

Most Quebecers support religious symbols ban, but they're split on how to enforce it

A majority of Quebec residents favour a ban on religious symbols, but they are split on how to punish those who would break the proposed new law, a poll reveals.

The Angus Reid Institute asked Quebecers whether hijab and cross-wearing teachers should be fined, fired or jailed and discovered deep ambivalence about how the proposed law in the province should be enforced.

While 64 per cent of the population supports the religious symbols ban and using the notwithstanding clause to get around religious freedom guarantees in Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms, they were split down the middle over whether civil servants who ignore the law should be fired (43 per cent for firing and 43 per cent against, with 14 per cent unsure).

They were slightly more enthusiastic about fining them (54 per cent pro-fines and 36 per cent against). But they generally did not think it appropriate to throw them in jail (seven per cent in favour, versus 86 per cent against).

The proposed ban on religious symbols under Bill 21 would apply only to public sector workers and only while they are on the job.

The law, which could be passed within weeks, will grandfather in employees who have been wearing religious symbols at work, but only until such time as they change roles.

A promotion or shift to another public sector job would require Jews to lose their kippahs, Sikhs to take off their turbans and Christians to tone down their crosses. Public sector workers represent 22.6 per cent of Quebec's workforce, according to Statistics Canada's April employment survey.

It's the fourth time Quebec has tried to impose official state secularism in the last decade. Previous attempts by both Liberal and Parti Quebecois governments either died when the government was voted out or were stymied by the courts.

This time, a majority CAQ (Coalition Avenir Quebec) government is fulfilling a campaign promise to clamp down on public displays of religion.

Quebec's bishops have been relatively silent on the question, releasing a letter on the subject March 6 then a press release April 16, in both cases only in French.

"The Quebec bishops didn't make a lot of noise with that, because many Catholics support Bill 21," explained Philippe Vaillancourt, editor-in-chief of Quebec's religious news service Presence. "Most Catholics actually."

In their submission, the Quebec Assembly of Catholic Bishops remind the government that freedom of religion is one of the cornerstones of the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

"Wearing religious symbols or clothing is a clear case of the exercise of religious freedom. Restricting in any way this fundamental freedom should be undertaken only on the basis of grave and unassailable reasons," said the March 6 message from the bishops.

The bishops concede that a government can opt for state neutrality on religion and employ different strategies to achieve official secularism. But the major focus of the bishops' intervention is to exempt teachers from the law.

"To oblige teachers, as if they have an authority like the policeman and the judge and so on... it's too much," said Bishop Noël Simard, president of the Quebec Assembly of Catholic Bishops.

The bishops support the government's attempt to force Muslim women who wear the niqab covering their faces to unveil in order to receive government services, Simard said.

"We need to see the face. The face is part of the identity of the person," he said. "When the face is hidden, that's unacceptable."

At the same time Simard said he supports the Charter of Rights.

"We have to respect the Charter of Rights and the freedom of religion and the freedom of conscience of everybody. That includes Muslims," he said.

Asked whether Catholics should come to the defence of Quebec's tiny, immigrant Muslim minority, Simard said he regretted the sometimes anti-Muslim tone of the debate.

"We need not to target specific groups," he said.