILUDES and private anti-sect organizations almost fully funded with public money?

MIVILUDES on the frontline of the sect-hunt

These questions can legitimately be raised with the recent wave of articles devoted to Geneviève [Dupont de Ligonnès](#), the mother of the supposed assassin of his wife and their four children, in which Georges Fenech, the head of MIVILUDES, has been quoted by the French media as saying:

"We have been alerted about a 'closed' Catholic prayer group created in 1960 by his mother" (AFP, 10 May 201)

"We are not talking about a sect but about a closed prayer group, created by Geneviève Dupont de Ligonnès in 1960. (...) Everybody is free to create a prayer group. However, we are interested in such groups when we are told about risks of sectarian deviations inside, which seems to have been the case and probably still is the case today. (...) Xavier Dupont de Ligonnès was the son of Geneviève and has therefore been educated in such a context, I imagine. We notice that Xavier was still a child when his mother created her prayer group. He was certainly immersed in this very mystical atmosphere, undoubtedly very anxiogenous. (...) MIVILUDES has received alerts from people who belonged to this group but who are not part of it any more and who have disclosed a number of practices such as receiving messages from Jesus-Christ, prayers to the Virgin Mary and some sort of apocalyptic messages. In 1994, some members had held a meeting thinking that the apocalypse was coming soon. At another time, in 1995, we were told about young people opting out of school, others leaving their job and donations given to that woman that were not insignificant, several hundred Euros per month". (Le Monde, 10 May 2011).

The subliminal of Georges Fenech conveyed through the media is clear: Xavier Dupont de Ligonnès has become a murderer because he was indoctrinated when he was a defenseless child; a sectarian Catholic group is responsible for this family massacre, France's policy is justified and the recent draft resolution of members of the National Assembly asking to put in place a parliamentary inquiry commission about fundamentalist and sectarian deviation in private schools should be unreservedly supported.

At the same time, the prosecutor of Nantes, Xavier Ronsin, was saying to AFP press agency: "By now there is no evidence of recent or old indoctrination of Xavier Dupont de Ligonnès". On her side, Geneviève Dupont de Ligonnès tasked her lawyer to refute the accusation of sect affiliation. "Why should you not say she is a witch? She is just a believer and she told me it is thanks to her faith that she manages to go through these hard times," her counsel said.

Media headlines

Despite the statement of the prosecutor of Nantes, the media jumped onto this fabricated story and made their headlines of it: Xavier Dupont de Ligonnès; a killer under the influence of a sect ? - The mother of Xavier Dupont de Ligonnès had created a prayer group with risks of sectarian deviations - The mother of Xavier Dupont de Ligonnès had created some sort of sectarian prayer group, etc.

AFP also noted without mentioning its source that "Xavier Dupont de Ligonnès was in any case a frequent visitor of a fundamentalist Catholic website. In 2010, he was thinking about the sense of 'sacrifice'; he had recently been aggressive and had doubts about his faith." AFP also quoted UNADFI, an anti-sect organization over 90% the budget of which is coming from the French state, as saying that the beliefs of the group were based on a "delirious doctrine" but UNADFI is also interested in keeping moral panic to justify its existence, its activities and its claims for public funding.

Increasing gap between France's anti-sect policy and U.N. Special Rapporteur recommendations

In its report on freedom of religion or belief presented on 15 December 2010 at the General Assembly of the Human Rights Council (See <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G10/177/93/PDF/G1017793.pdf?OpenElement>), Heiner Bielefeldt, the successor of Asma Jahangir, said on the theme of freedom of religion or belief and school education:

"29. (...) in many countries members of religious or belief minorities experience a shocking degree of public resentment or even hatred which is often nourished by a paradoxical combination of fear and contempt. Even tiny groups are sometimes portrayed as "dangerous" because they are alleged to undermine the social cohesion of the nation, due to some mysteriously "infectious" effects attributed to them. Such allegations can escalate into fully fledged conspiracy theories fabricated by competing groups, the media or even State authorities. At the same time, members of religious or belief minorities are often exposed to public contempt based for instance on rumours that they allegedly lack any moral values. It is exactly this combination of demonizing conspiracy projections and public contempt that typically triggers violence either directed against members of minorities or occurring between different communities. Hence the eradication of stereotypes and prejudices that constitute the root causes of fear, resentment and hatred is the most important contribution to preventing violence and concomitant human rights abuses."

Draft resolution proposing the creation of a parliamentary inquiry commission on fundamentalist and sectarian practices in private schools (1)

By Willy Fautré

HRWF (13.05.2011) - On 3 May 2011, the Presidency of the National Assembly registered a draft resolution proposing the creation of a parliamentary inquiry commission on fundamentalist and sectarian practices in private schools (2) on the alleged ground that they are "above the laws of the Republic". The draft resolution targets alleged "fundamentalist deviations in private schools" whether they are Catholic, Protestant, Jewish or Muslim. Here is an excerpt from the draft resolution:

"Catholic fundamentalism first: When the TV program "The Infiltrated" (3) was broadcast on France 2 on 27 April 2010, the reporters highlighted very serious deviations of religious traditionalism (4) and untenable statements made by some students and teachers of a self-supporting private school which is now closed. This school was depending from the Institut du Bon Pasteur whose principal was Abbot Philippe Laguérie, former priest of the traditionalist Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet Church and then of the Saint-Eloi Church in Bordeaux.

The statements made by some students and revealed by this TV program were clearly racist and anti-Semitic. So were the statements of a history teacher who was proudly comparing the Waffen SS to an elite army and was glorifying Pétain (5). Worse, this TV program disclosed links - but it must be said that this was contested by the school - between this school and an extreme-right group, *Dies Irae*, which was gathering in adjacent buildings. Its leader, Fabrice Sorlin, is a member of the parish of the school established in a church which alas was granted to the Saint-Eloi association by the mayor

of Bordeaux in the aftermath of a decision of the municipal council which was declared illegal by the Council of State.

Protestant **fundamentalism**, like the one developed by the community Brothers of Plymouth de Chambon-sur-Lignon in Haute-Loire region. After public school this community forbids to its children to attend high school due to morality problems. They therefore continue their curriculum through distance learning and the intervention of an education centre in Tence, named "Les Cardamines". One can be excluded from this community because of behaviour incompatible with the teachings of morals, for example fornication, adultery, marriage "outside the community"! Are these facts true? If they are, what do the public authorities do, in particular the National Education Ministry?

Jewish fundamentalism in certain - certain only, not all of them - Lubavitch schools which use educational practices that are not only contrary to secularity but also play with the limits of republican legality to outrageously engage in brainwashing and formatting of consciences, not to say refusal of coeducation, prohibition of trousers for girls, and mandatory stockings even in summer! But mainly, half of the time being dedicated to religious subjects, what is the room then left to teach the programs? Are these facts true? If they are, what do the public authorities do, in particular the National Education Ministry?

Finally **Muslim fundamentalism**. These schools are the least numerous - there are only three of them in France - so theoretically easier to control: Al Kindi High School located in Décines Charpieu (in Lyon suburbs), "Education and Knowledge" Muslim High School of Vitry-sur-Seine and Averroès High School of Lille. Only this latter, created in 2003, has been financed by the State since 2008. It claims to be the Muslim emblem of private school. Some say it would be close to the UOIF (Union of the Islamic Organizations of France) and the Muslim Brothers, whose representative in Lille, Amar Lasfar, sparked it off. This latter denies it. But the school, in its official information leaflets, proudly introduces itself as follows: "*the characteristic of Averroès school is the values and behaviours inspired by Muslim Orthodoxy*". If it were confirmed that certain teachers teach themes well-known to Muslim fundamentalists on the purported debauchery of western societies towards relations outside marriage, homosexuality, etc., are these facts true? If they are, what do the public authorities do, in particular the National Education Ministry?"

U.N. Special Rapporteur Asma Jahangir's viewpoint on France's religious policy

In September 2005, U.N. Special Rapporteur Asma Jahangir conducted a fact-finding mission in France and wrote in her conclusions and recommendations in the section "The question of cult groups and certain new religious movements or communities of belief"

(See <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G06/117/19/PDF/G0611719.pdf?OpenElement>)

107. The Special Rapporteur understands the legitimate concerns regarding the victims of criminal acts that have been committed by certain religious groups or communities of belief. She considers that, in many cases, the Government of France, and its judicial apparatus, have adopted a responsible attitude and provided an appropriate response to the offences committed.

108. However, she is of the opinion that the policy and measures that have been adopted by the French authorities have provoked situations where the right to freedom of religion or belief of members of these groups has been unduly limited. Moreover, the public condemnation of some of these groups, as well as the stigmatization of their members, has led to certain forms of discrimination, in particular vis-à-vis their children.

109. The Special Rapporteur has observed that the government policy may have contributed to a climate of general suspicion and intolerance towards those communities on the list created by the National Assembly in 1996, of movements and groups classified as *sectes*. Moreover, the campaigns and other actions that have been initiated by associations composed, inter alia, of victims of criminal acts committed by these groups, have often been emotional.

112. The Special Rapporteur urges the Government to ensure that its mechanisms for dealing with these religious groups or communities of belief deliver a message based on tolerance, freedom of religion or belief and on the principle that no one can be judged for his actions other than through the appropriate judicial channels.

113. Moreover, she recommends that the Government monitor more closely preventive actions and campaigns that are conducted throughout the country by private initiatives or Government-sponsored organizations, in particular within the school system in order to avoid children of members of these groups being negatively affected.

114. She urges judicial and conflict resolution mechanisms to no longer refer to, or use, the list published by Parliament in 1996.

U.N. Special Rapporteur Heiner Bielefeldt's viewpoint on France's religious policy

In its report on freedom of religion or belief presented on 15 December 2010 at the General Assembly of the Human Rights Council (See <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G10/177/93/PDF/G1017793.pdf?OpenElement>), Heiner Bielefeldt, the successor of Asma Jahangir, said on the theme of freedom of religion or belief and school education:

"29. School education can and should contribute to the elimination of negative stereotypes which frequently poison the relationship between different communities and have particularly detrimental effects on minorities. This is also true with regard to religious or belief communities of different - theistic, non-theistic or atheistic - orientations. Indeed, in many countries members of religious or belief minorities experience a shocking degree of public resentment or even hatred which is often nourished by a paradoxical combination of fear and contempt. Even tiny groups are sometimes portrayed as "dangerous" because they are alleged to undermine the social cohesion of the nation, due to some mysteriously "infectious" effects attributed to them. Such allegations can escalate into fully fledged conspiracy theories fabricated by competing groups, the media or even State authorities. At the same time, members of religious or belief minorities are often exposed to public contempt based for instance on rumours that they allegedly lack any moral values. It is exactly this combination of demonizing conspiracy projections and public contempt that typically triggers violence either directed against members of minorities or occurring between different communities. Hence the eradication of stereotypes and prejudices that constitute the root causes of fear, resentment and hatred is the most important contribution to preventing violence and concomitant human rights abuses."

Human Rights Without Frontiers recommends to the French authorities and media

- to integrate the recommendations of UN Special Rapporteurs Asma Jahangir and Heiner Bielefeldt into their practices;
- to stop fanning suspicions, intolerance and social hostility towards certain religious groups and their members;
- to refrain from stigmatizing members of religious groups or communities as this has led to certain forms of discrimination, in particular vis-à-vis their children;

- to keep in mind that no one can be judged for his actions other than through the appropriate judicial channels;
- to reconsider their warning campaigns against certain groups that are conducted throughout the country by private initiatives or Government-sponsored organizations, in particular within the school system in order to avoid children of members of certain religious groups being negatively affected.

Footnotes by HRWF

- (1) The state financed private schools are called "écoles sous contrat" in French. Self-supporting private schools are called "écoles hors contrat".
- (2) In September 2009, 9,952,700 students were attending public schools (83.09%), 1,976,174 students were attending state-financed (almost exclusively Catholic) private schools (16.49%) and 49,962 students self-supporting private schools (0.42%). Homeschooling is also allowed.
- (3) The reporting methods used for "The Infiltrated" on other issues have been criticized by a number of journalists.
- (4) The so-called Catholic traditionalists belong to a schismatic movement of the Roman Catholic Church created in 1970 by Bishop-Archbishop Marcel Lefèbvre. He rejected Council Vatican II and created a seminary where he trained his own "traditionalist" priests. In 1976, he anointed 13 priests. He was excommunicated in 1988 when he consecrated 4 bishops without the approval of Rome. Among other things Mgr Lefèbvre was against religious freedom for all religions. When he died in 1991, his movement was represented in about 50 countries.
- (5) Marshal Pétain: French hero of WW I and head of the French state under the German occupation. He was held responsible for France's collaboration with Nazi Germany. In 1945, he was sentenced to life detention for high treason. He was then 89 years old. He died at the age of 95 years in prison. In fall 1944, an IFOP survey indicated that 58% of the French were not in favor of sentencing the "traitor" against 32% (and 10% without opinion). In April 1945, 28% were in favor of the death penalty and only 22% were still siding with him. When his public trial started in July 1945, only 15% were still on his side and 76% were in favor of a sentence (37% of them for death penalty).

A Raelian leader discriminated against wins his battle for justice

HRWF (11.05.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - After 6 years of repeated requests addressed to the Prefecture of the Moselle region and to HALDE (French governmental institution for the defence of human rights) and after a 15-day hunger strike, Kimbangu Piffer has finally managed to get back the authorization to have access to the nuclear plant of Cattenom that he had lost when it was discovered that he was a member of the Raelian Movement.

In its October 2009 opinion, HALDE had recalled to the Prefect of the Moselle region that his decision was a discrimination prohibited by articles 9 and 14 of the European Convention and did not respect the fundamental principle of freedom of conscience.

After years of having access to sensitive locations, Kimbangu Piffer was abruptly told six years ago that he could not work any more at the nuclear plant at Cattenom. He then asked the French authorities to explain why he was suddenly unwanted, but his question had always remained unanswered.

"This situation illustrates the dangerous lack of respect that members of religious

minorities face in France," said Brigitte Boisselier, Ph.D., spokesperson for the International Raelian Movement.

French police arrest burqa ban protesters

By Niki Cook

CNN (10.04.2011) / HRWF (12.04.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Paris - Police in Paris arrested dozens of people for trying to hold an unauthorized demonstration to protest a ban on the wearing of Islamic veils such as burqas, they said Sunday.

France's controversial ban on the burqa and niqab takes effect on Monday.

A total of 59 people showed up at the scene of the planned march, which did not have police approval, authorities said. All were detained for refusing to leave the scene on Saturday.

Five were detained overnight because they did not have proper identification, and two of them are still in custody, police said Sunday afternoon.

Two other people, including the Britain-based radical Muslim Anjem Choudhury, were arrested while traveling to the planned demonstration Saturday, police said Sunday.

The organizers were denied permission to march because they are known Islamic extremists who could have promoted racial hatred, because they have been arrested in the past, and because of the likelihood that the protest would provoke a counter-demonstration that could lead to violence, police said.

A silent protest march against the burqa ban is planned for Monday morning in Paris. That demonstration, which was organized independently of the unauthorized Saturday protest, has been approved.

French Prime Minister Francois Fillon last month defended the ban as being in keeping with national values.

"The French Republic lives in a bare-headed fashion," he said in an official government newspaper explaining the law.

The law imposes a fine of 150 euros (\$190). The person breaking the law can be asked to carry out public service duty as part of the punishment or as an alternative to the fine.

The law was passed in October but included a six-month period to inform people of the penalty before it went into effect.

Penalties for forcing a person to wear a burqa are part of the law, and they became effective immediately in October.

Forcing a woman to wear a niqab or a burqa is punishable by a year in prison and a 30,000 euro fine (about \$43,400). Forcing a minor to do the same thing is punishable by two years in prison and 60,000 euro.

The government has called this coercion "a new form of enslavement that the republic cannot accept on its soil."

The practice has sparked a debate over religious freedom.

The French Constitutional Council said the law did not impose disproportionate punishments or prevent the free exercise of religion in a place of worship, finding therefore that "the law conforms to the Constitution."

"Given the damage it produces on those rules which allow the life in community, ensure the dignity of the person and equality between sexes, this practice, even if it is voluntary, cannot be tolerated in any public place," the French government said when it sent the measure to parliament in May of last year.

Lawmakers have also cited security reasons for forbidding people from covering their faces in public.

French people backed the ban by a margin of more than four to one, the Pew Global Attitudes Project found in a survey last year.

Some 82 percent of people polled approved of a ban, while 17 percent disapproved. That was the widest support the Washington-based think tank found in any of the five countries it surveyed.

Clear majorities also backed burqa bans in Germany, Britain and Spain, while two out of three Americans opposed it, the survey found.

Amnesty International had repeatedly urged France not to impose the ban, saying it violates European human rights law.

The ban pertains to the burqa, a full-body covering that includes a mesh over the face, and the niqab, a full-face veil that leaves an opening only for the eyes.

The hijab, which covers the hair and neck but not the face, and the chador, which covers the body but not the face, apparently are not banned by the law.

"The ban does not target the wearing of a headscarf, head-gear, scarf or glasses, as long as the accessories do not prevent the person from being identified," the Interior Ministry said in a statement.

Banning the burqa: an assault on freedom

Unfortunately, both France and some of its critics seem driven by a desire to police people's thoughts

By Brendan O'Neill

spiked (11.04.2011) / HRWF (12.04.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - *On the day that France's ban on the burqa comes into force, spiked republishes a speech given by editor Brendan O'Neill at the House of Literature in Oslo in October last year.*

There is no question, in my mind, that tolerance is under threat today. This Enlightenment ideal - one of the most important, radical Enlightenment ideals - is being assaulted and undermined around Europe.

However, it is being undermined not only by governments and thinkers who want to ban the burqa, but also by some of those who defend women's right to wear the burqa. Tolerance is being denigrated first by those who refuse to tolerate the burqa - and second by those who defend 'burqa rights' in a very shallow, relativistic fashion and who clearly don't have the first clue what tolerance really means.

So tolerance is suffering a double-whammy attack. It is being explicitly attacked by the authoritarians who want to ban certain religious symbols, and it is being implicitly attacked by some of the liberal critics of those bans, who foolishly and dangerously think that tolerance is the same thing as recognition.

Let's take the first lobby first: the burqa-banners. The great irony of the French government's restrictions on the burqa in public places, and to a certain extent the Belgian government's restrictions, is that they have been presented as being in the tradition of the Enlightenment. This is about liberating women from oppression, they say, and therefore it is a good, Enlightened, Voltairish thing to do.

In fact, banning a religious garment is counter to the spirit of the Enlightenment. What these authoritarians forget is that the Enlightenment sprang from a defence of religious liberty. The Enlightenment has its origins, not in any attempt to censor certain minority religious symbols, but in a belief that minority religions, even ones we consider 'heretical', should be protected from state intervention, censorship and oppression.

So in calling for the state to restrict a certain form of religious expression, these pseudo-Enlightened censors are doing something that the original men of the Enlightenment would have considered pretty outrageous.

One of the most important early texts of the Enlightenment was *A Letter Concerning Toleration* by the English liberal philosopher John Locke, published in 1689. It is easy to forget how radical this letter was when it first appeared, following the Inquisition and much religious conflict. Locke had to go into hiding and then exile simply for calling for the following: 'the toleration of those that differ from others in matters of religion'.

Locke argued that the civil authorities should not 'prejudice another person in his civil enjoyments simply because he is of another church or religion'. He wasn't defending these faiths because he liked them - in fact he considered many of them erroneous. Rather he was defending their right to believe what they wanted to believe and to practise their faith because he felt that the authorities had no right to interfere in our internal lives, in matters of faith, belief and conscience.

The liberal tradition was built on this foundation stone laid by Locke and others, on this determination to expel the civil authorities from the realm of belief. Now, in the twenty-first century, 300 years later, some of the self-styled heirs of Lockean liberalism are explicitly inviting the state back into the realm of belief. They are turning the clock back three centuries by fundamentally blurring the Enlightenment distinction between those areas where the civil authorities have jurisdiction - our 'outward lives' relating to property, security and law - and those areas where the civil authorities should have no jurisdiction - our 'inward lives' of freedom of belief and expression.

And they are mad if they believe that banning the burqa or the niqab will liberate Muslim women. In fact, it will make life even harder for the tiny minority of women in Europe who wear these garments. A woman who truly believes that it is wrong to go outside without being covered up – and as Locke pointed out, you can't magically change people's beliefs through brute bans since 'no man can, if he would, conform his faith to the dictates of another' – will now potentially be imprisoned in her home. She will be less free.

The burqa and niqab are symbols of oppression rather than the causes of it. You cannot tackle oppression, you cannot challenge the undoubtedly inferior position of some poor Muslim women, simply by attacking its outward symbols. From a principled point of view, banning religious symbols is illiberal and un-Enlightened – and from a pragmatic point of view, it is shallow and counterproductive.

However, there are some big problems on the other side of this debate, too, amongst those who defend the right of women to wear the niqab or burqa.

Too many of these people are also denigrating tolerance, by confusing it with the therapeutic category of recognition. For them, it is not enough to tolerate something – apparently we must also respect it, recognise its validity, even celebrate its contribution to making Europe a varied, multi-faceted, properly multicultural place. Some even say that Muslim veils are now as much 'part of the European fabric' as clogs or Italian coffee or Belgian beer.

This point is made very starkly by Tariq Ramadan, professor of contemporary Islamic studies at Oxford University. In his new book, *Quest for Meaning*, he says that tolerance is too passive a virtue – we have to replace it with the more active virtue of respect. He says that tolerance 'reduces the Other to a mere presence', whereas respect 'opens us up to the Other's complexities'.

This, too, is a worrying development – because the Enlightenment ideal of tolerance does *not* mean having to respect something. You can tolerate something and hate it; you can tolerate something and also ruthlessly criticise it. Tolerance is not about suspending judgement or putting one's critical faculties to one side in order to avoid offending 'Others'. As Locke said, it is wrong to try to force or censure people into changing their beliefs, but 'in teaching, instructing and redressing the erroneous by reason, [we] do what becomes any good man to do'.

Tolerance involves judgement and criticism and the free flow of ideas and debate. For the early Enlightenment thinkers, the real, true, explosive virtue of tolerance lay in the toleration of the things we hate. And I hate the burqa. It is deeply objectionable. It restricts women's vision, freedom of movement and ability to engage with their fellow citizens. I have no respect for it whatsoever, far less any desire to celebrate it as 'equally valid'. But I tolerate it, as Europe must, because we should recognise that people's freedom of conscience is so important that it overrides our personal objections to what they believe and how they express their beliefs.

Today, we have the emergence of a deeply relativistic tolerance industry. In the political sphere, and in education in particular, tolerance is promoted as a form of non-criticism, non-judgement. As Robert Weissberg argues in his book *Pernicious Tolerance*, 'an incredibly worthy idea – tolerance as enduring the odious – is being replaced with a fantasy: tolerance as a blank-cheque appreciation of diversity'. This so-called tolerance is actually about policing hate, policing our emotions and attitudes towards religion. Britain and other Western European countries have passed laws outlawing 'religious hatred' in the name of promoting tolerance.

So in a very powerful irony, the promoters of tolerance also invite the state into the realm of belief, the realm of thought. Like the burqa-banners, they too want the civil authorities to poke their noses into our inward lives. Both the banners and defenders of the burqa believe the state has the right to tell us what we can believe and how we should express those beliefs: the banners attack freedom of religion and the defenders attack our freedom to hate religion.

This is the crisis of tolerance today – it is being undermined both by religious censors disguised as men of the Enlightenment, and by the intolerant policers of hate disguised as the promoters of tolerance. This has got to stop. Tolerance means allowing people to believe what they want to believe, and allowing everyone else to criticise and even mock them for it. It might not be pretty, but who said freedom would always be pretty?

Brendan O’Neill is editor of *spiked*. The above is an edited version of a speech he gave at a Battle of Ideas/British Council satellite debate at the House of Literature in Oslo on 14 October 2010.

Islam debate sparks controversy

BBC (05.04.2011) / HRWF (07.04.2011) – <http://www.hrwf.org> - French President Nicolas Sarkozy's party, the UMP, has hosted a controversial debate on the practice of Islam in secular France.

The debate provoked protests from Islamic and other religious groups, and even from some members of the governing party itself.

Critics have accused the party of pandering to a resurgent far right.

The debate was held a week before a law banning the Islamic full-face veil in public comes into force.

With Muslim religious leaders boycotting the event, only politicians or representatives of other faiths took part in the three-hour, round-table discussion at a Paris hotel.

The BBC's Hugh Schofield in Paris says the political atmosphere in France in recent days has been poisonous, with accusations flying between left and right.

According to government estimates, France has as many as six million Muslims, or just under 10% of the population, making it the biggest Muslim minority in western Europe.

French people 'challenged'

The UMP argued that it would be irresponsible not to debate the great changes posed to French society by its growing numbers of Muslims.

It outlined 26 ideas aimed at underpinning the country's secular character, which was enshrined in a law of 1905.

The law poses modern-day quandaries about issues such as halal food being served in schools and Muslims praying in the street when mosques are too crowded.

Proposals discussed on Tuesday included

banning the wearing of religious symbols such as Muslim headscarves or prominent Christian crosses by day care personnel

preventing Muslim mothers from wearing headscarves when accompanying children on school field trips

preventing parents from withdrawing their children from mandatory subjects including physical education and biology.

Launching the debate entitled simply "Secularity" before 200 guests and scores of journalists, UMP leader Jean-Francois Cope defended the idea of holding it at all.

Accusing the opposition Socialists of being in denial and the National Front of demagoguery, he called for "a third way, that of responsibility".

"Many French people have the feeling that the republican pact to which they are attached is being challenged by globalisation and the failures of integration," he said.

'Importune'

However, one of Mr Cope's most senior UMP colleagues, Prime Minister Francois Fillon, declined to take part in the debate, warning that it risked "stigmatising Muslims".

Gilles Bernheim, France's chief rabbi, said the debate was "importune" but he was taking part nonetheless.

"We did not ask for this debate but there was no question for us of boycotting it and stigmatising a political party, even if it is a ruling party," he told reporters after arriving at the hotel.

Salim Himidi, a former foreign minister of the largely Muslim Comoros Islands, said Islam's relations with the secular state was "an important subject" that had to be discussed.

"I think France has a mission that goes beyond its geographical limits," he added.

Condemning the debate, Hassan Ben M'Barek of the pressure group Banlieues Respect, said it was aimed only at "keeping the UMP in the media in the year before the [next presidential] election".

France's Sarkozy faces rifts on Islam debate

By Robert Marquand

Christian Science Monitor (01.04.2011) / HRWF (05.04.2011) – <http://www.hrwf.org> - Paris, France - French President Nicolas Sarkozy, an early and strong voice for intervention in Libya, is striding tall as a world leader.

But at home his position is less commanding as he faces open dissent in his party over the merits of holding an April 5 debate on secularism and Islam in this nation that strictly prohibits religious talk or religious symbols in state affairs.

The debate follows speeches elsewhere in Europe on the "failure" of multiculturalism by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, British Prime Minister David Cameron, as well as President Sarkozy – speeches specifically aimed at Muslim integration.

But now the French president's political allies, among others, are shaking their heads over the April 5 event. Prime Minister François Fillon says he will not participate. An open letter this week from 12 leaders of France's main religious groups called the event mistimed, confusing, and bound to "stigmatize the nation's Muslim community." They questioned the appropriateness of a political party using the state apparatus to hold a debate on religious identity.

Sarkozy insists on forging ahead, though his United Popular Movement (UMP) has not yet announced specifics for the debate.

Like his counterparts elsewhere in Europe, Sarkozy is picking up on mainstream concern about a growing Muslim presence. But he is more precisely concerned with the growing popularity of far-right leader Marine Le Pen, analysts say. Ms. Le Pen hit the airwaves in December with high-voltage criticism of Muslims who, when their mosques spill over on Fridays, "occupy public space" in praying on the street. She compared it to the Nazi occupation.

A likely challenger to Sarkozy in the 2012 presidential election, Le Pen recently rebranded Europe's leading far-right party, the National Front, founded by her father, making it less hostile toward Jews and gays and more focused on Muslims and immigrants. Her National Front routed the UMP in local elections March 27.

Sarkozy faces internal dissent

That outcome, along with the failure of a Sarkozy-led national discussion in 2009 on "French identity," widely seen as code for a discussion about Islam, has led many in Sarkozy's party to say the debate idea either isn't proper or isn't working politically.

This moment pits two wings of the Palace against each other. One side is championed by the party Secretary General Jean-François Copé, a rising figure who engineered France's ban on publicly wearing the Muslim niqab, or full-face coverings. He argues for a fight on Le Pen's far-right ground to show voters the president is listening.

Another wing, which includes the prime minister, says the French center-right must stick to its own mainstream values and not tread the extremes. "We should put an end to these debates," said party stalwart François Baroin, who also happens to be the government spokesman.

On March 11, Sarkozy sacked the Palace "diversity adviser" for criticizing the debate, but the dissension has now gone past that kind of reprimand.

For now, Sarkozy is listening to Mr. Copé. As the debate over the debate began to melt the UMP's reactor core, Copé published a letter "to a Muslim friend" (not an actual person), calling for Muslims to rally with Sarkozy's UMP against Le Pen's National Front.

"You are always the first one to tell me: the practice of Islam in a secular republic cannot condone the burqa, nor the prayers in the street, nor the rejection of gender equality,"

he wrote, continuing: "The National Front and the Islamists relish our divisions. They arouse them because they live off them. With this letter, I wish to tell you that we can stop them."

Debating the debate

Meanwhile, the actual debate on secularism and Islam almost seems an afterthought. Essentially it hinges on the nation's famed laïcité, or laws forbidding religious expression in public life, that date to a 1905 decree designed to limit the influence of the Roman Catholic Church but that applies to all faiths.

The UMP debate would examine whether the state should help fund mosques or play a role in the training and certification of imams, for example, on the argument that the religious demography of France, which today has some 6 million Muslims, is more diverse than a century ago.

Yet it is the debate about the debate that occupies the public bandwidth.

"The president is hunting on the extreme right margins," says Pierre Haski, editor of Rue 89, an online daily and weekly magazine. "The debate over Islam is not interesting. It is a gimmick to show to National Front voters they can vote UMP."

Jehovah's Witnesses to have chaplains in prisons

AFP (28.02.2011) / HRWF (07.03.2011) – <http://www.hrwf.org> - On 28 February 2011, the administrative court of Lille ruled against the penitentiary administration which up to now had refused to authorize chaplains to Jehovah's Witnesses to visit detainees who has requested such a visit.

In April 2008, The interregional direction of the penitentiary services (DISP) of Lille rejected the requests of Jehovah's Witnesses religious ministers to recognize their chaplains for the detention centres of Bapaume (Pas-de-Calais), Rouen (Seine-Maritime) and Laon (Aisne).

The penitentiary administration justified its refusal by the fact that too few Jehovah's Witnesses were in prison and would need a chaplain.

The administrative court ruled that this argument was not sufficient to reject such a request all the more so since the chaplains would be volunteers and annulled the controversial decision.

Similar decisions were taken by other jurisdictions in France, notably by the administrative court of Paris in 2010.

In 2010, the HALDE, the High Authority of Fight Against Discrimination and for Equality had also ruled in favor of a prisoner in Rouen, considering that the penitentiary administration violated his "right to freedom of conscience and opinion." It also asked the Minister of Justice "to allow religious practices on the basis of objective criteria and to implement them effectively in penitentiary institutions."

There are about 150,000 Witnesses in France. Many of their local branches are recognized as "association culturelle", legal entity granted to religious associations.

Deviations of MIVILUDES: raid of 70 policemen on a biodynamism centre

One more case of the misuse of the law on the abuse of weakness

HRWF (02.03.2011) – <http://www.hrwf.org> - On 22 February 2011, on the initiative of MIVILUDES (Inter-Ministerial Mission Monitoring and Fighting against Sectarian Deviations), 70 policemen assisted by the CAIMADES (department of six persons inside the police specialized in sectarian deviations) invested the "Centre for teaching biodynamism" in Nyons (Drôme region) and interrupted a training program for people lacking self-confidence. Four persons were put in custody, including the director of the Centre, a former 53-year old physiotherapist. The Centre had been created in 2007. They were suspected of "potentially sectarian activity" and of "overcharging training sessions" (500 EUR per week).

The raid was triggered by a local anti-sect movement.

While the neighbors considered the people running the Center "*quiet and discreet*", the secretary general of MIVILUDES, Hervé Mashi declared that according to information collected in 2009, the founder of the Center *seemed* to exert mental control on the trainees and to abuse their weakness.

Similar raids orchestrated by MIVILUDES and anti-sect movements are not new. In October 2009, the "Moulin des Vallées", a peaceful ecumenical monastery in Ile-et-Vilaine, was also targeted and in January 2010, the Centre "Terre du Ciel" (Heaven's Earth) in Chardenous (Saône-et-Loire) was searched by MIVILUDES' troops. No "victims" of such groups could ever be identified and no evidence of violation of the law on the abuse of weakness could be produced.

Full-face veils law to enter effect

Veils that cover the face to be illegal from next month

Guardian (03.03.2011) / HRWF (07.03.2011) – <http://www.hrwf.org> - From Saudi tourists window-shopping on the Champs-Élysées to Muslim women in a departure lounge at Charles de Gaulle airport or the few young French converts on suburban estates, any woman who steps outside in France wearing a veil that covers her face will be breaking the law from next month.

France's bitterly divisive debate on Muslim women's clothing took a new turn when the legal details of the controversial "burqa ban" were published in a decree by the prime minister. From 11 April women will be banned from wearing the niqab – full-face Muslim veil – in any public place, including while walking down the street, taking a bus, at a bank, library or shop, or in a cinema or theatre. It will be illegal for a woman in niqab to visit the Louvre, or any other museum, take a train, visit a hospital or collect her child from school.

Face veils will be outlawed virtually anywhere outside women's own homes, except when they are worshipping in a religious place or travelling as a passenger in a private car, although traffic police may stop them if they think they do not have a clear "field of vision" while driving. Women wearing niqab will be fined €150 (about £130) and be given

a citizenship class to remind them of the republican values of secular France and gender equality. Any third party found to have coerced a woman into wearing the face covering, for example a husband or family member, risks a €30,000 fine and a year in prison.

The niqab ban, proposed by a communist MP but later championed by Nicolas Sarkozy and his rightwing ruling UMP party, has reopened the long-running debate over how the country with Europe's biggest Muslim community integrates Islam into its secular republic.

The timing of the new law risks plunging France even further into an identity crisis. Sarkozy, desperate to secure the far-right electorate in next year's presidential election, is under fire for deliberately stigmatising France's Muslim population to win votes. He has ordered a nationwide debate on Islam's place in secular France, briefing journalists he wants no halal food options in school canteens, no prayers outside and no minarets. He was defiant on Thursday, giving a speech lauding the "Christian heritage of France".

Sarkozy's move comes as Marine Le Pen, the new leader of the Front National, has seen her party's popularity soar to unprecedented levels since she compared Muslims praying in the streets outside overcrowded mosques to the Nazi occupation of France. She also criticised halal-only fast food restaurants.

One indication of the mood of unease in France is local authorities taking steps to ban proposed "pork and wine aperitifs" by rightwingers deliberately staged near Muslim places of worship, including a "rosé wine and porchetta" evening to be held near a Muslim place of prayer in Nice on Friday night.

The prime minister, François Fillon, this week distanced himself from Sarkozy's debate on Islam and said he was opposed to the "stigmatisation of Muslims". To get around accusations that the niqab ban unfairly prejudices French Muslims, his office has been tying itself in semantic knots over the law.

It is now officially called the bill against "covering one's face in public places", which Fillon deems an issue of public order and gender equality, not secularism. This means wearing any face covering, including balaclavas, hoodies or masks, is against the new law. So the state has had to seek special exemptions for motorcycle helmets or sports equipment such as fencing masks. There are also exemptions for people appearing in parades, celebrations or places of worship. After a teacher was convicted for trying to rip a face veil from an Emirati tourist in a shop, the law states public officials cannot force women to remove their niqabs in the street but must instead call the police or gendarmes.

Fillon argued that face coverings put those who wear them "in a situation of exclusion and inferiority incompatible with the principles of liberty, equality and human dignity affirmed by the French republic."

But the immigration historian Patrick Weil has warned that the law is open to challenge from the European court of human rights. He said the battle to stop women wearing niqab did not justify that "a woman who believes that her God orders her to wear it should be stopped from going out to buy food to feed herself, or from going to see a doctor".

A tiny minority of women in France wear full niqab, far fewer than in the UK: Muslim groups estimate only a few hundred out of France's more than 5 million Muslim population.

In 2004, after another heated national debate, France banned headscarves and all conspicuous religious symbols from state schools. But since the niqab ban was voted in

by parliament, standard headscarves have also become a bone of contention in high-profile cases.

A worker in a private creche went to court and lost after she claimed she was fired for refusing to take off her headscarf. The education minister insisted that mothers in headscarves should not be allowed to accompany children on school outings. One mother banned from escorting her son's primary school class for wearing a simple head-covering said: "I'm French, not a fanatic, I just want to be able to practise my religion without being ostracised."

Strasbourg: Two new mosques and a new Orthodox church

AFP (17.01.2011) / HRWF (10.02.2011) - www.hrwf.org - Strasbourg city council unanimously approved today the establishment of an Orthodox church and two nearby mosques, including one with a minaret, explained vice mayor in charge of religious affairs Oliver Bitz (PS).

The mosque with a minaret would be constructed in the Hautepierre neighborhood, to accommodate about 600 to 800 faithful who currently gather in a disused supermarket. A smaller mosque is also to be built in Robertsau.

The Orthodox Church, a large project estimated around ten million Euro, should be built in the EU institution quarter. An area will be made available to organizations under emphyteutic lease, which can give the usufruct of a property for a very long time. The mayor also will subsidize the construction work of the two mosques up to 10%.

This support from the municipality to building places of worship is seen in the particular context of the Alsace-Moselle legislation, which recognizes and organizes the Catholic, Protestant and Jewish religious groups, said Bitz.

"We also apply the scheme to religious groups who are not historically part of the legislation. There is need to reconcile the legislation and the principle of equality," he said. Such a decision had not been passed since the defeat of the left in the 2001 municipal elections, "while the need was huge," said Bitz. About 10% of the population is Muslim in Strasbourg, he said.

He praised the "responsibility of the opposition", which approved the text, while noting that "all projects (for places of worship) had previously been blocked by the prior city government," directed by Fabienne Keller (UMP).

In a statement, the Grand Mosque of Strasbourg thanked the Mayor of Strasbourg Roland Ries (PS) for his "courageous policy to treat Islam with fairness". The Association of Muslim worship in Alsace has welcomed the end of the "cellar Islam" in Strasbourg.
