

Quebec's new CAQ-authored chauvinist laws incite spike in hate crimes

By Louis Girard
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Two recent incidents highlight the reactionary chauvinist climate that has been promoted by the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) provincial government with its chauvinist Bills 9 and 21—legislation it rammed through the National Assembly and into law, over widespread popular opposition, in late June.

Bill 9, the so-called “Act to increase Québec’s socio-economic prosperity and adequately meet labour market needs through successful immigrant integration,” slashes the number of immigrants Quebec will receive in 2019 by almost a quarter. It also adds new “cultural” selection criteria that will enable the government to exclude would-be immigrants whom it deems don’t share “Quebec values,” opening the door wide to multiple forms of discrimination.

Bill 21, “An Act respecting the laicity (secular character) of the state,” targets religious minorities and particularly Muslim women. It prohibits a wide range of state employees from wearing visible religious symbols, such as the hijab, Jewish kippah, or Sikh turban, and bars Muslim women who wear the niqab or burqa from receiving vital public services, including health care and education.

On July 19, a taxi driver of Algerian origin was insulted and stabbed by two customers in Quebec City. In a video, he links the assault to the passage of Bill 21. Referring to Quebec Premier and CAQ leader François Legault, he says in a defiant tone, “Mr. Legault, thanks to you look what happened to me. Because yes, it’s because of you. You allowed Islamophobes and racists to declare their hatred while saying ‘we are in Quebec.’” In March, to acclaim from the tabloids owned by the billionaire Quebec nationalist Pierre-Karl Péladeau, Legault released a video in which defended his chauvinist, anti-democratic Bill 21 as an expression of Québécois self-assertion, declaring, “In Quebec, this is how we live.”

A few days after the Quebec City stabbing, a man accosted a woman and her two-year-old daughter, hurling insults at them, outside a Montreal daycare. The man was apparently outraged that the mother was speaking Arabic to her daughter. A video clip of the incident went viral in Quebec and across Canada.

Although hate crimes remain a small percentage of all crimes, figures compiled by Statistics Canada and various NGOs confirm that they and incidents of hate speech have been on the rise across Canada, with people of Arab origin and/or Muslim faith being particularly targeted.

Samira Laouni of the *Communication pour l’ouverture et le*

rapprochement, a non-~~pro~~intercultural group, told the *Montreal Gazette* just after Bill 21 was adopted that the preceding months had “seen a huge increase” in “hateful speech” and that “now it’s just getting worse.” Laouni, who has lived in Quebec for 20 years, added that on the day Bill 21 was passed by the National Assembly, she received some 60 Twitter messages telling her “to go home” to Iran, Saudi Arabia or another Middle East country.

The CAQ’s chauvinist laws emerge out of a foul, more than decade-long campaign led by the Quebec nationalist and *indépendantiste* right, but in which the entire Quebec political establishment, including the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire, has been complicit. From the start of this campaign in 2007, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that the establishment-promoted furor over “excessive accommodation” to religious and cultural differences and the purported threat immigrants represent to “Quebec values” was a reactionary fraud, aimed at dividing the working class and diverting attention away from the deepening crisis of capitalism and the turn of the entire ruling elite to class war and imperialist aggression.

The more workers challenge austerity and ever-growing social inequality—as exemplified by the mounting global wave of strikes and popular uprisings since 2018—the more the capitalist elite turns to chauvinism and reaction, including the promotion of ultra-right and outright fascist forces.

This is a worldwide phenomenon. In Germany, the neo-fascist party AfD (Alternative for Germany) now forms the official opposition and increasingly dictates government policy on refugees. The leading figure in Italy’s right-wing government, Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, is an admirer of Mussolini who is seeking to expel immigrants *en masse*. As for the administration headed by Donald Trump, it denounces as criminals refugees seeking to escape the misery caused by more than a century of US imperialist oppression in Latin America and organizes roundups of immigrants worthy of the Gestapo on American soil.

With its drive to divide workers along racial and religious lines, the ruling elite is seeking to make immigrants scapegoats for the crisis of the capitalist system and to justify wars of conquest abroad.

The complicity of the Quebec and Canadian elite

The CAQ’s Bill 21 echoes legislative initiatives taken by its Liberal and Parti Québécois (PQ) predecessors.

In 2013-2014, the Pauline Maoris-led PQ minority government tried to pass a so-called “Quebec Charter of Values” that would have banned half a million public sector workers from wearing “ostentatious religious symbols.” The CAQ law is somewhat more restricted, allowing it and the media to cynically promote what is a flagrant attack on minority rights as a “compromise.”

Retroactive to March 2019, Bill 21 prohibits newly promoted or newly hired state employees in “positions of authority” from wearing visible religious symbols. The job categories concerned include judges, police officers, prison guards, and wildlife officers, but also tens of thousands of teachers, principals and vice-principals at the province’s public primary and high schools.

Bill 21 also effectively incorporates a law passed shortly before the 2018 provincial election by the previous Philippe Couillard-led Liberal government. Bill 62 specifically targets Muslim women, barring Muslim women wearing the niqab or burqa from receiving or providing public services. However, pending the outcome of a court challenge to its constitutionality, Bill 62’s application has been stayed almost since its passage.

To ensure that application of Bill 21 will not similarly be impeded, the CAQ, with the PQ’s backing, has made it subject to the Canadian constitution’s “notwithstanding clause.” This rarely used anti-democratic provision allows the federal, provincial and territorial governments to run roughshod over the rights “guaranteed” in the Canadian constitution’s Charter of Rights and Freedom, as well as those enshrined in Quebec’s own rights charter.

Some prominent civil rights lawyers and constitutional experts nevertheless contend that some of the most egregious parts of Bill 21 could be overturned in the courts. However, last month, a Quebec Superior Court judge refused a request for a stay on the law’s application until its constitutionality has been adjudicated.

Lawyers for the National Council of Canadian Muslims, the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, and a hijab-wearing woman who is studying to become a teacher argued that the law is adversely impacting religious minorities; and, furthermore, that there is nothing to show that a person’s decision to wear a religious symbol is infringing on anyone else’s rights or harming society. In rejecting their request, Superior Court Justice Michel Yergeau denigrated the claims of discrimination, arguing it was based on “religious practices...the applicants liberally choose to adhere to,” and, turning reality on its head, went on to claim Bill 21 is meant to prevent discrimination!

Just before the final vote on Bill 21, the Legault government made last-minute amendments that underscore its repressive and chauvinistic nature. The law now includes provisions to enforce the ban on religious symbols, including through the appointment of a functionary who will monitor compliance with the law and impose sanctions, including dismissal, if it is violated.

In addition, the CAQ government reinforced the protection that Bill 21 provides, in the name of preserving “Quebec’s heritage,” to Roman Catholic symbols that are ubiquitous in the province’s institutions. It now stipulates that ordinary citizens cannot initiate requests for the removal of Catholic crosses or other religious symbols in schools, hospitals or courts.

The crucifix that has hung above legislators in the Blue Room of

the National Assembly is simply to be moved to another room in the same building. And, while the CAQ and the Quebec elite proclaim their commitment to “secularism” when banning hijab-wearing Muslim women from working in the public school system, the Quebec government will continue to lavishly fund private religious schools, a large majority of which are Catholic.

The obvious double standard has caused some pro-Bill 21 commentators to voice concern about the law’s “Catho-secularist” character. They fear that the CAQ’s increasingly unbridled anti-immigrant chauvinism will generate strong popular opposition to the entire ruling establishment, which in one way or another, helped to legitimize it.

This goes not only for the mass media, but also for Québec Solidaire (QS). QS now claims to oppose any state prohibitions on the wearing of religious symbols, but it long advocated a ban similar to that now imposed by the CAQ and for more than a decade insisted that the reactionary “excessive accommodation/secularism” debate was legitimate (see: “How Québec Solidaire abetted the rise of anti-Muslim chauvinism”).

The opposition of the English-speaking ruling elite to Bill 21—including the right-wing populist governments of Doug Ford in Ontario and Jason Kenney in Alberta—is completely hypocritical. It is inseparable from their virulently anti-Quebec Anglo-chauvinist appeals, which have included oft-repeated assertions that Quebec benefits more from federal government largesse than the other provinces. Moreover, Ford and Kenney are also stirring up anti-immigrant chauvinism, while imposing austerity. Ford has denounced refugees as a threat to Ontario’s public services, while Andrew Scheer’s federal Conservative Party and Kenney’s Alberta United Conservatives maintain links to the far-right Rebel Media website. Kenney, for his part, was a key player in the hard-right cabinet of federal Prime Minister Stephen Harper. This included a stint as immigration minister, during which he repeatedly sought to stir up Islamophobia.

The recent provincial premiers’ conference welcomed the CAQ’s Bill 9 and called on Ottawa to curtail the family reunification program to bring immigration more in line with the needs of big business.

Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s claims to oppose Bill 21 are no less hypocritical. His four years in power have been marked by a drastic increase in military spending, Canada’s increased participation in Washington’s predatory wars in the Middle East under the pretext of fighting “Islamic terrorism,” and Ottawa’s complicity in the witch-hunt the Trump administration is mounting against refugees and immigrants.

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