

Egypt: Dispute Over Veil Spreads Across Country



Cairo — A decision by the government to ban the veil in some academic institutions has reignited debate about personal rights.

"The niqab (Islamic face veil) is certainly one of the more extreme manifestations of Islam," Hossam Bahgat, director of the Cairo-based Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights tells IPS. "But according to the constitution, no one has the right to force women not to wear them."

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The controversy began Oct. 3, the first day of the academic year, when the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar mosque in Cairo Mohammed Sayyed Tantawi visited a girls-only school. Tantawi reportedly ordered an 11-year-old student to remove her niqab, saying the practice was not an Islamic obligation.

Four days later, the supreme council of Al-Azhar — the highest religious authority in the Sunni Muslim world — declared a formal ban on the niqab at all Al-Azhar affiliated schools and university dormitories. Because these were female-only institutions, the council reasoned, there was no need for students or teachers to don the niqab.

The council asserted it was not opposed to the practice per se, but said the niqab was considered an Islamic obligation only by a minority of Muslim scholars. The council issued a statement saying it was opposed to "imprinting a dress code in the minds of girls."google_protectAndRun("ads_core.google_render_ad", google_handleError, google_render_ad);

Minister for higher education Hani Hilal announced later that the niqab would also not be allowed in women's dormitories in public universities for "security reasons." The decision, the minister said, followed a number of

incidents in which men had been caught attempting to enter dormitories disguised as women. 'I took this decision to protect the students, who are my responsibility,' Hilal said.

Students who wear the niqab were outraged. 'Even though we said we would remove our niqabs at the entrance for security, the university administration still refuses to let us stay in the dormitories (wearing niqab),' Amira Hasan, a 21-year-old student at Helwan University told IPS. 'This is going to ruin my perfect attendance record.'

The decision prompted strong debate in the media, and there were some small demonstrations by face-veiled protestors, but Al-Azhar only reiterated its position.

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On Nov. 8, Mufti of the Republic Ali Gomaa – the state-appointed arbiter of all religious issues – ruled that the niqab represented "a tradition rather than an Islamic obligation." Gomaa went on to say that state institutions, such as universities and hospitals, 'have the right to forbid the practice.'

Rights activists, meanwhile, have criticised the ban, calling it a blatant infringement on personal liberties, particularly the freedom to dress as one sees fit.

'I'm opposed to this decision, which effectively deprives face-veiled students of a service provided by the state on the basis of their religious beliefs,' said Bahgat. 'It represents an unacceptable violation of their personal freedoms. It is bias in its most blatant form.'

'The government claims the decision was taken for 'security reasons,' but, in reality, it's because of these students' personal beliefs,' he added. 'These measures, which in some cases have forced students onto the street, will only serve to encourage extremism.'

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According to Zaghoul Al-Naggar, an Egyptian member of the international Organisation of the Islamic Conference's council for Islamic affairs, the move only serves to confirm that the leadership of Al-Azhar – particularly Tantawi – "does not have an independent opinion."

Al-Naggar described Tantawi in independent daily Al-Dustour as "a government employee," and said the niqab ban constituted "an affront to his position as leader of Al-Azhar." Ever since Tantawi's direct appointment by President Hosni Mubarak in 1996, Al-Naggar said, 'he has done nothing but serve the state and the ruling regime.'

Hamdi Hassan, MP for the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's largest opposition movement, also questioned the institutional independence of Al-Azhar.

'When the sheikh of Al-Azhar simply implements government directives, his words can't be respected,' he said. 'The sheikh of Al-Azhar represents one of the greatest and most revered symbols of Islam, and he should therefore behave in a way that corresponds to his title.'

'The government's stance against Islam and Islamic law is well-known and has been made obvious by its policies,' Hassan said. 'These latest decisions, by both Al-Azhar and the education ministry, constitute proof that there are



instructions from on high to discourage the wearing of the face veil.

"The state has obviously been rattled by the niqab's recent proliferation," Hassan added.

While there are no official figures on how many women wear the niqab in Egypt, the practice has become increasingly widespread in recent years.

"These decisions are part of an official campaign against the niqab due to the government's annoyance over its recent proliferation," agreed Bahgat. "But if the state wants to promote ideas of equality and women's rights – as it claims to do – it must do so in way that isn't oppressive."