

Denying Rights and Realities

By: Alim Fakirani, Dr. W. Y. Alice Chan, Dr. Margie Patrick

When asked for his thoughts on Muslim women who reported acts of discrimination since the introduction of Bill 21 during a CBC Radio interview (on June 27, 2019), Premier Legault said “I don’t believe it”. As a response, this op-ed raises questions based on these recent comments through 3 points and invites readers to consider a similar bill imposed on other groups and how to respond.



The Centre for Civic Religious Literacy (CCRL) team members protesting Bill 21 on June 17, 2019 in Montreal.

In June, Quebec’s Premier Legault [denied the reality of women](#) who have been attacked, discriminated against, and spat on since he introduced Bill 21. He said he did not really believe the women, despite the fact that Justice Femme, a local non-profit recorded [40 cases of discrimination since March 2019](#), and numerous women have reported these acts. Unfortunately, this is not surprising since Legault also denies the rights to obtain employment of influence (as teachers, lawyers, judges, police officers, and prison guards) for certain groups of individuals.

In July, Quebec’s Education Minister took a photo with Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai. When asked what he would do should Yousafzai wish to teach in Quebec, the Education Minister said [he would inform her that it would be an honour but that all teachers would need to remove their religious symbols when working](#).

While this law may impact a minority of Quebecois, even a minority of religious individuals, we should still consider what is at stake here. “I’m not a Muslim, I don’t wear a Hijab so this law

doesn't impact me." "It's no big deal for a Jewish doctor to take off their Kippah when practicing medicine." "Why should a Sikh police officer receive an exemption that permits him to wear his turban?" To these comments, we raise three points.

Firstly, this law undermines a central principle of liberal democracies - freedom. As a citizen, you have access to certain inalienable freedoms. These freedoms are enshrined in constitutions, charters, bills, etc. across liberal democracies globally. In Canada, these freedoms are enshrined in our *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and serve, for the most part, as a recognition of hard-won rights that successive generations of Canadians valiantly fought to secure. From securing the right for women to vote to ensuring that non-whites had the same rights as their Caucasian neighbour, the rights that we fight for, once given, are too precious to yield.

For example, the idea of revoking women's right to vote based on a perceived social concern would be unimaginable today. However, this is happening to religious minority groups today. The "**fundamental**" right to freedom of conscience and religion is guaranteed by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, but is being revoked by a government that decided such rights no longer apply to certain citizens of Quebec. What other rights and could they deny and revoke? How should we speak up for those groups at that time?

Secondly, what problem does Bill 21 address? Are tax dollars being used to address a non-existent issue? How many complaints exist around hijab-wearing teachers, or being pulled over by a turban-wearing cop? Is the real issue discomfort with non-Christian religions? With public religion? Are the perceived threats of pluralism felt throughout the province or is this bill a reaction against the diversity of large urban cities like Montreal and Laval?

This bill, when analyzed, addresses a non-existing issue. The issue isn't that religious diversity will erode "Quebec values." Legault wishes to confine certain religious minorities into specific sectors of society, ones that do not influence the common good or future generations. However, the reality is that Quebec will continue to become increasingly diverse. Such diversity will inevitably affect all areas of public life. We will have no choice but to grow in our awareness of others, even if the practices, beliefs, languages, clothing, etc. of newcomers may seem, on the surface, to be different from that which we are accustomed.

Lastly, Bill 21 brings to light a more resounding issue in Quebec. Decisions are being made on behalf of people, but have we spoken to them? It may be very easy for someone to say that a Muslim woman can take off her hijab or that it's not necessary for a Sikh to wear his kirpan in order to practice their faith, but how many of these same people have actually sat down with a member from either of these communities and had a conversation about what these symbols mean to them, and more importantly, to ask them, their neighbours, children's teachers, nurses, and retail workers, how this law makes them *feel*. This is the missing element in this conversation.

At the heart of this issue are real people - good people - who are trying to build lives for themselves (especially if they were born in Quebec) or integrate into their new adoptive homes, and who now might feel that, try as they might, will always be seen as outsiders and second-class citizens.

So, we invite Quebec citizens and Quebec leaders to consider: Does Bill 21 protect or revoke the fundamental freedoms of all Quebec citizens? What problem is Bill 21 addressing, or has it created more problems? How does Bill 21 help people integrate into society or is it excluding people instead? If a Bill revokes rights and freedoms, does not address an existing issue, and excludes people in the process, what is the purpose of the Bill in the first place? How long can we deny the reality of people around us?

About the authors

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