

- EUROPE NEWS
- September 19, 2013, 3:52 p.m. ET

Swiss Canton Puts Burqa Ban to a Vote

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LOCARNO, Switzerland—People in the southern Swiss canton of Ticino are set to decide whether to follow the lead of France and Belgium and ban the burqas worn by some Muslim women on religious grounds.

The proposal up for a vote on Sunday would outlaw clothes that "hide one's face in public," vague wording that would include burqas, niqabs and other veiled garments.

It is being spearheaded by Giorgio Ghiringhelli, a 61-year-old political activist and former journalist. Although burqas are rarely seen in Ticino, where less than 2% of the roughly 340,000 inhabitants identify as Muslim, Mr. Ghiringhelli said his ban could help curb Islamic extremism before it takes root, and would be "a strong signal for Switzerland and maybe for other countries" to follow suit.

"We don't need to tolerate this," Mr. Ghiringhelli said recently at a sun-washed cafe in Locarno, a popular tourist spot overlooking Lake Maggiore near the Swiss-Italian border.

The referendum comes as Switzerland and other European countries increasingly question how comfortable they are accommodating foreigners and their cultures, particularly those practicing Islam.

Four years ago, Switzerland approved a national ban on the construction of new minarets—the spires from which worshipers are called to prayer at mosques. The move spurred a wave of self-reflection in this relatively immigrant-friendly country, which has hundreds of mosques and about 320,000 long-term Muslim residents (as of 2011) out of a population of eight million.

The right-wing Swiss People's Party, the largest in the lower house of the federal parliament, has been vocal about perceived problems with integrating foreigners into Swiss society. In an August position paper, the party said it is "practically impossible" to integrate women wearing burqas.

"We don't want to be an Islamic country," said Pierre Rusconi, a Swiss People's Party member who represents Ticino in the federal parliament.

Switzerland also recently tightened laws governing asylum seekers, many of whom come from the Middle East and other traditionally Muslim parts of the world.

France and Belgium implemented laws in 2011 that ban the wearing of clothes concealing or covering the face—a de facto prohibition of the burqa.

Since then, about 800 women in France have been stopped and 750 fined €150 (\$200), including some foreigners, primarily Middle Eastern tourists, according to the Interior Ministry. Women who are stopped can also be ordered to take a course about French republican values, but rarely are.

In most cases, the women uncover their faces without protest, a ministry spokesman said. But riots erupted in July near Versailles after police tried to have a woman remove her face-covering veil and got into a scuffle with her husband. Despite the law, veiled women can still be seen on the touristy Champs-Élysées in Paris, an area with heavy police presence.

No national statistics are yet available for Belgium. But Johan Berckmans, spokesman for a Brussels police district that includes much of the city's Muslim population, said there have been "very few" fines as it is "extremely rare" to find women wearing a full veil.

There are between 250,000 and 300,000 Muslims in the Belgian capital, around a quarter of the city's population, according to a 2011 study by sociologist Felice Dassetto.

In the U.K., the topic has been rekindled in recent days after a Home Office minister, Jeremy Browne, said that although he is uneasy about banning burqas, he believed there was a legitimate debate to be had about whether girls should be compelled to wear a veil.

Another Swiss canton tried to force a nationwide burqa ban in 2010, although parliament ultimately voted it down.

Mr. Ghiringhelli and his opponents estimate that only about 100 residents wear burqas in all of Switzerland, and none in Ticino. Still, the new proposal has angered some of Ticino's few Muslims.

"The proposal is an attack on Islam," said Slaheddine Gasmi, president of the Muslim League of Ticino.

At a news conference at a Ticino hotel on Wednesday, Nora Illi, the head of the women's department of the Islamic Central Council of Switzerland, said the ban would make her yearly

vacations in Ticino uncomfortable because she wears a niqab. "A veiled woman will no longer be able to move around freely," she said.

Mr. Ghiringhelli declined to attend a Sept. 12 public debate on his proposal with Islamic leaders and academics, saying he was concerned he'd be outnumbered by critics. Most of the more than 100 people who turned out in Lugano, Ticino's largest city, seemed opposed to the ban.

No polls have been conducted to gauge support for the ban. But academics and human rights groups are reluctant to dismiss it given the influence of some right-wing political groups and rising anti-foreigner sentiment.

Eva Maria Belser, a law professor at the University of Fribourg, noted that the minaret referendum passed in 2009 despite polls at the time showing it likely wouldn't succeed.

In Ticino, "the antiforeigner climate has really worsened" recently, said Sarah Rusconi, a spokeswoman for the Ticino office of Amnesty International. "I'm kind of fearing the worst." (She isn't related to Pierre Rusconi.)

Ticino's local government has tried to water down Mr. Ghiringhelli's effort by putting an alternative on the ballot that would also ban most face-covering attire for reasons of public safety, but without requiring the canton to amend its constitution.

The president of the Federal Commission Against Racism has publicly criticized Ticino authorities for failing to explain to voters that Mr. Ghiringhelli's proposal is potentially discriminatory.

A Ticino government representative declined to comment.

—Inti Landauro, Frances Robinson and Cassell Bryan-Low contributed to this article.

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