

Press Release

Muslim Women and Foreign Pupils Become the Focus of Italy's Election Politics

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has announced that her government is preparing legislation to ban the burqa and niqab in schools; introduce a legal limit on the number of foreign pupils in each classroom, and require parents of pupils facing serious difficulties integrating into the school system to learn Italian. On the 24th September, Meloni's cabinet adopted the decree-law, making the wearing of face coverings in schools illegal and introducing a 30% cap on non-Italian speakers in classrooms. The announcement comes as Italy moves towards elections next year and political competition over migration becomes stronger. Muslim women and their Islamic dress have been placed at the centre of a political debate in Europe. Instead of being treated simply as citizens, students and members of society, their clothing becomes a political tool through which politicians can show that they are taking a hard stance on Islam, migration and so-called integration. Meloni said that it is unacceptable for Italian children to feel "pushed into a corner" because they have become a minority in their classroom. But putting a legal limit on foreign pupils raises an important question: why should a child's place in a school depend on how many other foreign children are already there? The proposals therefore bring together two groups that repeatedly become subjects of political attack: the Muslim woman, whose religious dress is presented as a problem, and the migrant child, whose presence is discussed as something that must be controlled or limited.

This is not only an Italian issue. France, Belgium, Denmark, Austria, Switzerland and The Netherlands have introduced restrictions on face coverings or the hijab. Such measures are often defended in the name of security, secularism, women's rights or integration. Yet they expose a clear contradiction. European governments speak about freedom, equality and women making their own choices, while also passing laws that decide what Muslim women may wear and where they may wear it.

The political timing should also not be ignored. Italy is heading towards elections, while Meloni faces competition from figures demanding stricter migration policies. Roberto Vannacci has called for tougher measures. In such a climate, Islam, Muslim women and migrants can become useful tools in election campaigns, with politicians competing over who can take the hardest position on migration and integration. This pattern has been seen elsewhere in Europe. Islamic clothing is repeatedly connected to extremism, insecurity or a supposed failure to integrate. Muslim women are often described as needing protection, while policies exclude them from schools, public institutions or parts of public life. Integration should mean participating in society, receiving an education, and interacting with respect with people from different backgrounds. When it becomes connected to restrictions on religious practices or pressure to leave parts of one's identity behind, it resembles forced assimilation rather than equal participation.

There is also a wider question about the secular system itself. These policies are not only examples of individual politicians going too far. They show a deeper problem in a system where rights and freedoms can change according to political interests, public pressure and electoral calculations. A system that presents itself as the protector of freedom and equality should be able to protect minorities even when their beliefs are unpopular. Yet repeated restrictions on Muslim women and migrant families raise serious doubts about whether secular politics can truly guarantee equal treatment of people and create harmony between people with different religious beliefs and ethnic and racial backgrounds. The issue is therefore about much more than the niqab or classroom numbers. It is about a political climate in which Muslim women and migrant families have become convenient targets in debates about identity, migration and national values. It raises serious questions about the soundness of the secular system and how far its principles of freedom, equality and tolerance extend when minorities seek to exercise their basic rights. Muslim women should not be used as political tools whenever governments want to demonstrate toughness on Islam or migration. Nor should children be made to feel that their presence in a classroom is a problem because of their nationality or family background. All this is surely a reflection of a system that is not fit for purpose in governing a society.

Women's Section

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