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Quebec's religious-symbols law resisted

by Dan Bilefsky *The New York Times* | March 8, 2020 at 5:42 a.m.

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MONTREAL -- A Muslim lawyer who wears a headscarf has put aside her aspiration to become a public prosecutor.

A Sikh teacher with a turban moved about 2,800 miles from Quebec to Vancouver, calling herself a "refugee in her own country."

And an Orthodox Jewish teacher who wears a head kerchief is worried she could be blocked from a promotion.

Since the Quebec government in June banned teachers, police officers, prosecutors and other public-sector employees from wearing religious symbols while at work, people such as these three women have been grappling with the consequences.

Francois Legault, the right-leaning Quebec premier, says the law -- which applies to Muslim headscarves, Sikh turbans, Jewish skullcaps, Catholic crosses and other religious symbols -- upholds the separation between religion and state, and maintains the neutrality of public-sector workers. The government has stressed that the vast majority of Quebecers support the ban.

"I would not feel comfortable being faced with a judge or lawyer in court wearing a headscarf here, because I would worry about their neutrality," said Radhia Ben Amor, a research coordinator at the University of Montreal, who is Muslim and said she moved from Tunisia to live in a more secular country.

But the law has prompted vocal protests and legal challenges, as well as condemnation by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Critics say it flouts freedom of religion, breaches constitutional protections and excludes minorities who choose to wear symbols of faith from vital professions. They also say implementing the law will be fraught because it can be hard to discern a religious symbol from a fashion accessory or nonreligious garb.

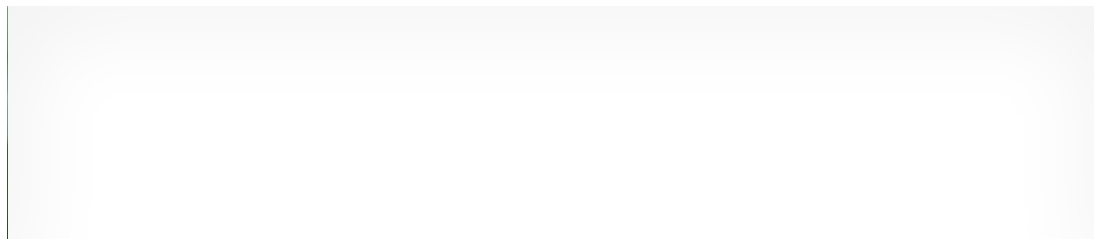
The English Montreal School Board said the law was forcing it to turn away qualified teachers. It said at least one teacher had removed her headscarf while at work to keep her job.

The Coalition Inclusion Quebec -- a group that includes Roman Catholics, Jews, Sikhs and Muslims -- is challenging the law in court, along with three teachers, including two Muslims and a Roman Catholic.

Perri Ravon, a lawyer who has worked on two of the lawsuits against the ban, said that at least for now, "the law is disproportionately affecting Muslim women because the hijab is an outwardly visible religious symbol." She noted that a Catholic cross was less conspicuous since it could be concealed in a blouse or shirt while at work.

Nonetheless, the Catholic teacher named in one of the suits, Andrea Lauzon, who wears a visible cross and medallion of the Virgin Mary, said in court papers that her faith and identity were inextricably bound, and that her constitutional right to freedom of religion was being breached.

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After the ban passed, Sumayya Patel, 24, asked herself whether she could remove her headscarf.

She couldn't.

"There are times when I want to take it off and let my hair down like other girls," she said. "But I have stuck with it since I am 13 years old, and, after all that effort and sacrifice, it has become a part of me."

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Patel said that just a few months after she graduated from McGill University in Montreal with a degree in education, and had been offered a job as a substitute teacher, her life was upended when the school board told her that to continue to work, she would need to remove her hijab.

Eventually, the board let her keep her job because she was hired before the law took effect. However, her future is uncertain.

Some feminists in Quebec support the ban, arguing that keeping religion out of public life can help further women's rights.

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