

The Egyptian government prohibits the use of the niqab in educational institutions. (Tie your camel first, and then put your trust in Allah - Hadith)

On 11 September 2023, coinciding with the beginning of the school and academic year, the Egyptian Government launched a substantial package of reforms in the world of school, aimed at making the educational process aligned with modernization and evolution in course in Egyptian society. The declared aim is to bring the Arab Republic of Egypt up to speed with the industrial and technological revolution as well as with digital transformation and artificial intelligence, through the creation of diversified teaching models, which include the introduction of national identity exams on such subjects as Arabic language, civic education and religious education, and which will have to be based, among other things, above all on the understanding of information rather than on its memorisation.

The guidelines of the reform were illustrated by the Minister of Education, Dr. Reda Hegazy, in occasion of a press release during which significant innovations also emerged regarding the clothing to be worn in school and university buildings.

In fact, referring to school uniforms, the Minister explained how it was decided to adopt a coordinated and shared approach, according to which the school council, in collaboration with the teaching body and with the parents' representatives, will have to jointly choose the type of uniform and the color. Furthermore, he underlined that wearing the uniform is an obligation and any student found not respecting it, will not be allowed to access the education building.

Moreover, female students are allowed to cover their hair, as long as the chosen garment or accessory does not cover or obscure the face. For minor girls, the father or guardian must be informed of the student's choice to wear a garment or accessory covering the head and must consent to it. In the document launched by the Ministry, it is additionally prescribed that the choice to wear a hair scarf must be voluntary and free from any coercion or external pressure, and the managements of the education centers of the various governorates have been charged with the responsibility to verify the existence of the student's will, together with the approval from the parent or guardian regarding the way of dressing.

Therefore, the government reform decrees in the teaching places a general ban on the use of the niqab, that is, that particular type of veil that leaves only the eyes uncovered. The ban immediately sparked several discussions and provoked many reactions within the country, not least criticism from some religious associations, because the provision causes the compression of

constitutional principles on religious freedom and the violation of civil liberties for female students who want to wear a more covering veil.

The government initiative represents, on the one hand, an important change and certainly constitutes a forward step towards directing Egyptian women on the path of emancipation and orienting society towards a more liberal approach to gender relations and the way of living religion. On the other hand, the niqab ban is not an absolute novelty, since numerous public and private institutions throughout Egypt have already imposed a ban, such as Cairo University, which introduced the niqab ban for teaching staff since 2015, a decision legitimized by a sentence of 01/27/2020 issued by the Supreme Administrative Court of Cairo. On this point, it is important to note that the majority of Muslim women in Egypt wear the hijab, a veil that covers the hair but not the face, and the niqab is worn only by a small number of women, belonging to that fringe of the population linked to ultra-conservative positions - mostly gravitating around the Iqwan al-Muslimin, the Muslim Brotherhood - and it is not a coincidence that the ban was introduced in the State University shortly after the deposition of the previous President Muhammad Mursi, coming from the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Ultimately, we need to think not so much about the usefulness, but rather about the timing of this new ban. In fact, some analysts tend to connect it to the particular and delicate moment that the country and its President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi are experiencing, in view of the next presidential elections in December 2023, and to the need to secure endorsement from Western countries and especially from the United States of America, considered essential for his re-election.

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