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## A Veil Closes France's Door to Citizenship

By KATRIN BENNHOLD

LA VERRIÈRE, [France](#) — When Faiza Silmi applied for French citizenship, she worried that her French was not quite good enough or that her Moroccan upbringing would pose a problem.

“I would never have imagined that they would turn me down because of what I choose to wear,” Ms. Silmi said, her hazel eyes looking out of the narrow slit in her niqab, an Islamic facial veil that is among three flowing layers of turquoise, blue and black that cover her body from head to toe.

But last month, France's highest administrative court upheld a decision to deny citizenship to Ms. Silmi, 32, on the ground that her “radical” practice of Islam was incompatible with French values like equality of the sexes.

It was the first time that a French court had judged someone's capacity to be assimilated into France based on private religious practice, taking *laïcité* — the country's strict concept of secularism — from the public sphere into the home.

The case has sharpened the focus on the delicate balance between the tradition of Republican secularism and the freedom of religion guaranteed under the French Constitution, and how that balance may be shifting. Four years ago, a law banned religious clothing in public schools. Earlier this year, a court in Lille annulled a marriage on request of a Muslim husband whose wife had lied about being a virgin. (The government later demanded a review of the court decision.)

So far, citizenship has been denied on religious grounds in France only when applicants were believed to be close to fundamentalist groups.

The ruling on Ms. Silmi has received almost unequivocal support across the political spectrum, including among many Muslims. Fadela Amara, the French minister for urban affairs, called Ms. Silmi's niqab “a prison” and a “straitjacket.”

“It is not a religious insignia but the insignia of a totalitarian political project that promotes inequality between the sexes and is totally lacking in democracy,” Ms. Amara, herself a practicing Muslim of Algerian descent, told the newspaper *Le Parisien* in an interview published Wednesday.

François Hollande, the leader of the opposition Socialist Party, called the ruling “a good application of the law,” while Jacques Myard, a conservative lawmaker elected in the district where Ms. Silmi lives, demanded that face-covering veils be outlawed.

In an interview at her home in a public housing complex southwest of Paris, the first she has given since her

citizenship was denied, Ms. Silmi told of her shock and embarrassment when she found herself unexpectedly in the public eye. Since July 12, when Le Monde first reported the court decision, her story has been endlessly dissected on newspaper front pages and in late-night television talk shows.

“They say I am under my husband’s command and that I am a recluse,” Ms. Silmi said during an hourlong conversation in her apartment in La Verrière, a small town 30 minutes by train from Paris. At home, when no men are present, she lifts her facial veil and exposes a smiling, heart-shaped face.

“They say I wear the niqab because my husband told me so,” she said. “I want to tell them: It is my choice. I take care of my children, and I leave the house when I please. I have my own car. I do the shopping on my own. Yes, I am a practicing Muslim, I am orthodox. But is that not my right?”

Ms. Silmi declined to have her photograph taken, saying that she and her husband were uncomfortable with the idea.

Eight years ago, Ms. Silmi married Karim, a French national of Moroccan descent, and moved to France with him. Their four children, three boys and a girl, ages 2 to 7, were born in France. In 2004, Ms. Silmi applied for French citizenship, she said, “because I wanted to have the same nationality as my husband and my children.” But her request was denied a year later because of “insufficient assimilation” into France.

She appealed, invoking the right to religious freedom. But in late June, the Council of State, the judicial institution with final say on disputes between individuals and the public administration, upheld the ruling.

“She has adopted a radical practice of her religion, incompatible with essential values of the French community, particularly the principle of equality of the sexes,” the ruling said.

Ms. Silmi, who resides in France as a legal immigrant, will not lose her right to stay. She has given herself until September to decide whether to make another attempt to acquire citizenship.

Emmanuelle Prada-Bordenave, the government commissioner who reported to the Council of State, said Ms. Silmi’s interviews with social services revealed that “She lives in total submission to her male relatives. She seems to find this normal, and the idea of challenging it has never crossed her mind.”

The unease with a very small but growing number of Muslim women wearing face veils is not unique to France. In Denmark, the government barred judges from wearing religious garments and symbols after a rightist political party whose support it needs campaigned for such a ban. Its campaign featured posters showing a judge in a niqab. In Britain last year, a schoolteacher wearing a niqab was told to go home. Several Belgian cities have enacted outright bans on burqas.

M’hammed Henniche, of the Union of Muslim Associations in the Seine-St.-Denis district north of Paris, says he fears that the French ruling may open the door to what he considers ever more arbitrary interpretations of what constitutes “radical” Islam.

“What is it going to be tomorrow?” he asked. “The annual pilgrimage to Mecca? The daily prayer?”

“This sets a dangerous precedent,” he said. “Religion, so far as it is personal, should be kept out of these decisions.”

In a sign of the nature of some of the criteria used to evaluate Ms. Silmi's fitness to become French, the government commissioner approvingly noted in her report that she was treated by a male gynecologist during her pregnancies.

The Silmis say they live by a literalist interpretation of the Koran. They do not like the term Salafism, although they say literally it means following the way of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions.

"But today 'Salafist' has come to mean political Islam; people who don't like the government and who approve of violence call themselves Salafists," said her husband, a soft-spoken man who bears two physical signs of devotion in Islam: a beard and a light bruising on his forehead caused by bows in prayer. "We have nothing to do with them."

His wife said that in 2000 she decided to wear the niqab, which is usually worn on the Arabian Peninsula, because in her eyes her traditional Moroccan djelaba — a long flowing garment with a head scarf — was not modest enough. "I don't like to draw men's looks," she said. "I want to belong to my husband and my husband only."

France is home to about five million Muslims, three out of five of them French citizens, experts estimate. Criteria for granting French citizenship include "assimilation," which focuses on how well the candidate speaks French. Ms. Silmi's French is fluent.

Lately, though, President [Nicolas Sarkozy](#) has stressed the importance of "integration" into French life. Part of his tougher [immigration](#) policy is new legislation to require foreigners who want to join their families to take an exam on French values as well as the French language before leaving their countries.

Ms. Silmi's husband, a former bus driver who says he is finding it hard to get work because of his beard, dreams of moving his family to Morocco or Saudi Arabia. "We don't feel welcome here," he said. "I am French, but I can't really say that I am proud of it right now."

### Dutch Court Rules for Immigrant

AMSTERDAM (AP) — A Dutch court punched a hole in toughened immigration restrictions on Friday, ruling that an illiterate Moroccan woman cannot be required to pass a Dutch language test in order to join her husband in the Netherlands.

The order dismayed politicians who have sought to curb immigration from non-Western countries, and they vowed to fix the law to cover the loophole exposed by the Amsterdam District Court.

On the other side, the ruling was applauded by rights activists who say the government should scrap the requirement entirely, which they say is discriminatory and violates international law.

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