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Harper Opposes Voters' Veils to Boost Quebec Support (Update1)

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Sept. 14 (Bloomberg) -- Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, facing elections as early as this year, is taking a stand against veiled Muslim voters, helping him tap into a growing backlash against immigrants.

Harper criticized the nation's elections body for allowing veiled women to vote next week in by-elections to fill three vacant seats in Quebec, asserting that citizens should have to show their faces to prove their identity.

"I profoundly disagree with the decision," Harper told reporters in Sydney, where he was attending an Asia-Pacific summit. "It concerns me greatly because the role of Elections Canada is not to make its own laws."

The comments may help him build support among rural voters in Quebec. Harper needs to make gains in the French-speaking province in order to win a majority in the House of Commons. Recent polls show his ruling Conservatives tied for support with the opposition Liberal Party.

Harper is "stoking his natural support base," said Pierre Martin, a political science professor at Universite de Montreal. "It affects a very small number of people but it touches on an important symbolic issue."

At stake may be the timing and outcome of the next federal election. Harper's minority government may face general elections this year or early in 2008, said Nikita Nanos of polling firm SES Research. To win a majority, the Conservatives must increase their count of 10 seats in Quebec, which is Canada's second-most populous province after Ontario.

Early Elections

A good showing in the three Sept. 17 by-elections might give Harper the confidence to call a federal election, after his party ousted the Liberals 20 months ago, Nanos said.

"It will probably be the best indicator whether we are going to move toward an early election," he said. "If the Conservatives increase their popular vote, that's probably going to embolden them."

Two of the vacant seats -- Roberval and Saint-Hyacinthe -- were held by the separatist Bloc Quebecois party and are centered in small, primarily French-speaking towns. The Conservatives came in second in both districts in last year's elections. The other seat is for the former Liberal district of Outremont, where about 8 percent of the population is Muslim, four times the national

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average. The seats are vacant because the representatives retired.

Conservatives Lead

The Conservative Party is leading in Roberval, with 43 percent support, compared with 37 percent for the Bloc Quebecois, according to a poll in La Presse today. The New Democratic Party leads in the Montreal district of Outremont and the Bloc has the most support in Saint-Hyacinthe, the poll found.

The controversy over veils broke just as a provincial inquiry in Quebec began holding televised hearings on how much Quebecers should accommodate immigrants. At a hearing in Gatineau Sept. 10, one public servant complained about having to watch a co-worker wash her feet in the sink before praying, while being forbidden to put up Christmas decorations in her office, the Montreal Gazette newspaper reported.

``It's wrong for them to wear the veils" while voting, said Montreal resident Mike Divicarro, 51. ``We need to be able to see the face. They can do that in other countries, but not here."

No Stoning

A poll published by the Gazette this week found that a third of Quebecers say ``Quebec society" is threatened by non-Christian immigrants. Fifty-eight percent want the province to adopt rules of behavior for religious minorities similar to the one adopted in the town of Herouville earlier this year that outlawed the stoning of women.

``We are watching what is happening in Quebec and hoping and praying that this doesn't lead" to discrimination, said Mohamed Elmasry, president of the Canadian Islamic Congress.

He said most Muslim women would take off their veils at the voting booth if asked.

``Even in Muslim countries, they have to lift the veil when they vote," said Jamie Sastre, a federal government employee who lives in Gatineau, Quebec. ``Muslims don't have to be completely assimilated, but most don't have a problem with this."

Harper wasn't the first to protest the ruling by Elections Canada. The Bloc Quebecois, which holds most of the province's federal voting districts, called for a reversal of the veil ruling two days before Harper's statement. The Liberals and the socialist New Democratic Party also criticized the decision.

``Everybody tried to take a position early on this," said Rejean Pelletier, a political science professor at Laval University in Quebec City. ``This is a very important election for the Conservative Party, and for the other parties as well."

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