Eid or Yom Kippur, Christian holidays were observed throughout the school system – and that was no less of a religious statement. Many dubbed state bans on headscarves as pandering to anti-Islamic sentiments among non-Muslim voters.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, in its 2004 report, declared: "The French government's promotion of its understanding of the principle of secularism should not result in violations of the internationally recognized individual right to freedom of religion or belief." Human Rights Watch stated, "The proposed law is an unwarranted infringement on the right to religious practice. For many Muslims, wearing a headscarf is not only about religious expression, it is about religious obligation." President Obama also defended Muslim women's right to wear the headscarf in 2009 speech in Cairo.

Many countries have since banned the headscarf in public institutions and it has given rise to much confusion. In Baden-Wuerttemberg, Germany – a court ruled that the ban on headscarves must apply to Christian nuns too. But the author of the ban legislation argued that nuns' habit including head-covering constituted a 'professional uniform' – and was therefore admissible. Then a Muslim woman went to court after being rejected from a teaching job, argued 'religious freedom' and was finally allowed to wear her Hijab. In 2007, FIFA, world football's governing body, banned players from wearing the Islamic headscarf, claiming it was 'unsafe'. But then Sarah Attar got a standing ovation when she completed the 800m heat in the 2012 Olympics. In 2011, a Berlin dentist asked young Fereshta Ludin, to remove her Hijab to get the job of an assistant. When she refused, the dentist also refused her the job on those grounds. Fereshta filed a case on grounds of discrimination. At the hearing, the dentist acknowledged the woman was qualified but argued that his refusal to employ her stemmed from the right to religious neutrality. The court ordered the dentist to pay 1,500 euros in damages. Today, the practice and politics of the Hijab is truly at a crossroads.

***

Whether one sees the Hijab as the symbol of oppression depends largely on his/her own orientation. As historian Caroline Ford shows, Western perception of the Hijab is influenced by its similarity to the nun's habit. Therefore, the act of wearing it is often supposed to result in a loss of 'civil personality' and forced claustration – as suffered by 19th century nuns. Also, much of what the Hijab represents to Western societies is derived from images of diminutive women in turquoise-burqas herded around by the Taliban. Or from black-clad Saudi women who are forced to wear the Hijab and kept from driving. Naturally, it is seen as a garb of shame, oppression and patriarchy. This is why

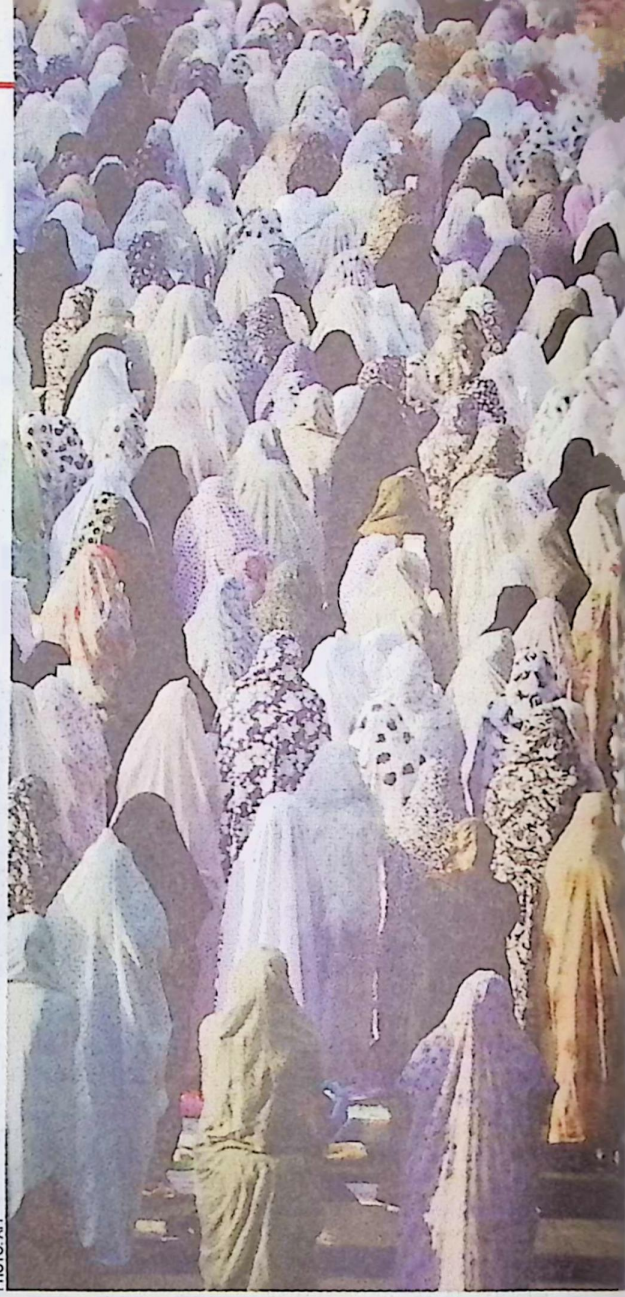


PHOTO: AFP

Sarkozy called veiled women 'prisoners behind netting'. And that adherents should have to suffer discrimination in society and the workplace – is often retrospectively rationalized and passively accepted in these societies. Those who do not, embark upon mighty rescue-missions. So, Femen activists think it imperative, even charitable, to bare their breasts and demonstrate to save Muslim women whose heads and bodies have been taken over by this shroud of subjugation.

But contrary to perception, many Muslim women in the West are choosing to wear headscarves and veils. It is, to them, an act of worship and a vital component of their identity. Thus, while the symbol – the Hijab – remains the same,