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Tantawi says French president is free to ban burka Muslim imams say burka not obligatory in Islam



A French women wears a face veil in Paris (File)

PARIS/CAIRO (Saad al-Masoudi and Ahmed al-Sayed)

Days after President Nicolas Sarkozy slammed the burka, or face veil, as "not welcome" in France, Islamic scholars said the burka was not obligatory in Islam and said every state had a right to ban the face veil.

The burka debate has been raging for a while in Europe with countries like the Netherlands banning it in universities and the British press reporting that Muslims and non-Muslims alike are calling for a ban on the face covering attire.

As for the Islamic reaction Egypt's Grand Imam, Sheikh Mohammad Tantawi, said the face veil was not compulsory in Islam and said every head of state had the right to accept or prohibit it.

"I have nothing to do with the French president's decision. Every country has its own rules," Tantawi who heads al-Azhar University, the world's leading Sunni Islam institution, told Al Arabiya.

Tantawi added that women who wear the burka have to abide by the rules of the country they live in, especially because it is not an obligation in Islam.

"The traditional headscarf [hijab] is what is obligatory. This means covering the entire body except the face and hands and wearing clothes that are neither tight nor transparent," he said.

In a parliament session, Sarkozy supported French lawmakers' request that an inquiry be held to determine if the face veil undermines French secularism or women rights.

"We cannot accept to have in our country women who are prisoners behind netting, cut off from all social life, deprived of identity," he said. "That is not the idea that the French republic has of women's dignity."

However, Sarkozy made it clear that Islam, like other religions, was respected in France, home to the biggest Muslim community in Europe.

Headscarf is enough

Meanwhile Egypt's deputy minister of Religious Endowments for Preaching agreed with Tantawi's statements that the niqab was not obligatory and said a Muslim woman is only required to wear the headscarf.

Deputy Minister of Religious Endowments for Preaching, agreed with Tantawi's statements. Abdel-Galil was assigned by Minister of Religious Endowments Mahmoud Hamqi Zaqzouq to give lectures to explain to the ministry's face-veiled female employees that niqab is not an obligation in Islam and that the head scarf is enough.

"A woman's outfit is personal freedom and no country has the right to interfere with it," Dr. Salem Abdel-Galil told AlArabiya. "However, if a woman who wears the face veil is asked to take it off to, for example, have her identity verified, she has to do so."

Abdel-Galil said he believed Sarkozy had taken such a tough stance on the burka because of an incident where a woman refused to remove her face veil while giving a testimony in a French court.

"Sarkozy's decision is in harmony with the secularism of the French republic," Dalil Boubakeur, Imam of the Paris Grand Mosque, told Al Arabiya.

In contrast, Ahmed Gaballah, head of the European Institute of Human Sciences and member of European Council for Fatwa and Research, expressed his surprise at the timing of the decision.

"I believe this is a way of distracting people from the internal problems the society is suffering from," he told Al Arabiya. "The number of face-veiled women in France is very minimal and cannot by any means be considered a phenomenon."

Gaballah added that Sarkozy's statements would have made more sense had they been founded on legal rather than religious basis.