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Quebec Ban on Full-Face Veils Draws Muslims’ Uproar

Quebec’s passage of a law banning the wearing of full-face veils is sparking anger among Muslims in Canada, who claim the measure represents ‘ugly identity politics’ from a government seeking re-election in a year.
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By Paul Vieira

OTTAWA—Quebec’s passage of a law banning the wearing of full-face veils is sparking anger among Muslims in Canada, who claim the measure represents “ugly identity politics” from a government seeking re-election in a year.

The government of the French-speaking province of Quebec on Wednesday used its majority in the legislature to pass a bill that prohibits public-sector employees and
majority in the legislature to pass a bill that prohibits public-sector employees and recipients of public services from wearing face coverings. The ban, which the provincial government has called a first in North America, in theory prohibits niqab-wearing women from taking public transit, or from signing out books from a library.

Legal experts said Thursday they expect the Quebec law to be challenged. “It’s just a question of when, to be honest,” said Dia Dabby, a Quebec lawyer with an expertise in religious freedom. Quebec’s move follows measures implemented in France, Belgium, and several African countries. France, for instance, argued full-face veils pose a security risk as they conceal a person’s identity. Further, it argued successfully before the European Court of Human Rights that showing one’s face in public was one of the “minimum requirement” of participating in society.

Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard played on this theme when defending the legislation to reporters in Quebec City Wednesday.

“We are just saying that for reasons linked to communication, identification and safety, public services should be given and received with an open face,” Mr. Couillard said. “We are in a free and democratic society. You speak to me, I should see your face, and you should see mine. It’s as simple as that.” The bill does offer the possibility of religious accommodation, but details as to how that will work remain unclear. The government wants the law fully implemented by next summer.
Benjamin Berger, a constitutional law professor at Toronto’s York University, said the law as written is “extremely vulnerable” because, in his opinion, it likely violates freedom of religion provisions in Canada’s constitution, as well as human-rights legislation in Quebec.

The National Council of Canadian Muslims said in a statement the new law “boils down to ugly identity politics.”

The council’s executive director, Ihsaan Gardee, said Quebec’s Liberal government—which faces re-election next year—“is advancing a dangerous political agenda on the backs of minorities, while pandering to bigoted populism instead of practicing principled governance.” Opposition parties in Quebec voted against the bill because they believed the legislation didn’t go far enough in ensuring so-called religious neutrality, a stance that means the state shouldn’t promote religion of any kind. Polling organization Angus Reid Institute said this month its research indicates over 60% of Quebec residents “strongly support” the proposed law.

A ban on religious wardrobe isn’t a new issue in Quebec, or Canadian, politics. The previous separatist Parti Québécois government in 2013 sought to ban public-sector workers from wearing religious symbols like turbans, yarmulkes and niqabs, in the name of promoting a secular society.

At the time, the Parti Québécois government said the measures were in line with Quebec’s
efforts that began in the 1960s to reduce the influence of the Catholic church in provincial affairs, and become a more secular jurisdiction.

Wearing the niqab also popped up as an issue during the 2015 Canadian election, when then Liberal leader—and now prime minister—Justin Trudeau criticized former Premier Stephen Harper for advocating that Muslim women shouldn’t wear a face covering at citizenship ceremonies.

“I think it’s obvious that [Mr. Harper] is playing a very reckless and dangerous game,” Mr. Trudeau said in October 2015, of Mr. Harper’s proposal.

But this time, Mr. Trudeau told the Canadian legislature that he was prepared to “respect the choice” different legislatures make. He added it is his job to ensure the rights of all Canadians are protected under the country’s constitution, and that would continue.

André Lamoureux, a spokesman for Coalition Laïcité Québec—a group that promotes secularism in Quebec and supports the new law—told The Canadian Press news agency the niqab represents a “political symbol of the enslavement and de-empowerment of women,” and hence has no place in province.

The mayor of Montreal, Denis Coderre, said he opposes the bill. Montreal is the biggest city in Quebec, and roughly 10% of the city’s population is considered Muslim. “What does it mean now? Now we’ll have to have bus drivers as niqab police? What are we going
to do in libraries?” he asked reporters in Montreal.

Quebec has been a draw for immigrants from French-speaking countries in North Africa where Islam is practiced. Overall, 3.2% of Quebec’s population is Muslim.

The ban on full-face veils like the niqab emerge months after a deadly shooting at a Quebec City mosque, in which six men were killed during prayer service. Mr. Trudeau called it a terrorist attack on “innocents targeted for practicing their faith.”

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