

Prime Minister Trudeau casts himself as defender of religious freedom

In a campaign-style address, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau claimed to be Canada's defender of religious freedom July 6 at an annual religious festival.

"We will always speak up for freedom of religion and for human rights here in Canada and around the world," said Trudeau, who early in his mandate eliminated the Office for Religious Freedom created by the previous Conservative government.

Trudeau appeared with nearly a dozen Liberal MPs, including Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Ahmed Hussen, to make an appeal for votes to more than 20,000 Ahmadiyya Muslims at Mississauga's International Centre.

"When our party created the Charter of Rights and Freedoms almost 40 years ago, it was because we knew the most vital rights and freedoms must never be called into question," Trudeau told the audience gathered in the heart of the election-critical 905 belt around Toronto.

"Well, today that's something we have to keep defending. Because there are leaders who think there are some people who are less Canadian than others, and who would use Islamophobia once again at the ballot box."



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, with a number of Liberal MPs at his side, addresses more than 20,000 Ahmadiyya Muslims at a religious festival July 6 in Mississauga, Ont. Michael Swan, Canadian Catholic News

Without specifically mentioning Quebec's new law which bans most employees in the public sector from wearing religious clothing or symbols on the job, Trudeau criticized the practice of outlawing certain types of dress.

"There are politicians who think that it's the government's place to tell women, or anyone, what they can or cannot wear. It's up to us to say no – no to hatred, no to fear and no to intolerance," he said.

Even though the Liberal government eliminated the Office for Religious Freedom, the Ahmadiyya community believes Trudeau is sincere when it comes to religious freedom, said Lal Khan Malik, national president of Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama.

"That office has been replaced with another office which is fulfilling the same objective," Malik said. "Every program should have good outcomes. They have showed us that they are taking care of the various functions that the previous office had."

At a similar political appearance before an audience of Chaldean Catholics from Iraq and Syria last November, Conservative leader Andrew Scheer promised that if elected his party would restore the position of ambassador for religious freedom.

"When we see people persecuted by things like blasphemy laws, Canada has to do more to protect those people," Scheer said in reference to the eight-year imprisonment of [Asia Bibi](#), a Catholic mother of five, in Pakistan.

Bibi has since been granted asylum in Canada.

Pakistan's blasphemy laws have hit the Ahmadiyya in Pakistan particularly hard, where members of the community can face jail time just for claiming to be Muslim, quoting from the Quran or calling their mosques mosques.

Both Sunni and Shia Muslims widely regard the Ahmadiyya as heretics and non-Muslims for referring to the founder of their religious movement, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, as both the promised Mahdi (Guided One) and Messiah.

The Office for Religious Freedom was launched at an Ahmadiyya mosque in Vaughan, Ont. in 2013. It was closed by the Liberals and its mandate became part of the Office of Human Rights, Freedom and Inclusion, which is a considerable step down from an office headed by an ambassador, former Ambassador for Religious Freedom [Fr. Deacon Andrew Bennett](#) told Canadian Catholic News.

"They just basically re-profiled the existing human rights bureau within Global Affairs and they decided to call it an office – even though it's no different from any other bureau. That was all optics," Bennett said.

The current office has lower status within Global Affairs Canada and no

dedicated budget to finance religious freedom projects abroad, Bennett said. Bennett's old office had a budget of \$5 million per year.

Without an ambassador heading the office, Global Affairs' focus on religious freedom is less effective, according to Bennett.

"It's been farmed out to our missions abroad, but they've got, obviously, numerous other files that they've got to manage," he said. "I think it's a significant difference of degree of priority."

Bennett's office was criticized both in Canada and abroad as being too focused on Christians because it was led by an ordained Catholic deacon.