

Critics vow to overturn Swiss minaret ban: Surprise and dismay

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A Swiss vote to ban the construction of minarets at Muslim houses of worship sent ripples of surprise and dismay across Europe and Islamic countries at the end of November, even as opponents vowed to challenge the results.

“We are really sad—for ourselves and for Switzerland’s place in the world,” said Geneva Muslim leader Hafid Ourardiri, after 57.5 percent of Swiss voted in favor of the ban. “This is not good for our country—and Switzerland is our country.”

An estimated 400,000 Muslims call Switzerland home. Ourardiri, who heads the Muslim Council of Interknowing, a nonprofit aimed at promoting interfaith ties, said critics of the measure would file an appeal with the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France.

Thorbjørn Jagland, secretary general of the Council of Europe, suggested that a case could be made against the ban. According to the Associated Press, the Council of Europe said that banning “new minarets in Switzerland raises concerns as to whether fundamental rights of individuals, protected by international treaties, should be subject to popular votes.”

The news service also quoted officials of the UN Human Rights Council in condemning the ban. Spokes person Rupert Colville said that High Commissioner Navi Pillay hesitated to condemn a democratic vote. “But she has no hesitation at all in condemning the antforeigner scaremongering which has characterized political campaigns in a number of countries, including Switzerland.”

The vote on November 29 amounts to a major victory for the nationalist Swiss People’s Party, or SVP, which had championed the ban on grounds that minarets are unnecessary for worship (such as the call to prayer in Muslim countries) but rather symbolize Islamic power.

“We have nothing against the building of mosques—it’s a private affair and it’s part of religious freedom,” said Oskar Freysinger, a senior member of the SVP. “But we don’t want Islam to interfere in our political or legal system.”

Critics fear that the Swiss vote could trigger a furious backlash; far-right politicians in Europe, however, say they are energized by the results.

“We’re faced with a real anti-Muslim campaign that has begun in Switzerland and which might spread elsewhere in Europe,” Kamel Kebtane, director of the mosque in Lyon, France, told France-Info radio. “Today it’s minarets, tomorrow it may be banning Muslims from practicing their faith.”

French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner said he was “scandalized” by the results, while the *Times* of London called it a “destructive and pernicious decision.”

The top official of the Geneva-based Lutheran World Federation expressed regret at the Swiss vote. Ishmael Noko, general secretary of the LWF, said that while there may be a legitimate interest in protecting a specific Swiss cultural heritage, the vote “has framed this interest in explicitly sectarian terms vis-à-vis Muslims.” Noko said the result undermined “the Swiss reputation and heritage of tolerance and hospitality.”

Prominent Swiss Muslim scholar Tariq Ramadan urged Europeans to stand up against populist sentiments. “The Swiss majority are sending a clear message to their Muslim fellow citizens: we do not trust you, and the best Muslim for us is the Muslim we cannot see,” Ramadan wrote in a commentary in Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper.

In practical terms, the minaret ban will make little difference—at least for now. Switzerland has only four mosque minarets, none of which will be affected by the measure. But far-right parties in Denmark and the Netherlands said they would push for similar legislation, while Marine Le Pen, a senior member of France’s anti-immigrant National Front Party, said the Swiss vote reflected European fears of the region’s growing Muslim population.

The minaret ban is only the latest example of opposition to Islamic symbols in Europe. Efforts to build mosques have stalled in a number of European countries. The minaret controversy drew much editorial comment in the United States as well. J. Brent Walker, executive director of the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee, called the Swiss referendum “a cheap shot at Islam [and] a wholesale attack

on religious liberty."