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Critics denounce Quebec ban on religious symbols in public sector

By Allison Lampert

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MONTREAL (Reuters) - Civil liberties and Muslim groups on Monday vowed to challenge a new law in the Canadian province of Quebec that bans some public sector employees from wearing religious symbols during work hours, arguing it triggered the “politics of fear.”



Critics said the long-expected Bill 21 that was passed by the predominately French-speaking province's legislature on Sunday mainly targeted Muslim women who wear hijabs.

“We will be filing a challenge to the law,” said Mustafa Farooq, executive director of the National Council of Canadian Muslims. “I think Bill 21 is a law that will do irreparable harm to communities in Quebec.”

“This creates a second-class citizenship,” he said, adding that the group would seek a court injunction to block the law that he called “a recipe for the politics of fear.”

The law covers public workers in positions of authority, including teachers, judges and police officers, but exempts current government employees and civil servants.

It sets the province's centre-right Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government on a collision course with Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who promotes religious freedom, in a federal election year where Quebec is a vital battleground.

“Our position is clear: It's not up to politicians to tell people what to wear or not to wear,” said Simon Ross, a spokesman for Canada's Minister of Canadian Heritage and Multiculturalism Pablo Rodriguez.

“Canada is already a secular state and that is reflected in our institutions. This new law undermines fundamental rights and individual freedoms because it forces some people to choose between their religion and their job. We will monitor the implementation of the law.”

Governments in Quebec have been trying for years to restrict civil servants from wearing overt religious symbols like headscarves and Jewish skullcaps at work in an effort to cement a secular society.

Quebec's immigration minister, Simon Jolin-Barrette, argued in a statement on Monday that "it is legitimate for the Quebec nation to decide in which form secularism applies in its territory and in its institutions."

Like France, which passed a ban on veils, crosses and other religious symbols in schools in 2004, Quebec has struggled to reconcile its secular identity with a growing Muslim population, many of them North African emigrants.

While the Quebec law does not single out any religion by name, Muslim headwear have long been a source of public debate in the province.

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