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Switzerland's burka ban is mainly symbolic

People in Switzerland will not be allowed to wear full-face coverings in future. Fear of radical Islam along with feminist arguments against the burka tipped the vote in favour of a ban. This outcome is primarily symbolic, because only an extremely small number of Muslim women in Switzerland wear the burka.

EVELINE RUTZ

Fully veiled tourists: you can spot them on the Jungfrau-joch, in Lucerne's old town, and on Zurich's Bahnhofstrasse. Otherwise, women wearing the burka or niqab are very few and far between in Switzerland. Nevertheless, full-face coverings are now banned across the country according to the Federal Constitution, after 51.2 per cent of the electorate approved the "Yes to a ban on face coverings" popular initiative on 7 March 2021. Twenty cantons voted in favour of a ban; only six against. Switzerland has thus joined six other European nations that have already introduced bans. They include neighbour France, which took the lead in 2011.

Affecting only a small minority

Not only Muslim women risk a fine in future if they cover their faces in public. The ruling also applies to football fans, demonstrators, and advertising mascots. However, carnival participants as well as people wearing protective masks, safety helmets, or balaclavas are exempt. On voting day, the justice minister, Karin Keller-Sutter, stressed that the decision was not a vote against Switzerland's Muslim population and would affect only a fraction of the 400,000 Muslim women who lived in the country. There are 20 to 30 niqab wearers, it is estimated, most of whom have been socialised in the West, are well educated and wear the veil of their own free will. Their numbers have not increased in recent years, and they do not pose a problem, according to the federal government. During the voting campaign, opponents of the initiative called it a "phony debate" and said that those championing the ban were making a mountain out of a molehill.

Voters on the left also supported the ban

Unusual political factors explain why the initiative succeeded. The proposal found favour not only on the conservative side of the spectrum, but among left-leaning women's rights activists who believe face veils symbolise a funda-

mentalist ideology that violates the dignity of women with impunity. Full-face coverings are anathema to a free society, the activists argued. However, feminist motives were also behind people opposing the initiative, with critics saying that women had the right to wear what they wanted. In their view, putting on a niqab was integral to religious freedom.

Party politicians have framed the yes outcome as a vote against radical Islam and female oppression. According to SVP President Marco Chiesa, it is about "defending certain



values and prerequisites that are essential for society to function". SVP National Councillor Walter Wobmann of the Egerkingen Committee, which spearheaded the initiative: "In Switzerland, our tradition is that you show your face. Veils symbolise this extreme, political Islam that has no place in Switzerland." But banning them does not solve any tangible problem, says FDP leader Petra Güssi, adding that clothing rules do nothing to fight terrorism. SP co-president Cédric Wermuth agrees. In his opinion, the ruling will not improve the lives of any of the Muslim women it targeted. "We must now do something to ensure that these women are truly liberated."

Second success for the Egerkingen Committee

This is the first time that voters have approved any popular initiative at national level since 2014. And it is already the second referendum victory of its kind for the Egerkingen Committee. The group, known for its critical stance on Islam, managed to ban the construction of new minarets on mosques in 2009 – a result that took many by surprise and hit the headlines abroad. However, political commen-



Tourists will not be allowed to wear full-face coverings in future – even to keep out the chill wind on the Jungfrauoch.

Photo: Keystone

tators believe that the ban on full-face coverings cannot be compared with the controversy back then. Although supporters tried to exploit anti-Muslim feeling again, Switzerland is not the only country to outlaw face veils. A yes vote was therefore on the cards, they say.

The cantons of Ticino and St. Gallen already had burka bans in place. Furthermore, people attending demonstrations or sports events in 15 cantons are not permitted to cover their face. The cantons are responsible for use of public space, so it would be up to them to enforce the new national ban. However, the cantons are waiting for the federal government to take the lead with a uniform solution. Berne intends to make a proposal by the summer.

Had the decision been left to the Swiss Abroad, Muslim women would still be able to wear full-face coverings in public. Some 51.1 per cent of expatriate voters rejected the initiative. Tourist destinations were also opposed, with 64 per cent voting against in the city of Lucerne for example. The overriding fear was that wealthy guests from the Gulf States would stay away in future.

E-ID is off the agenda

On 7 March, the electorate rejected plans by the Federal Council and parliament to introduce an electronic identity (e-ID) scheme, with 64.4 per cent voting no. In particular, the prospect of the private sector getting involved in the scheme was unpalatable for many. Both opponents and supporters of the rejected initiative now want an exclusively government-driven solution as soon as possible. The Swiss Abroad also dismissed the proposal, albeit a little less emphatically, with 53.2 per cent voting against. E-voting could have become fully digital as a result of e-ID. It will now remain post-reliant for the foreseeable future, because PINs still have to be sent by paper mail.

Free trade with Indonesia

The electorate approved the controversial free trade agreement with Indonesia on 7 March. It was a close-run thing, with 51.7 per cent in favour. The majority of voters from the “Fifth Switzerland” rejected the agreement, which will remove customs duty on imports and exports, including on those of sustainably produced palm oil under certain conditions. Consequently, environmental and social standards have been formalised in a free trade agreement for the first time ever. The standards are likely to have a bearing on future trade agreements.