

IN THE NEWS - French Parliament Bans Religious Symbols in Public Schools*By Cynthia Kirk*

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This is Steve Ember with In the News, in VOA Special English.

This week, the French Senate approved a law to give public schools the right to ban almost anything worn clearly as a show of religion. The law passed by a vote of two-hundred-seventy-six to twenty. The National Assembly, France's lower house of parliament, passed a similar measure last month. Conservatives control both houses of parliament.

President Jacques Chirac proposed the legislation. He is expected to sign the ban into law within fifteen days. Mister Chirac says the ban is designed to defend the French tradition of separating religion from civil life and education. He says there is a dangerous and growing extremist threat against this tradition. There have been times, for example, where Muslims girls refused to remove their head coverings in school.

Under the new law, students could not wear headscarves or such things as large Christian crosses or Jewish skullcaps. French officials say public schools should be places of education, not places to display religious or ethnic identities.

But many Jewish, Muslim and Christian leaders have sharply criticized the legislation. They say it violates freedom of expression in France, including religious expression. Some foreign governments, including the United States, have also expressed concern about such a ban.

The ban has widespread public support in France. But it has angered many Muslims and led to demonstrations in several countries.

Some Muslims say the ban unfairly targets them. They say that some of the objects listed are cultural, not religious. Some say they fear that the headscarf issue may cause some Muslim girls to leave school or attend Islamic schools.

France has an estimated five-million Muslims, the most of any country in western Europe. Most other people in France are Roman Catholic. Several top French officials have expressed concern that the law may damage relations with French Muslims.

Yet public opinion research finds that not all Muslims in France oppose a law like this. In fact, some studies find that many, especially women, support the idea of a ban on too much show of religion.

Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin says the new law is not anti-religious. He says it is needed to contain the spread of Muslim extremism and to protect the laws of the French Republic. He says France needs to explain the law better, especially on the international level. Mister Raffarin has also spoken of the need for a law to require that patients at public hospitals follow Western rules of medical care.

The new law for state schools would go into effect at the start of the new school year in September. France's education minister says he will meet with leaders of religious groups to see if they can find compromises.

In the News, in VOA Special English, was written by Cynthia Kirk. This is Steve Ember.



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