

Does France's Burkini Ban Matter?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



As is well known, many French cities and towns, and even local swimming pools, have banned the “burkini,” the islamically correct bathing garb that covers a woman, leaving only her face, hands, and feet exposed.

Many French people regard this swimsuit as a symbol of political Islam and incompatible with secularism.

The story is [here](#).

The Jean Bron swimming pool is among many in France that ban burkinis.

“Operation burkini” was launched last month by members of the group Citizen Alliance of Grenoble to defend what they say is

the right of Muslim women.

After changing into burkinis, the Muslim members of the group were told by lifeguards that their swimsuits were not allowed.

Despite this, they entered the pool and bathed for about an hour with members of the community, many of whom cheered and applauded them for doing so.

The women were later questioned by police and each fined €35 (\$40; £30) for breaching the rules, news outlet France Bleu reported (in French).

Speaking to the BBC, two of the Muslim women involved in the protest, Hassiba and Latifa, said they should have the same rights as other citizens.

“We have a dream: to have fun in public swimming pools like all other citizens, to accompany our children whenever they want to have a swim while it is very hot in the summer here in Grenoble.

“We must fight against discriminatory policies and prejudice in France, as we are actually deprived of our civil rights of access to public services and city-owned infrastructures.”

In a Facebook post, the Citizen Alliance said the move was part of a campaign that began in May 2018 with a petition signed by more than 600 Muslim women urging the Grenoble Mayor Éric Piolle to reform the rules governing public swimming pools.

Responding to events on Sunday, a member of France’s centre-right party The Republicans, Matthieu Chamussy said: “Political Islam is moving forward step by step and the cause of women receding.”

Burkinis, a mix of the words “burka” and “bikini”, are marketed to Muslim women as a way for them to swim in public

while adhering to modesty edicts.

But the Burkina remains controversial in France, where authorities in several French towns have proposed banning the garment altogether [and they have done so].

Is the burkini a symbol of a Muslim woman's right to choose, that local regulators in France, by banning it, impermissibly infringe upon? That is what the women who took part in this defiant act want us all to think. But without men to pressure them to wear the burkini, how many would freely chose to do so? If modesty is the issue, is not the old-fashioned one-piece bathing suit still available and modest enough? When one wears the "burkini," does this not put others inexorably in mind of the burka, the niqab, the chador, all variants on the extreme cover that is imposed on women in such strict Muslim countries as Afghanistan (burka), Saudi Arabia (niqab), and Iran (chador)? Have these Muslim women, in their eagerness to wear the burkini, not simply internalized a certain unflattering view of Muslim men? Cover is meant to prevent Muslim women from being too alluring to men, who need to be helped to control their sexual passion. It is a view of men as crude animals, while the French male Unbelievers, seem able to control themselves without the need for women to wear such cover as the burkini to control the natural desires of the men. Is it possible that the male Unbelievers are in this respect superior to Muslims? But surely that cannot be; the Qur'an tells Muslims they are the "best of peoples" (3:110) while Unbelievers are the "most vile of created beings."(98:6) Perhaps Muslim women should put Muslim men to the test, to see what self-control they can exercise, by wearing a regular bathing suit (albeit one-piece), instead of a burkini. Will Muslim men be able to master their own supposedly unbridled lust, in the same way that non-Muslim men manage to do?

A local mayor who bans the burkini can turn the tables on Muslims: "The wearing of the burkini is based on a view of

Muslim males that I find disheartening. That view suggests that Muslim women must be covered up, as much as possible, to avoid arousing men. I allow myself to believe that Muslim men are fully as capable of self-control as non-Muslim men, and the wearing of the burkini is therefore not really necessary. But Muslim men are behind the felt need of some Muslim women to wear the the niqab, the burka, the chador and, for swimming, the burkini; the women claim no one is forcing them, but they feel the intense pressure from men to dress "modestly," and when they wear the burkini, they are offering mute testimony to the animalistic urges of their menfolk, which the burkini is supposed to curb. I do not think Muslim men are any less capable of self-control than are non-Muslim men, and it is in that spirit of equality that I have chosen to ban the burkini."

Furthermore, the women wearing the burkini are choosing to promote Muslim values by defying the laws of local French authorities. They are choosing the rules of Islam over the rules of the French laic state. This is intolerable. The fines imposed on wearers of the burkini – \$40 dollars apiece – were derisory, and ought to be increased tenfold to make an impression. If defiance of the law banning the burkini, however inconsequential that defiance might seem, were to be permitted, it would inevitably lead to more challenges by Muslims to French secularism. There is a war now on in France, between those trying to maintain the validity and authority of the French laic state, and Muslims who are intent on defying that secular state, by imposing step by step their own values and, if they are successful, proceeding to the next challenge to French authority.

Such challenges might take any number of forms. French Muslims could insist on same-sex swimming hours, claiming that allowing men and women to freely mix in pools violates their religious values. They could demand separate seating for men and women in sports stadia. Or they might challenge the

Ministry of Education's nationwide curriculum, claiming that there is too much, or not enough, or not the right kind of, attention paid to certain subjects. One can imagine the complaints of Muslims in France about what is taught: the history of Christianity is dwelt on in schools at too great length; the evils of the Crusades are grossly understated; the deism and skepticism of the Enlightenment are dangerous subjects for impressionable young Muslims, for they suggest that religions can be questioned; French colonialism is taught as if it were not an irredeemable evil; the Holocaust is given far too much attention, and unfairly arouses sympathy for Jews. In school biology classes, Muslims could insist that evolution – which they describe as a ‘theory’ that they do not accept – should not be taught. In all of these cases, there is a challenge to the state's authority. It is not clear what would be the result if Muslim parents, en masse, simply kept their children home from school, until their demands for curriculum changes were met. What about demands that Muslim pupils be excused from class three times a day to say their prayers? Those who would defy the burkini ban are looking for ways to challenge the authority of the French state; the burkini is not a cause but an excuse; if they win on this, Muslim appetites for further defiance of the French will not be sated, but whetted. That is why the burkini ban matters: it is a test of wills that the French cannot afford to lose.

Where it has been adopted, the burkini ban must be imposed with the full force of the law. That means fines that inflict real pain (\$400 not \$40), or other punishments, possibly preventing repeat offenders from using any municipal pool, no matter what bathing costume they finally agree to wear. If Muslims get away with violating the burkini ban in Grenoble, then the test of wills between Muslims and the secular French state will only move to other cities, in Marseille, Lille, Dijon, Toulouse, Paris, and then to other matters, such as what's in and what's out of the school curriculum. It's not a battle the French can afford to lose.

First published in