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## **Amsterdam mosque's first loudspeaker call to prayer today**



The Blauwe Moskee in Amsterdam Nieuw-West

By Janene Pieters

On Friday afternoon the Blauwe Moskee in Amsterdam will sound its first enhanced call to prayer. A specialized company connected the speakers and performed noise measurements on Thursday, to make sure the Adhan does not exceed any noise limits, imam Yassin Elforkani said to Het Parool.

Elforkani hopes that Friday's first enhanced Adhan will be the beginning of a new tradition. The call to the most important prayer of the week on a Friday afternoon will be done through speakers from now on. He hopes that this will help make Islam more visible so that Amsterdam residents can become more used to the religion. "We do not

want to provoke with this, but try to normalize Islamic traditions", the imam said to Parool last month.

The Blauwe Moskee is the first mosque in Amsterdam to boost its call to prayer. The Amsterdam city council was critical about the idea, and mayor Femke Halsema called enhancing the Adhan unnecessary and outdated. But they had to acknowledge that this falls under religious freedom - the same as Christian churches are allowed to ring their bells on Sundays.

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## **No burka ban fines so far; MPs critical, organizations worried about aggression**

**By Janene Pieters**

NLTIMES.NL (26.09.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2ooItHA> - Since the Partial Ban on Face-Covering Clothing was implemented on August 1st, banning clothing items like burkas and balaclavas in public transport, hospitals, education- and government buildings, no violators have been fined, RTL Nieuws reports after speaking to institutions where the ban applies. A number of organizations raised concerns about increased aggression and hostility against women who wear burkas and niqabs. Political parties like the VVD, CDA, PVV and SP blame the lack of fines on how the ban was implemented.

So far there have been 35 reports of niqab wearers in public transport, a spokesperson on behalf of all public transport companies said to RTL nieuws. "In two cases the police had to be called in", the spokesperson said, likely referring to incidents on a bus in Limburg and a train in Rotterdam. No fines have been issued in public transit as far as the spokesperson knows. "The incidents caused a lot of attention. Especially on social media."

As far as the Dutch Association of Hospitals knows, there have been "zero reports of incidents", a spokesperson said to the broadcaster.

The Discrimination Affairs Office, Islamic party NIDA, and the Collective Against Islamophobia are also not aware of any fines. But all of them told RTL that they are receiving signals of a growing aggression against Muslim women on the street since the introduction of the law. "People are abusing the law to address, intimidate or insult Muslim women with a headscarf", Abdou Menebhi of the collective said to the broadcaster. "The atmosphere and climate have become harsher. We receive reports from Muslim women all over the country who are being approached aggressively."

Discrimination hotlines are receiving similar signals, Frederique Janss of the Discrimination Affairs Office said. "Muslim women with headscarves often have to deal with aggression because of their headscarves. Unfortunately, many see that as everyday practice. Since the introduction of the burka law, this has become more intense. Annoying comments, angry looks or abusive words; it is increasingly the order of the day."

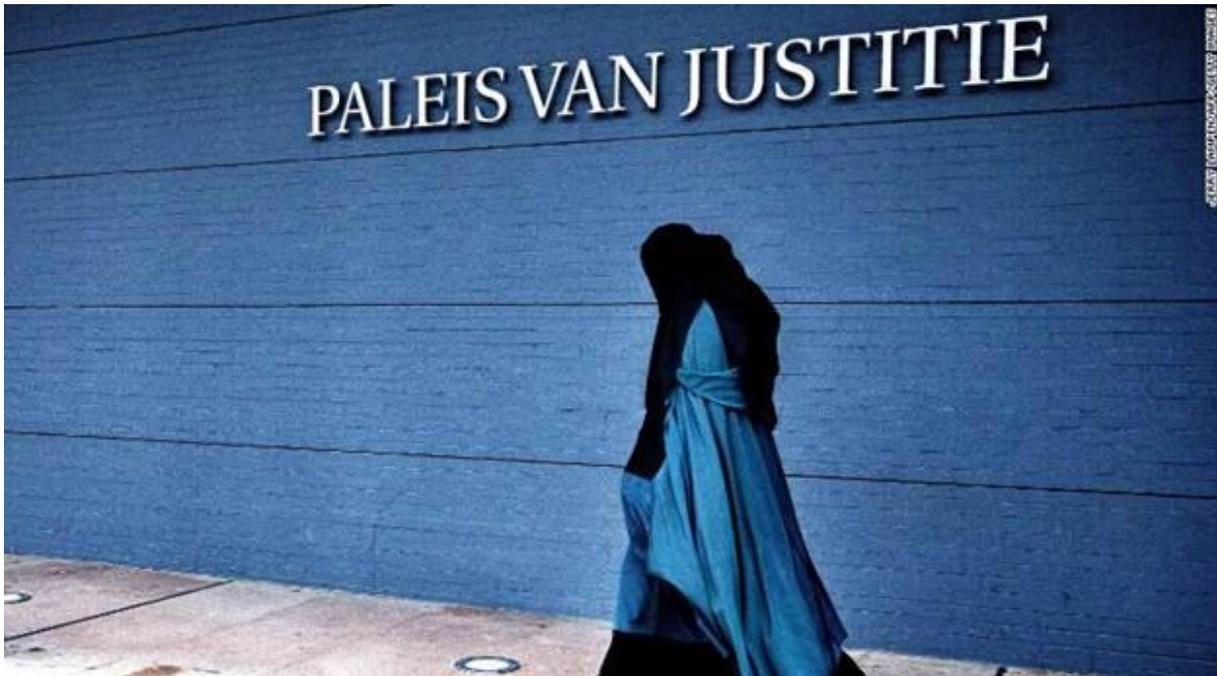
Minister Kasja Ollongren of Home Affairs and Kingdom Relations will discuss the ban with the Tweede Kamer, the lower house of parliament, on Thursday. Many parties think she failed in her duty to properly implement this law, according to the Telegraaf. Even before the ban was implemented, cities like Amsterdam and Rotterdam said that enforcement would not have top priority. Representatives from schools, transport companies and healthcare institutions also indicated that the ban is mainly perceived as a nuisance, according to the newspaper.

"The law is crystal clear, but the implementation of the Minister can be called lousy", VVD parliamentarian Dennis Wiersma said to the newspaper.

CDA parliamentarian Harry van der Molen called it "unacceptable" that the law is not being enforced. He wants Ollongren to make it crystal clear to all concerned that burkas are prohibited in the involved areas, the Telegraaf writes. "The minister does not have the partners on a lead, but is responsible for the proper implementation of the law." PVV parliamentarian Martin Bosma called the way in which the ban was implemented "sabotage", and said that Ollongren did not lift a finger to stop it. SP MP Jasper van Dijk said that he thinks the Minister "did not do her best". "It doesn't deserve a beauty prize at all", he said.

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## **The Netherlands has introduced a 'burqa ban' -- but its enforcement is in doubt**



***The Netherlands ban on face coverings came into force on August 1.***

**By Jack Guy**

CNN (01.08.2019) - <https://cnn.it/2ODOhtv> - A "burqa ban" came into force in the Netherlands Thursday, but there are doubts over whether it will be applied in practice.

The legislation applies to all face-covering clothing on public transport and in schools, hospitals and government buildings, according to a police statement. However, it does not apply to public streets.

It covers the burqa and the niqab, as well as motor helmets and ski masks, with offenders subject to a 150 euro (\$166) fine. But it does not include headscarves, as the face is still visible.

Police guidance says that staff at government institutions or on public transport are responsible for addressing those who flout the ban and requesting they remove the face covering or leave the premises.

However spokespeople for the affected sectors have said they will not take responsibility.



A niqab is a head and face covering, which has an opening so the wearer's eyes are visible. A burqa is similar, but also features a mesh covering over the eyes.

Hospitals "should not be charged with this task, but it is up to the police and the judiciary," the Dutch Federation of University Medical Centers told CNN affiliate NOS.

Representatives for the transport industry also said they will not enforce the ban, citing worries over disruption to services if police assistance is required, according to NOS.

Transport workers will not be able to hand out fines, instead stopping vehicles until police arrive.

However police say anyone who spots someone breaking the ban is authorized to make a citizen's arrest.

Dutch MEP Samira Rafaela spoke out against the idea of citizen's arrests on Twitter, raising fears over violence against women wearing the burqa as a result of the provision.

The law will be evaluated in three years, according to NOS, faster than the standard five-year assessment period for new legislation in the Netherlands.

A niqab is a head and face covering, which has an opening so the wearer's eyes are visible. A burqa is similar, but also features a mesh covering over the eyes.

When the law passed in June 2018, Upper House press officer Gert Riphagen estimated there were between 200 and 400 burqa or niqab-wearing people in the Netherlands, out of a population of roughly 17 million.

Proponents of the law, including far-right Freedom Party politician Geert Wilders, say it will improve safety by making people more easily identifiable.

Critics warn it could dissuade some women from entering public spaces, including schools.

The law follows similar bans in France, Germany, Belgium, Switzerland and Denmark, some of which go further than the Dutch prohibition.

Denmark's ban, which covers all public places, came into force on August 1 2018, sparking protests from hundreds of demonstrators.

By August 3 the first woman was fined 1,000 Danish kroner (about \$155) for violating the ban.

France has had a ban in place since 2011, with fines of up to 150 euros (\$172) for wearing the niqab or burqa in public places.

In October 2018 the United Nations Human Rights Committee said the ban violates the human rights of Muslim women and risks "confining them to their homes."

The committee said two women fined for wearing the full-face Islamic veils should be compensated and called on France to review the ban.

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## **Burka ban: No face-covering clothing in Gov't buildings, public transport**

By Janene Pieters



*Woman wearing a burka. (Photo: belchonock/DepositPhotos)*

NL Times (01.08.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2GRyKjm> - After some 14 years of discussions and failed attempts, the Netherlands is implementing the so-called [burka ban](#) today. From now on you are not allowed to wear face-covering clothing in government buildings, education institutions, healthcare institutions, and public transport.

The ban applies to a burka or niqab, but also helmets and ski masks. Face-covering clothing may still be worn on the street, but the police may ask you to remove it for identification purposes. People who enter a government building, school, hospital or tram, for example, with face-covering clothing on, will be asked to remove it. If they refuse, the police will be called in and they can be fined 150 euros.

The idea for a burka ban was first floated in the Netherlands in 2006 by Rita Verdonk, the then Minister of Immigration and Integration, RTL Nieuws reports. After investigating whether such a ban was possible, the government decided against it, partly due to the discriminatory nature of such a law. In the years that followed, multiple parliamentarians submitted initiative bills for such a ban, including Geert Wilders.

In 2015 the government [again decided to try implementing a burka ban](#), but only in certain places. A year later, a majority in the Tweede Kamer, the lower house of Dutch parliament, [approved the law](#). The Eerste Kamer, the Dutch Senate, [gave the green light in 2018](#). Then followed a long discussion on how [exactly the law will be implemented and enforced](#), which is why it is only implemented today.

The law that regulates the burka ban, officially called the Partial Ban On Face Covering Clothing Act, was proposed by Ronald Plasterk, then Minister of Home Affairs and Kingdom Relations. He argued that open communication between citizens is important in places where people meet. Wearing clothing that covers your face makes that more difficult and could cause a feeling of insecurity, according to Plasterk.

The burka ban was subject to a lot of criticism. In 2015 the Council of State said that the law does not "provide for such an urgent need that this can justify a restriction on the right to freedom of religion". The large Dutch cities were also reluctant to enforce the ban. Amsterdam mayor Femke Halsema said that it will [not be given priority in the Dutch capital](#). Rotterdam and Utrecht similarly said that they have no intention of actively imposing fines for violations of the ban. In response Prime Minister Mark Rutte said that [the ban applies to everyone, including the large cities](#).

Exactly how many women in the Netherlands wear a burka or niqab is unknown. During discussions about the ban, it was often said that an estimated 150 women wear a burka or niqab on a daily basis, according to RTL. A few hundred more women sometimes do so, according to estimates.

The police are currently looking for a solution on how to ensure that women who wear a burka or niqab, or other people who wear face-covering clothing for religious reasons, can [still come to a police station](#) to file reports.

### **Reading recommended by HRWF**

The Burqa Ban: An Unreasonable Limitation on Religious Freedom or a Justifiable Restriction?

<http://law.emory.edu/eilr/content/volume-25/issue-3/comments/burqa-ban-limitation-religious-freedom-restriction.html>

## **She escaped from China as a Catholic and joined The Church of Almighty God abroad**

***Interview with a Chinese believer who fled from China, currently residing in the Netherlands, and still fears for her life***

**HRWF (28.02.2019) - Zhao Y, whose full name is withheld for security reasons, was forced to leave China because of her Catholic faith. As she sought refuge in Switzerland, she found a new spiritual home in The Church of Almighty God.**

***Zhao Y was denied asylum in Switzerland and lives in constant fear of her life if forced to return to China. Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l interviewed her.***

**HRWF: Ms Zhao, it's not easy to leave your home and family behind. What prompted you to make this difficult decision and come to Europe?**

**Ms Zhao:** I became a Catholic in October 2011, and since that time I have suffered threats to my life because of my belief. I was not arrested or imprisoned myself, but after my mother was arrested my family was put under surveillance by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). I was forced to leave my home and to go into hiding. In January 2016, Li, a faith sister, was arrested and so heavily tortured that she gave my name to the police. Afterwards, the police went to my home several times to look for me. There was no other option for me to flee from China.

**HRWF: In China, how free were you to practice your faith publicly?**

**Ms Zhao:** Before my mother was arrested, we attended mass twice a week in a private home. A priest could only be present for one of the weekly meetings because the situation was too dangerous to attend more often. Other meetings were run by a "godmother". We sang songs quietly, read the Bible, and prayed for people who had difficulties.

**HRWF: Can you tell more about the circumstances surrounding your mother's arrest?**

**Ms Zhao:** My mother was arrested in May 2015 and detained for fifteen days. During her time in custody, she was severely tortured and forced to sign three letters to recant her faith (Letter of Guarantee, Letter of Penance and Letter of Rupture). She was released only after my uncle bribed a police officer with money and gifts.

However, her freedom is an illusion. My family is still being under surveillance and she is shunned by our neighbors. While I still lived at home, the village cadre came to my house every few days to see if my mother went outside to worship. Our neighbors did not dare visit her and pushed us to give up our beliefs. The village cadre also let it be known everywhere that our family believe in God. So, we often suffered from discrimination, ridicule, and depreciation from our neighbors and some of our relatives.

Later on, I was forced to leave home and stayed at my church member's house and lived a dark life. Every day, I stayed in a small room without opening the window. When I heard footsteps or a police car, I was filled with fear and had nightmares almost every night. I couldn't go back home, but I couldn't leave the house.

**HRWF: That sounds like quite the ordeal. What did you do to make it through that difficult time?**

**Ms Zhao:** When I think back to that period of life, without God's companionship, protection, and the strength God gave to me, I really couldn't have survived in such conditions. I never knew what would happen the next day. I lived in fear and suffered mental torture every day. Then, through the grace of God, I fled to this free and democratic country, fortunately.

**HRWF: Is anyone else in your family a Catholic, and, if so, have they ever experienced any problems with the CCP?**

**Ms Zhao:** My brother was a Catholic for a time, but he gave up his faith because of the acute persecution from the CCP against Christians and he was afraid of losing his job. However, he still supported my mother and me in our belief. Sometimes he listened to us talk about our religion and he believes in the existence of God.

My auntie was arrested in 2012 for preaching the gospel; she was reported by someone. She was detained for approximately a month and only released because her husband paid a lot of money for her release. But after her release the police still controlled her; they pushed my uncle to make her stop believing in God and even threatened him with the future of their son. So my auntie was persecuted by her own husband, and he even used violence to make her stop believing. He kept her under surveillance, restrained her with an iron chain, and didn't let her leave the house. My uncle also threatened to report all the Catholics he knew if she was found to still believe in God. Hence, my auntie lost all her freedom.

**HRWF: Did anyone else in your religious community face persecution from the police?**

**Ms Zhao:** Yes. One day in May 2015, one of my church members was reported by a neighbor when she attended mass. She was detained for approximately fifteen days and tortured severely by the CCP. During her detention, the Chinese police made threats against her family members' livelihoods if she didn't release the names of other church members. They told her they would monitor all her movements and she was not allowed to sleep.

Furthermore, in January 2016, another church member, Li, was reported when she attended mass and was arrested. After enduring half-a-month of torture, Li was exhausted. Because the police couldn't get any more information out of her, they threatened on her five-year old grandchild, saying that if she didn't cooperate the CCP would ensure the child would bear the burden of his family's crimes and live with constant bullying. Due to this threat, Li betrayed me.

**HRWF: Is there anything else you want to share about the pressure you felt to renounce your faith?**

**Ms Zhao:** Yes. Because the CCP is an atheistic party, I was educated with atheism since I was young. The CCP lavishly promotes atheism on television, in newspapers, and via other media outlets. It condemns Christianity, Catholicism, and other religious beliefs as superstition. To believe in God in China means you not only face arrest and persecution, but also discrimination from others.

**HRWF: How did you come to join The Church of Almighty God?**

**Ms Zhao:** In April 2016, I escaped to Switzerland to ask for asylum. In July of the same year, I met sister Si Ma, a Christian of the Church of Almighty God in Switzerland. She told me about The Church of Almighty God. Over a period of four months, I researched

and read a lot about the teachings of the church and I officially became a member of The Church of Almighty God in December 2016.

**HRWF: Your asylum claim in Switzerland was rejected. Do you still fear for your life if you are sent back to China?**

**Ms Zhao:**My experience in Switzerland has brought me to live in fear again. My asylum application was rejected by the Swiss government. Even worse, some Christians were repatriated to China. I am scared I will also be also repatriated, and then I will be arrested by the CCP, tortured, and sentenced.

Recently, I saw a report about my fellow-Christian, Wang X. I knew her when I was in Switzerland. She was arrested by the CCP after she was deported back to China by the Swiss government. She was sentenced to three and a half years in the name of "participating in cult activities". I am now more worried than ever about my situation.

I have submitted the asylum application in the Netherlands, but I don't know what the result will be. I hope it will be a good decision.

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) recommends that the Dutch authorities grant Ms Zhao Y. political asylum. HRWF is in possession of the details of her case (full name, date and place of birth, certificate of membership of The Church of Almighty God, composition of her family, dates and places of incidents, etc.) and can help the Dutch authorities dealing with applications for political asylum.

Interview taken by Elisa Van Ruiten with a translator Chinese-English.