

Dati Does U-Turn on Virginity Annulment Marriage

The French justice minister, Rachida Dati, has once again shown that she has a less than a firm grasp of her job by doing a complete volte face in a case that has been making the headlines here in France over the past week.

On Monday Dati asked the public prosecutors office to appeal a court ruling, which had annulled a marriage because the wife had lied about being a virgin.

When the case first came to public attention last week, Dati refused to intervene (she actually supported the decision by the court). But a heated debate has since raged – largely fuelled by the media – and the justice minister (or is it the president, Nicolas Sarkozy?) has now decided it's time to act.

The case involves a man who suspected that his bride – also a Moslem – had lied about being a virgin before they were married in 2006.

His wife at first assured him she was “pure” but later revealed that she had indeed had sex before marriage. The wife returned to her family “in disgrace” and although she was initially reluctant to assent to her husband’s request to seek an annulment, she eventually agreed.

In April a judge in the northern French city of Lille granted the couple’s request for an annulment on the grounds that the man had been “mistaken about the essential qualities” of his wife-to-be. Such a term of course leaves the door wide open for a myriad of potential interpretations.

The media didn’t actually get wind of the story until last week but not surprisingly once it broke it created an uproar with many politicians, women’s rights campaigners and leading French Moslem figures denouncing the court’s ruling as both a breach of a woman’s privacy and an offence – in legal terms – to the equality of men and women.

While the debate raged Dati appeared to say very little and do even less – until that is her immediate boss, the prime minister, François Fillon, stepped in.

Fillon suggested that annulling a marriage on grounds of virginity was tantamount to taking France – a secular country - back in time and he didn’t want “people one day to be able to make virginity a constitutional element of marital consent.”

Dati’s hesitance in taking the decision to request an appeal is perhaps to a certain extent further proof - to put it kindly - of her political inexperience. Before she became justice minister last year Dati had never held office.

Critics – and there are many who accuse Dati of sheer incompetence – will be less generous in their assessment.

She has already raised the hackles of many in the legal profession by the manner in which she has tried to force through reforms to the judicial system. And Dati is often the target of much media ridicule, being portrayed as an overbearing boss. Since she took over at the justice ministry there have been a dozen resignations among her staff.

Dati has also come in for a fair amount of stick for her spending habits especially after she admitted that her department had spent over two-thirds of its annual €200,000 entertainment budget in the first three months of this year.

Her delayed decision to act in this latest case – albeit a controversial one - will hardly have increased her political stock.

About the Author

Johnny Summerton is a Paris-based broadcaster, writer and journalist specializing in politics, sport and travel. For more on what’s making the headlines here in France, log on to his site at <http://www.persiflagefrance.com>

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