

German Court Rules Muslim Girls Must Join Swimming Classes With Boys

A German court ruled on Wednesday that Muslim girls must take part in school swimming lessons with boys, in a landmark decision that touches on the sensitive relationship between religion and the state.

The decision by Germany's top court for public and administrative disputes signals that the state's constitutional obligation to educate children can take precedence over customs and practices linked to an individual's religious beliefs.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and her center-right government have sought dialogue with the country's roughly four-millions Muslims, but have also said they must make an effort to integrate and learn German.

The court said Muslim schoolgirls could not be exempted from swimming lessons, provided they were allowed to wear so-called 'burkinis', full-body swimsuits worn by many Muslim women which leave only the face, hands and feet exposed.

The plaintiff was a Muslim girl, originally from Morocco, who goes to school in the western state of Hesse. Her parents have tried for several years to stop her from joining swimming lessons with boys. She was 11 years old when the case started.

"The plaintiff has not made sufficiently clear that ... taking part in co-educational swimming lessons with a burkini breaches Muslim rules on clothing," said the Federal Administrative Court in Leipzig, rejecting her appeal.

Two courts in Hesse had already rejected her bid to be

exempted from swimming lessons.

However, the girl's lawyer argued that she was embarrassed to see boys wearing nothing but swimming trunks.

"The Koran not only forbids being seen by others in light clothing but she herself should not see boys and girls with (swimsuits) on," Klaus Meissner, her lawyer, was quoted in German media as saying before the hearing.

The question of Muslim girls taking part in physical education and swimming lessons has prompted legal disputes in several European countries in recent years, highlighting the challenge of accommodating different religious beliefs.

German Islamic groups say they are not against burkinis.

"From our point of view, a full body swimsuit is appropriate and acceptable in Islam. However, freedom of belief and conscience should be respected," Aiman Mazyek, head of Germany's Central Council of Muslims, told German radio.

In May, the Swiss Supreme Court rejected a Muslim family's case against a school rule that their daughter had to take part in swimming classes and could not wear a burkini.

In staunchly secular France, which has banned religious dress such as Muslim headscarves and Jewish skullcaps as well as large Christian crosses in state schools, some public swimming pools have banned burkinis.