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Abaya ban in French schools: 'Wearing the abaya is a political gesture'

OP-ED

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Iannis Roder, a history and geography teacher, agrees with French Education Minister Gabriel Attal's ban on abaya dresses in public schools. He says that the abaya is traditionally worn in order to conform to the religious norms set out by Islamists.

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The law of March 15, 2004, prohibits pupils from wearing any conspicuous symbols or clothing that manifest a religious affiliation. It was in the application of this law that Education Minister Gabriel Attal said that "abayas could no longer be worn at school." While the appearance of this garment was noted back in 2010 in a few schools in the northern Paris suburb Seine-Saint-Denis, it's only recently that it has been widely worn.

So as not to fall foul of the law, some students have argued that wearing the abaya has no religious significance but is simply a dress worn "culturally and not religiously." In Lille, Nice and Toulouse, girls are being schooled to use the same argument and language and are simply repeating Islamist rhetoric aimed at undermining the French Republic's education system, which represents a danger for political Islam, as it offers access to individual freedom through knowledge.

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Wearing the abaya is not religious? Online stores offering "Islamic clothing" or "for Muslim women" suggest otherwise. In fact, the abaya is commonly worn to comply with religious norms that require women to be "modest" and by extension, "virtuous." The concept belittles women, who are deemed inherently impure and are expected to conceal their forms – just as the hijab conceals their hair – from the gaze of men, at the risk of arousing their contempt, anger and even violence.

The situation of women in Iran and Afghanistan is a daily reminder of this: Not only how the control of women's bodies and dress policing are established, but also how Islamism is gradually sliding Islam toward rigid norms, leading some French young people to believe that certain practices are Muslim when in fact, they are Islamist.

Belonging to a community

Wearing the abaya is part of this logic, as it is a political gesture more consistent with wearing a uniform than simply a fashion statement: the dress differentiates women and gives them recognition, but at the same time they are submitting to rules of conduct whose philosophy is foreign

to that of the Republic's education system. It symbolizes belonging to a community, and if it is difficult for some to remove it, it is because they would be breaking the rules, which are sometimes understood as absolute. Moreover, could an ordinary garment give rise to the outburst that followed the announcement of its ban on social media?

The political dimension is also brought home to France by the appearance of Abdelhakim Sefrioui in 2011 – a disquieting figure at the heart of what led to the murder of Samuel Paty – who, during the first incidents linked to the wearing of abayas in a high school in Saint-Ouen, in the northern suburbs of Paris, posed as the uncle of one of the students in order to put pressure on the principal. At the time, the girls said they wore the garment voluntarily, and many of them today tirelessly repeat: "It's my choice."

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One cannot be sure that some of them do not say this under pressure, directly or indirectly, through the internalization of social control in their immediate environment, which conveys a message contrary to republican equality. The purpose of the law passed on March 15, 2004, is to protect young citizens while they are being educated from pressure during school hours, which is in line with the 1905 law, Article 1 stipulating that "the Republic ensures freedom of conscience" for all citizens, and Article 31 that everyone must be protected from pressure.

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It would also be strange if the school, which has made gender equality a priority, were to allow the wearing of clothing that, in the words of Jean-Luc Mélenchon [in an interview with the weekly Marianne](#) in 2010, is "a symbol of patriarchal submission."

A form of pressure

So, yes, this type of dress must be outlawed in France's schools, where every child in France has the right, for the duration of their schooling and citizenship, to be offered the opportunity to free themselves from determinism and to take advantage of the "secular breathing space" advocated by the philosopher Catherine Kintzler. At school, a young person no longer belongs to their parents, nor to their environment; he or she is a pupil progressing in the construction of their free will and their autonomy, perhaps to be freed from the weight of outside constraints. And this applies only for the time they are in school since nothing prohibits pupils from wearing whatever they want once outside the establishment.

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The French government is not asking students to adhere to its rhetoric, or even to its teachings. It is asking them to follow it and not to challenge it, because it is based on science and reason, i.e., on what is demonstrable and a priori acceptable to all, thus opening the door to free will and individual emancipation. However, wearing clothing, which in the light of common representations, undoubtedly allows pupils to be identified by their religious affiliation, can also exert a form of pressure, not only on the pupils, but also on the teacher, who teaches subjects which we now know may be open to discussion, or even contestation, on religious grounds.

This is the case with certain texts by Enlightenment philosophers, such as the relationship between Rimbaud and Verlaine, the origins of life and many other themes. The intrusion of claims and beliefs into the school environment had already prompted reactions from the educational establishment. We should remember and live up to the words of Jean Zay [1904-1944], who was a minister for the Front Populaire party, which was an alliance of left-wing movements, who said that "schools must remain an inviolable asylum where the quarrels of men do not penetrate."

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