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How it feels to be an outsider

By LOUISE PEMBLE
13nov05

TO walk around Perth dressed as a Muslim is to be treated as an outsider in your own town.

In a week of allegations that Muslims were plotting a terrorist attack in Australia, I donned full Islamic garb and walked through the city to gauge public reaction.

Would people see me as a harmless shopper, or would they suspect I was hiding a bomb under my clothes?

My mission was to test tolerance towards Muslims by dressing as one for the day.

I had the full support of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, whose president, Ameer Ali, viewed it as a chance to highlight some of the issues faced by Australia's Muslims.

I visited shops and cafes in Forrest Chase, Northbridge and Hay St Mall, before catching a bus and train.

I was surprised at how accepting younger people were, suggesting that Perth may be able to shrug off racism.

But I wasn't prepared for the hostility from older Australians. The first cheap shot came from an elderly woman walking through Forrest Chase. "Stupid woman," she hissed at her mate as they passed me.

Later, as I was waiting at the crosswalk outside Perth railway station, a woman in her 60s saw me standing beside her and said to her companion: "Move away from the bomber."

With the help of Perth's Muslim community, I was fitted in black trousers, a long black dress called an abya, a headscarf (hijab) and a facepiece (niqab).



UNCOVERED: Reporter Louise Pemble dressed as a Muslim.

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My eyes were the only visible part of my body.

I chose the facepiece because I wanted to test its impact on others, but my Muslim adviser told me it was up to individuals to decide whether they wore just a headscarf or covered their entire face.

My senses were on high alert the minute I stepped out of *The Sunday Times* building.

Most people did a double take on seeing me and then either gave me a hostile stare or – in the case of several young women – smiled encouragingly.

It soon became obvious that many people thought I was dressed this way as an act of defiance. In their view, I was snubbing my nose at the anti-Muslim feeling said to be running high in the Australian community.

I had heard of Muslim women being spat at and abused. One woman even had her headscarf torn from her head at Carousel Shopping Centre.

In the morning, I was accompanied by a Muslim woman wearing the headscarf, but not the facepiece that I wore. In our two hours of walking around the city we were twice subjected to vilification.

"Imagine how this must affect you if it happened every time you left your house," she said.

It was then I realised how much we take for granted our right to feel safe in our own community and how people take only seconds to decide if you are friend or enemy.

But for every snide remark and hostile stare, I was surprised by the extra respect I was shown by young men and women.

Every shopkeeper I approached was much more polite than I had experienced when dressed in my usual clothes.

And on a train, where I feared I might be regarded as a suicide bomber, I was twice offered a seat. It was a similar story on a bus, which was standing-room only.

By this stage I had removed the niqab so that my face was showing – but nothing else. This seemed to ease some of the tension I had sensed earlier in the day.

Back at the office, workmates asked me how uncomfortable I had been walking around Perth in my Muslim clothes.

The icy stares on the street had forced me for the first time in my life to be wary of anyone who came near me.

Of all the garments I wore, the facepiece caused the most discomfort. With it positioned just under my eyes, I found it difficult to look straight down.

It also made drinking a juice in a city cafe a challenge.

On the plus side, I found being hidden under all those garments surprisingly liberating. For the first time I was able to walk down the street without the usual scrutiny of my figure, face and hair.

On the downside, dressing as a Muslim woman showed me how it feels to leave home every day unsure of your own safety.

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