

French Government denies it plans to lift veil ban

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A new report by a French Government committee has created controversy after it called for an end to the ban on Muslim headscarves in schools and emphasised the "Arab-Oriental" dimension to French identity.

The report is part of a Government review into how one of Europe's largest Muslim populations can be integrated into a strictly secular country. It was commissioned by the Socialist Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault who plans to overhaul policy next year.

Among the proposals in the report — which was prepared by senior civil servant Thierry Tuot and a group of experts — was to forbid authorities and the media from referring to people's nationality, religion or ethnicity, and the creation of a new offence of "racial harassment".

It has recommended promoting the teaching of Arabic and African languages in schools. It also suggests that children should learn more about slavery and colonisation and that a Museum of Colonisation be created.

The report brought an immediate reaction from the leading opposition party, the UMP. One of its leaders, Jean-François Copé, said: "It will no longer be up to immigrants to adopt French culture but up to France to abandon its culture, its values, its history to adapt to the culture of others.

"I cannot accept that we abandon the idea of secularism to let religions dictate their law in the republic's schools, that our language, French, be taught on the same level as the languages of the entire world... that our common history be erased for the benefit of an impersonal and multiple history that champions all histories except the history of France."

He claimed that the report reversed the idea of secularism and "republican assimilation" – which required immigrants to speak French and virtually forget about their origins.

Wearing hijabs in schools was banned in 2004, and in 2011 face coverings were banned in public places.

The report said these restrictions were "discriminatory" and served to justify other restrictions that had been introduced by private companies.

Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault responded to the outcry by denying that he was considering dropping the ban on the hijab in schools or the burqa in the streets.

"Just because I receive a report doesn't make it government policy," Ayrault said after the daily *Le Figaro* newspaper drew attention to the document, which was posted on the prime minister's official website last month.

A recent IFOP poll found that almost half of French see Muslims as a threat to their national identity.

Human rights groups have criticised the French approach to its immigrant population.

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