

# Chad's Veil Ban Risks Increasing Radicalisation – by Hilary Matfess

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Last month's twin suicide bombings in the Chadian capital of N'Djamena were met with rapid international condemnation from French, Nigerian, and American diplomatic envoys. In response to the attack, Chad redoubled its efforts against the insurgency, reportedly engaging in an air raid against the terrorist organization's camps within Nigerian territory, destroying six bases and killing several militants.

Domestically, however, Chad has fumbled its response to the Nigerian insurgency's spread across borders. The Chadian Prime Minister announced that clothing "where you can only see the eyes" would henceforth be illegal in the country. This ban includes a prohibition against tinted windows on vehicles, leading some to suggest that "it's not religion being targeted, but privacy."

In a country where 53% of the population is Muslim and where "many Muslim women... wear the full-face veil with just the eyes exposed," such a ban, regardless of its purported similarities to Western mass surveillance programs, was bound to provoke a mixed response.

According to the Chadian government, "Catholic church leaders, Muslim leaders and evangelical leaders were briefed on the ban and were asked to convey the new law to their respective congregations," suggesting that there was an attempt to incorporate civil society. However, it is unclear how much influence civil society had in the process and it appears the ban was dictated to, rather than negotiated with, religious leaders.

Compounding the decree's controversy was the announcement that Chad planned "to round up beggars and some foreigners as part of a security clamp down." Those detained will be held in a town near Lake Chad, Baga Sola.

This, coupled with the announcement that the veil ban would be enforced through the criminalization of the sale of such garments and the burning of existing veils and turbans, suggests that in an effort to stem the Boko Haram insurgency's regional growth, Chad is risking radicalizing its own population.

According to the Secretary General of King Faisal University in N'Djamena, Abakar Walar Modou, "simply banning... is no solution. You can't halt an ideology that way, it causes frustration" – even in a country that

is, according to Modou, “lucky to have very tolerant Islam.” Though the majority of Chadian Muslims are Sufis, a branch of Islam widely regarded to be ‘moderate,’ the importance of religion makes the regulation of spiritual practices a sensitive issue.

The Chadian government does not have a significant reserve of civilian goodwill to gamble with such religious regulations. Frustration with the government manifested itself in March following a thoroughly secular decree that helmets must be worn while riding motorbikes.

The protests, led by students, turned violent when the Chadian police brutally cracked down on the demonstrators. Three people died in the clashes and the Chadian authorities were forced to close all schools and universities in the capital.

The president of Human Rights Without Borders in Chad, Daniel Deuzoumbe Passalet, asserted that the protest against the ban was because of the “lack of transparency over the decision process.” He argued that the Chadian government should make an especially robust effort to incorporate citizen concerns, particularly with the effort against the Boko Haram insurgency taxing the state’s limited resources.

The low levels of human development and rampant poverty in Chad have contributed to a sense of despondency and frustration throughout the country; life expectancy remains just above 50 years and the country’s GDP per capita has plateaued in recent years, hovering near \$1,600. The country was ranked 184<sup>th</sup> of the 187 countries surveyed by the United Nations’ 2014 Human Development Index.

Following the decree that motorcycle helmets were mandatory, the price of helmets reportedly tripled; this economic strain compounded the frustration that Chadians felt and made it difficult for many citizens to abide by the law.

These underwhelming development indicators are matched by the country’s stifling political atmosphere. Chad’s incumbent president, Idriss Deby, has been in power since 1990. In response to domestic challenges to his power, including narrowly avoiding being overthrown in a coup in 2013, Deby has invested considerably in the country’s military to fortify his position.

Passalet concluded that “even if wearing a helmet is necessary [for safety], the government should have initiated conversation, especially in the context of war when we are in a struggle against Islamists”, in order to prevent unrest.

Unfortunately, it appears that the government has not internalized the lessons of the previous unrest regarding motorcycle helmets. The ban on the Muslim veil and the aggressive form of implementation proposed are more likely to contribute to the grievances of urban Chadians than to contribute to the fight against extremism.

Unilateral decrees, particularly concerning topics as sensitive and easily politicized as religious clothing, could contribute to the multiple grievances that N’Djamena’s residents have against the government. In the fight against extremism, fostering citizen allegiance to and trust in the state is critical.

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