The Political Construction of the Full-face Veil Debate

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ABSTRACT

France was the first European state to enact a full-face veil ban in April 2011. Belgium followed three months later. Then, in 2015, the Dutch cabinet approved a partial ban on face-covering Islamic veils, and in 2016 Merkel endorsed such a ban in Germany. Most recently, the Austrian government legislated to prohibit the wearing of the face veils in public areas. This paper will explore these five cases to better understand why the wearing of face-covering veils in the public sphere has been outlawed. It will focus on the political context that has shaped policy in this area (and especially pressures from right-wing forces), and on the role the media played in the debate and how this affected public discourse and public opinion.

Keywords: Europe, full-face veil ban, media, public sphere.

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CONTENT OF THE PAPER

Present day Europe is faced with a growing religious plurality. One of its consequences is the debate on full-face veils and its place in society. The debate has led to the enactment of laws banning the presence of these veils in public spaces. Expressing religious or cultural belief, especially those concerning women and veiling, continues to raise controversy in many European countries. This is a crucial time to discuss the full-face veil debate because laws banning the wearing of face veils in public have led to the violation of human rights and to the rise in hate crime. In fact, the United Nations stated in two landmark decisions that banning and then fining women for wearing the full-face veil violates the human rights of those women (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2018). Furthermore, the Chair of the Committee, Yuval Shany said that 'the decisions represented the position of the Committee that a general criminal ban [on the full-face veil] did not allow for a reasonable balance between public interests and individual rights' (OHCHR, 2018).

The full-face veil debate began in France and it spread across the continent. As Silvestri (2010) points out, the 'contagious' element of the anti-face veil mood is undisputable. Belgium and France were the first countries in Europe to pass legislation restricting full-face-veiling in the public space in 2011 (Weaver, 2017). While the French and Belgium parliaments passed this law in the name of liberating women and security, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch found no legitimate ground for interfering with fundamental rights and saw this as 'an attack on religious freedom' (Mock and Lichfield, 2010). According to Human Rights Watch, the so-called liberation from veils only leads to imprisonment of women to their homes because it stops women from going out. There is no evidence that wearing the full-face veil in public jeopardizes public safety, public order, and fundamental rights of others. Its prohibition does, however, violate freedom of belief, thought and conscience. And in turn, this discriminates on the basis of gender and religion which is not in accordance with EU anti-discrimination laws and with the European Convention on Human Rights (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

Anthony Gill examined what shapes policies related to the regulation of religion. He argues that policies in this area are often made as a result of the calculations and rational behaviour of politicians rather than on the basis of secularization. In short, politicians calculate the cost and benefit of their preferences and pass policies accordingly. Gill argues that state restriction of religion is detrimental to civil liberties. On the other hand, if a government favours one religion and restricts other religions it will have negative effects on equality of religious treatment and religious freedom in general (Gill, 2007). This rational choice approach can be used to explain why right-wing populists have exploited the terror attacks that have taken place in Europe, and the anxieties of the population to put forward their illiberal agenda. In this they have promoted an anti-globalist and anti-Muslim rhetoric. And meanwhile the Left has taken an appeasement approach and has succumbed to right-wing pressures in a strategic bargaining process thus allowing for bans on religious dress codes. Such behaviour is all the more apparent in an era in which the Left faces a decline in public support, while right-wing populists continue to enjoy a surge in popularity.

When people think of democracy they think of freedoms, liberties and rights. A social-democratic notion of democracy also includes social rights such as 'social services, providing for those in need, and ensuring the general welfare of others' (Dalton, et al., 2007). The values of democracy also extent to protecting religious minorities facing discrimination. However, these values have come under threat, and when they do, they appear to become second to public safety and order. More specifically, freedoms, liberties and human rights lose their attraction when people are faced with

terror attacks, globalization and economic instability, and many voters who once valued the principles of democracy seem willing to relinquish their rights and freedoms in difficult times. In such a climate there is strong pressure arising from right-wing populist parties, who incite resentment, paranoia and fear of 'others'. In particular, these populists have shown themselves very skilful at linking the migrant crisis to terrorist threats, and in presenting immigrants as potential terrorists. Helped by right-wing news outlets that have presented stories in particular ways (Ebner, 2017). Populists have managed to change public perceptions of the 'other' and have reaped the electoral rewards. And it is in this context that the full-face veil ban has been introduced across many European countries.

States that have enacted a full-face veil ban

In 2010 the French parliament voted on the full-face veil ban and adopted a law stipulating that "No one may, in a public space, wear any article of clothing intended to conceal the face." The law has the effect of banning the wearing of the full-face veils in public (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2018). The socialist and the communist parties, as well as the green party, abstained from voting. Thus, the vote was almost unanimous, and the 335-1 result came as no surprise (Silvestri, 2010). The ban was enforced in April 2011 (BBC, 2011). It is no surprise that this legislation would soon lead to lawsuits. While the European Court of Human Rights has preferred to hide under the margin of appreciation, the United Nations has taken a different approach. In a high-profile court case, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2018) stated the following:

> 'The Committee found that the general criminal ban on the wearing of the niqab in public introduced by the French law disproportionately harmed the petitioners' right to manifest their religious beliefs, and that France had not adequately explained why it was necessary to prohibit this clothing. In particular, the Committee was not persuaded by France's claim that a ban on face covering was necessary and proportionate from a security standpoint or for attaining the goal of "living together" in society. The Committee acknowledged that States could require that individuals show their faces in specific circumstances for identification purposes, but considered that a general ban on the niqab was too sweeping for this purpose. The Committee also concluded that the ban, rather than protecting fully veiled women, could have the opposite effect of confining them to their homes, impeding their access to public services and marginalizing them'.

In April 2010 Belgium also voted to ban the full-face veil/niqab in public spaces, and here the ban was supported by all parties across the political spectrum. The law came into force in July 2011 (BBC, 2011). Following France, Belgium was the second country to introduce a ban on the wearing of the full-face veil (Flo and Vrielink, 2013). Although there are very few women who wear full face veiling in Belgium, the argument, as made by Daniel Bacquelaine – the liberal MP who proposed the bill – was that it was a pre-emptive move to avoid the spread of its wearing (Traynor, 2010). The argument was also made that the ban would improve public safety. The ban in France and Belgium was a full ban, prohibiting the wearing of the full-face veil in all public spaces. By contrast, the legislation in the Netherlands, Germany and Austria concerned partial bans. For example, the partial ban pertains only to state institutions whereas full bans involve all public spaces ranging from institutions to streets and squares.

States where parliament has voted to approve a partial burka ban

In 2015, the lower house of the Dutch parliament approved a partial ban (this is now awaiting approval in the first chamber). Full-face veils would be prohibited on public transport and in public areas such as schools and hospitals, but they would not be forbidden on the streets. Indeed, the coalition government – composed of the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and the Labour Party (PvdA) – had withdrawn a previous bill proposing banning the full-face veil on the streets. The government argued that the ban was for security purposes only, and had not been developed for any religious reasons. Seeking to explain the reason for the introduction of the ban, the Labour Party acknowledged that people should be able to cover their faces should they wish to do so, and that this was why the ban did not apply to presence on the streets. The government also insisted it attempted to find a balance between people's freedom to dress according to their wishes and the importance of face-to-face communication (France-Presse, 2015). Despite this explanation, it is difficult to conclude that there was no religious incentive behind the ban as it is designed to target a single religion, and in practice only affect between 100 and 500 women. The interior minister, Ronald Plasterk confirmed that the media uproar surrounding the full-face veil had played a key role in the ban's approval (Associated Press, 2016). Just as important was the role played by the radical right PVV who have put tremendous amount of pressure on the government to introduce this ban.

The pressures to introduce a ban on the wearing of veils in the public sphere have also spread to Germany. Here, in December 2016, and in response to the Berlin attack at a Christmas market by a failed asylum-seeker (Huggler, 2017), Chancellor Merkel endorsed a call from within her Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party to introduce a partial ban on the full-face veil and niqab. She told delegates at the CDU conference that the full-face veil was inappropriate, 'not acceptable in Germany' and should be banned 'wherever it is legally possible' (Oltermann, 2016). Thereafter, in 2017 the German parliament supported a draft law banning women working in the civil service, judiciary and military from wearing full-face veils. This proposed legislation is directed at public officials, and does not affect the right of individuals to wear the burka in public. The law will come into effect once approved by the Bundesrat, the upper house of parliament.

Opponents of the legislation find it redundant given that there is not a single woman in the professions that are targeted by the law who wears a full-face veil. Indeed, politicians from the left-wing Die Linke and Die Grünen parties have dismissed the legislation as a 'purely symbolic policy' which they argue was developed in response to the radical right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) ahead of September's elections (Dearden, 2017). The Greens described it as the result of a 'fear-filled debate' (Huggler, 2017). By contrast, right-wing politicians have called for a full ban on the full-face veil in public, as imposed in France and Belgium. However, a blanket ban of this type would be unconstitutional in Germany and would be struck down by the courts.

The political pressure on Merkel was quite apparent. Her approval ratings dropped quite considerably in the wake of the European migrant crisis of 2016 during which time she allowed over a million refugees to enter Germany. And in this climate the radical right anti-immigration AfD party has enjoyed wide support and has 'capitalised on a wave of anger over last year's migrant crisis, and made strong gains in regional election' (BBC, 2016). Most recently, in the federal elections of September 2017, the AfD won 12.6% of the votes, and became the third largest party in the Bundestag. Although Merkel's CDU (in partnership with the Christian Social Union, CSU) remained the largest party, its support declined considerably and it is now facing difficulties in forming a

coalition government. Moreover, for the first time since WWII a far right-wing party has now won seats in the parliament.

Since 2011, Austria and the Netherlands have passed similar restrictions, and Germany appears to be heading in the same direction. Austria is the latest European state to pass a partial full-face veil ban. In January 2017, the Austrian government composed of a coalition by the Social Democratic party (SPÖ) and the centre-right Austrian People's party (ÖVP) decided to prohibit full-face veils in order to avoid the collapse of their government and prevent the triggering of new elections. The ban is a symbolic measure to deter pressure from the right-wing populist Freedom party (FPÖ). The ban will affect around 150 women in Austria (Oltermann, 2017). The coalition has agreed to ban full-face veils in courts, schools and other public places. The agreement also bans police officers, judges and magistrates and public prosecutors from wearing headscarves to maintain their ideological neutrality. This is a part of a reform programme initiated by the coalition government aimed at countering the rise of the extreme right (Freedom Party (FPO) in the country ahead of next year's parliamentary election (Henderson, 2017).

Similar practices in other European countries

Other countries in Europe have also regulated the wearing of the full-face veil. The Bulgarian parliament approved the full-face veil ban, in a move that was very much driven by the nationalist 'Patriotic Front' alliance (Fenton, 2016). Some regions of Italy, Spain and Switzerland also regulate the wearing of full-face veils. Italy does not have a ban on the full-face veil, but municipalities have been allowed to implement restrictions. For example, the town of Novara imposed restrictions in 2010. Spain also does not have a national ban, but parts of Catalonia have laws banning full-face veils. While the Spanish Supreme Court overturned these bans, stating they restrict religious freedom, the regions persisted with their laws, citing the 2014 European Court of Human Rights ruling that banning the veil does not breach human rights (Sanghani, 2017). In Switzerland, the far-right People's Party led the campaign in September 2016 to introduce a ban on the wearing of the full-face veil in public places, and the motion was narrowly approved in the lower house of parliament (by 88 votes to 87). However, in August 2017, Switzerland's upper house of parliament voted against the law. When rejecting the draft bill, members of the Council of States argued that 'there were so few people wearing full-face veils in Switzerland that there was no need to legislate for a problem that does not exist' (The Local, 2017). However, the Italian-speaking Ticino canton has nonetheless enforced a full-face veil ban since July 1, 2016 (Wicki, 2017).

Human rights and the full-face veil debate

The status of religious symbols in the public space has been an ongoing subject of debate in Europe because the right to freedom of religion is often associated with the prerogative to wear religious symbols and clothing. The wearing or display of religious symbols is not about promoting the position of certain creeds. Rather it is to ensure the protection of individual freedom (Mahlmann, 2009: 2491). This argument is based on Rawls' (1993) normative principle of freedom and equality for all. Such a concern for the individual, the believer and the non-believer, constitutes the basis of human rights and requires the protection of the individual's freedom of religion. Freedom of religion and other dimensions of freedom go hand-in-hand. Religious freedom is a component of human freedom, and so freedom of speech necessarily implies freedom of religious speech, and freedom of the press implies freedom of the religious press as long as it does not infringe on the rights and freedoms of others. Guaranteeing freedom in religious affairs allows religious groups to participate

in democracy. Therefore, as Stepan (2012: 90) argues, there needs to be cooperation and toleration for the coexistence of religion and democracy.

While each case under study has unique historical circumstances, they do share common concerns pertaining to the recent influx of Muslim refugees and their integration. The right-wing media has been successful in depicting Muslims as the 'other' and as a threat. As Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe's commissioner for human rights, said, 'the way the dress of a small number of women has been portrayed as a key problem requiring urgent discussion and legislation is a sad capitulation to the prejudices of the xenophobes' (Chrisafis, 2011). And this represents an important and noticeable shift. As Joppke (2009: 2) has explained, liberalism is now responsible for 'exclusionary' work which in the past was done by nationalism and racism. Minority rights are not of primary concern anymore; neutrality, autonomy and equality have become more important. Joppke argues, states that identify themselves as liberal, such as Germany, Britain, France and the Netherlands, have identical responses to offenses of liberal values, i.e. banning full-face veils, which are to exclude them from the public space.

The ban on the full-face veil has often been defended on the grounds that face veils are symbols or oppression. However, scholars such as Cécile Laborde and Martha Nussbaum point out that 'forbidding by law a "symbol" of perceived oppression does not equate with solving the oppression problem. It might even produce another form of oppression, of coercion of conscience on the part of the state, which would go well beyond reasonable concerns and security priorities' (Silvestri, 2010). In this way, a full-face veil/niqab ban is illiberal, ineffective, and counterproductive, and it subsequently undermines pluralistic values of a democratic system (Ebner, 2017). Moreover, in the quest to forbid this 'symbol of oppression', an irony is created in that the ban actually discriminates against women. As Sunderland (2012) points out, whether women are being forced to cover or to uncover, either way they are being discriminated against. Forced unveiling, just like forced veiling, constitutes a serious women's rights issue. And apart from this, while bans may be constructed in neutral terms, the reality is that the political debate surrounding the issue is 'infused with discomfort with an increasingly visible Muslim minority population, and concerns about integrating newer Europeans while preserving so-called European values' (Sunderland, 2012).

Other justifications for bans are that they are necessary for public safety, public order and living together. The main argument behind these justifications is that full-face covering hinders communication and social cohesion. But this simply means that, freedom of religion is restricted in order to force people to communicate when meeting in public places, with the state acting as the enforcer in promoting democratic citizenship and social cohesion. Such interference renders the state undemocratic, illiberal and violates the basic human rights of Muslim women who choose to cover their face. To make matters worse, the institution which aims to protect freedom of thought, conscience and belief – the European Court of Human Rights – decided to allow banning full or partial face veils because it deemed this is 'necessary in a democratic society', to guarantee conditions of 'living together' and for the 'protection of the rights and freedoms of others' (ECtHR Press Release, 2017). The ECtHR determined that the 2011 Belgian law that prohibits people from covering their face in public, as well as the France's full-face veil ban of 2014, are justifiable under the European Convention of Human Rights for above stated reasons. These court judgements show just how important symbols are to social order in Europe. Dr. Eva Brems, an expert on human rights and former Member of the Belgian Federal Chamber of Representatives (2010 – 2014) who voted against the full-face veil ban, said in an interview, 'If there's a societal consensus against a particular

group, that's where human rights are most needed, and that's when you have to be most alert'. As for the ECtHR 'no violations' findings pertaining to full-face veils, Brems added, 'As long as you don't say something openly Islamophobic or openly sexist, if you say the right thing—'we are doing this for social cohesion,' for example—it will pass' (Serhan, 2017). This, according to Brems, can serve for states as a guide to passing restrictive legislation and getting away with it.

The full-face veil debate is merely an excuse to target the Muslim minority and to create a debate of 'us' versus 'them'. As Scott (2007: 90) said about the headscarf controversy in France, 'Racism was the subtext of the headscarf controversy, but secularism was its explicit justification'. Historian George Frederickson (2002: 5) defined racism as 'It is when differences that might otherwise be considered ethnocultural are regarded as innate, indelible, and unchangeable that a racist attitude or ideology can be said to exist'. He continued, 'My theory or conception of racism…has two components: difference and power. It originates from a mind set that regards 'them' and 'us' in ways that are permanent and unbridgeable…In all manifestations of racism…what is being denied is the possibility that the racializers and the racialized can coexist in the same society, except perhaps on the basis of domination and subordination' (2002: 9). What Scott (2007: 45) has stated about the veil over a decade ago, it still paints a good picture of contemporary reality '[…] the veil has long been a symbol of the irreducible difference and thus the inassimilability of Islam'. Muslims are still being accused of not being able to assimilate to the European ways of life and conform to the existing cultural norms. One would assume that following the rule of law would suffice, but it does not. One must embrace the European culture as well in order to be considered fully European, and the wearing of the full-face veil is seen as provocation and as an act of rejection of European values that deserves no tolerance legal or otherwise. Legally forcing women to unveil is just one form of subjugation Muslim women face in liberal democracies. Historically, veiling represented backwardness and oppression, today wearing the full-face veil is associated with dangerous militancy. It may be argued that September 11, 2001 and fear of terrorism led to the politicization of the wearing of the veil, but according the Scott (2007: 61) the veil had been politicized much earlier during the Algerian War in the 1950s. Furthermore, Scott (2007: 79) claims that Muslims are the primary target for French racism, this argument can be taken a step further and say that Muslims are the primary target for European racism. Thus, racism is only the subtext of the full-face veil controversy, therefore the focus on the full-face veil is both misplaced and inflammatory.

The silence of the left wing

In a lack of a unified left wing approach towards the so-called burka ban, which in fact is a niqab ban, the response has been – silence. The left wing parties sustain an amicable relationship with Islam and the Muslim population in part due to a large Muslim voter base. The left wing across Europe has opposed regulating the full-face veil/niqab and has come out against potential laws banning it in public spaces. However, when the proposed law was put to vote, the left did little to prevent the proposal from becoming law. The UK Labour Party and the German Die Linke are the only left wing parties to vote against banning the veil in public spaces. In UK, MP Hollobone put forward the Face Coverings (Regulation) Bill, he proposed a law to ban wearing burkas and niqabs but it failed to complete its passage through Parliament (BBC, 2010). German politicians from the left-wing, Die Linke, also dismissed the legislation as a 'purely symbolic policy' (Dearden, 2017). Conversely, in France most Socialists abstained from the 2010 vote in the National Assembly to ban face veils (The Independent, 2012). In Denmark and Austria the left voted in favour of the ban.

Conclusion

As religious diversity has become more visible, it has gained greater attention in the media and national governments have pursued policies to accommodate or eliminate diversity in a manner that will serve and preserve national identity and culture. Consequently, France and Belgium have enforced full full-face veil bans in public places whereas the Netherlands, Germany and Austria have opted for limited bans. These full-face veil laws reflect a disturbing trend of increasing racism, xenophobia, and intolerance in Europe and elsewhere. Progressive parties in Europe have not stood up for the protection of diversity and minority rights. Right of centre parties have exploited the migrant crisis and the wave of terrorist attacks in the last few years to promote their agenda, and have done so with significant effect. In this, they have managed to reduce the full-face veil debate to issues of integration, oppression, secularism and identity, and have associated the full-face veil with extremism, so as to further serve its restriction. Moreover, the volume and salience of the debate has been disproportional in that women who do wear the full-face veil are actually very small in number. There are much more pressing and widespread national issues to be resolved. Anti-immigration rhetoric has been crucial to the right-wing electoral success across Europe, and social media has contributed to this success. If the aim is to liberate women from oppression, how will liberation occur if it confines women to their private sphere and excludes them from public spaces? In reality, 'It might even produce another form of oppression, of coercion of conscience on the part of the state, which would go well beyond reasonable concerns and security priorities' (Silvestri, 2010).

The Representation of Niqabis in the European Press: the Cases of Belgium, France and the Netherlands

The representation of Muslim women in the European media is an extremely sensitive subject in our time because it refers to the representations of Islam and those labeled as 'foreigners' in the European collective imaginary world. Furthermore, these issues are presented by the different political parties as priority themes, they are at the heart of the news. In fact, the media coverage of Muslims and Islam in Europe frequently links these representations to certain controversial societal issues such as immigration, integration, terrorism, extremism, gender equality and social cohesion (Saifuddin and Jörg, 2016). It is therefore logical that the representation of Muslim women in the European media should also be influenced by the different perceptions[1] that are expressed on these themes. In an attempt to illustrate a form of representation of Muslim women, we have worked on the case of the figure of the Niqabis[2] in the European written press. More specifically, we analyzed the print media of three countries: Belgium, France and the Netherlands. For each country, we have decided to select two popular national newspapers of different political tendencies. In Belgium, we doubled the number of periodicals because of the existence of two national languages, so we have

[1] There are created by these essentializing links.
[2] It is the name given to women who are wearing a full-face veil called niqab.

chosen four Belgian newspapers. These newspapers are "Le Soir" (progressive left), "La Libre" (liberal), "De Morgen" (progressive left) and "Het Nieuwsblad" (slightly liberal). For France, we have chosen "Le Monde" (progressive left) and "Le Figaro" (conservative right). For the Netherlands, we have selected "NRC Handelsblad" (liberal) and "De Telegraaf" (conservative). In order to find articles addressing the issue of full-face veils, we have analyzed all press articles addressing this subject between 2001 and 2017. This material will therefore constitute our sample, which allowed us to observe that there are two periods in the written press where the problem of the niqab is approached in different ways.

The Sarkozy Effect

The first period is located between 2001 and August 2009, there is very little mention of the woman in niqab[3]. Our statistical analysis shows that on average, 2 to 10 press articles per year were devoted to this issue which was mainly perceived as "external" and "marginal" (this average can be either higher or lower depending on the period)[4]. Indeed, these articles addressed the niqab either to talk about women living under the Taliban regime (Ferrari and Pastorelli, 2013) or to talk about the Maaseik case[5] (only for Belgium and the Netherlands; De Morgen 2006; Glissen P. 2004; Maurice B. 2005; NRC 2006). In both cases, the niqab is associated with religious fundamentalism and the oppression of women by men. A very negative image was thus conveyed to talk about the niqab. The newspapers had simply relayed the information provided by the authorities without making any criticism, they were completely passive about this issue. The phenomenon was therefore not interesting for the media at the time. Even in the Maaseik case, the focus was on the men whom the Belgian federal police suspected of being part of a terrorist network. This observation allows us to say that the very low media coverage of Niqabis by these newspapers also reveals the very low interest of citizens in this issue. There was no visible public debate or expressed public opinion. According to these statistics, the vast majority of Europeans who lived between 2001 and August 2008 were not seemingly so bothered by these women. Of course, this does not mean that the niqab was absent from all debates, we are simply saying that it was neither important nor symbolic at the political and media scene. In fact, the case of Belgium shows that this debate was present despite its very low media coverage. Indeed, it was the first country to apply a legal restriction on Niqab in the public space in 2004 (Laporte C., 2010). The application of this law, which has been in force since 1993, follows the arrival of a woman in niqab in front of an administrative office in the municipality of Molenbeek. Its application will be strengthened following the Maaseik case. As mentioned earlier, despite these events, the niqab issue had remained marginal. Even if we take the case of the claims of Geert Wilders' team (PVV[6] party) who advocated at an early stage for the ban of the wearing of the full-face veil in the Dutch public space (Hudson, 2007). Indeed, since the early 2000s, the PVV has been campaigning for this type of ban, which would only become effective much later (La Libre, 2019).

The second period began in September 2009 and continues to this day. It is characterized by a greater media coverage of the niqab issue and its rise as a national debate. The print media has gone from producing less than ten articles per year on the subject to dozens of articles per year (hundreds

[3] Except for 2001 when the mention of the full veil is very high due to the invasion of Afghanistan by the US army. The figure of the woman wearing niqab was mobilized to denounce Taliban fundamentalism
[4] The phenomenon is also related to external factors.
[5] Group of Islamists identified after the dismantling of a network linked to the GICM (Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group). Some of these protagonists were linked to the Hofstad group (assassination of Theo Van Gogh by M. Bouyeri in 2004).
[6] Dutch far-right party.

if we take all the newspapers). The question here is to understand how a low-publicized and very marginal debate has become an extremely important and national one. The answer may seem surprising, but in reality it is simple: it is the media and political campaign of former French President Nicolas Sarkozy (AFP 2009; La Libre, 2010; Hugues, 2009; Le Monde, 2009), who is behind the ultra-mediatization of this sociologically very minor phenomenon (especially between late 2009 and early 2011). Indeed, according to the French parliamentary information report on the practice of full-face veiling in France (January 2010), 1900 women (out of 4 to 5 million Muslims) wore the niqab in France and 270 women (out of 350,000 to 650,000 Muslims) in Belgium (Assemblée Nationale, 2010). In the Netherlands, some sources mention statistics of 100 to 400 women (Nieber, 2012; Vandenbosh, 2016).

What exactly happened in France in 2009? The case of the full-face veil broke out following the refusal of the Council of State to uphold the appeal brought by a woman wearing the full-face veil who had contested the May 2005 decree prohibiting her from acquiring French nationality for lack of integration. This case became a controversy when several public figures reacted by agreeing with the Council of State (AFP, 2008; Le Figaro, 2008). A cautious reading of these various articles reveals that the debate on the wearing of the full-face veil had turned into a debate on Islam in France. Moreover, the French parliamentary information report perfectly illustrates this shift. But if the politicization of this social object has been a catalyst for a greater media coverage, it is still the Sarkozyism that remains the first causal vector of this ultra-mediatization.

Several definitions have been given to designate Sarkozyism. In our case, we will not discuss the different definitions that have been given, but we will simply refer to Sarkozyism's position towards Islam. This policy differentiates Islam in France from the rest of Islam without defining it. Moreover, a polarizing "struggle" had actually risen in the era of the Sarkozy government. Namely the opposition between "French secularism" and "Muslim fundamentalism" (Chombeau, C. and Ridet, P., 2007; Liogier, 2009). It is also in the scope of this controversy that the debate on the full-face veil was being introduced into the agenda. This analysis shows that this case was symptomatic, its political and media treatment perfectly reflected the thoughts of many French citizens (AFP, 2010; La Libre, 2010; Mayer, 2007; Bayart J-F., 2016). Namely that Islam is in conflict with the West, which is symbolized in this specific case by the French issue of the full-face veil. It is easy to trace the presence of this idea of confrontation in the collective imaginary by examining the words being used to portray these women: "incompatibilities of values", "cultural archaism", "religious fundamentalism", "women's submission", "patriarchal religion", "lack of integration", "Islamization of France", "Islamist offensive", and even "attack on national identity". The use of these specific words allows us to say that these women were essentialized through their religion. This is what is intellectually called "an orientalist vision of the Muslim woman". This case is completely in line with the Orientalism as described by Edward Said (Said, 1978). The Niqabi woman is in fact described as any Muslim woman who is essentialized and subdued by the Muslim patriarchy until her release by the civilized white man. And as proof, the law voted in 2010 by the French National Assembly against the wearing of the full-face veil in public spaces was proposed and promulgated by a large majority of white males of privileged socioeconomic status. To sum up, under the label of the implementation of secularism and gender equality, a new patriarchy is imposed on these "imprisoned" women. Even more strikingly, "feminist" women have joined this "other patriarchy" in great numbers, as illustrated by the participation of several anti-niqab feminist groups during the French national debate. The majority of these "feminists", who are supposed to unconditionally denounce patriarchy, had really contributed to the establishment of this "new patriarchy".

The issue of the full-face veil and its media coverage were not confined to France, this debate was taken up by other European political parties (especially liberal and conservative) such as the MR (liberal party) in Belgium and the VVD (liberal party) in the Netherlands (Belga, 2010; Belga, 2011; De Morgen, 2012; Nu, 2016; Rijksoverhein, 2012; Van de Wiel, 2016). These two countries have also banned the wearing of the full-face veil by adding arguments brought forward by Republican France (see the two parliamentary proposals on the issue; Vandenbosh, 2016). In this case, we can speak of a "contagion effect". But again, the actions of these two liberal parties, ideologically close to the French right, reveal the solidarity that exists between the European parties (they were also supported by the extremists of Vlaams Belang[7] and PVV; Kallis, 2018). We can even say that this "contagion effect" had led to a Europeanization of the full-face veil case. Europeanisation certainly but limited because the media coverage of the Belgian and Dutch media remained very low compared to that of the French media. This also means that there was a difference in journalistic agendas.

An illusion of participatory democracy

While reading these hundreds of press articles, one element left a much greater impact on us than the others, the total absence of Niqabis from this debate. How can we speak of democratic debate if the main stakeholders are not even represented? This shameful absence does not simply symbolize at its finest the patriarchal treatment of the full-face veil issue by our elected representatives, it also demonstrates the failure of our society to be able to activate a democratic debate based on the pluralism of opinions. A bankruptcy aggravated by the absence of real political and journalistic oppositions.

The various analyzed presses did not show any objectivity or even neutrality in addressing the issue of the full-face veil, they had remained passive to the statements of the anti-niqab public actors. No newspaper has done its journalistic duty by trying to investigate these women or even by verifying the received statements. It is this lack of critical thinking that has led to regrettable misunderstandings over the used terms. These articles used the word "burqa" to refer to the "niqab". Not only are they two different types of full-face veils with very different histories, but the wearing of the "burqa" is a phenomenon that is almost non-existent outside the Afghan-Pakistani territories. All reported Belgian, French and Dutch women wore the "niqab". Only the daily newspaper "Le Monde" distinguished itself later (Laurent, S., 2015) by publishing an article detailing the different types of Islamic veils. This observation is not only intended to denounce the lack of objectivity on the part of these media, but also to highlight that despite the diversity of their editorial lines and political orientations, they provided the same media coverage on these women. In fact, the different newspapers have adopted the same attitude towards the full-face veil case, i.e. passivity. The latter were not obliged to "defend" these women, but they could at least balance the debate for ethical journalistic reasons.

A final comment must also be made: the socialist campaign was not as successful in comparison to the campaigns launched by the liberals, conservatives and far-right extremists. Even worse, the arguments made by political personalities affiliated with socialism were in fact in line with the arguments put forward by the other political families. Indeed, the socialist family's main argument

[7] Belgian far-right party.

was to say that wearing a full-face veil is an assault on women's dignity and gender equality (Legrand and Fressoz, 2009). Thus, sweeping away the sociological studies[8] conducted on these women, which clearly demonstrate that the vast majority of them have freely chosen to wear the full-face veil. Moreover, the same studies show that they often wear it against the wishes of their father, husband or brother (De Féo, 2016). What is the point of opposing other political families over the shape if it is to agree on the content? The time has come for the progressive left to question its political discourse and communication strategy. A semblance of opposition can only be harmful in the long term. Instead of shaping the discourse, the progressives have merely reacted to the discourse put forward by the right-wing.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussing the socialists' behavior in the case of the niqab ban serves to identify the weak points of socialist policies on religion. In this article, we have argued that the socialist parties have failed on two levels: discursive and ideological. Socialist campaigns were unable to deliver a strong and effective discourse to be considered as oppositional. This discursive weakness actually reflects an ideological weakness that is easily detected by the lack of solid arguments. Our main advice is to invite the European Socialist Party to reflect on its ideological position regarding Islam and to rework its communication campaigns. These failures will cause the socialist parties to lose Muslim votes and make them fall into the trap of liberals, conservatives and extremists. It has already been observed that some Muslims have started to vote for other political parties such as the Greens and the Communists (Le Vif, 2019). Moreover, we have observed how some political parties have gained considerable votes by clearly positioning themselves on Islam. It is time for the European Socialist Party to take a clear stand on Islam while distinguishing itself from other political ideologies. In fact, this is the ideal time to do so, since the issue of the place of Muslims in Europe is a heavily debated topic in the media. We think that an inclusive approach of the socialists towards Islam can only be beneficial for the elections.

[8] See, for example, the studies conducted by Agnès De Féo on the wearing of the full face veil in Europe.

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