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June 24, 2019 6:16AM EDT | Commentary

Quebec's Ban on Religious Clothing is Chilling: To Be Like Us, You Must Dress Like Us

Published in: *Los Angeles Times*

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Right after 9/11, my mom started wearing the hijab in Sarnia, Ontario — a town with little diversity on the U.S. border. She had made a conscious and unilateral decision to do so, despite the reservations and anxiety my father and I shared about the potential ramifications of her choice. After all, there had been a spike in hate crimes against Muslims following the deadliest terrorist attack on North American soil.

To the teenage me, it was a bold feminist choice. A woman, my *mom*, made the choice to don a religious garment because it made her feel closer to her faith, regardless of how it might cause strangers to treat her. And when I visit my parents, I exercise that fundamental right to equality and freedom to choose when I wear a bikini to Sarnia's beautiful Canatara Beach. I make the call — not my husband, not my parents and certainly not the state.

That is the beauty of Canada, our adopted home. People have had the freedom to wear their faith on their metaphorical sleeves, should they choose. As a Muslim woman in Canada, I could always dress however I pleased.

The Quebec government took away some of that Canadian freedom with Sunday's passage of a controversial bill that bans many public employees in the province from wearing religious symbols at work. Teachers, judges and police officers, among other civil servants, can no longer wear Muslim headscarves (hijabs), Jewish skullcaps, Sikh turbans and other symbols of their faith in the workplace.

Even more alarming, the law also prohibits anyone wearing face coverings — Muslim women wearing niqabs (face veils) are the primary target — from receiving government services that include healthcare and using public transit.

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The law does not clearly define what a religious symbol is, how the ban will be enforced or what the penalties are. It appoints the government as the arbiter of religious authority that arbitrarily determines which symbols are "religious" —and violate the law — and which are "cultural" expressions and therefore permitted. Meanwhile, a giant gold crucifix hangs over the speaker's chair in Quebec's National Assembly. The government's position and provincial consensus appears to be that the cross is a "cultural symbol."

Quebec is not alone in banning hijabs and niqabs. In May, Austria approved a law banning Muslim headscarves in primary schools. The scarves and other conspicuous religious symbols have also been banned at state schools in France.

With its ban, Quebec's ostensible goal is to ensure strict secularism and the separation of the state and religion. However, the ban does not target all religions, but singles out particular faiths that call for religious symbols and garb. It targets women who wear the niqab or burka with a provision that does not allow the wearing of face coverings while receiving government services. Instead of allowing women to decide whether to cover their faces, Quebec's ban will isolate women by pushing them out of public life. Fewer will be able to get a public education, progress in their public service careers, travel on public transportation or obtain healthcare from the publicly funded system.

In enacting the ban, Quebec invoked a rarely used loophole that allows the government to override basic constitutional rights. While that may make it more difficult to overturn the law in the courts, a legal challenge has already been filed in Quebec's Superior Court by a University of Montreal student training to become a teacher, the Canadian Civil Liberties Assn. and the National Council of Canadian Muslims.

In May, three U.N. investigators warned the Quebec legislature about the risk of violating fundamental rights, including freedom of religion and equality. They reminded the province that it is bound by international human rights treaties that cover religious rights, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights — a treaty Canada signed in 1976 that Quebec must also comply with.

Prohibiting specific religious dress is a textbook example of religious persecution. Where is the recognition of the values of equality and fairness public servants need to be able to bring to their roles? History has shown us time and time again that targeting minority groups can lead to systematic persecution, violence and worse.

A woman who chooses to wear a hijab or niqab in Canada is exercising a personal choice. My mom is a shining example of this. Our country has promised her that freedom of choice, and Quebec is taking that freedom away from the people in its province. Since my mom lives in the neighboring

Quebec's new law could have far-reaching consequences that go beyond keeping many people from working in the public sector or from securing government services. The message is an authoritarian one: Dress, think, believe like us — if you don't, you are not one of us.

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