

# Banning the abaya: identity prosecution or protection?

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Woman in Berlin, veiled with abaya and headscarf.

Anna Johnson - As part of a pattern intended to preserve the French nation, France's top court upheld a government ban on the abaya - a modest garment worn by some Muslim women. In the United States, expression like clothing and language is protected by law. In other states like France, however, that expression is not protected and, in some cases, is being restricted.

This and similar campaigns to ban religious clothing are part of France's broader *laïcité* policy of secularism designed to protect French national identity. An individual's [national identity](#) is what connects them to their specific group of people or nation. It is built up through everyday actions like dress and language. Actions like paying taxes and supporting national sports teams also build up this sense identity. Religiously- clothing like the abaya can act as a dividing force to weaken national identity. It connects those who wear it with their faith rather than the French nation. French policymakers argue these policies and *laïcité* protect the right to believe in religion, to not believe and the separation of church and state in political affairs. The [abaya](#), [burkini](#), and [full-face veils](#) have each been banned in France's public spaces, particularly in schools. The way people dress is part of how they form their attachment to their nation. To protect French culture from the wave of globalization that has partially unified much of the West under a single identity, the French have long sought to prevent the loss of the French language and culture. Increasingly, many Europeans are identifying more with a [European identity](#) over their individual nation.

These restrictions to protect national identity are part of a larger trend of French protectionism in their evolving [geopolitical code](#). Polls show most [French people](#)

[support](#) the ban, but internationally, the move has drawn criticism. Banning clothing worn by almost exclusively Muslim women puts strain on France's relationship with Muslim-majority states. Women who choose to wear the abaya will have to find another modest clothing option if they decide to travel to France, restricting their ability to travel and preventing cross-culture interactions in France. Banning the clothing paints religious clothing and, by extension, the states that enforce its use, in a negative light - presenting those choices as anti-French. Paired with [growing animosity](#) to refugees from the Middle East, France's geopolitical code creates a hostile environment for Muslims who choose to display their religious affiliation through their clothing.

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