

Quebec to prohibit women wearing Muslim veil from receiving public services

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The Quebec Liberal government of Jean Charest is vowing to adopt as law its chauvinist, anti-democratic Bill 94 during the fall session of the National Assembly.

If passed, this law would prohibit women wearing the niqab or burqa, i.e. a full Muslim face veil, from obtaining services from public and para-governmental institutions under Quebec jurisdiction, including doctors' offices and health clinics and government-funded schools, colleges (CEGEPs), and universities. Women wearing a full face veil would also be prevented from working in such institutions.

Premier Jean Charest described Bill 94 in these terms: "Two words: Uncovered face. The principle is clear. The person providing a service and the person obtaining a service must have their face uncovered." The government has since said that a "humanitarian" exception will be made in cases of medical emergency.

Bill 94, which has been generally well received by Quebec's corporate media and political elite, was initially tabled last March following a trumped-up media furor over a Muslim woman who chose to wear the niqab while attending a government-sponsored French-language course for immigrants.

This furor was itself only the latest stage in a now almost four year-old debate in Quebec over "reasonable accommodation"—a debate in which much of the press and political elite have charged that too many "concessions" have been made to immigrants and religious minorities and that they should be called upon to do more to "respect" and adhere to Quebec values.

This campaign was spearheaded by the rightwing populist Action démocratique du Québec, which placed it at the center of its campaign in the spring 2007 Quebec election. The media, especially the *Journal de Montréal* and other Quebecor tabloids, strongly supported this campaign, hoping to use it to establish a popular base of support for rightwing policies. For many years, Quebec's business elite has been expressing frustration and anger over the lack of popular support for "free market" policies, especially for the dismantling of Medicare (universal free public health insurance) and other public and social services.

The governing Liberals and the official opposition Parti Québécois (PQ), a Quebec *indépendantiste* that has moved sharply to the right over the past two decades, adapted to the ADQ campaign, notably in prevailing upon the *Directeur général des élections du Québec* to change the province's election regulations on the eve of the 2007 vote to force Muslim women to unveil themselves if they wanted to exercise their right to vote. (See, "Quebec state yields to right-wing provocation on eve of provincial election: A warning to workers")

In the wake of the 2007 election, the PQ decided it had to seize back the mantle of foremost "defender" of Quebec culture and Québécois "identity" from the ADQ. Toward that end, the party's new leader, Pauline Marois, proposed in the fall of 2007 legislation that would deny "Quebec citizenship" to persons newly arrived to Quebec who failed a French competency test or refused to pledge to uphold "Quebec values."

Under Marois' proposal, those without Quebec citizenship would be stripped of important political rights, including the right to stand for to the National Assembly, city and town councils, and school boards.

The Charest government's move to deny rights to Muslim women is part of a global phenomenon. In all the advanced capitalist countries, ruling elites—discredited by the economic crisis, mounting social inequality, and rising militarism—are scapegoating ethnic and religious minorities in an effort to divert popular anxiety and anger over falling living standards and pervasive economic insecurity.

At the same time that the Charest Liberals were drawing up their Bill 94, leading politicians in France were advocating outlawing the wearing of Muslim face veils in public. France's Parliament has now officially adopted such a ban, on the pretext that it upholds the secular character of the French state and equality between men and women. The reality is these measures are animated by chauvinism—as is the campaign being mounted against so-called illegal immigrants in the US—and are being encouraged and deployed by the bourgeoisie with the aim of splitting the working class, promoting a bellicose nationalism, and acclimatizing the population to restrictions on democratic rights.

Comments by the Quebec minister responsible for the status of women, Christine St-Pierre, underscore the connection between the campaign to stigmatize Muslim women wearing the veil and the Canadian bourgeoisie's attempt to whip up support for the Canadian Armed Forces' leading role in the neo-colonial war in Afghanistan. While the chauvinistic campaign that preceded the Liberals' announcement of Bill 94 was in full swing, St-Pierre declared, "There are people in Quebec, in Canada, and other countries around the world, who have gone to Afghanistan and spilled their blood so that these things [i.e. face veils] won't be tolerated. Here, we cannot tolerate this sort of thing."

The immediate pretext for Bill 94 was the media-instigated furor over Egyptian-born Naema Ahmed's wearing of the niqab during French-language courses. In early March *La presse* reported that Ahmed had been expelled the previous fall from a French-language course at CEGEP St. Laurent because she had insisted on wearing the veil and had expressed a reluctance to speak one-on-one with male students. A week later—this time at the express orders of Quebec Immigration Minister Yolande James—the 29 year-old Ahmed was expelled from a second French-language course, this one given by the Centre d'appui aux communautés immigrantes (CACI, Center for the Support of Immigrant Communities) with the express aim of integrating immigrants into Quebec society.

Although Ahmed had violated no existing regulation, let alone law, and neither her teacher nor any of the students in her class had complained about her presence in the CACI course, James arbitrarily declared her persona non grata. Said James, "If you want to [attend] our classes, if you want to integrate into Quebec society, here are our values—we want to see your face."

Ahmed's second expulsion was applauded by the Quebec media and the PQ and numerous editorialists urged the government to follow the logic of

its own actions and adopt “clear directives” toward the wearing of veils in schools and other public places.

The government’s response was Bill 94. It failed however to satisfy the PQ. Pauline Marois immediately denounced the bill for not going far enough. She said that Quebec should also prohibit the hijab (a scarf which covers the head and leaves the face uncovered) and condemned the Liberals for ignoring “the issue of the wearing of ostensible religious signs.” In an attempt to whip up public fear, Marois held hare hands far apart and demagogically declared, “Will it be possible to enter the National Assembly with a *kirpan* this size?” (The *kirpan* is a small symbolic dagger stitched into the clothing of orthodox male Sikhs.)

In English Canada, the media reaction to Bill 94 was much more mixed than in Quebec. Nonetheless, the most important federal political leaders, Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Michael Ignatieff, the head of the Official Opposition Liberals, have declared their support for Bill 94. Harper’s spokesman Dimitri Soudas said the bill “makes sense,” while Ignatieff said the Charest government had found a “good balance”. The Harper government has subsequently mounted its own anti-immigrant campaign, ordering the Canadian Armed Forces to seize a boat loaded with Tamil refugees off Canada’s west coast.

As for Amir Khadir, the only National Assembly member of Québec Solidaire, which presents itself as a left *indépendantiste* party, he declared, after Ahmed was expelled from her French course, that the interdiction of the Muslim veil in French classes for immigrants would “block the way for some of these veiled women who want to get out” to integrate into Quebec society.

But Québec Solidaire quickly adapted to the anti-immigrant campaign. When Bill 94 was tabled in the National Assembly, Khadir did not denounce it as a chauvinist and anti-democratic measure. Rather he provided it with legitimacy. Accepting the bogus claim that the legislation is aimed at upholding secularism and gender equality, he called for it to be amended so as to better realize those goals.

Speaking about the bill, Khadir declared, “It lacks markers to better affirm the secular character of the Quebec State and to secure the protection of equality between men and women in Quebec. To maintain the image of State neutrality in religious matters, it is reasonable, for example, to ban the wearing of religious signs for people in positions of authority, such as policemen, judges or peace officers.”

Needless to say, none of the advocates of Bill 94 or a more sweeping ban on all religious signs can explain how depriving a minority of women of public services and jobs, on the basis of their religious beliefs, will promote equality between men and women, let alone the well-being of the women targeted.

Given that the “reasonable accommodation” debate has from the beginning been a trumped-up affair, calculated to exploit inchoate popular anxieties, it is hardly surprising that the real problems facing immigrants in Canada—including unemployment, poverty, racism and police harassment—have been all but entirely excluded from the discussion. According to a report from Statistics Canada published in 2008, new immigrants, that is those who arrived in Canada during the last five years, earn far less than their Canadian counterparts, with or without a college degree. This situation has worsened markedly since the 1980s. The report says, “In 1980, recent immigrant men who had some employment income earned 85 cents for each dollar received by Canadian-born men. By 2005, the ratio had dropped to 63 cents. The corresponding numbers for recent immigrant women were 85 cents and 56 cents, respectively.”

The claim that denying Muslim women access to vital public services is an affirmation of the “secular character of the Quebec State” is utterly hypocritical and constitutes a grotesque attempt to manipulate public opinion.

While the PLQ and PQ act as enforcers of anti-Muslim bigotry and chauvinism, they persist in arguing that Catholicism should have a

privileged position in Quebec, on the grounds that the Catholic Church is part of Quebec’s historical heritage. “We cannot disown our ancestors” is a frequent refrain.

Thus, in response to Pauline Marois’ call for Bill 94 to also ban the hijab, Charest asserted: “Madame. Marois goes too far... Nuns also cover their head, and a more severe law would restrict their practices too.”

In 2008, at Charest’s urging, the National Assembly unanimously passed a resolution rejecting a proposal made by the government-appointed Bouchard-Taylor Commission on “reasonable accommodation” that the government remove the crucifix that hangs over the Quebec parliament so as to affirm the state’s secular character. The resolution was the Charest government’s first reaction to the recommendations of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission, a body it had created in 2007 to respond to the fabricated crisis over reasonable accommodations. The crucifix, which has hung in the National Assembly since 1936, was introduced by the arch-reactionary Maurice Duplessis so as to demonstrate that his Union Nationale government would honor “Catholic values,” unlike its Liberal predecessors.

And our champions of secularism have nothing to say about the Quebec flag, which consists of a white cross on a blue background adorned with four white lily flowers that symbolize the purity of the Virgin Mary.

In the debate on reasonable accommodations, the Liberal government has tried to present itself as more moderate and reasonable than its PQ and ADQ adversaries. Yet, as Bill 94 attests, Charest and his Liberals have repeatedly adapted to and implemented their reactionary demands.

More fundamentally, the Liberal government’s cuts in social spending, fee increases, and corporate tax cuts are a major factor in the increase of social inequality and economic insecurity. In the absence of an independent political movement of the working class, these socially regressive measures are giving rise to the social frustrations that the chauvinists and their big business sponsors are exploiting, even if a clear majority of Quebecers continue to view immigration as a positive influence on the province.

It is no coincidence that within days of the Charest Liberal government tabling its anti-democratic and chauvinist Bill 94, it presented an austerity budget—far and away the most rightwing budget of its seven years in office.

Workers must unequivocally and energetically oppose Bill 94 and defend the right of all, regardless of gender, religious belief or ethnicity, to have a decent job and benefit from quality public services.

In opposition to the bourgeoisie, which seeks to impose the burden of the economic crisis on working people by using racism and chauvinism and otherwise promoting reaction, workers of all nationalities and religions must unite in a common struggle against the moribund capitalist system.



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