

Belgian city scraps headscarf ban

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A Belgian city which introduced a ban on its civil servants wearing headscarves in 2007, has now voted to reverse the decision.

Ghent city council, which now has a socialist and Green majority, was responding to a petition signed by 10,000 people calling for the prohibition to be lifted.

In practice the ban prevented Muslim women in headscarves from sitting at public counters in city offices.

"This is a historic turning point for ethnic and cultural minorities" said Naima Charkaoui, director of Forum of Minorities, an umbrella group that coordinated the citizen action. "Migrant populations are gaining political voice."

Several other municipalities, including Antwerp, Lokeren and Lier introduced restrictions on council employees wearing headscarves at work. Two years ago, Belgium banned wearing face-covering veils for anyone in public.

Neighbouring France, with the largest Muslim population in western Europe, has outlawed wearing religious symbols such as Islamic headscarves in schools, and face coverings in the street, although this has been almost impossible to police.

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