

Chauvinist Quebec bill targets Muslim minority

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Responding to calls from the most chauvinist sections of the ruling class, Quebec Liberal's government has tabled two bills that target the province's Muslim minority. These measures represent an attack on the democratic rights of the working class and aim to legitimize the Canadian bourgeoisie's phony "war on terror."

Bill 62, which purports to legally enshrine the "religious neutrality" of the state, would ban Muslim women wearing the *burqa* or *niqab* from receiving or providing public services, including education and health care. The bill also introduces new limits on the Quebec government's policy of "reasonable accommodation" for ethnic and religious minorities, so as to place greater onus on minorities to prove that such accommodations are necessary and don't threaten "Quebec values."

Bill 62 explicitly targets only the tiny minority of Muslim women in Quebec who partially or wholly cover their faces when in public. But it serves to stigmatize the entire Muslim population, one of Quebec's largest minorities and one already subject to increasing discrimination.

Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard claims Bill 62 will ensure equality between men and women. In fact it will result in Muslim women being denied essential public services and severely restrict their access to employment, solely because of their religious beliefs.

While Bill 62 imposes restrictions on the rights of religious minorities in the name of ensuring the "religious neutrality" of the state, it excludes from its scope "the religious"—i.e. Roman Catholic—"heritage of Quebec." Should Bill 62 become law, a crucifix will remain hanging over the National Assembly and a large government-owned electrified cross will continue to shine forth from the summit of Montreal's Mount Royal.

At the same time as it tabled Bill 62, the Quebec Liberal government introduced Bill 59 "to prevent and combat hate speech." The simultaneous submission of the two bills was a further appeal to Islamophobia, designed to promote the notion that there is a connection between Quebec's mainly Arab-origin Muslim community and extremism.

Bill 59 is written in deliberately vague language so as to provide the authorities with wide latitude in investigating "extremist speech." Anyone who publicly expresses comments deemed "hateful" or that incite violence against a group "of people with a common characteristic" can be made the target of an investigation by the Commission on Human Rights and Youth.

The legislation also empowers the government to withhold or suspend public funding for a school board or educational or vocational institution, whether public or private that tolerates "extremist" behavior. The threat of financial penalties is aimed at forcing educational institutions to assume a role in policing the views of their students and to vet those renting their facilities.

In tandem with Bill 59, the Quebec government is setting up an integrated team within the provincial police force to monitor social media to detect hate messages.

With its Bills 59 and 62, the Liberal government is lending state sanction to the anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant agitation mounted by the Parti Québécois (PQ), particularly with its 2013 "Charter of Values," and other sections of the political establishment—including the now defunct Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ), the CAQ or Coalition for Quebec's Future (with which the ADQ merged) and Stephen Harper's Conservatives—since the mid-2000s,

In the 2007 Quebec elections, much of the corporate media, especially the tabloids of the press magnate and current PQ leader, Pierre-Karl Péladeau, promoted the claims of Mario Dumont and his ADQ that the "reasonable accommodation" of religious and ethnic minorities was undermining the rights of the Québécois majority. By fueling anti-immigrant chauvinism, the ADQ and its big business backers hoped to push politics sharply rightward and thereby create the conditions for a frontal assault on public services.

The Liberal government of Jean Charest, having narrowly escaped defeat at the hands of the ADQ in the 2007 election, launched the Bouchard-Taylor commission to investigate the "religious accommodation" issue. While critical of the most extreme chauvinists, the Bouchard-Taylor commission

legitimized the argument that immigration poses a threat to “Quebec values.” In the name of secularism, it called for some state officials to be banned from wearing religious symbols.

After its devastating third-place finish in the 2007 Quebec elections, the PQ, which when it had held power between 1994 and 2003 had carried out the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history, concluded it must never again “cede leadership” on so-called Quebec identity issues to a political rival. In 2010, the pro-independence PQ proposed a “Quebec citizenship” that would have removed significant political rights from immigrants who were deemed to be insufficiently fluent in French. The “Charter of Values” that the PQ sought to impose during the 19 months it held office from 2012-2014 went far beyond the recommendations of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission. It would, under threat of dismissal, have deprived more than half a million Quebec government employees of the right to wear “ostentatious” religious symbols, while sanctioning them to wear a “discreet” Christian cross.

After the Liberals defeated the PQ in the 2014 election, the debate on the religious “neutrality” of the state was temporarily put aside. However, Last January’s attack on *Charlie Hebdo* in France was seized on in Quebec, as elsewhere, to revive the anti-Muslim campaign.

The Liberals also launched a campaign against “radicalization” citing reports surrounding six young Montrealers who allegedly left Canada earlier this year to join the jihadist movement in Syria, and the indictment of two students from Montreal’s Collège de Maisonneuve for “terrorist activities.”

Not surprisingly, all the opposition parties in the Quebec National Assembly have attacked Bill 62 from the right.

The PQ has criticized the Liberals for not having imposed a blanket ban on government employees wearing religious symbols. It was especially incensed that the government hasn’t targeted the *chador*, a religious garment worn by women in the Middle East, especially Iran. “How can the Minister of Justice, who is also responsible for the status of women, defend the wearing of the *chador* in the public service??” exclaimed PQ legislator Agnes Maltais.

The head of the CAQ, François Legault, criticized the premier for accepting a situation where “a police officer could wear a turban, a yarmulke, or a policewoman, a *hijab* (Muslim scarf). I do not understand why Mr. Couillard is so timid in his defense of Quebec values,” he told a press conference.

Québec Solidaire (QS), the party of the Quebec pseudo-left, also supports the ban on the “anti-woman” niqab and burqa. In order to give a progressive gloss to this chauvinistic measure, it is demanding that the word

“secularism” be included in Bill 62. QS, it need be recalled, endorsed the PQ’s chauvinist charter, albeit with some reservations.

Bill 62 was also enthusiastically welcomed by the federal government of Stephen Harper, which quickly moved to introduce a similar measure, forcing immigrants to have their faces uncovered at citizenship ceremonies. This is part of the ultra-reactionary campaign the Conservatives are conducting around the themes of security and militarism in the run-up to the October 19 federal election.

Like its imperialist allies, the Canadian bourgeoisie has used the pretext of a “war on terror” to attack democratic rights at home and justify its leading role in a series of US-led wars.

Last year, shortly after the fatal shootings of two Canadian soldiers in Ottawa and St-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Harper announced the stepping up of Canada’s involvement in the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, then tabled Bill C-51. In the name of fighting terrorism, Bill C-51 gives the security apparatus sweeping new powers. This includes empowering the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) to violate virtually any law when disrupting what it deems are threats to Canada’s national and economic security.

The assault on democratic rights—including measures to fan chauvinism and divide workers along ethnic and religious lines—is the ruling class’s response to the intensification of the class struggle and the growing hostility of workers to social inequality, militarism and imperialist war.



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