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Americas

Quebec to appeal court ruling on disputed religious symbols law

Reuters, Allison Lampert



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People protest Quebec's new Bill 21, which will ban teachers, police, government lawyers and others in positions of authority from wearing religious symbols such as Muslim head coverings and Sikh turbans, in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, June 17, 2019. REUTERS/Christinne Muschi

The Canadian province of Quebec said on Tuesday it would appeal a court ruling that exempts some teachers and provincial politicians from a controversial law that bans public employees from wearing religious symbols.

The ruling, which upheld most of a 2019 law, stops it from applying to educators in Quebec's minority English-language school boards since they hold special rights over education under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Quebec Justice Minister Simon Jolin-Barrette said the decision would be appealed to ensure that it applies to all. The law still prohibits many civil servants, including judges and police officers, from wearing religious symbols such as hijabs and turbans on the job.

The Quebec government has said the law was designed to preserve secularism in the mainly French-speaking province,

"We cannot divide Quebec in two," Premier François Legault said on Tuesday.

The law was passed by the province's ruling centre-right Coalition Avenir Quebec although other governments had been trying for years to impose such restrictions.

LAWSUITS

Multiple lawsuits have challenged the law, calling it unconstitutional. Several Muslim women said they were refused teaching jobs because they wore a headscarf, or hijab.

Yusuf Faqiri, Quebec director for the National Council of Canadian Muslims, said "it's not the last day" that we will be speaking about the law.

A spokeswoman for Canadian Justice Minister David Lametti said the federal government was reviewing the decision.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made clear in 2019 that he opposed the law but has not mentioned it since. The case is sensitive for the ruling Liberals since Quebec will be of critical importance in an election expected later this year.

A March 2021 poll found a majority of Quebecers favored such a ban.

Besides staff in the English-language school system, the ruling also exempts members of Quebec's provincial parliament.

"We are elated," said Joe Ortona, chair of the English Montreal School Board. "It means that we can now hire any qualified teacher to work in our system regardless of whether they choose to wear a religious symbol."

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