

LOCAL // NEWS

Quebec proposes ban on religious clothing for public workers

By TRACEY LINDEMAN, Associated Press

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In this Thursday, April 4, 2019, photo, kindergarten teacher Haniyfa Scott gives a lesson during class in Montreal. The Quebec government's recently tabled Bill 21 bans the wearing of religious symbols for new government placed employees within schools, the courts and law enforcement. Bill 21 is Quebec's fourth legislative attempt since 2011 ...

Photo: Graham Hughes, AP

MONTREAL (AP) — A proposal to ban many public employees from wearing religious clothing is creating a fiery debate in the Canadian province of Quebec, where people are fighting to freely practice their religion — or to be free of it.

The measure introduced late last month would prohibit civil servants, teachers, nurses, bus drivers, lawyers and other people who interact with the public from wearing symbols of religion while at work.

It would apply to Sikh turbans, Christian jewelry and Jewish yarmulkes, but the focus of the controversy has been over hijabs worn by many Muslim women in Quebec.

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"The proposed legislation will affect Muslims more than other groups as they are the fastest growing religious group," said Nelson Wiseman, a political science professor at the University of Toronto. Muslims represent about 3% of Quebec's 8.3 million people.

Thousands of demonstrators attended a recent march in Montreal to protest the measure, with some holding signs saying, "No one tells women what they can wear" and "It's what's in my head, not on my head, that matters."

Even Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who is from Montreal, has spoken ill of Bill 21: "It's unthinkable to me that in a free society we would legitimize discrimination against citizens based on their religion," he said.

Christian, Jewish, Muslim and even secular groups across the province have denounced the measure, as have school boards, political parties and some municipal leaders.

However, on Friday Montreal Mayor Valérie Plante said that while she personally opposes the bill, Montreal would not disobey it if it is passed.

That said, next week city councilors will vote on a bipartisan declaration that argues Quebec is already secular and doesn't require additional legislation.

Earlier this month, Quebec Premier Francois Legault told reporters that the bill would reinforce gender equality in the province. The new measure would also help him make good on an electoral promise.

"I think at this point in Quebec in 2019, people who are in an authority position, which includes teachers (shouldn't wear religious symbols), I think it's reasonable. It's fair," he

said. "We have to think about what's best for our children."

The history behind the measure is rooted in Quebec's "Quiet Revolution" of the 1960s, a movement that weaned the province away from political and cultural domination by the Catholic Church. But critics also say it's motivated by more recent growing anti-Muslim sentiment.

The debate also pits two ideas of secularism against one another: A stricter European interpretation and a North American version that embraces the idea of religious freedom.

Quebec is torn because it shares a long history and language with France — which along with Denmark, Belgium and Austria has banned face-covering garments — but it's also heavily influenced by North American culture, said Bertrand Lavoie, a researcher at the University of Sherbrooke who in 2018 published a book on the relationship between Islam, religious freedom and public institutions in Quebec.

"What's unique to Quebec is that these two concepts of secularism are facing off in the public sphere, among politicians, academics, lawyers and even judges," Lavoie told The Associated Press.

Many who support Bill 21 say that even if women choose to wear the hijab, the garment is rooted in the idea of women's inferiority. Prohibiting it, they say, would help promote gender equality.

"The hijab is a symbol of oppression. It's an invention by Islamists to control women," said Ameni Ben Ammar, an accountant in Montreal who immigrated from Tunisia, a majority-Muslim country, in 2013.

"They convinced women it would protect them from sexual assault. For me, it's an insult to both men and women," she said, referring to the hijab's resurgence in the 1970s.

The debate has tangled issues of gender, race and religion, with Muslim women caught in the crosshairs, said Saaz Taher, a doctoral candidate at the University of Montreal who is studying ethnicity and citizenship.

"Racialized women's bodies are constantly a topic of public discourse. We feel (authorized) to judge the best way for women to be free and emancipated," said Taher,

who added that Muslim women should be allowed to wear the hijab by choice.

Lavoie said anti-minority sentiment in the province has grown since 2001, when a Sikh boy brought a kirpan — a ceremonial dagger — to school. The incident caused a debate over how far the province should go to accommodate religion.

In 2007, a provincial commission studied the issue and suggested that only people yielding coercive power, such as judges, police officers and prison guards, should abstain from wearing religious symbols.

Bill 21 is Quebec's fourth legislative attempt since 2011 to regulate the wearing of religious symbols for people working in the public sphere, and for the first time it invokes a constitutional clause allowing local governments to override some constitutional rights.

Lavoie said that's a clear sign backers know the measure is discriminatory.

"The public's perception is that there's a problem (with Islam), and if there's a problem, we have to fix it," Lavoie said.

The province was stunned in 2017 when a gunman opened fire in a Quebec City mosque, killing six and wounding 19, and racist groups appear to still be growing.

"I've never seen it like this," said Salam Elmenyawy, president of the Montreal Council of Muslims, who immigrated to Quebec from Egypt in 1972 and believes Bill 21 is an outcropping of anti-Muslim sentiment.

"This hate was manufactured. This hate did not come by accident," he said.

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