

Quebec introduces a chauvinist bill with Muslim women as its principal target

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In the name of defending Quebec's "way of life" and "national identity," the province's right-wing-populist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government has introduced a bill "Respecting the Laicity (secularism) of the State" that targets religious minorities—first and foremost Muslim women—and marks a further step in the Canadian ruling elite's embrace of anti-immigrant chauvinism.

In Canada, as internationally, the ruling class is mounting an increasingly virulent agitation against migrants and refugees, with the aim of scapegoating them for the economic and social catastrophe caused by capitalism. This has led to a series of draconian measures such as the Trump administration's Gestapo-style raids and deportations of immigrants, or the ban on wearing the "Islamic headscarf" (hijab) in French public schools.

The promotion of chauvinism in official politics has encouraged far-right elements to launch violent attacks on "foreigners" and minorities, as German neo-Nazi gangs did in the streets of Chemnitz last August, and to carry out mass killings at mosques such as Alexandre Bissonnette did in Quebec City in January 2017 and last month's horrific atrocity in Christchurch, New Zealand.

The CAQ's Bill 21 is the product of a xenophobic campaign that the ruling elite in Quebec has mounted for more than a decade. Launched on the claim that "excessive accommodations" have been made to Quebec's cultural minorities, this campaign has been marked from its outset by toxic denunciations of Muslims and the promotion of one discriminatory measure after another.

The CAQ's proposed legislation would prohibit the wearing of "religious symbols" by state employees in so-called "positions of authority"—including tens of thousands of public school teachers, as well as the principals and vice-principals of primary and secondary public schools.

Police officers, prison guards, wildlife officers, Crown prosecutors and government lawyers would also be subject to the ban. So would the Speaker and Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly, as well as the heads of many public bodies.

The CAQ bill is only superficially different from the justly reviled "Charter of Quebec Values" that the then Parti Québécois (PQ) government introduced in 2013 and made the

centerpiece of its unsuccessful 2014 election campaign. Under the PQ's Charter, all public and para-public government workers were to be prohibited from wearing "ostentatious" religious symbols, with an exception made for "discreet crucifixes."

While the crucifix hanging above the National Assembly will probably be removed and crucifixes are included in the CAQ's ban on the wearing of religious symbols, Bill 21 provides a broad exception for other Roman Catholic symbols, which are ubiquitous across Quebec, in the name of preserving Quebec's "cultural heritage". The government will also continue to subsidize private religious schools, and such schools and all other private schools are exempt from the ban on teachers and principals wearing religious symbols.

In one of several cynical attempts to portray the bill as "moderate," even "tolerant," the Minister of Immigration, Diversity and Inclusiveness, Simon Jolin-Barrette, quipped that "there will be no strip searches to verify whether a person is wearing a religious symbol." This only highlights that those who will be deprived of jobs in the public sector, the principal source of jobs in Quebec, under the CAQ's religious-symbols ban are Muslim teachers who out of religious conviction wear the hijab, Jews who wear the kippah, and Sikhs who in conformity with their faith wear the turban and kirpan.

As for the "grandfather clause" that the CAQ added in the hope of mollifying popular opposition to its discriminatory bill, it only applies to those already working in one of the professions subject to the ban, and should they change their employer or job they will lose their "acquired rights."

To prevent a court challenge of Bill 21's constitutionality, the CAQ government has invoked the "notwithstanding clause" that empowers it to pass legislation that violates fundamental rights "guaranteed" under the Canadian and Quebec Charters of Rights and Freedoms. Doug Ford's populist Conservative government in Ontario also recently threatened to use the notwithstanding clause to pass legislation related to its right-wing anti-worker program. This only underlines that Bill 21 is part of a much broader turn on the part of the ruling class to reaction and authoritarian forms of rule.

The CAQ's bill reintroduces the central measure of the previous Quebec Liberal government's Bill 62—a ban on

Muslim women who wear the niqab or burqa (“full veil”) from receiving or providing public services, including health care, public education, and public transit. The inclusion of the notwithstanding clause in the CAQ’s Bill 21 will render null and void several lawsuits currently before the courts that challenge the constitutional validity of denying services and employment to Muslim women who wear the “full veil.”

Bill 21 was tabled just one month after the CAQ introduced Bill 9, the “cornerstone” of its immigration “reform.” Bill 9 will slash the number of immigrants to Quebec by over 20 percent per year and adds “cultural” criteria to the immigration selection process, opening the door to a racist and chauvinist immigration policy.

As has been the case on every occasion the political establishment has chosen to ratchet up the “debate” over “excessive accommodation” and the need to defend “Quebec values,” the CAQ’s phoney secularism bill will embolden the most reactionary elements and lead to an increase in hate crimes against religious and ethno-cultural minorities across Quebec and Canada.

Seven organizations, including Amnesty International and the League of Human Rights, have called for the withdrawal of the bill, which they describe as racist. The Quebec office of the National Council of Canadian Muslims pointed out that the bill would make “Muslims and other minority communities in Quebec second-class citizens.”

The editorial boards of Quebec’s major newspapers, on other hand, have generally welcomed the CAQ’s discriminatory bill.

La Presse, which speaks for the dominant federalist wing of Quebec big business, deplores that the CAQ has moved away from the Bouchard-Taylor Commission “consensus” [a ban on the wearing of religious symbols by state employees in position of “coercive authority”], by extending it to teachers and by using the “notwithstanding clause.” But it goes on to say that “it was about time Quebec moved on this issue” and that “individual rights are not absolute”—another indication that no section of the ruling class, including its supposedly liberal wing, is committed to upholding democratic rights.

Le Devoir, a daily close to Quebec *indépendantiste* circles, also argues that it would have been better to limit the ban “to state agents who exercise coercive power.” Nevertheless, it describes the proposed law as a “major step forward.” It concedes Bill 21 “does restrict individual rights,” but defends this as it “is to achieve an objective of social peace”—thus promoting the reactionary canard that immigrants and religious minorities threaten “Quebec values.”

In lauding Bill 21, the *Journal de Montreal* characteristically blurts out the most vulgar Quebec chauvinism. In the days running up to last Thursday’s tabling of Bill 21 and in the week since, it has devoted myriad pages to promoting legislation that attacks the rights of Muslim women, one of the most vulnerable sections of society, as a necessary affirmation of the collective rights of the Quebec people. “Quebec is virtually under siege,”

exclaimed columnist Denise Bombardier in response to criticism of the CAQ’s chauvinist bill in the rest of country. “This law on secularism serves as a pretext for the rest of Canada to go to war again against this ‘turbulent’ Francophone majority” which “claimed its distinctness in the Canadian multiculturalist Eden.”

Of the three opposition parties in the Quebec National Assembly, only the PQ has welcomed the CAQ bill, although it has criticized the government for not extending its ban on religious symbols to workers in Quebec’s state-supported daycares.

For the past 12 years, the supposedly “left-wing” Quebec Solidaire (QS) has described the phony debate on “reasonable accommodation” and “secularism,” including the Parti Québécois’ Charter of Values, as “legitimate.” However, it remained without an official position on the CAQ’s bill until its National Council repudiated QS’ traditional support for the “Bouchard-Taylor compromise” last Saturday. This volte-face is nothing short of an admission that Quebec Solidaire has been complicit in the longstanding campaign of Quebec’s political and media establishment to spread the poison of anti-immigrant chauvinism.

Except for the pro-Quebec independence Bloc Québécois, all the major parties in Canada’s federal parliament—the Liberals, Conservatives, and NDP—have denounced the CAQ bill in a transparent and demagogic attempt to promote Canadian nationalism. “It is unthinkable that a free society would legitimize discrimination against anyone on the basis of religion,” declared the Prime Minister and Liberal leader Justin Trudeau.

Such hypocritical posturing serves to cover up the real character of Canadian imperialism, including its close collaboration with the Trump administration in its anti-immigrant witch-hunt and its own discriminatory immigration and refugee policies. The stigmatization of Muslims by all sections of Canada’s ruling class—federalist and Quebec nationalist alike—since the launching of the phony “war on terror” in 2001 has served as a means of justifying Canada’s involvement in Washington’s predatory wars in the Middle East and around the world.



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