

Anger over non-Muslims eating halal meat

By EDWARD CODY

IN a bitterly divisive presidential election campaign, France is once again torn by an uncomfortable struggle over the place of Muslims in a society pledged to secularism but deeply rooted in Christianity.

After a disputed law to ban full-face Muslim veils, the latest chapter in the long-running drama has flared over non-Muslims who might unknowingly eat halal meat.

As with the veil debate, the concern over slaughtering practices reflects a widely shared irritation against the growing number of Muslims who defy France's traditional majority by insisting on their own customs and dress codes.

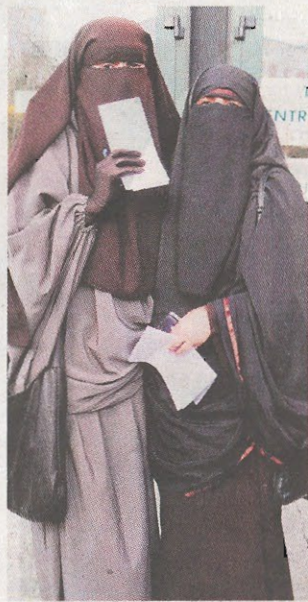
The confrontation between traditional Muslim ways and Europe's Christian heritage has erupted in several European countries as the number of Muslims increases across the continent because of continuing immigration and the customary large families of Muslim immigrants.

But it is particularly raw in France. This is true in part because it has emerged as an issue in the election campaign. But it is also because, with Europe's largest Muslim population, France has a number of urban and suburban areas where Muslims are a majority and find it easy to live according to their traditions without seeking to integrate into French society.

The number of Muslims in France has never been established scientifically because it is illegal here to ask people to identify themselves by race or religion.

The Interior Ministry, backed by academic researchers, estimates the number of those born into Muslim families at more than five million. But some Muslim leaders have suggested that illegal immigrants are undercounted and the real tally is closer to six million, although many of them do not practise their faith.

The spark for the latest round of invective was a claim by Marine Le Pen, presidential candidate of the far-right National Front, that all the meat consumed by Parisians is ha-



AGAINST THE LAW: Kenza Drider (right) poses with Hind Ahmas on Dec 12 last year in front of the police tribunal in Paris, after both women were fined for violating France's niqab ban — AFPpic

lal and that millions of French people are consuming halal meat without knowing it.

President Nicolas Sarkozy at first dismissed the claim as nonsense, and butchers agreed.

A recent poll said halal meat was the No 1 worry of the

French people.

Sarkozy's main adversary, Francois Hollande of the Socialist Party, accused the president of banging on Muslims to gain National Front votes and called for "restraint."

Hollande said the only concern should be that animals are slaughtered in humane and sanitary conditions and promised to make sure that is the case "in cooperation with the professionals".

Against that background, Interior Minister Claude Gueant, a key Sarkozy lieutenant, declared that non-French Muslim residents, if they are allowed to vote in local elections as proposed by Hollande, could gain a majority in town councils and impose halal meat in school cafeterias.

His warning, repeated several times, was denounced as a scare tactic by Hollande's campaign and repudiated even by some Sarkozy supporters.

Mohammed Moussaoui, who heads the French Council of the Muslim Religion, said he was concerned to see the question of halal meat enter the campaign because "it cre-

ates tensions in the society". But he avoided confronting the issue head-on, following a long-standing policy of keeping a low profile.

France's Jewish leaders, whose kosher tradition requires similar slaughtering techniques, also expressed concern. Rabbi Bruno Fizon, a specialist in the issue, said labelling meat only by the way it was slaughtered "would lead to stigmatisation".

Prime Minister Francois Fillon intensified the storm with a suggestion that Muslims and Jews alike should think about abandoning their slaughtering traditions, which he said "no longer have much to do with today's state of science, with the state of technology, with health problems".

The head of the Representative Council of French Jewish Institutions, Richard Prasquier, responded that he was "shocked" by Fillon's proposal, leading Fillon to invite Jewish and Muslim community leaders in for a talk to smooth things over.

More than 280 women were accosted by police for wearing full-face veils in violation

of the law between its enactment in April and the end of 2011, according to the Interior Ministry. Of those, 237 were cited with summons similar to tickets handed out for driving violations, producing only six convictions and one fine.

For a Muslim couple in Lyon, however, the law was taken a step too far. They sued the city for US\$65,000 (RM195,650) for what they called a "humiliation at the so precious moment of celebrating a marriage" and "an attack on the fundamental liberty of religion".

The woman, identified as Nassima, showed up with her groom last June to be married in Lyon. The judge, they alleged in their suit, refused to perform the ceremony until Nassima took off the veil covering her hair, a garment that was not prohibited by the April law and that was not so different from the white veils worn at traditional Christian weddings.

The judge defended her action as "defence of women's liberties". She was identified as Fatiha Benahmed. — The Washington Post