



FRENCH GOVT. BANS RELIGIOUS CLOTHING IN SCHOOLS

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In a move that has sparked protest across France, the French government last week passed a law banning public school students from wearing Jewish skullcaps, large Christian crosses, Sikh turbans and, most controversially, Muslim head scarves.

While the clothing restrictions in American public schools usually focus on interpretations of style and fashion -- blue hair, midriff tops, gang colors -- the focus in France is religion.

The 276-20 vote in the French Senate forbids religious apparel and signs that “conspicuously show” a student’s religious affiliation. The law would not apply in private schools or in French schools in other countries.

Expected to take effect in September, the law must now go to French President Jacques Chirac, who has 15 days to sign it into law.

The conservative president is a strong supporter of the law, which he has said is needed to protect the French principal of secularism -- the idea that religion should be excluded from civil affairs or public education.

"To do nothing would be irresponsible. It would be a fault," Chirac told a closed-door Cabinet meeting last month.

Fears of Islamic extremism

France is mostly Roman Catholic but has a growing Muslim population of 5 million, which is the largest Muslim population in Western Europe.

Officials there fear that the Muslim community's demand that girls be allowed to wear head scarves in schools is the first of many extremist demands -- from separate swimming areas to segregated male and female classrooms. They want to stop what they see as a growing Muslim fundamentalism.

“We must not consider that this situation is minor. Our vision of secularism is not against religion,” said Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin. “Everyone has the right to express his faith, on condition that inside the schools of the republic, he respects the laws of the republic.”

Many in France believe that immigrants should assimilate and not try to separate into religious and ethnic groups.

"Some people have to realize that they're in France and not in Mecca. And I tell you something, that kind of people only respect people who are firm," said Jacques Myard, a National Assembly member of Chirac's governing party.

Critics of the law

The majority of the French public supports the measure, but it has enraged Muslims across the country, some who say the scarf is a religious obligation and others who deny that girls are forced to wear them.

"Nobody wants to hear what Muslim women are actually saying – I think they wear the headscarf by choice," Sylvie Taleb, the director of the first Muslim private school in mainland France told the BBC.

Critics also fear that this ban will cause Muslim girls to transfer to Muslim schools or drop out of school altogether. They believe it will actually push students closer to radical Islam, the very aim the law is designed to avoid.

"Politicians who pushed for this law have laid time bombs that will explode when we least expect it," Laurent Levy, whose two teenage daughters were expelled for wearing headscarves to school and now are home schooled, told the Toronto Star.

"When they went to a public school, they had friends of all ethnic origins and all religions — that's what national unity is all about," says Levy. "Today, they exclusively meet with friends who come to visit at home, and the large majority of those are practicing Muslims.

"In other words, they're being forced into a ghetto."

Even some high-ranking French ministers, such as Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin and Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, have said that the law might inflame passions among Muslims in France and around the world.

The ban was mentioned last month in an audiotape from Ayman Zawahiri, a top leader in the al-Qaida terrorist network. He called it "another example of the Crusader's malice, which Westerners have against Muslims."

By Annie Schleicher, NewsHour Extra

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