

Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany calls for a ban of burqas as election nears

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In accepting her party's nomination for a fourth term in office, German chancellor Angela Merkel delivered a speech that took aim at conservative critics of her liberal asylum policies, yet also embraced a proposal to ban the burqa.

"In interpersonal communication, which plays a fundamental role here, we show our face," she said in reference to the full-body covering that, while rarely worn in Germany, is a touchstone issue for the far right. "And that's why a full veil is inappropriate in our country. It should be banned wherever legally possible. It does not belong in our country."

Those comments on December 6 were met with resounding applause from members of her center-right Christian Democratic Union. And she went so far as to bring up a far-right conspiracy theory: "We don't want any parallel societies. Our law takes precedence before tribal rules, codes of honor, and Shari'a."

Considered against the rest of her speech, the comments may be a wager of sorts: that legislative action against a cultural symbol, associated increasingly with chauvinistic political projects, can coexist with an open society's obligations of tolerance and inclusiveness.

"Germany is often called 'the reluctant land of migration,'" said Paul Harris, a political scientist at Auburn University who specializes in comparative immigration policy. Millions of Germans are immigrants or trace their ancestry to countries such as Russia, Poland, Hungary, or Greece, he said.

But Germany's immigration model tends to emphasize the state's role rather than the mandates of free commerce, as in the United States. Recent arrivals are enrolled in language classes and job training, for instance, with the intent of preparing them for integration into the labor market, and cultural integration in some form or another is paramount.

Most Germans favor banning the burqa: 81 percent of respondents told pollsters in August that they'd like to see it disappear from public places, and 51 percent said they'd like to prohibit it entirely.

That's in spite of most Germans probably never having seen anyone wear it in public. One reporter's attempt at a best guess, based on experts' research, landed at no more than 200 or 300 women and girls who wear the full veil, or about 0.01 percent of the country's 4.7 million Muslims.

"The burqa is seen as very oppressive in Europe, and certainly in Germany," Harris said of Merkel's comment. "She's not playing to nationalist tendencies. This is very much a mainstream approach."

In 2011, France and Belgium became the first countries in Europe to ban the garment, using legislation that also includes fines. In November, Dutch lawmakers voted to ban the veil in public places.

It remains unclear how far Merkel's government will go with its burqa-ban legislation, but the gesture will probably go over well with German voters rattled by two July attacks carried out by asylum seekers—as well as other violent incidents, like a string of sexual assaults last New Year's Eve, which have been conflated with a liberal asylum policy in many people's minds.

Since then, the anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany party has won a small number of seats in state parliaments and in the European Parliament.

As federal elections approach later this year, Merkel has tightened asylum restrictions and spearheaded a deal with Turkey to deport some refugees arriving from that country. —[The Christian Science Monitor](#); Religion News Service

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