

Ontario legislature bans the kaffiyeh as Canada's ruling class clamps down on pro-Palestinian demonstrations

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The legislature in Ontario, Canada's most populous province, voted Thursday to uphold a reactionary ban on wearing the kaffiyeh within the precinct of Queen's Park, the seat of the provincial government. The move—which followed the secret introduction of the racist ban by the Speaker of the Legislature, Tory MPP (Member of the Provincial Parliament) Ted Arnott—attests to the ruthlessness with which Canada's ruling class is cracking down on any opposition to its backing for Israel's genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza.

Arnott surreptitiously banned the wearing of the traditional headdress of Palestinians and other Arab people in the “legislative precinct,” which is officially under the Speaker's legal authority, sometime in late March or early April. The “precinct” includes the Legislature building itself, the surrounding grounds known as “Queen's Park,” where large protests often occur on a range of issues, and the Whitney Block, the parliamentary office building. The unprecedented ban applies to members of the legislature, their staff and all members of the public.

Arnott issued a private directive to members of the Legislative Protective Service, the legislature's special police force, to order MPPs, legislative staffers and members of the public to remove their keffiyehs without so much as a public announcement, let alone a debate or a vote.

Arnott's action was reportedly prompted a few weeks previous by an MPP whose identity remains anonymous. This member complained to Arnott about independent Hamilton Centre MPP Sarah Jama, who always wears a keffiyeh to the legislature. When Jama described Israel as an “apartheid state” last October shortly after the far-right Netanyahu regime launched its genocidal onslaught on Gaza, the Ontario New Democratic Party (NDP) leadership threw her out of the party's legislative caucus.

The ban only came to light after an NDP staffer who wore the keffiyeh every day was ordered by LPS officers to remove it in early April. NDP leader Marit Stiles subsequently wrote to Speaker Arnott on April 12 requesting that the order be rescinded. Arnott replied in an April 16 letter, stating that he had “done his research” and had “concluded that the keffiyeh is

a political symbol.” The wearing of political symbols and signs, or T-shirts with political slogans, by MLAs and staffers is banned in the Legislature building, but not on the grounds of Queen's Park or by members of the public. Arnott claimed further that his ruling was about upholding “parliamentary decorum.”

Hard-right Premier Doug Ford, who since last October has routinely denounced anti-genocide protesters and smeared them as antisemites, made a public show of calling for the overturning of the ban. He was joined by Stiles and Ontario Liberal Party leader Bonnie Crombie, who all backed an NDP-sponsored motion Thursday to overturn the ban. The measure, which required the unanimous consent of the legislature to compel Speaker Arnott to reconsider his decision, predictably failed after a few Tory MPPs shouted “no” after the motion was read out and one, Robin Martin, formally voted against it.

Aside from the political maneuvering and posturing, the entire episode underlines the degree to which any criticism of the imperialist-backed genocide, including by showing sympathy for the horrendous conditions facing the Palestinians in Gaza, is taboo within Canada's political establishment.

Stiles' supposed horror over the ban and her call for its rescinding, joined by Ford and Crombie, reflects concerns that such a blatant political provocation will fuel the already widespread opposition to Canadian imperialism's support for the genocide, and further discredit the fraudulent ruling class-incipited furor over purported “left-wing antisemitism.” This was made clear after the failure of the vote. Rather than calling for protests against the draconian ban or its defiance, Stiles politely thanked Ford for being “on her side” on the issue, as the CBC put it, and urged him to talk to “his people” and get them to “do the right thing.”

The NDP is politically complicit in creating the conditions under which a kaffiyeh ban could be imposed. It was Stiles personally who moved to expel Jama from the NDP caucus over Jama's description of Israel as an “apartheid” state, a designation which the United Nations and countless aid organizations support. Stiles' actions gave the Ford government a free hand to censure Jama in the Legislature,

preventing her from speaking on any issue until she “apologizes.”

At the federal level, the NDP has continued to use its votes in parliament to keep the pro-war, pro-austerity minority Liberal government in office under their “confidence-and-supply” agreement. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has unconditionally backed Israel’s massacre of the Palestinians, repeatedly invoking the Zionist regime’s “right” to “self-defence.” The government dispatched over \$28 million of weaponry to Israel in the first months of the genocide. At home, it has helped incite a vicious crackdown on pro-Palestinian protests.

In March, the NDP acted out a political farce in the House of Commons, introducing a motion that called for the recognition of Palestine’s right to “self-determination” and an arms embargo on Israel, and condemned Israel’s continuing onslaught on the people of Gaza. The party then entered backroom talks with its Liberal allies to rewrite the motion so that it was transformed into a declaration of support for the genocide. The version ultimately adopted contained an explicit reference to Israel’s “right to defend itself” and called for a ceasefire only after Hamas has completely surrendered, i.e., the same formulations used by the Israel Defence Forces and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The passage calling for an arms embargo was gutted to make it totally ineffectual.

The unrestrained support for Israel’s genocide by the political establishment has been accompanied by an intensification of state repression against protesters across the country. On Monday, 21 protesters were arrested by the police in Halifax, Nova Scotia, after they blocked traffic. The protesters held signs declaring, “No business as usual during a genocide” and “Free Palestine.”

Later that day, 45 protesters in Montreal were arrested by the police after occupying a downtown bank to protest the genocide. Six protesters were detained Wednesday in Regina, Saskatchewan, after attempting to block a railway with a banner calling for an arms embargo.

The resort by Canada’s ruling elite to racist persecution of pro-Palestine protesters and ever-more aggressive forms of state repression is of a piece with authoritarian developments in all of the major imperialist centres. On Friday, April 12, 900 German police officers stormed the peaceful Palestine Congress in Berlin, dispersing the gathering and arresting organizers. Prominent speakers were detained on arrival at Berlin Airport and banned from speaking in Germany. In the United States, a state-led campaign to suppress opposition to the genocide on university campuses reached a new high-point Thursday with the arrest by the NYPD of over 100 students.

The Canadian ruling class is at war—joining with its American allies in backing the Israeli genocide, threatening Iran, and using Ukraine as a proxy force to attack Russia and against the working class at home. Its actions against the anti-genocide movement, justified on the bogus claim that they are combatting “antisemitism,” are being coordinated with the

ruling class in the other imperialist countries.

The representatives of Canadian imperialism have no right to lecture anyone about antisemitism. Ottawa has time and again for decades aligned itself with the most far-right political forces to advance its global imperialist interests, including far-right Ukrainian nationalists who collaborated with the Nazis during World War II and helped carry out the Holocaust. The unanimous standing ovation given to Nazi war criminal and Waffen-SS member Yaroslav Hunka by the House of Commons last September, with Trudeau in the lead and supported by the ambassadors from all G-7 states, demonstrated the Canadian ruling elite’s true attitude towards the Jewish people. Its association of Israeli state criminality with the Jewish people as a whole is itself an antisemitic slander.

As Ottawa participates alongside Washington in the US-NATO war on Russia and backs Israel’s genocide against the Palestinians to the hilt, the ruling class cannot tolerate any opposition to the rapidly developing third world war. In the summer of 2023, Ontario Labour Minister Monte McNaughton and Toronto City Councillor Brad Bradford campaigned to shut down meetings organized by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party, to oppose the imperialist war on Russia. These same political forces are now engaged in a witch hunt against opponents of Israel’s genocide.

Workers, students and youth must draw the requisite political conclusions and turn towards the building of a socialist, anti-war movement rooted in the international working class. Only by putting an end to the crisis-ridden, historically obsolete capitalist system will it be possible to stop the genocide of the Palestinian people and the third imperialist world war.



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