

Muslim Woman Can't Wear Veil in License Photo

By Mike Branom
The Associated Press

She had argued that asking her to remove it violated her religious rights. Florida authorities countered that photo identification is necessary for public safety.

Orlando, Fla.- A Florida judge ruled Friday that a Muslim woman cannot wear a veil in her driver's license photo, agreeing with state authorities that the practice could help terrorists conceal their identities.

After hearing three days of testimony last week, Circuit Judge Janet C. Thorpe ruled that Sulthaana Freeman's right to free exercise of religion would not be infringed by having to show her face on her license.

Thorpe said that state "has a compelling interest in protecting the public from criminal activities and security threats" and "having access to photo image identification is essential to promote that interest."

Freeman, 35, had obtained a license in 2001 that showed her veiled with only her eyes visible through a slit. But after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the state demanded that she return to have her photo retaken with her face uncovered. She refused and the state revoked her license.

Freeman sued the state of Florida, saying it would violate her Islamic beliefs to show her face publicly.

Her case was taken up by the American Civil Liberties Union, which saw the case as a test of free religious expression. Some conservative commentators ridiculed the case, saying it would be absurd to allow people to obscure their faces in ID photos.

Assistant Attorney General Jason Vail had argued that Islamic law has exceptions that allow women to expose their faces if it serves a public good, and that arrangements could be made to have Freeman photographed with only women present to allay her concerns about modesty.

"Nothing is more important than making sure that our people are safe, and (Thorpe's) good logic in making sure Floridians continue to be able to be safe is very, very important," Florida Attorney General Charlie Crist said Friday.

Freeman's lawyers argued that instead of a driver's license photo, she could use other documents such as a birth certificate or Social Security card to prove her identity.

Freeman, a convert to Islam previously known as Sandra Kellar, started wearing a veil in 1997. She had a mug shot taken without the veil after her arrest in Illinois in 1998 on a domestic battery charge involving one of twin 3-year-old sisters who were in her foster care.

Child welfare workers told investigators that Freeman and her husband had used their concerns about religious modesty to hinder them from looking for bruises on the girls, according to police records. The girls were removed from the home.