

French ban on full-face veils takes effect

by [Elizabeth Bryant](#)

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PARIS (RNS) Police arrested several veiled Muslim women Monday (April 11) and protests continued to spread as France's controversial ban against the full-face veil came into force.

At least two women wearing the face-covering veil, or niqab, were reportedly arrested at a small protest in front of Notre Dame Cathedral in downtown Paris, along with several sympathizers.

"All I have done is to practice my rights as a citizen, I haven't committed any crime," one of the woman, Kenza Drider, told French radio before being taken away in a police car.

Championed by President Nicolas Sarkozy and his ruling UMP party, the legislation bans all face-covering garments in public spaces. Supporters say the ban is critical to enforce France's strict separation of church and state -- and to ensure respect for women's rights.

Neighboring Belgium has similar legislation and other European countries are eyeing it, but France has become the first country to enforce it.

But critics -- including Muslims who do not wear or even approve of the niqab -- say it unfairly targets France's estimated 6 million

Muslims. Only about 2,000 women wear the niqab, according to French government estimates.

"This law puts France to shame -- a country that prides itself on the human rights it claims to promote and protect, freedom of expression included," said Amnesty International's John Dalhuisen.

At the Fraternite, or Brotherhood, mosque in the Paris suburb of Aubervilliers, 22-year-old Someya said she would comply with the legislation.

"But it breaks my heart," she added, "because it's a personal choice, a statement of my faith."