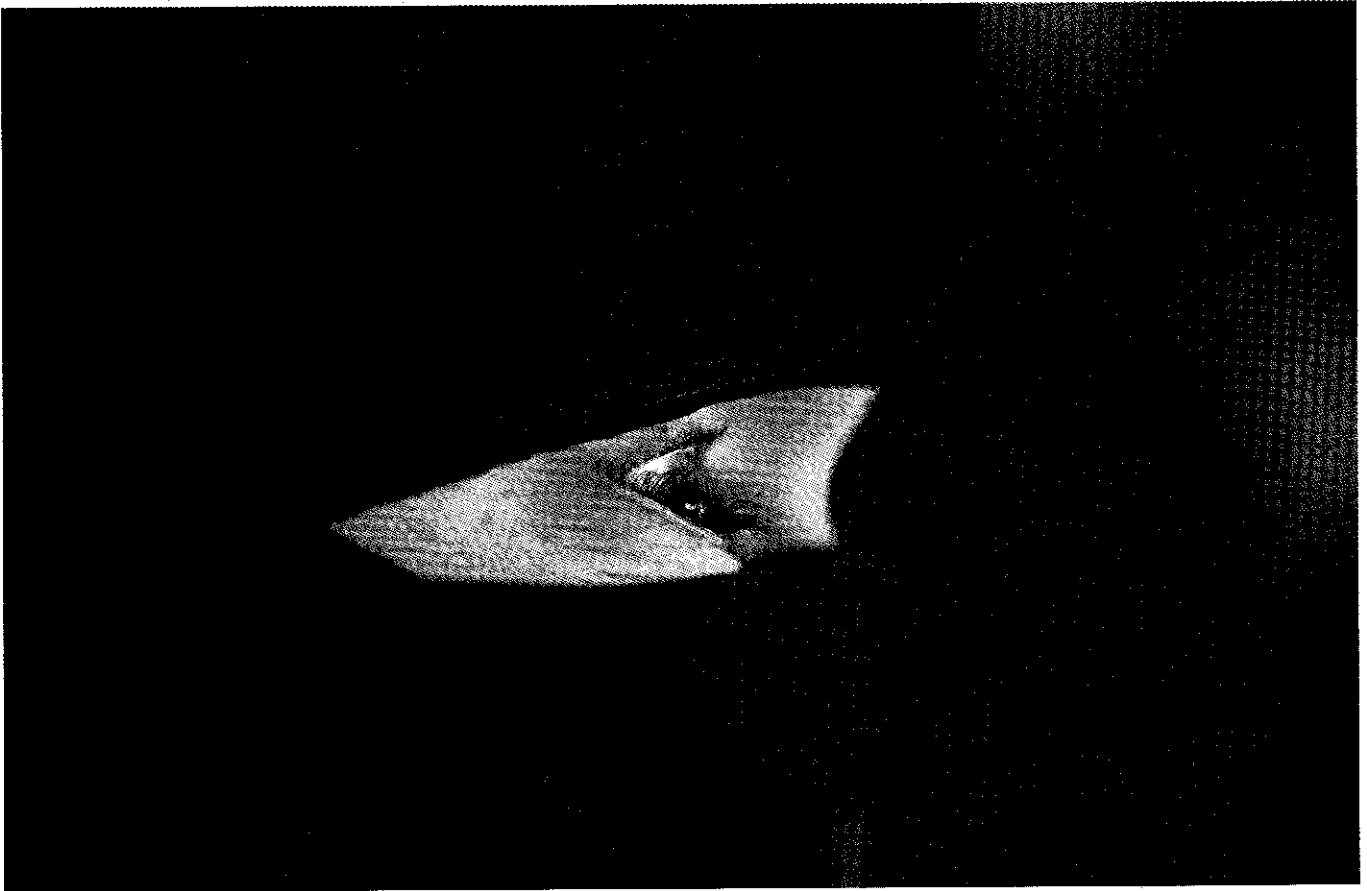


JEAN-PIERRE L'ESPERANCE/SIPA

OF FRANCE'S ESTIMATED 5 MILLION MUSLIMS, ONLY ABOUT 2,000 wear the full-face Islamic veil. Yet this micro-minority so alarms the mighty French Republic that its fractious politicians have united in the fight against the burqa. As is usual when the many bully the few, the majority are likely to have their way. On July 13, the National Assembly passed a draft law (by a vote of 335 to 1) declaring that "no one can, in the public space, wear clothing intended to hide the face." Critics of the veil have described it as oppressive to women, although few seem to have asked the veiled 2,000 if they feel oppressed. Others have posited that the burqa is antithetical to French culture, a reasoning shot through with the very intolerance that is often laid at the door of Muslims. The worst of the arguments for the ban came from Jean-François Copé, the Assembly's majority leader, who asked, with Gallic archness, "How can you establish a relationship with a person who, by hiding a smile or a glance ... refuses to exist in the eyes of others?" If veiled Frenchwomen are forced to reveal their faces, will people like Copé hide theirs, in shame? —BY ROBBY GHOSH

7/13/10: PARIS

The Moment



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