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Minaret ban: A complaint at the European Court

De Telegraaf (16.12.2009) / HRWF Int. (18.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - An inhabitant of Geneva has filed a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg about the minaret ban in Switzerland. The plaintiff, Hafid Quardiri, said on Wednesday on the francophone radio TSR that the ban undermines freedom of religion or belief and the provisions against discrimination of the European Convention.

About 57,5% of the participants in the 29 November referendum voted for the ban on the construction of minarets in Switzerland. The support to the prohibition was mainly coming from the rural German-speaking cantons. The cities and the French-speaking cantons said clearly no to the ban. There are four minarets in Switzerland.

Translation by Human Rights Without Frontiers

The Swiss vote to ban minarets

Eurotopics (30.11.2009) / HRWF Int. (04.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The people of Switzerland voted on Sunday to ban the construction of new minarets. The referendum initiated by the Swiss People's Party and the conservative Federal Democratic Union of Switzerland has dealt a severe blow to religious peace in the country, writes the European press.

Die Presse – Austria

The campaign to ban minarets in Switzerland has fanned fears of Islamic fundamentalism, writes the daily Die Presse: "With their vote the people of Switzerland have done their country a huge disservice. The country's Muslims, who make up 4.5 percent of the population, many of whom come from the former Yugoslavia, are for the most part well-integrated and largely unproblematic. Religious peace has been dealt a severe - and needless - blow. Moreover, in such questions it becomes a religiously neutral state like Switzerland to behave neutrally. The degree to which the unexpected outcome of the referendum has unnerved the government can be read in the sentence - meant reassuringly - that the four existing minarets do not have to be taken down. The initiators' hard-nosed bet has paid off: Their campaign has succeeded in fanning fears of militant Islamic fundamentalism, which may be a problem in some regions of the world,

but certainly not in Appenzell [where 71 percent voted in favour of the ban]."
(30/11/2009)

[Full article \(external link, German\)](#)

Diário de Notícias – Portugal

The minaret ban in Switzerland is pre-modern, the daily Diário de Notícias writes: "Switzerland has stressed its intolerance towards a religion that is growing in Western Europe as a result of the influx of immigrants. The building ban for minarets on mosques won't bring the Swiss the [national] security they used as an argument during the campaign. With this choice ... Switzerland is rather providing Islamic extremists with new arguments. For centuries Christians were tolerated in Islam, while the opposite was unthinkable in Europe. Today ... there is a mosque in Rome but it's unimaginable that a Christian would travel to Mecca. Switzerland has decided to go back several centuries in European history." (30/11/2009)

[Full article \(external link, Portuguese\)](#)

Le Temps – Switzerland

The vote in favour of a ban on minarets could harm Switzerland's international image, the daily Le Temps fears: "The result of the referendum on a minaret ban was far from being a coincidental majority But the campaign has shown that the reality of Islam in Switzerland has nothing to do with the demonised image that has clung to this religion for years - the image of a religious fanaticism that manifests itself in such shocking extremes as terrorism, sharia law, the burka and the stoning of women. The Swiss Muslims don't deserve this unfair sanction, which was prompted by fear, fantasy and ignorance. We can safely bet that the same initiative would have produced a similar result in other European countries, but this doesn't make the damage to Switzerland's image any less spectacular." (30/11/2009)

[Full article \(external link, French\)](#)

Postimees – Estonia

The Swiss ban on building minarets is reminiscent of the headscarf debate in France but with a few differences, the daily Postimees comments: "The dispute in Switzerland has been going on for some time, but in the end it was the right-wing Swiss People's Party that saw its opportunity and seized it: the economic crisis made it easier for it to explain to citizens why minarets are supposed to symbolise the power struggle with the rapidly growing Muslim immigrants community. In the dispute over headscarves in France other religious symbols like large crucifixes were also removed. In Switzerland on the other hand the minarets which already exist won't disappear. At any rate it's not yet clear whether the ban on new minarets in a multicultural country with around 400,000 Muslims will destroy the peace between religions or even lead to a new conflict between Muslims and the Western world." (30/11/2009)

[Full article \(external link, estonian\)](#)

The full articles in the original language are accessible through

http://www.eurotopics.net/en/archiv/results/archiv_article/DOSSIER61911-The-Swiss-vote-to-ban-minarets

Swiss vote to ban Islamic minarets

Measure to amend constitution stuns experts

By Colin Lovett

VOA News (29.11.2009) / HRWF Int. (29.11.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Demonstrators light candles next to a banner that reads "This is not my Switzerland" on the Bundesplatz square in front of the government building in Bern, Switzerland, to protest the acceptance of a minaret ban initiative.

The "Yes" vote - to amend the constitution in favor of banning minarets - stunned experts who had predicted the measure would be rejected. It also sent ripples of anxiety across the country's Muslim community, which makes up about six percent of Switzerland's population.

Some 57.5 percent of voters backed the initiative, which was championed by the nationalist Swiss People's Party. The party argues that minarets are a symbol of Islamic political power. There are only four minarets in Switzerland and they will not be affected by the ban.

Public opinion polls ahead of the election predicted that the measure would be rejected, and the Swiss government had urged citizens to vote against it.

Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey said she was shocked by the outcome and deeply regrets it.

But on the streets of one Swiss town - Gstaad - the reaction was mixed.

Anton Seil said that Muslims living in Switzerland need to adapt to Swiss customs. If he were in another country, Seil said, he would not be allowed to build a church.

But another Swiss, Anne-Marie Birnstein, expressed dismay at the vote. Birnstein said she is very disappointed and that she is afraid of the consequences.

Human rights groups say a ban against minaret construction violates freedom of expression. Many Muslims have expressed concern the vote could resonate across Europe, including in neighboring France - home to about five million Muslims, Western Europe's largest Islamic community.

Swiss referendum stirs a debate about Islam

Business Is Worried as Rightist Party's Move to Ban the Construction of Minarets on Mosques Will Be Voted on Nov. 29

By Deborah Ball and Anita Greil

The Wall Street Journal (06.11.2009) / HRWF Int. (26.11.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - An emotional debate over the role of Islam in Switzerland is heating up as a referendum approaches that would ban the construction of minarets on mosques.

On Nov. 29, the Swiss will vote on a referendum to ban the construction of minarets, an initiative promoted by the right-wing Swiss People's Party, who argue that a minaret is a symbol of Islamic intolerance. Minarets are tower-like structures capped with crowns; while the structure has no special religious significance, it is often used for the call to prayer for Muslims.

The debate comes in a country that has prided itself on integrating its large immigrant population and that largely avoided the clashes over the rights of Muslim minorities seen

elsewhere in Europe. Business and political interests are especially worried about a possible backlash from the Muslim world.

For example, Swiss watchmaker Swatch Group Ltd. is worried that its relations with Muslim countries -- an important destination for its goods -- will be imperiled if the initiative passes. "The brand 'Swiss' must continue to represent values such as openness, pluralism and freedom of religion," said Hanspeter Rentsch, member of the executive group management board at Swatch. "Under no circumstances must it be brought in connection with hatred, animosity towards foreigners and narrow-mindedness."

The Swiss People's Party gathered twice the required signatures needed to call a vote. Its campaign used posters depicting a woman in a burqa in front of a row of minarets shaped like missiles. Some cities, such as Basel, have banned the posters, while Zurich and others have allowed them in the name of free speech.

The party, the country's largest political group and a fierce critic of immigration, drew international criticism for a campaign poster two years ago showing a white sheep kicking a black sheep out of Switzerland.

A national poll by state-owned media group SRG shows that 53% of voters oppose the ban and 34% support it. Muslim leaders, who have taken a low-key approach to the controversy, are nonetheless worried.

"This initiative gives a message that Muslims are not welcome here," says Elham Manea, a lecturer in political science at the University of Zurich. "If it passes, it raises the possibility of radicalization of some young people. It would be a big disappointment."

Some say that even defeating the referendum won't dissolve the tension. "It won't end with this," says Hisham Maizer, head of the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Switzerland. "The debate about Islam in Switzerland has just begun."

The controversy is unusual in a country where 20% of the population are counted as foreigners, and which has taken a pragmatic approach to integrating its immigrants. About 400,000, or roughly 5%, of Swiss residents are Muslim. Most are of Turkish or Balkan origin, with a small minority from the Arab world.

According to a government poll in 2000, less than 15% of Swiss Muslims actively practice their faith. Indeed, only four of the roughly 150 mosques in Switzerland have minarets. Laws against sound pollution forbid mosques from using minarets to hold speakers for the call to prayer.

Controversies have erupted in Switzerland over Muslims' place in society in recent years, but haven't been nearly as incendiary as in France or the Netherlands. In 2004, the demand of a cashier at Swiss supermarket chain Migros to be permitted to wear a headscarf at work sparked debate, but when Migros and a rival, Coop, set a policy banning headscarves for employees who deal with the public, the controversy faded.

Lately, however, conservative Muslims have pushed for greater recognition of their faith. One group has successfully appealed to Swiss courts to allow parents to dress their children in full-body swimming suits during co-ed lessons.

The Swiss government has come out strongly against the minaret referendum, fearful of a radicalization of Muslims at home and reprisals against Swiss interests abroad. A yes vote "could make Switzerland a target for Islamic terrorism," said Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey.

Swiss diplomats are working to reassure their counterparts in Muslim countries that Bern opposes the initiative. A working group is also monitoring the media in those countries for signs of backlash. So far, Bern hasn't detected a rise in anti-Swiss sentiment, according to one official.

Swiss businesses, many with large interests in Muslim countries, have come out against the referendum, for fear of a boycott like one that hit Denmark in 2005 following a controversy over published cartoons of the prophet Muhammad. Nestlé SA, which has about 50 factories and 5.5 billion Swiss francs (\$5.36 billion) of sales in Muslim countries, has declined to take a stance on the referendum.

According to Economiesuisse, Switzerland's main business association, about 7%, or 14.5 billion francs, of Switzerland's total exports go to predominantly Muslim countries. In 2008, those exports rose 14%, compared with a rise in overall exports of 4.3%. Switzerland is still bruised from a spat with Libya that led that country to cut off oil exports to Switzerland for a time.

"The possible economic impact must not be used as a way to kill this debate," said Martin Baltisser, general secretary of the Swiss People's Party. "A backlash against Swiss foreign economic relations has been exaggerated."

Town becomes focus of right-wing campaign ahead of controversial referendum

By Tony Paterson

The Independent (14.08.2009) / HRWF Int. (15.08.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The normally sleepy Swiss country town of Langenthal has become the focus of a virulent right-wing campaign to ban minarets from all mosques in the Alpine republic on the grounds that they symbolise ideological opposition to the country's constitution.

Switzerland's "stop minaret" movement is backed by the influential ultra-conservative Swiss People's Party, (SVP) which was re-elected in 2007 with its largest ever share of the vote after mounting an anti-foreigner campaign that was denounced by the United Nations as racist.

Ulrich Schüler, an SVP parliamentarian and leading member of the anti-minaret movement, says the edifices are political rather than religious. "They are symbols of a desire for power, of an Islam which wants to establish a legal and social order fundamentally contrary to the liberties guaranteed in our constitution," he said.

Switzerland is home to a population of about 400,000 Muslims, the majority of whom are Turks, Bosnians and Albanians. The "stop minaret" campaign was launched two years ago, prompting a national debate on the subject. A petition in support of its aims has since been signed by more than 100,000 citizens. Under Swiss law the issue now has to be decided by a national referendum which will be conducted in late November.

However, before then, the "stop minaret" campaign is hoping to create a legal precedent by thwarting construction of a minaret in Langenthal, a provincial town halfway between Bern and Basel that is home to 14,000 people and 11 churches.

Thomas Rufener, the town's mayor, said about eight per cent of Langenthal's residents were Muslims. "All the main parties have given their approval for the mosque," he said. The regional canton of Bern has given approval in addition for the construction of a

domed mosque. That will stand alongside the planned minaret which will be little more than 30 feet high.

An anti-minaret campaign has now lodged a formal complaint with the canton, claiming that the planned mosque amounts to an "ideological intrusion". Daniel Zigg, a campaign spokesman, said the building would attract more than 100 Muslim believers a day during the Ramadan fast because it was the only one of its kind in the canton.

The anti-minaret campaigners are hoping to force Bern to rescind its approval for the minaret and score an important victory in the run-up to the November referendum. "There may be different laws governing this kind of thing in certain parts of Paris or Berlin, but we don't want them in Switzerland," Mr Schüler said.

Two years ago his party fought a general election with famously xenophobic campaign posters depicting a flock of white sheep kicking a black sheep out of Switzerland.

Switzerland has permitted the construction of mosques with minarets in major cities such as Geneva, Zurich and Winterthur where they have been accepted with little noticeable objection. However the inauguration of a mosque with a minaret in the small town of Wangen in June brought protests from the "stop minaret" movement and accusations that the town's Muslim community had links with the right-wing Turkish extremist group, the Grey Wolves.

Switzerland's Muslim community has been largely reluctant to discuss the anti-minaret campaign. Ahmed Sadaqat, Imam at Zurich's Balgrist mosque, the first to be built in Switzerland in 1963, recalled last week how the building provoked vociferous protests at the time. But he added: "Since then there have been no problems at all." He accuses the anti-minaret campaigners of failing to make any distinction between Islam, the burqa and terrorism. "They should accept that Muslims are a fact in this society and that they live here. They must accept this reality," he said.

Human Rights Without Frontiers is opposed to any attempt to block the construction, renting and/or use of public or private premises for the use of worship and peaceful meetings by religious or belief groups.

Deconstructing the new religious landscape

Simon Bradley in Biel

Swissinfo.ch (22.06.2009) / HRWF Int. (24.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Experts have been studying why it is easier for some non-native religions to build a temple or church in Switzerland, whereas others, such as Muslims, face resistance.

Lucerne University researchers have been examining the complex issue of new religious buildings and their symbols in the public domain, and the possible tensions that can arise from this. Their results form the basis for a special exhibition.

"Dome, temple, minaret: the new face of Switzerland", documenting the emergence of 18 new religious buildings in Switzerland since 1945, is currently being held in the town of Biel, before moving on to Bern, Basel, Zug and Nyon.

The majestic traditional-style brilliant-white Gurdwara, a Sikh temple with bulb-like decorations and a golden spire, stands out dramatically against the Langenthal industrial skyline. Inaugurated on September 23, 2006, the construction was not contested and was even supported by the local authorities and a rightwing Swiss People's Party councillor.

Just two kilometres away the Langenthal Islamic centre is much more discrete: a modest grey building without any external adornment. Yet the Muslim place of prayer in Langenthal and another in Wangen, near Olten, have been at the heart of local and national controversies over plans to construct small minarets.

Swiss citizens are due to vote on a rightwing proposal to ban minarets, possibly later this year. The people's initiative has been dismissed by the government, most political parties and religious groups, but will go ahead after receiving the necessary 113,000 signatures for a national ballot.

"We see that in the same city, two religions do not receive the same treatment," said Andreas Tunger-Zanetti, from the Religion Research Centre at Lucerne University and the exhibition's coordinator.

According to the researcher, the public is not that familiar with the small Swiss Sikh community, but the media is full of stories of Islamic terror, making Muslims an easy target for politicians.

Acceptance

The case of Langenthal underlines the deep transformations that are taking place in the Swiss religious landscape. Church attendance among the main traditional organised religions in Switzerland is very low, but migration has brought an increase in non-native, lesser-known religions.

While the majority of the population (75 per cent) are of either Catholic or Protestant faith, at the last census in 2000 there were more than 311,000 Muslims, 132,000 members of Orthodox churches, 18,000 Jews, 21,000 Buddhists and 28,000 Hindus. It is estimated the number of Muslims and Hindus now stand at around 400,000 and 50,000, respectively.

Public acceptance of a new religious building depends on a range of factors, like the political context, media climate and whether the religion is new or established, say researchers.

In the exhibition they present the example of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints, the Mormon Church, which experienced initial resistance when building its huge temple near Zollikofen, a suburb of Bern, in the 1950s.

"At the time the church only had 1.2 million members worldwide. Many people thought of it as a 'weird sect'...but these fears haven't been around for a long time," said spokesman Peter Gysler.

The Mahmud Mosque in Zurich is located next to the Balgrist Reformist Church (swissinfo)

Public perception

General public perception is also important, said Tunger-Zanetti: "Buddhism encounters less prejudice than Islamic communities, especially since September 11, but you can't say that Buddhists per se are much more peaceful than Muslims."

He added that it was easier to build a mosque in a big city, like Geneva or Zurich, than in a small location, and it helps if you carry out a proper communication campaign early on, have sufficient funds or a local backer.

This was the case for Europe's first Tibetan monastery, which was built at Rikon, east of Zurich, on land owned by the Kuhn Rikon metallurgy firm.

More than 100,000 people fled Tibet in 1959; Switzerland was the first European country to welcome 1,000 Tibetan refugees. Some of them were given a home and job at the Kuhn Rikon factory and in 1967 construction began on their own monastery.

"The village was very positive and the Tibetans were almost welcomed with flowers by the population," said Jacques Kuhn, who helped drive through the project.

"Natural process"

Tunger-Zanetti is convinced that current frictions over minarets or other religious symbols are part of a "natural necessary process" that occurs in every society when foreigners are being integrated.

The difference in Switzerland is that direct democracy means people get to vote on proposals like the anti-minaret initiative.

"But the advantage is that Swiss society leads the discussion," said the researcher. "It will most probably conclude that it can cope with this emerging diversity and plurality in the same way that society coped with similar problems in the past, like between Catholics and Protestants."

"People tend to forget history," he said, pointing to the fact that the huge Catholic Valentin Church in predominantly Protestant Lausanne, built in 1832, was only allowed to have a bell tower in the 1930s.

"In the end it was built and Lausanne society didn't collapse," he said "Catholics and Protestants now live side by side and the same can be expected of us living next to Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims in 20 years time."
