

# Cover story

Should the burka be banned as “a hideous instrument of control”? Or is it a matter of freedom of choice for Muslim women? **Lynne Minion** reports



## FREEDOM – OR AFFRONT?

Whenever she steps out on to the streets of Afghanistan, Malalai Joya is encased in what she refers to as a “death shroud for a live body”. The burka she must wear is a heavy, hot, dehumanising cloak of blue fabric that covers her from head to toe, with a mesh window for her eyes. “It’s like being in jail,” Joya says. “It’s a symbol of oppression. For me it’s something like that.”

In Australia and speaking out against the “puppet mafia” that runs her country with the launch of her memoir *Raising my Voice*, Joya’s life is about defying oppression, despite the risk.

Suspended from the Afghan Parliament in 2007, where she sat as the youngest elected member, the human rights activist, now 30, has survived five assassination attempts and is moved from safe house to safe house every few days, running from those who want to silence her voice – the fundamentalist warlords, she says, who are in power.

It’s her strident condemnation of the Australian-backed regime and its subjugation of women that has made Joya a target, but she says death is a price she’s willing to pay on behalf of a wretched population.

“I am ready to do every kind of sacrifice for them. As I said to the enemies of my people, enemies of the women, it is easy for you to kill me, I am not better than many other women of my country and men of my country that you killed and still you kill them. But you can never

silence this voice as it has become the voice of voiceless men and women of my country and you never can hide the truth.”

For now, the burka has become a kind of shield for Joya, as it is for other women in Afghanistan. “It looks like a shroud for our bodies but today we have to wear it just to be safe.”

The burka has been the subject of debate following a speech in June by French President Nicolas Sarkozy at the Palace of Versailles in which he called for it to be banned in France.

Sarkozy said, “In our country, we cannot accept that women be prisoners behind a screen, cut off from all social life, deprived of all identity . . . The burka is not a sign of religion, it’s a sign of subservience, a sign of debasement. I want to say it solemnly, it will not be welcome on the territory of the French Republic. We cannot accept in our country women who are prisoners behind netting, cut off from all social life, deprived of identity. That is not the idea that the French republic has of women’s dignity.”

The issue was brought closer to home by ABC TV newsreader and *Canberra Times* columnist Virginia Haussegger who wrote in *Forum* about the sight of a woman in a niqab – a black face veil that can show the eyes and is usually worn with a cloak – in the Canberra Centre. Describing the form of Muslim dress as a “hideous instrument of control”, Haussegger called for Australians to rally to have it banned in this country.

“I abhor the burka, and the niqab,” she wrote. “I hate what it does to women. I am appalled that women are separated from the world in this



“I can’t see that in a modern society dress codes should necessarily be banned or stigmatised or victimised – it’s choice, a freedom of expression.”

Secretary of the Canberra Islamic Centre, Azra Khan

**Different views:** Variations of clothing for Muslim women: the hijab, left, burka and niqab.

way. And I am furious that some women will continue to choose to wear it. But then, throughout history, feeble women who are afraid of modernity have always been complicit in their own oppression.”

Describing the coverings as “tools of patriarchy used to subjugate women”, Haussegger went on to say, “This shroud of cloth thrown over women defies freedom.”

The issue exploded on to *The Canberra Times* letters page, local talkback radio and internet blogs, with territorians expressing strong views on how much fabric a woman should be allowed to wear.

Within the volumes of opinions, most supported a ban. Jo Mazengarb, of Bonython, wrote to *The Canberra Times* that, “People who are faceless have no individual identity – and few if any rights”, and Patricia Beaton, of Weston, agreed, adding, “There are reasons [for a ban] other than the subjugation of women. Where security is an issue, such as banks and hospitals, motorcycle helmets are often banned, yet not burkas.”

On the other side of the debate, N. Mahony, of Holt, contributed, “No government should legislate what can and cannot be worn. Australia would be just as bad as Islamic fundamentalist groups and governments if it dictated what clothing is socially acceptable.” While Kambah’s John Passant commented that, “[Haussegger] is supporting the very processes that deem women incapable of making decisions for themselves.”

But alarmingly, one correspondent who condemned the burka referred to Muslims as “rag-