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# 'Burqa ban' poorly veils Sarkozy's failed efforts



As the French President Nicolas Sarkozy addressed allegations this week that France's richest woman, Liliane Bettencourt, may have funded his election campaign, the country's parliamentarians were debating the dressing habits of some of its women, including its poorest.

The National Assembly is set to pass a so-called "burqa ban", preventing women from wearing full Islamic veils in public. If rubber-stamped by the Senate in September, it is expected to affect around 2,000 Muslim women, largely socially disadvantaged ones living on out-of-town housing estates.

The president's impassioned TV plea was, meanwhile, about "L'Affaire Bettencourt" – a sleazy case exposing corruption at the very heart of government. Mr Sarkozy and senior ministers are accused of accepting "manila envelopes stuffed with cash" from Mrs Bettencourt, the multi-billionaire major shareholder in the cosmetics giant L'Oréal. In turn, they are said to have "assisted" the 87-year-old heiress in avoiding paying tax on her vast fortune – allegations that they all strenuously deny.

While Mr Sarkozy's ponderous, metaphor-filled defence will undoubtedly keep him in power (as an incumbent president, he cannot be formally charged, and even if he could be, he would point to the fact that almost all of his predecessors periodically got away with "accounting difficulties"), its juxtaposition with proceedings across the Seine in parliament's lower house cannot be ignored.

In contrast to the shady, unconvincing allusions being applied to "L'Affaire Bettencourt", the language being used in the "burqa ban" debate has been viciously sharp.

Mr Sarkozy and his lieutenants have made it absolutely clear

that they detest the full Islamic veil. The President has called it a "sign of enslavement and debasement" that has "no part to play in the life of the Republic". His prime minister, François Fillon, accused wearers of "hijacking Islam" and displaying a "dark sectarian image", while the immigration minister Eric Besson called it a "walking coffin". More shocking still were the words of a backbench member of parliament from the ruling Union for a Popular Movement Party, who asked to remain anonymous as he called the veil "a muzzle".

Aisha, a highly-educated 28-year-old woman I met in the Paris suburb of the Seine-Saint-Denis earlier this week, was one of many who recoiled at the vitriol comparing her to some kind of dangerous animal. She has been wearing a niqab, the Islamic veil which conceals a woman's face, for most of her adult life and said: "This is the language of thugs who just want to victimise people they don't like. It is disgusting language, and says everything about the debate surrounding the burqa ban."

Women like Aisha concede that the niqab and the burqa (the less obviously Islamic cloak which covers the entire body and is most common in countries like Afghanistan) may trouble those who believe in the secular nature of the French Republic. Religious symbols, including Islamic headscarves, have been banned in French schools since 2004, and there are also fears that veils may be used by men to oppress women.

However, they also rightly believe that there are good reasons for leaving the veils alone, and that these reasons have widespread judicial support. The Council of State, France's highest court, has already indicated that a ban may be unconstitutional because it prevents freedom of

expression. The European Court of Human Rights is also likely to have a say about what amounts to a ban on what clothes people can wear while taking part in activities that do not cause any harm to any other people whatsoever.

While the draft of the bill suggests a year-long prison sentence and €30,000 fine for men who force their women to wear a burqa, there are easily enough current laws to stop this from happening. The truth is that very few, if any, French women are worried about this type of oppression, and even if they were, they could simply go to the police and press criminal charges.

Bearing all this in mind, it soon becomes clear that the real aim of the "burqa ban" is to anchor the stuttering "national identity" debate that Mr Sarkozy started a year ago. Ostensibly aimed at reviving Gallic patriotism by getting people to talk about what makes them feel good about being French, it has backfired horribly. Those who took part in discussions on the internet forums chose – like Mr Sarkozy – to concentrate on the negative.

As Mr Sarkozy made an all-out attempt to win supporters of the National Front, the overtly racist party that views the very presence of some five million Muslims in France as the greatest of all threats to "national identity", he saw the burqa ban as a perfect way of galvanising such support. The "dark" image of the Islamic veil fits in perfectly with all the negative clichés surrounding Islam in western Europe, including immigrant youths rioting on the kind of council estates where veil wearers invariably live.

There's also little doubt that the supremely image-conscious Mr Sarkozy is trying to use a French burqa ban to curry favour with other countries, and so raise his profile at home. Belgium and Spain are both well on their way to introducing similar legislation, while countries like Britain have also heard calls for a ban – not just from overtly right-wing parties like the UK Independence Party but also from backbenchers from the ruling Conservative Party.

While there may be sensible and honestly held reasons for France to introduce a burqa ban (ones which are supported by a good number of Muslims, as well as many others), the way in which the debate has been conducted is nothing short of despicable.



## Memorial for slain Egyptian woman vandalised

BERLIN (Reuters) - A memorial for an Egyptian woman who was murdered inside a German court last year has been vandalised just weeks after being unveiled, police in the eastern city of Dresden said on Friday.

Marwa El-Sherbiny, the mother of a three-year-old and pregnant with her second child, was stabbed 18 times last July by a man she was testifying against during an appeal hearing.

Three of the knife-shaped columns that make up the memorial for the 31-year-old

Egyptian woman were knocked over.

Organisers of the memorial, Buerger Courage, plans to put up 18 columns in Dresden to symbolise the number of stab wounds.

The July 1, 2009 courtroom killing sparked anger in several Islamic countries, where some accused Germany of tolerating xenophobia and anti-Islamic views. The German killer, a man of Russian origin, was convicted and given a life sentence.

Sherbiny was stabbed when

the man was appealing a conviction for insulting her by calling her an "Islamist," "terrorist" and "slut" when she asked him to make room for her son to play on swings in a playground.

Germany has the second-largest Muslim population in western Europe after France. Some groups in Germany said after the murder Islamophobia was rife and criticised the German government for taking several days to condemn the murder.

## Indonesian Muslims praying in the wrong direction



JAKARTA (Reuters) – Indonesia's Muslims learned on Friday they have been praying in the wrong direction, after the country's highest Islamic authority said its directive on the direction of Mecca actually had people facing Africa.

Muslims are supposed to face the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia during prayer and the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) issued an edict in March stipulating westward was the correct direction from the world's most populous Muslim

country. "But it has been decided that actually the mosques are facing Somalia or Kenya, so we are now suggesting people shift the direction slightly to the north-west," the head of the MUI, Cholil Ridwan, told Reuters. "There's no need to knock down mosques, just shift your direction slightly during prayer."

Ridwan said Muslims need not fear that their prayers have been wasted because they were facing the wrong way.

"Their prayers will still be

heard by Allah," he said. Said Agil Siradj, head of Indonesia's largest Muslim organization Nahdlatul Ulama, told English language newspaper the Jakarta Globe that the confusion showed the MUI issued edicts too fast and that this was a lesson for them.

The MUI has, in the past, issued controversial edicts banning Muslims from chanting during yoga, and from smoking.

Indonesia is a majority Muslim but officially secular country.