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CANADIAN POLITICSFEMINISM

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Niqab: Radical feminism or female subjugation?

by Christopher Majka September 30, 2015October 5, 2021

I may have no desire to wear a niqab but my universe is not diminished if my neighbour does. That said, how women choose to dress should not become a “dead cat” on the Canadian electoral stage.

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Unexpectedly (or perhaps not) the wearing of the niqab has emerged as an issue in the Canadian federal election. Yes, that’s right — the Canadian federal election, not that of Pakistan or Yemen. And in the year 2015, not 1015. How is it that we are even having a discussion about how a very small minority of Muslim women in Canada dress in the context of determining the political future of Canada?

Zunera Ishaq

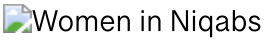
The unlikely pretext of this controversy is Zunera Ishaq, a 29-year-old mother of three, a Canadian immigrant from Pakistan, and observant Sunni Muslim who wears a niqab. Accepted for Canadian citizenship, Ms. Ishaq wanted to swear her oath of citizenship while wearing her niqab.

In 2011 the Harper Conservatives issued a directive that disallowed any face coverings during the citizenship ceremony. Ishaq thought the law discriminatory and filed suit to have it struck down. A lower court agreed that this ban violated *The Citizenship Act*. The Justice Department appealed the ruling, however three justices of the Federal Court of Appeal upheld the original decision — a

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Harper Conservatives are seeking a stay of the judgment that would allow Ms. Ishaq to expeditiously obtain her citizenship in time to vote in the October 19, 2015 federal election.

There is no doubt that the wearing of the niqab does provoke a response amongst some Canadians, particularly in Quebec in regard to what is considered religious and cultural "accommodation." On the one hand, writers like Mobina Jaffer writing in *The Vancouver Sun* considers Ishaq a **Canadian hero**, "A strong Muslim woman who is holding our Charter to its word when it says it respects the multicultural heritage of all Canadians." On the other hand. Margaret Wente writing in the pages of *The Globe and Mail* says:


Women in Niqabs

> But the people who argue that the niqab debate is irrelevant are wrong. It is really a debate about our values, and equality, and the limits of tolerance. How far are we prepared to go to accommodate religious and cultural differences? At what point must newcomers be prepared to accommodate themselves to Canadian society and values? The debate about accommodation and values will last far beyond this election. It will be among the biggest issues of our future....
>
> I believe that Canada is strong and confident enough to tolerate a few women in face coverings. I also believe that the niqab has no place in Canada, and that women who wear them should be strongly discouraged (but not, under most circumstances, barred) from doing so. Symbols matter. And this one matters more than most.

Views on the significance of the niqab differ, however, its emergence as an issue on the national political stage is in large measure due to the expert machinations of the Harper Conservatives who are highly skilled in distracting the electorate from a consideration of their social, political, economic, and environmental record. This is an illustration of the "dead cat" theory of political campaigning as espoused by the "dark arts" practitioner and so-called "Australian rottweiler," **Lynton Crosby**, recently recruited by Stephen Harper to salvage his electoral prospects.

The dead cat on the table

According to London mayor, Boris Johnson, who Crosby also helped out of an electoral squeeze, Crosby advised that:

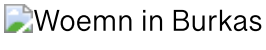
> "If you're losing an argument, if you're in a weak position, throw a dead cat on the table. Everyone will shout 'Jeez, mate, there's a dead cat on the table!'; in other words they will be talking about the dead cat, the thing you want them to talk about, and they will not be talking about the issue that has been causing you so much grief."

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My advice: ignore this dead cat. The only dead (or is it really?) cat worthy of attention belonged to **Erwin Schrödinger**, and while deserving worthy of attention by subatomic physicists and philosophers, it has nothing to do with the Canadian election either.

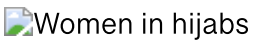
Red herrings to feed dead cats

If you still can't keep your eyes off this dead cat, consider this.


Woemn in Burkas

There are legitimate reasons why one might regard the niqāb as problematic. Facial coverings are not mandated by the Quran (the Quran admonishes Muslim women to dress modestly and cover their breasts and genitals; there is no requirement for facial coverings) and a convincing case can be made that they represent an imposition upon women by theocratic authorities whose desire it is to subjugate women, literally and metaphorically keeping them invisible from the public sphere.

Many Islamic countries have deservedly bad reputations when it comes to the treatment of women. In that context, it is not difficult to understand that socially, culturally, and religiously dictated codes of dress and behaviour for women — particularly those like the burka and niqab that cloak the identity of women — should come to be regarded as oppressive instruments of maintaining theocratic and patriarchal rule.


Women in hijabs

That said, there are alternative views that consider facial and other coverings (hijab, niqab, burka, chador, etc.) as symbols of modesty and privacy, and in a free society such as Canada, everyone should be free to dress as they please for what they regard as religious, or any other purpose. Canadians are guaranteed freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression under the **Charter of Rights and Freedoms**, and surely dressing as one pleases falls into this category.

The **Citizenship Act** states that states citizenship judges must allow the greatest possible religious freedom when administering the citizenship oath. Two levels of courts have clearly ruled that regulations that would require someone "to violate or renounce a basic tenet of their religion" are impermissible and would violate the *Act*. At the same time, in situations where establishing identity is required (i.e., at airport security), women wearing niqabs are required to remove them, and routinely do so.

At the end of the day, here is the central principle that needs to be applied in this and many other situations. Although we may not agree in every regard with the beliefs of our neighbours, or share their dress, language, cuisine, or other cultural values, however, living in a tolerant, pluralist, democracy demands that we must find ways to get along. Whether of "old" or "new" stock (to

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residents on the path of becoming citizens, and tolerance of diversity is a requirement of us all.

We need to strike a generous balance of accommodation. We have come (socially and legally) to understand that allowing lesbian and gay couples matrimonial rights does not diminish the significance of marriage for heterosexual ones. So it should be with personal attire. I may have no desire to wear a niqab, but my universe is not diminished if my literal or figurative next-door neighbour does. *Vive la différence!*

[Note: The idea of cultural accommodation is an important issue to discuss, and its range needs to be clearly delineated. There is no place in the Canadian cultural fabric for "traditional" practices such as forced marriages, female genital mutilation, and honour killings. This is the boundary line between medievalism and modernity which needs to be assiduously maintained by Canadian law.]

Radical feminism or female subjugation?



The issue of religiously motivated dress and facial coverings is certainly a worthwhile one to consider, although for the reasons outlined above, not within the context of a Canadian federal election. It is certainly not confined to Islam as keen observers of the habits of Catholic nuns will recollect. On entering an Orthodox church, all women are required to cover their heads, whereas all men are required to have their uncovered — gender-specific expressions of piety and humility.

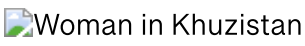
This is a vast subject that one can't even scratch of in the context of a brief article such as this, but I'll leave readers with a taste of the issues in the form of a fascinating video essay for The Guardian by **Hanna Yusuf**, a British freelance writer with an interest in feminism, interfaith matters, and the European-Muslim identity. It is called **My hijab has nothing to do with oppression. It's a feminist statement** and I thoroughly recommend it to all. [Note: For those unfamiliar with the terminology of head coverings, the **hijab** is a head scarf that largely or entirely covers a woman's hair. The **niqāb**, in contrast, covers almost all of the face with the exception of the eyes.]

Yusuf makes a compelling case that not all women who chose to wear the hijab — as she does — should be perceived as internalizing the oppression of women. That, in her view, it is instead a feminist statement. It is certainly an engaging piece, however, it doesn't really get to the bottom of some core issues. The commodification of female sexuality is certainly a depressing feature of western corporate capitalism. And Hanna Yusuf's choice in wearing a hijab is certainly a rejection of those values.

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experience in talking to women there is that for a large majority of those who wear such garments, their decision to don them has very little to do with rejecting the commodification of female sexuality and a great deal to do with religious, family, and social pressures to conform to what a modest and pious woman should look and dress like [Note: I wrote previously about this issue in my article, **Islam, Iran and women: Moving from medievalism to modernity.**]

Indeed, in Iran there are now morality police, **the Basij**, who roam the streets and beat and shame women who they consider to be "immodestly" dressed. In my time in Iran the vast majority of educated, young women that I spoke to wanted nothing more than to foist off the dress and codes of conduct that were imposed upon them by a theocracy that they, as secular citizens, felt little kinship with.


Woman in Khuzistan

Furthermore, rejecting the commodification of female sexuality can be accomplished in ways other than wrapping yourself up. There is a robust tradition of feminists in the west that refuse to buy into the hyper-sexualization of women, and they do so while dressing as they please.

In the west we have energetic programs that challenge juvenile notions that women are somehow "asking" for sexual harassment if they dress in some way that can be construed as "provocative." That the problem with such thinking lies with the men who hold such views, and that the solution lies with changing such male attitudes, not by requiring women to dress and behave in conformity to antiquated sexist notions.

So, while I applaud Hanna Yusuf's eloquent exposition of why she has made the choices she has, and of course support anyone's decision to dress as they please, the notion that wearing a**hijab** (or **niqab**, or **burka**, or **chador**) is a feminist rejection of oppression for the majority of women in the Middle East is, in my view, an argument based on shaky foundations.

However, whether one agrees with Yusuf or not, the personal choices of women in their attire should not be a subject of political discourse on the Canadian electoral stage in 2015. When climate change threatens the future of humanity, when economic inequality oppresses the vast majority of the planet's denizens, when electoral dysfunctionality cripples democratic expression,

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refugees are pleading for succor at our doors — these issues urgently need to command our political attention — and not how a woman chooses to dress herself.

Christopher Majka *is an ecologist, environmentalist, policy analyst, and writer. He is the director of* ***Natural History Resources*** *and* ***Democracy: Vox Populi****.*

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Nick Seebruch, editor

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CHRISTOPHER MAJKA

Christopher Majka studied oceanography, biology, mathematics, philosophy, and Russian studies at Mount Alison and Dalhousie Universities and the Pushkin Institute in Moscow, and was a guest researcher... More by Christopher Majka

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Best Newest Oldest

Misterioso
11 years ago edited

In order to retain power, Harper and his fellow political thugs use the inexcusable ignorance that comprises a large proportion of their electoral base to promote fear and Islamophobia.

I would be surprised if there are more than 100 Muslim women in all of Canada who wear the niqab.

The utter unimportance of the niqab in this election is well demonstrated by the fact that a grand total of only two Muslim women have wanted to wear one during the swearing in ceremony for Canadian citizenship. (Source: CBC TV news with Peter Mansbridge, Sept. 29/15)

2 0



Christopher Majka → Misterioso
11 years ago

Misterioso: exactly correct! Muslims comprise 3.2 per cent of the country's population, and Muslim women, 1.6 per cent, and as Toula Drimonis points out, in Much ado about niqab, those who wear niqābs, are "a negligible minority within that minority." This is not an issue that requires a solution. It's a red herring seeking to instigate a problem.

1 0

lifeamongtheruins → Christopher Majka
11 years ago edited

It is code just like "old stock" is to too many Canadians that fear the other, or to those that wish to bring back those fears or to those that can have those fears aroused again. It is dangerous and potent at polling time and needs to be deep sixed asap by bringing something better and stronger to catch the Canadian public's interest and attention..

2 0

Misterioso → Christopher Majka
11 years ago

Well and truly stated!!

0 0

jimmy kraktov → Misterioso
11 years ago

In a country of 35 million I'm sure that there are more than 100 women who wear the niqab, but I get your point. This is fear mongering at least and certainly has nothing to do with the upcoming election.

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11 years ago edited

"Should be a dead cat' and will be for those with open minds but for others no. I know that too many Canadians hide their xenophobia or outright racial and ethnic fears all to well. The wearing of turbans in Legions and in the RCMP controversy as an outlet for fears still sits fresh in the back of their minds and when safe and in the company of known cohorts the old slurs pass around as if it were yesterday. This niqab noise is much more than just code to all the fearful haters and is indeed a much bigger hidden issue than Mulcair has time to sort out before polling day. Are those running the NDP campaign that stupid that they allowed this issue to run wild, because beneath the charitable face of Canadian society there is too much fear of the other by too many. Have the NDP campaign brain trust never heard a group of Conservative types talk their talk? Or if not then at least understood the code words amounting to the same open talk of ragheads, camel jockeys and "sand N word" that gets toned down into code when they-Conservatives talk to the voter. As disgusting as the Conservatives are there are one hell of a lot of people they can bring along with them in "old stock" Canada,. Boy the NDP better come up with something really big to catch the imagination of the Canadian people (restoration of the Bank of Canada anyone?) and fast or be ready for a possible gross reaction to their fortunes. Some times I get quite cynical and get to thinking this was planned ....because as FDR said, "nothing happens in politics that is not first thoroughly planned"....Where or where is Canada's Corbyn ?.... also known by his initials.....yes!

1 0

Marg W. → lifeamongtheruins

11 years ago

Excellent analysis. I see this all the time and always find it very disturbing. I have also been attacked for speaking out! I have learned it does no good, so now I try to avoid these people!

0 0

lifeamongtheruins → Marg W.

11 years ago

Yes, I to have learned to avoid such people if at all possible. Most of them know not to be blatant unless they know the company their in will accept the slurs....cheers Marg.

0 0

jimmy kraktov

11 years ago

Harper will do anything to confuse the voter, and misinform them. As for women wearing face coverings, have the right to do so, in Canada, is fine but, women in Canada who do wear them are doing so in most instances because their male family members would beat the silly if they didn't. That should be what concerns Canadians. The men who enforce this method of control and humiliation over women should be what concerns all Canadians who demand equal treatment of all.

1 1

Marg W. → jimmy kraktov

11 years ago

How do you know it's the men forcing them to wear them. It may just be the women who

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Evelyn Rebman → Marg W.

11 years ago

Of course these women have the freedom to wear or not to wear the Niguab. This is Canada, isn't it? They bare their faces to a legitimate person BEFORE the Citizenship ceremonies. They do not need to show their faces to the whole country, if they prefer not to. This whole election ploy by the Cons.is just one of their dirty tricks.My God, is this kind of crap what we are voting for? No wonder so many people don't bother to vote.

2 0



Christopher Majka → Evelyn Rebman

11 years ago

Quite correct: this is a ploy that the Conservatives are attempting to use to distract Canadians. The degree to which this is a non-issue is illustrated by the fact that since 2011 the number of women who have been refused citizenship for wearing a niqab is ... drum roll please ... two. Two people in four years. And now the courts have ruled – twice – that the law that the Harper Conservatives passed to prohibit this is in violation of The Citizenship Act. Thus, these women have a perfect right to wear a niqab to a swearing-in ceremony. Yet Stephen Harper would have us believe that this is a major issue that confronts Canadians. This is what Stephen Harper would like to have Canadians thinking about rather than the many substantive economic, social, political, and environmental issues which we actually need to come to grips with. Ridiculous.

2 0

jimmy kraktov → Marg W.

11 years ago

Out of fear or simply brainwashed.

0 1



Karla Babe → jimmy kraktov

11 years ago

another man talking about women's issues...

a number of Canadian women have come out saying wearing a niqab is a matter of personal choice.. and are happy with their decision...

2 0

r **Misterioso** → jimmy kraktov

11 years ago

"...in most instances..." Please provide evidence.

1 0

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Honour Killings have been well covered in the MSM which amount to the same form of control

0 0



jimmy kraktov → Misterioso

11 years ago

Really? The are centuries worth of evidence. Muslim women who can't leave home without a male's permission, and an escort. Even then they can only do so while being covered to the extent that you have no idea who they are or even what gender they may be. Muslim men give more to the family dog than they ever have to 'their' women. Smiling at a man on the street can get a women whipped and beaten, or worse. Evidence? It's everywhere!

0 0

Misterioso → jimmy kraktov

11 years ago edited

You have failed to provide any real evidence to support your contention that "in MOST [my emphasis] instances" a Muslim woman would be beaten "silly" by her husband if she refused to wear a face covering. Of course, as occurs within Christianity and Judaism, some Muslim women are badly mistreated by their husbands.

However, speaking as a native born American of Irish Catholic heritage who has had the great pleasure to have lived in the Arab world for over five years, I can assure you that the vast majority of Muslim women are well treated by their husbands and family. Indeed, as I observed in the many homes I visited, it is often the Muslim wives who "rule the roost."

On an historical note, I remind you that the concept of chivalry was passed from the Muslims to the "Christian" Crusaders who then introduced it to Europe.

I also remind you that more than half the world's Muslims live in Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Turkey, and each of these four countries has elected a woman head of government, something the US has not managed to do.

Enough said.

3 0

lifeamongtheruins → Misterioso

11 years ago edited

Just as a reminder women were not considered persons under Canadian law well into the 20th century and a Man was allowed to legally beat HIS wife or other female household members with a stick not thicker than his thumb. Women's rights, while they have made great strides, are still in their infancy as far as achieving equality. If Arabic culture, not Islam please, demands women cover their faces in public, that they cannot be in public without an adult male member of the

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women. The wearing of the Niqab is a cultural norm and as such may never be challenged or may be discarded more and more as orthodoxy itself changes or in open revolt as those women wearing the Niqag may choose and the men, if under Canadian law, had better learn to accept such changes. I C troubles ahead....

2 0

Marg W. → lifeamongtheruins
11 years ago

The Christian Heritage Party in Canada believes Canada should be ruled by Biblical Law, not much different than Sharia Law! Back to the 20th century.

2 0

lifeamongtheruins → Marg W.
11 years ago edited

What a frightening thought for females of all ages if these misogynist throwbacks were to ever attain any political clout. I say this as the father and grandfather of a whole bunch of lovely bright and independent people of the female persuasion.

0 0

jimmy kraktov → lifeamongtheruins
11 years ago

"Trouble" is what the plan is. One side against the other. Divide and conquer. The U.S. is well advanced with their version. Harper doesn't want to be left out.

0 0



Evelyn Rebman → Misterioso
11 years ago

Very well said, I might add. Thanks !

0 0

jimmy kraktov → Misterioso
11 years ago edited

If you care to take the time and look you'll find endless examples of muslim women being badly mistreated by their male overlords. A couple of keywords typed on a Google search page will get you hundreds of pages of results. What I have "failed to provide" you with are my services as your personal research assistant. Information, news articles, blogs etc., are easily found by anyone with a desire to do so. However, here's one that comes to mind frequently. I wouldn't be at all surprised if you came up with a way to justify what happened. But, enough said!?

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Misterioso → jimmy kraktov
11 years ago

Jimmy

Once again, you have failed to make your case that
"in MOST [my emphasis] instances" a Muslim woman would be beaten "silly" by her husband if she refused to wear a face covering.
End of story.

1 0

jimmy kraktov → Misterioso
11 years ago

You'll never be satisfied with whatever I could tell you. You're the type who could start an argument in an empty room. How about this? MOST muslim men who take their cult seriously would, and MOST always do, exactly what I've said they do. The 'Muslims In Name Only' don't count here. MOST of the rest do. They infiltrate all cults, not just Islam. You obviously won't take or consider any other road but the very narrow one you seem to be stuck on. Enjoy. I've better things to do.

0 1

Misterioso → jimmy kraktov
11 years ago

"MOST muslim men who take their CULT [my emphasis] seriously would, and MOST always do, exactly what I've said they do...."
By referring to Islam, one of the three Abrahamic faiths, the world's fastest growing religion (currently 1.75 billion adherents estimated to be 3 billion in 20-25 years) as a "cult," you reveal yourself to be just another two-bit Islamophobe.
I have no time for hate-mongers. Crawl back under your rock.
Bye, bye.

0 0

jimmy kraktov → Misterioso
11 years ago

FYI: I see every religion as a cult. I don't discriminate.

0 0

Marg W. → jimmy kraktov
11 years ago

There is no justification, for violence against women or anyone for that matter, with the exception of self defense or the defense of others!

0 0

Marg W. → jimmy kraktov
11 years ago

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1 0



Evelyn Rebman → jimmy kraktov

11 years ago

That is why they are living in Canada, Canadian women (and I include women immigrants who wish to wear whatever suits them) have minds of their own are very educated and take no orders from anyone even their husbands.Respect for each other and their wishes is what makes things work. This is Canada,folks, not Iran etc. etc. Stop this nonsense and get real.

0 0



Lisa Gauthier

11 years ago

The election is over and my thought on the Niqab still stands: There is no place for it, or any mask, in Canadian society. There is no logical or practical reason for wearing it. I'm a tenured Canadian woman who happens to feel the Niqab is offensive, oppressive and threatening to women. I know a few Canadian Muslim women who wear no head covering at all and they are feeling the same way. A woman can dress modestly so as not to be provocative as can a man. To completely enshroud oneself in a loose body bag to avoid inciting lustful thoughts is ludicrous.

0 0

Gonzaga

11 years ago edited

Did anyone point out the mistake in paragraph 3? What JASON KENNEY did was issue a DIRECTIVE to not let women wear a niqab at citizenship ceremonies, knowing that a directive couldn't and wouldn't outweigh the existing REGULATION ("knowing" because the department's lawyers told him so) specifying that new swearees should be given the greatest possible latitude about wearing traditional or national dress at the ceremony.

Then when the directive was challenged and a judge said "Duh, a directive can't overturn a regulation," the government thought the best course of action would be, oh, I dunno...conduct a poll to see what people would say off the tops of their heads after a little prime ministerial priming?

With that out of the way, they thought, gosh, what next? The answer apparently was to appeal the ruling, whereupon they were told that the appeal would have to be expedited to safeguard Zunera Ishaq's right to vote. And that meant (gee whiz) that the decision would fall smack dab in the middle of the election campaign.

And in due course a team of judges came out and said something like "Dude, if you wanna change the regulation, THEN CHANGE THE REGULATION. Now get outta here!"

Plans are now in the works to see if a directive PLUS a phone call from the minister will be considered sufficient to overturn a regulation. Then perhaps a phone call, a directive, and a cheque for $90,000 from the PMO. Perhaps they figure they can keep the whole thing popping up at every election until the climate becomes uninhabitable, eliminating any danger of a JOB-KILLING CARBON TAX.

0 0

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Good point: it was actually a directive and not within legislation. Corrected!

0 0

r

MahmoodIsGood

11 years ago

It is simple, why you need make it so complicated? Holy Qur'an states: “O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks all over their bodies that they may thus be distinguished and not molested.”

Or so you western pigs can understand: women have right to not be molested, to exercise this right they must cover their bodies. Islam is best for women rights.

0 1



Christopher Majka → MahmoodIsGood

11 years ago

You are entitled to you views, but these are not shared by the entire Islamic ummah, indeed, far from it.

Amongst the four principal schools of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence, neither the Maliki nor the Hanfi schools take the view that covering the face or hands are obligatory. Amongst the Shafi'I and Hanbali schools of Islamic jurisprudence, there are (in both) two schools of thought: one that considers the covering of the face and hands obligatory; the other that considers that it is not so.

Within the Shi'a Ja'fari school of jurisprudence adhered to by Shi'a muslims, covering of the face is not considered obligatory.

So, even within Islam, the covering of the face is a minority position in Sunni Islam and is not obligatory in Shi'a view. See the URL below for further information:

Furthermore, western nations – such as Canada – have their own legal traditions not connected with sharia law, under which everyone – and every woman – is free to make their own decisions on matters such as dress.

As for your slur about "western pigs" you simply demonstrate your own prejudices with such derogatory remarks.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wi...

4 1



jimmy kraktov → Christopher Majka

11 years ago

'MahmoodIsGood' has a mind that's on such a narrow track, there's room for nothing but his own. People like this state opinions as fact. Agree, or you're a 'western pig'. Your ONLY option.

0 0



dda → jimmy kraktov

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0 0

jimmy kraktov dda

11 years ago

I tried to see if he would stray from his single line of contention and then moved on. I hopefully upset his day. My experience with people who 'demand' that you do their research for them is that even if you do they won't accept it. I figured I had a plant or an idiot at the other end.

0 0

dda jimmy kraktov

11 years ago

I think we can expect many such 'rabble rousers' to jump into these threads with inflammatory and derogatory remarks leading up to the election date. Now who's tactic would it be to whip up as much hate and baseless fear as possible as a last ditch effort to win the election? It's

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