Securitization of Islam and Religious Freedom

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Six countries in Europe have now passed nationwide or partial bans on face-veils, and others have legislation pending for additional bans. Speaking critically of either the bans or the Muslim practice of veiling engenders a firestorm of debate, as former Mayor of London and Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Boris Johnson did with an article in the Telegraph denouncing the ban in Denmark, while also bluntly criticizing in demeaning fashion the practice of covering the face.

The response to the controversy has largely focused on questions of free speech, with the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) labeling the remarks as "inflammatory and divisive" but not within its jurisdiction to prosecute.

Yet, what of the more fundamental question about the public expression of religious belief? Is it appropriate, as the European Court of Human Rights said in its 2014 ruling in S.A.S vs. France, that veiling must be restricted in favor of the principle of "living together" and promoting "tolerance and broadmindedness without which there is no democratic society."

What are the implications of religious freedom for protecting the right to public expressions of faith, even those expressions which may seem to resist cultural assimilation?

To see all posts in this series visit: Debating Burqa Bans

At first glance, the ban of the burqa across Europe seems a generalization of secular impingements on religious practices, in the same vein as the French ban of the veil in 2004. But how do we explain that countries like Denmark and the Netherlands have recently adopted burqa bans but do not prohibit the veil? It is because European countries are sharing a particular political situation that I have called the securitization of Islam in the post 9/11 context. This can help illuminate the meaning of this wave of burqa bans.

Securitization usually refers to exceptional political acts like increased military presence or police controls, taken by governments, in violation of the rule of law, as a way to preserve the security of citizens against attacks or destruction. I have argued that beyond the visibility of the exceptional measures, securitization influences administrative routine and regular legislation and therefore negatively affects the exercise of religious freedom (see Cesari: 2013).
When Muslims assert their religious affiliation through dress code and engagement in public religious activities, they become politically suspect. In fact, they are perceived not as believers but as promoters of a global ideology which from Europe to Iraq is seen as a threat to European nations. As a consequence, security concerns blur the line between international and domestic policies, since regular policy-making—from education to economic integration—are increasingly interpreted through the lens of the War on Terror. The burqa bans are therefore part of a shift in policies motivated by security concerns, as the examples below on immigration and naturalization procedures illustrate.

Even before 9/11, measures have been taken by all European countries to restrict immigration flows by raising the requirements newcomers must meet. Since 9/11, standard civic integration tests have been modified to include cultural and religious questions to assess the ability of Muslim immigrants to accept liberal secular values. For example, in the Netherlands in 2006, candidates for emigration had to pass at the Dutch embassy in their country of origin, a “civic integration test abroad” (inburgeringsexamen buitenland). In itself, the test abroad is atypical since it aims at limiting immigration at the source, i.e. in the sending countries, in contrast to standard tests performed in the receiving country, not to mention that these tests abroad were implemented in priority in Muslim countries. As part of the test materials, applicants had to watch a video entitled, “Coming to the Netherlands,” which included images of gay men kissing and topless women lying on the beach. Such a discriminatory procedure however raised a lot of protests and was later removed, although the test abroad in the countries of origin has been maintained. The wave of Islamist terrorist attacks in Paris, Manchester, and London in the last couple of years has cemented the idea that conservative practices of Islam (especially about gender segregation and sexual minorities) are a sign of radical ideology, hence leading to the 2018 ban (which was in the work for some years before that date).

In France, while the 2004 ban of religious signs in public schools was motivated by laïcité (French version of secularism), the burqa ban is in fact the result of growing security concerns. A case in point was the 2016 attempt on Nice beaches to ban the burkini, with officials stating that “wearing [an] outfit ostentatiously showing religious beliefs may be interpreted as affiliation with religious fundamentalism”, especially after the terrorist attack on Bastille Day of that year which killed at least 86 people. The ban in Nice was subsequently overturned by French judges, who ruled that “the emotion and concerns arising from terrorist attacks, including those committed in Nice on July 14, are not sufficient to legally justify the contested ban.”

Along the same line, denial of citizenship on the ground of religious practices has been on the rise. A 32-year-old woman, married to a French national, who arrived in the country in 2000 and speaks good French and whose three children were born in the country was denied French citizenship in 2008 because she wears a burqa and lives in "total submission" to her husband and male relatives, according to reports by social services. “She has adopted a radical practice of her religion, incompatible with essential values of the French community, particularly the principle of equality of the sexes,” said the ruling of the Council of State (the French equivalent of the Supreme Court). Similarly, an Algerian woman’s refusal to shake hands with male officials at a French naturalization ceremony was sufficient grounds for denying her citizenship, according to the Council of State’s ruling in April 2018. Similar debates have played out elsewhere in Europe. In 2016, local authorities in Switzerland said two Muslim boys, both immigrants from Syria, could not refuse to shake their female teacher’s hand on religious grounds.
The perception of Muslims as the enemy has affected across Europe most of the Islamic activities—from the circulation of imams, to the use of Islamic prescriptions in marriage and divorce procedures. In the last decade, quantitative surveys have in fact validated the securitization thesis by highlighting the significant rise of governmental and societal discrimination against Muslims (see Akbaba & Fox: 2015). Interestingly, these surveys have shown that since 2001, Jews and Christians have also experienced increased religious discrimination as a consequence of the securitization of Islam.

In sum, securitization is not simply state prevention of foreign political violence. It is also increasingly aimed at Islamic religious practices like the burqa which are interpreted as signs of political radicalism. One of the unexpected consequences of such a situation has been to grant governments greater means to control religions in general. As such, it is a very serious threat to religious freedom and democracy across Europe.

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