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2016

Farish Noor. (2016). The Burkini Debate in France: Triggering Painful Colonial Memories. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 218). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/83430>

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The Burkini Debate in France: Triggering Painful Colonial Memories

By Farish Noor

Synopsis

The decision to ban the ‘burkini’ – a form of beachwear favoured by Muslim women today – in parts of France has sparked a reaction from Muslims and non-Muslims alike. It has developed into a heated debate about French identity and the assimilationist policies of the secular French state. But reports of women being forced to undress themselves in public have also triggered memories of France’s colonial policies in the past, and may do more harm than good to the process of integration in France today.

Commentary

RECENTLY THERE has appeared – on the internet as well as the mainstream media the world over – images of a Muslim woman being forced to remove items of her clothing by policemen on the beach in the coastal city of Nice in France. This comes at a time when inter-communal tensions are already high in the country in the wake of the attacks in Paris and Nice, and when right-wing political parties across Europe are calling for stricter controls on migration and the influx of refugees into the continent.

At a time when political tensions are high, governments across Europe need to extend their outreach to communities who feel increasingly vulnerable and victimised, while recognising the fact that millions of minority Europeans whose ancestors hail from Africa, Asia and the Arab world have been born and bred in Europe themselves.

Double Standards

The event in Nice has been analysed by commentators thus far, and many have pointed out the double standards evidently at work - where nuns, for instance, would not face the same kind of policing if they were to take a leisurely stroll by the beach. Equally important is the feminist critique of the event that correctly notes that once again women are not allowed to determine for themselves what they can wear and what makes them feel comfortable in the public domain.

Perhaps the most skewed argument forwarded so far is the claim that the Burkini and other forms of beach attire deemed more appropriate by people of other cultural-religious backgrounds is somehow 'oppressive' and 'demeaning' to women, while wearing less is immediately equated with 'liberation' and 'freedom'. This is reminiscent of the way in which some sections of the mainstream media celebrated the 'opening up' of the former Soviet bloc countries of Eastern Europe in the late 1980s/early 1990s, by pointing to how many beauty contests there were; as if political-economic freedom can be measured by how many beauty contests were organised, where women were paraded on a stage.

Colonial Memories Revived

But in the case of the Burkini debate in France, and the action taken by the authorities in Nice recently, another complex problem was unearthed: Namely, France's own colonial history, and the manner in which France's colonial enterprise in North Africa was predicated on a so-called 'civilising mission' which likewise sought to 'liberate' the natives from their own past and culture.

This happens to be a particularly sore and sensitive point in contemporary France today, where millions of French citizens of North African descent recall all too clearly the modes and means through which French colonisation in countries like Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria worked; and how it was often expressed in the form of coercive modes of assimilation and cultural engineering that often created more problems than solutions.

Many French Muslims of North African descent remember how France's 'civilising mission' took off with campaigns to alter the way North Africans dressed and behaved in the public domain; and how these efforts were intensified during the last decades of French imperial rule. During the Algerian war of independence, there were many documented cases of Arab women being forced to take off their veils by French troops, in public and at gunpoint.

Needless to say, by that late stage of the colonial experiment it was clear that these campaigns were really intended to break the will of the Algerian people themselves, and to humiliate them – women in particular – in public.

French society today is more complex and multicultural than ever before, but this does not mean that such memories have been erased from the public domain. And for many French citizens of North African descent they remain as scars of the colonial encounter that have never really healed.

Deepening Divisions

With that as the background, the event in Nice may trigger a flood of painful recollections of the age of Empire; and in the process render meaningful social integration and inter-communal cooperation more difficult.

Perhaps the most worrying potential outcome of the Burkini debate in France is that it will render integration even more problematic in the near future. France is not merely concerned about the influx of migrants and refugees from abroad, but with the integration of minorities within who have been there for more than half a century, and who still feel themselves marginalised.

Just how a policy of banning the Burkini and forcing women to take it off in public can help to overcome such problems is unclear: for it could be argued that the Burkini provided a half-way compromise that allowed Muslim women the opportunity to enjoy a visit to the beach, and to swim and have a good time like everyone else – and by doing so, become ordinary members of mainstream French society. If anything, a ban on the Burkini may well rob these women of the means through which they can participate in public life in an innocent manner, and further ostracise them instead.

Furthermore the ban might play into the hands of sectarian individuals and groups who wish to see European society further disunited and fragile, and will not help overcome the colonial legacy of the past.

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