

# Rep. Ilhan Omar prompts new rule that allows, for the first time in 181 years, head coverings on House floor

By Michelle Boorstein



January 4, 2019



A newly diverse House of Representatives has passed a rule that, for the first time in 181 years, allows head coverings to be worn on the House floor for religious reasons.


The rules package passed Thursday, 234 to 197, includes a number of provisions, among them several seeking to “restore inclusion and diversity.” It passed the same day the country’s first female Muslim members of Congress took office — Rashida Tlaib of Michigan and Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, who wears a head covering. Both women are Democrats.




Omar celebrated the change on Twitter:

**Ilhan Omar**   
@IlhanMN 

Yesterday, Congress voted to lift a 181 year ban on headwear to make the [#116thCongress](#) more inclusive for all.

I thank my colleagues for welcoming me, and I look forward to the day we lift the Muslim ban separating families all over the U.S. from their loved ones.

2:25 PM · Jan 4, 2019 

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The ban on head coverings has been in place since 1837, the [Washington Post](#) history blog [Retropolis](#) reported Friday.

According to the [Web page](#) of the House historian, the 1837 measure passed with weirdly little debate, considering that efforts to keep heads bare had been going down in flames for years. Some opponents of the ban before 1837 argued that there was nowhere for men (no women in office then, obviously) to put their hats. Others said wearing hats showed a connection to the British House of Commons, where lawmakers wore hats during debates to reflect their independence from the king of England.

“Regarding then this usage as merely ‘the outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual’ freedom of this body from all executive control or interference, let us preserve it,” John M. Patton of Virginia argued on the floor of the House. “And whenever, if ever, our executive magistrates shall attempt to employ any improper influence on this body, let us be found with our hats on.”

House historians told [Retropolis](#) that French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville noted the general lack of decorum in the House in the early 1800s. “One is struck by the vulgar demeanor of that great assembly,” de Tocqueville wrote. Members used chewing tobacco and spat, smoked cigars, carried weapons, swilled liquor, and propped their feet on their desks.

This week, the argument in favor of lifting the ban was different. It was proposed last month by Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), then the House minority leader; Rep. Jim McGovern (Mass.), the House Rules Committee’s ranking Democrat; and Omar, of Minnesota. It was proposed to accommodate Omar. The rule change reads:

“During the session of the House, a Member, Delegate, or Resident Commissioner may not wear *nonreligious headdress or* a hat or remain by the Clerk’s desk during the call of the roll or the counting of ballots. A person on the floor of the House may not smoke or use a mobile electronic device that impairs decorum.”

Nathan Diamant, executive director of the Orthodox Union Advocacy Center, which represents the interests of Orthodox Jews, said when the rule change was recently proposed that no Jewish House member had made the ban an issue in the past. However, he said there have been special House sessions when Jewish men wore head coverings — including when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addressed Congress, and Israeli officials wore yarmulkes — called “kipot” in Hebrew.

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“The Orthodox Union has long supported laws and policies that foster the accommodation of religious practices in the workplace. Religious practices — such as wearing religious garb, whether a kippot or a hijab, should be accommodated in all workplaces — including in the halls of Congress,” he said.

*Mike DeBonis contributed to this report.*

By Michelle Boorstein

Michelle Boorstein has been a religion reporter since 2006. She has covered the shifting blend of religion and politics under four U.S. presidents, chronicled the rise of secularism in the United States, and broken financial and sexual scandals from the synagogue down the street to the Mormon Church in Utah to the Vatican. [!\[\]\(4729e517bc6a7cd81c8025b9646574fb\_img.jpg\) Twitter](#)

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