



What Is Behind Austria's Ban on Hijabs in Schools?

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In January, a new government was formed in Austria after months of negotiations following an inconclusive federal election in September of last year. The new government represents a coalition between the previous federal chancellor Sebastian Kurz's center-right Austrian People's Party and the Green Party led by Werner Kogler. As part of the coalition deal between the two parties, the government will make it [illegal](#) for children under the age of fourteen to wear religious headscarves in school.

This new proposal expands upon [previous restrictions](#) on headscarves enacted under Kurz's previous coalition with the far-right and populist Freedom Party of Austria. In the fall of 2018, the headscarf was banned for children in kindergartens, and in the summer of 2019 the prohibition was extended to children in schools through age ten. The precise details of the new proposal have yet to be announced, but the text of last year's law stated that the ban covered any "ideologically or religiously influenced clothing which is associated with the covering of the head." The government followed up on this by declaring that the Jewish yarmulke and the Sikh patka – worn by Sikh boys – would not be affected by the law because the law would refer specifically to garments worn on the head that "cover all of the hair or large parts of it." In the event of a violation of the law, the school's headmaster must immediately notify the authorities who will in turn summon the parents to a mandatory meeting within four days to discuss their child's wearing of the headscarf. If the parents do not attend this meeting or if the child appears in school again with a headscarf, a fine of up to 440 euros will be imposed.

Members of the Austrian government have explicitly [stated](#) that these laws target Muslims, and specifically young Muslim girls. The deliberate and carefully chosen words of the new law make as much clear. The law's authors have provided two main justifications for this further strengthening of the hijab law and the specific focus on Muslim schoolchildren.

The first is an apparent concern to free young girls from their alleged subjugation at the hands of their parents. Rudolf Taschner from the governing People's Party has stated that school children wearing the headscarf are a symbol of oppression of women and girls. The reality, however, is that only a very small minority of school children in Austria actually wear headscarves. What this latest proposal does is to stigmatize Muslim school girls further, singling them out as targets for discrimination, verbal abuse, and even physical attack. Indeed, far from freeing Muslim school girls from subjugation, these kinds of laws can also negatively affect their educational experience and

subsequent life opportunities. The proposed ban would likely elevate anti-Muslim sentiment in schools and subject these students to greater psychological distress as a result.

The second, but arguably primary, reason for the Austrian ban on headscarves in schools relates to the country's declared battle with what it calls "political Islam." Last year the federal chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, stated that "covering up small children is definitely not something for which there should be space in our country," and Wendelin Mölzer of the Freedom Party declared that the ban on the headscarf in schools was a "signal against political Islam" and a necessary step towards the goal of integrating Austria's Muslim population. Such rhetoric and the laws inspired by it present the Muslim headscarf as a symbol of a dangerous and oppressive "political Islam" that seeks to Islamize all of society, rather than as an expression or manifestation of religious belief and therefore something fundamental to freedom of religion. The proposed ban seeks to justify and legitimize blatant discrimination that unfairly targets Austria's Muslim community.

With this latest proposal, Kurz is also seeking to capitalize on the loss of support for his previous coalition partner, the Freedom Party, which saw its support fall from 26% to 16% in the most recent federal election, largely due to a political corruption scandal that [brought down](#) Kurz's first coalition government last May. Kurz hopes that this latest proposal, along with measures to put in place a system for "preventative detention" of asylum seekers, will help him maintain support for his People's Party and also win over disgruntled former far-right supporters. What is happening in Austria merely mirrors what is happening in many countries across Europe, particularly in Italy, Poland, and Hungary. Political parties in these countries—not just from the far-right and center-right but across the political spectrum—have combined an aversion to Islam and Muslims, xenophobia, and appeals to a version of Christianity [tinged](#) with exclusionary cultural nationalism, into a largely successful formula to win elections. The fear of the immigrant and the Muslim have been used to tap into people's often genuine fears about the pace and extent of globalization and international migration, and the consequences for national identity, stability, and social cohesion. Austria's Muslim community condemned the restrictions on the headscarf in schools passed last year and will no doubt condemn this latest proposal to restrict the headscarf further. Representatives of Austria's Muslim community last year [signaled](#) their intention to challenge the law in Austria's constitutional court but, as of today, the law remains on the statute books while the religious freedom rights of Austria's Muslim community are further eroded.

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