

Quebec teacher removed from classroom because she wears a hijab

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Fatemeh Anvari had been teaching language arts at Chelsea Elementary School since late October. She was reassigned to another role focusing on literacy and inclusion in early December, when the Western Quebec School Board became aware that her presence in class violated provincial law, interim chair Wayne Daly said.

Quebec's Bill 21 has been in place since June, 2019. It bars a range of public servants in authority roles, including teachers, from wearing visible religious symbols.

Although Ms. Anvari has become a focal point in a long-running debate about religion in Quebec's public sphere, she said she has been heartened by the response from community members and wants to use this moment to raise awareness about the need to express oneself in the workplace.

"I was sad, but at the same time I find it empowering to get so much support," she said in an interview. "This isn't about me so much. It's a human issue."

Quebec undergoes a culture shift as 'woke' politics is redefined in the province

The 27-year-old has worn the hijab since she was young. She previously taught English in Iran and began supply-teaching at the Western Quebec School Board in March. She believed Bill 21 didn't apply to English schools, and no one raised possible legal issues with her until recently, she said.

"There were no comments, there were no issues, there was no hostility."

In her new role with the school, she will still be interacting with students, speaking to them about the value of diversity and inclusion. She feels it's a testament to the board's support that they offered her the job.

In April, the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) won a court ruling exempting it from Bill 21 because the law violated the English-language community's rights. But the provincial government appealed, and the restrictions remained in place. In November, the EMSB was denied a stay of the law while the appeal proceeds.

Federal parties have generally been cautious about denouncing the law, which is popular in Quebec, but Ms. Anvari's removal caused outrage across the political spectrum. In a statement, the Prime Minister's Office said "nobody in Canada should ever lose their job because of what they wear or their religious beliefs," adding that "Quebeckers are defending their rights through the courts."

"I think it's cowardly," said Marc Miller, a Liberal MP and the Crown-Indigenous Relations Minister. "It's disheartening and it's picking on someone vulnerable."

Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole offered a milder response, calling it "an issue that is best left for Quebeckers to decide." But one member of his caucus, Ontario MP Kyle Seebach, lashed out at the law on Twitter.

"I cannot in good conscience keep silent on this anymore," he wrote. "This is an absolute disgrace. It's time politicians stood up for what's right."

The Western Quebec School Board, which serves anglophones and opposes Bill 21, has said it had no choice but to comply with the law when it realized Ms. Anvari was teaching in a hijab.

"It was the correct ruling under Bill 21, we cannot have this teacher in our school board if they will not comply with Bill 21," Mr. Daly said. "She had decided that she would not comply with Bill 21, and in not complying that is justification for termination of a contract."



statement wearing a hijab.”

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