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France votes to ban full-face veils

Amnesty International has condemned an overwhelming vote by the lower house of the French parliament to ban the wearing of full-face veils in public.

336 parliamentarians voted for the measure on Tuesday, with only one opposing it.

“A complete ban on the covering of the face would violate the rights to freedom of expression and religion of those women who wear the burqa or the niqab as an expression of their identity or beliefs,” said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International’s expert on discrimination in Europe.

The law, which must still be approved by the French Senate, prohibits the wearing anywhere in public of any form of clothing intended to conceal one’s face.

Breach of the law would be punishable by a fine of up to 150 Euros and / or the requirement to complete a community rehabilitation programme.

The law also provides for a penalty of up to one year imprisonment and a fine of up to 30,000 Euros for those who use force or threats to oblige others to cover their faces.

Advocates for the ban in France have characterized full-face veils as contrary to French Republican values, incompatible with gender equality and a threat to public safety.

“As a general rule, the rights to freedom of religion and expression entail that all people should be free to choose what - and what not - to wear. These rights cannot be restricted simply because some - even a majority - find a form of dress objectionable or offensive”

States are obliged under international law to protect women against pressure and threats to wear full-face veils.

“However, comprehensive bans are not the way to do this,” said John Dalhuisen.

“They carry a risk that women who currently wear full face veils will become confined to their homes, less able to work or study and to access public services”

“Governments should instead be looking to strengthen efforts to combat the discrimination faced by Muslim women, both in their communities and in the broader societies in which they live. Their focus should be on empowering women to make their own choices, rather than limiting the range of choices available to them,”

“Legitimate security concerns can be met by targeted restrictions on the complete covering of the face in well-defined high risk locations.

Individuals may also be required to reveal their faces when objectively necessary, for instance for identity checks. French law already allows for such limited restrictions,” said John Dalhuisen.

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