

**Business and Politics in the Muslim World  
Global Election Reports  
Weekly Report  
December 10, 2009 to December 16, 2009**

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This report is about the Swiss referendum “Ban on Minarets” held on November 29, 2009.

<b>Contents-----</b>	<b>Page#</b>
<b>1. Introduction-----</b>	<b>3</b>
• Muslims in Switzerland	
• Cantons	
<b>2. Minaret controversy in Switzerland-----</b>	<b>8</b>
• Background	
• Legal dispute	
• Political dispute	
• Federal constitutional amendment banning the construction of minarets	
<b>3. Results-----</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>4. Supporters-----</b>	<b>19</b>
• Egerkinger committee	
• Poster campaign	
• Feminists	
<b>5. Oppositionists-----</b>	<b>21</b>
• The Swiss Government	
• Parliament	
• Non-governmental organizations	
• Religious organizations	
• Individual legal experts	
<b>6. Implementation and the Langenthal minaret-----</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>7. Consequences and International Community Reactions-----</b>	<b>25</b>

## Swiss Confederation

Capital                    Bern  
                              46°57'N 7°27'E / 46.95°N 7.45°E  
                              / 46.95; 7.45

Official languages    German,  
                              French,  
                              Italian,  
                              Romansh

Government            Direct democracy  
                              Federal parliamentary republic

### Independence

- Foundation date      1 August 1291
- de facto                22 September 1499
- Recognized            24 October 1648
- Restored                7 August 1815
- Federal state         12 September 1848

### Area

- Total                    41,284 km<sup>2</sup>  
                              15,940 sq mi

### Population

- 2009 estimate        7,739,100
- 2007 census            7,593,500
- Density                186.5/km<sup>2</sup>  
                              477.4/sq Military Intelligence

GDP (nominal)        2008 estimate

- Total                    \$500.260 billion
- Per capita              \$68,433

## **1. Introduction**

Switzerland, officially the Swiss Confederation is a federal republic consisting of 26 cantons, with Bern as the seat of the federal authorities. The country is situated in Western Europe where it is bordered by Germany to the north, France to the west, Italy to the south, and Austria and Liechtenstein to the east.

Switzerland is a landlocked country whose territory is geographically divided between the Alps, the Central Plateau and the Jura; adding together an area of 41,285 km<sup>2</sup> (15,940 sq mi). The Swiss population of approximately 7.7 million people concentrates mostly on the Plateau, where the largest cities are to be found. Among them are the two global cities and economic centres of Zurich and Geneva. Switzerland is one of the richest countries in the world by per capita gross domestic product, with a nominal per capita GDP of \$67,384. Zurich and Geneva have respectively been ranked as having the second and third highest quality of life in the world.

The Swiss Confederation has a long history of neutrality—it has not been in a state of war internationally since 1815—and was one of the last countries to join the United Nations. Switzerland is home to many international organizations, including the World Economic Forum, the Red Cross, the World Trade Organization and the second largest UN office. On the European level it was a founder of the European Free Trade Association and is part of the Schengen Agreement.

Switzerland comprises three main linguistic and cultural regions: German, French, and Italian, to which are added the Romansh-speaking valleys. The Swiss therefore do not form a nation in the sense of a common ethnic or linguistic identity. The strong sense of belonging to the country is founded on the common historical background, shared values (federalism, direct democracy, neutrality) and Alpine symbolism. The establishment of the Swiss Confederation is traditionally dated to 1 August 1291; Swiss National Day is celebrated on the anniversary.

## **Muslims in Switzerland**

According to the Confederate census of 2001, a total number of 310,807 Muslims were living in Switzerland which made up 4.26% of the total population. In 2009 there were an estimated 400,000 Muslims in Switzerland, accounting to around 5% of the total population.

### **Location**

The largest concentration of Muslim population is in the German speaking Swiss plateau.

The cantons with more than 5% Muslim population are:

6.72% Basel-Stadt

6.50% Glarus

6.13% St. Gallen

5.94% Thurgau

5.80% Schaffhausen

5.49% Aargau

5.39% Solothurn

5.33% Zürich

Geneva is the only non-German-speaking canton where the Muslim population is slightly above the average (4, 35). Another remarkable demographic feature in comparison to other European countries is the relatively equal distribution throughout the country (compare Islam in the United Kingdom). No administrative unit has more than 8.55% of Muslim population, and no town or village more than 16.8%. The lowest percentage of Muslims in a canton is 1.82% (the Italian-speaking Ticino).

### **Demographics**

Most Muslims in Switzerland are from former Yugoslavia (56.4%; especially Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, the Republic of Macedonia and the Sandžak region) and Turkey (20.2%).

## **Mosques**

There are two Swiss mosques which predate 1980 and the rapid increase of immigration of Muslims from the Balkans and Turkey over the following decades. These are the Ahmadiyya mosque in Zurich, built in 1963 and also boasting the first minaret built in Switzerland, and a Saudi-financed mosque in Geneva, built in 1978. Today, there are numerous further mosques and prayer rooms across the country, predominantly in the urban parts of the Swiss plateau.

In 2007 the Bern city council rejected plans to build one of the largest Islamic cultural centers in Europe.

Four Swiss mosques have minarets, besides the Zurich and Geneva mosques mentioned above; these are a mosque in Winterthur and a mosque in Wangen bei Olten. The latter was erected in 2009 following several years of political and legal disputes. In the wake of the Wangen minaret controversy, a popular initiative was passed with 57.5% of the popular vote in November 2009, introducing a ban on the construction of new minarets. The four existing minarets are not affected by the ban.

## **Cantons**

The 26 cantons of Switzerland are the member states of the federal state of Switzerland. Each canton was a fully sovereign state with its own borders, army and currency from the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) until the establishment of the Swiss federal state in 1848. The most recently created canton is the Canton of Jura, which separated from the Canton of Bern in 1979.

## **History**

In the 16th century, the Old Swiss Confederacy was composed of thirteen sovereign cantons, and there were two different kinds: six land (or forest) cantons and seven city (or urban) cantons. Though they were technically part of the Holy Roman Empire, they had become de facto independent when the Swiss defeated Emperor Maximilian in 1499. The six forest cantons were democratic republics, whereas the seven urban cantons were oligarchic republics controlled by noble families.

## **Constitution**

Each canton has its own constitution, legislature, government and courts. Most of the cantons' legislatures are unicameral parliaments, their size varying between fifty-eight and two hundred seats. A few legislatures are general assemblies known as Landsgemeinden. The cantonal governments consist of either five or seven members, depending on the canton. For the names of the institutions, see List of legislative and executive councils of the Cantons of Switzerland.

The Swiss Federal Constitution declares the cantons to be sovereign to the extent their sovereignty is not limited by federal law. The cantons also retain all powers and competencies not delegated to the Confederation by the Constitution. Most significantly, the cantons are responsible for healthcare, welfare, law enforcement and public education; they also retain the power of taxation. The cantonal constitutions determine the degree of autonomy accorded to the municipalities, which varies but almost always includes the power to levy taxes and pass municipal laws. The sizes of the cantons vary from 37 km<sup>2</sup> to 7,105 km<sup>2</sup>; the populations vary from 15,471 to 1,244,400.

## **Direct democracy**

As on the federal level, all cantons provide for (half-)direct democracy. Citizens may demand a popular vote to amend the cantonal constitution or laws, or to veto laws or spending bills passed by the parliament. General popular assemblies (Landsgemeinde) are now limited to the cantons of Appenzell Innerrhoden and Glarus. In all other cantons democratic rights are exercised by secret ballot.

## **List of Swiss cantons**

The cantons are listed in the order given in the federal constitution.

Canton	Since	Capital	Population	Area	Density	No munic.	Official languages
Zürich	1351	Zürich	1,307,567	1,729	701	171	German
Bern	1353	Bern	962,982	5,959	158	392	German, French
Luzern (Lucerne)	1332	Lucerne	363,475	1,493	233	88	German
Uri	1291	Altdorf	34,989	1,077	33	20	German
Schwyz	1291	Schwyz	141,024	908	143	30	German
Obwalden (Obwald)	1291	Sarnen	33,997	491	66	7	German
Nidwalden (Nidwald)	1291	Stans	40,287	276	138	11	German
Glarus	1352	Glarus	38,237	685	51	25	German
Zug	1352	Zug	109,141	239	416	11	German
Fribourg	1481	Fribourg	263,241	1,671	141	168	French, German
Solothurn	1481	Solothurn	250,240	791	308	125	German
Basel-Stadt (Basel-City)	1501 (part of Basel until 1833)	Basel	185,227	37	5,072	3	German
Basel-Landschaft (Basel-Country)	1501 (part of Basel until 1833)	Liestal	269,145	518	502	86	German
Schaffhausen	1501	Schaffhausen	74,527	298	246	27	German
Appenzell Ausserrhoden (Outer Rhodes)	1513 (part of Appenzell	Herisau / Trogen[6]	52,654	243	220	20	German

			until 1597)					
Appenzell Innerrhoden (Inner Rhodes)	1513 (part of Appenzell until 1597)	Appenzell	15,471	173	87	6	German	
St. Gallen (St. Gall)	1803	St. Gallen	465,937	2,026	222	86	German	
Graubünden (Grisons)	1803	Chur	188,762	7,105	26	190	German, Romansh, Italian	
Aargau (Argovia)	1803	Aarau	581,562	1,404	388	229	German	
Thurgau (Thurgovia)	1803	Frauenfeld / Weinfelden	238,316	991	229	80	German	
Ticino	1803	Bellinzona	328,580	2,812	110	176	Italian	
Vaud	1803	Lausanne	672,039	3,212	188	375	French	
Valais	1815	Sion	298,580	5,224	53	143	French, German	
Neuchâtel	1815	Neuchâtel	169,782	803	206	53	French	
Geneva	1815	Geneva	438,177	282	1,442	45	French	
	1979 (previously part of Bern)	Delémont	69,555	838	82	64	French	

Switzerland		Bern	7,593,494	41,285	174	2,631	German, French, Italian, Romansh
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## 2. Minaret controversy in Switzerland

### Introduction

The **Minaret controversy in Switzerland** refers to construction of minarets, which has been subject to legal and political controversy in Switzerland during the 2000s.

In a November 2009 referendum, the ban was approved by 57.5% of the participating voters. Only four of the 26 Swiss cantons, mostly in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, opposed the initiative.

This referendum originates from action on 1 May 2007, when a group of right of centre politicians mainly from the Swiss People's Party and the Federal Democratic Union, the *Egerkinger Komitee* ("Egerkingen Committee") launched a federal popular initiative that sought a constitutional ban on minarets. The Swiss government recommended that the proposed amendment be rejected as inconsistent with basic principles of the constitution.

As of the date of the 2009 vote, there were four minarets in Switzerland, attached to mosques in Zürich, Geneva, Winterthur and Wangen bei Olten. These existing minarets are not affected by the ban.

On 29 November 2009, the citizens of Switzerland voted on a referendum to decide on three proposals on the federal level:

a ban on the construction of new minarets (without retroactive effect on four existing Swiss minarets), passed with 57% in favour; The referendum took place after a controversial campaign to ban minarets in the country.

a ban on exporting weapons and war materiel, rejected with 68% against;

a prescription that money collected from aviation fuel taxation should be used for aviation matters, passed with 65% in favour.

There were numerous other issues voted upon at the cantonal and municipal levels.

## **Background**

### **Legal dispute**

Minaret at the mosque of the local Turkish cultural association in Wangen bei Olten, the initial motivation for the popular initiative.

The Swiss minaret controversy began in a small municipality in the northern part of Switzerland in 2005. The contention involved the Turkish cultural association in Wangen bei Olten, which applied for a construction permit to erect a 6-metre-high minaret on the roof of its Islamic community centre. The project faced opposition from surrounding residents, who had formed a group to prevent the tower's erection. The Turkish association claimed that the building authorities improperly and arbitrarily delayed its building application. They also believed that the members of the local opposition group were motivated by religious bias. The Communal Building and Planning Commission rejected the association's application. The applicants appealed to the Building and Justice Department, which reverted the decision and remanded. As a consequence of that decision, local residents (who were members of the group mentioned) and the commune of Wangen brought the case before the Administrative Court of the Canton of Solothurn, but failed with their claims. On appeal the Federal Supreme Court affirmed the decision of the lower court. The 6-metre (20 ft)-high minaret was eventually erected in July 2009.

### **Political dispute**

From 2006 until 2008, members of the Swiss People's Party and the Federal Democratic Union launched several cantonal initiatives against the erection of minarets. The cantonal citizenry never had the opportunity to vote on it because all cantonal parliaments held the initiatives unconstitutional and therefore void.

### **Federal constitutional amendment banning the construction of minarets**

In 2007, in response to the political defeats described above, the Egerkinger committee launched a federal popular initiative against minarets. The committee's proposed

amendment to article 72 of the Swiss Federal Constitution read: "The building of minarets is prohibited."

In Switzerland, federal popular initiatives are not subject to judicial review, as they amend the federal constitution (whereas cantonal initiatives can be challenged in court for violating federal law). Promoters of popular initiatives have 18 months to collect at least 100,000 signatures. If they succeed, the initiative is put before the Swiss citizenry in a national vote. Both federal and cantonal initiatives are common in Switzerland, resulting in many referendum votes each year.

### **Minaret ban**

The referendum was initiated by a small group of people and (among the governmental parties) only supported by the right wing Swiss People's Party. It aimed at stopping the "Islamization of Switzerland".

Early exit polls suggested that the proposal had been passed at plebiscite. According to gfs.bern the motion received 58% of the votes, then 59% with a turnout of about 55%.

Final results indicated that 57.5% (1 534 054 citizens of voters had approved the proposals to ban minarets, out of a 53.4% turnout. Only 3½ cantons out of 23 rejected the proposals.

An official from the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) called upon the Muslim community in Switzerland to remain calm and called for dialogue to address the "growing challenge of the rise of Islamophobia in Europe".

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### **3. The Results**

In a referendum on 29 November 2009, the amendment, which needed a double majority to pass, was approved by 57.5% (1 534 054 citizens) of the voters and by 19½ cantons out of 23. Geneva, Vaud and Neuchatel, all of which are French speaking cantons, voted against the ban (59.7%, 53.1% and 50.9% respectively). The canton of Basel-City, which has half a cantonal vote and the largest Muslim community of Switzerland, also rejected the ban by 51.6%. The voter turnout was 53.4%.

The city of Zurich along with Geneva and Basel also showed a slight majority opposed to the ban, uniting the three largest Swiss cities in rejecting the initiative. The canton of Zurich as a whole, however, voted 52% yes. The highest percentage of votes in favour of the ban were counted in Appenzell Innerrhoden (71%) followed by Glarus (69%), Ticino (68%) and Thurgau (68%).

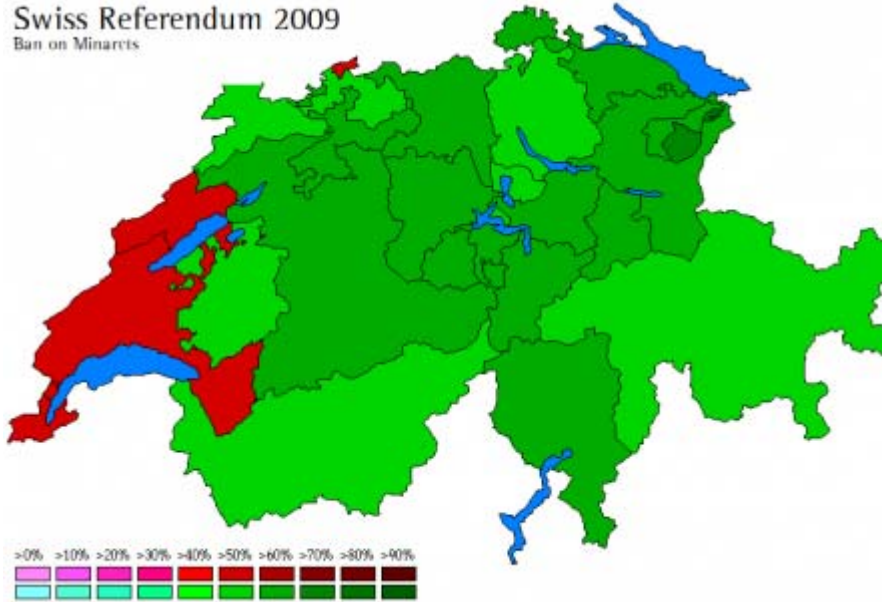
The Swiss Green Party have declared that in their opinion, the ban introduces a contradiction into the Swiss constitution, which also contains a paragraph which guarantees freedom of religion and they have announced their intention to appeal to the European Court on Human Rights on the matter.

Switzerland held three popular referendums on November 29, including a very controversial vote on a right-wing popular initiative on banning minarets in the country. The measures, supported politically only by the right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP) and smaller far-right outfit, was badly trailing in polls up till the vote, but there was a late massive swing in favour of the initiative, which led to a good turnout (53.4%) but a very strong vote in favour of the ban (57.5%).

**YES 57.5%**

**NO 42.5%**

Swiss Referendum 2009  
Ban on Minarets



The vote was narrowly rejected in only four cantons: Geneva (with nearly 60% opposed), the liberal Francophone canton of Vaud, Francophone Neuchatel and the urban city of Basel. Although it passed in the canton of Zurich, it was opposed by over 60% of voters in the city of Zurich and similarly opposed in Bern (with around 56% opposed). The Swiss Statistical Office breaks down the vote by linguistic community: only the Francophones opposed it with 48.3% in favour. The Germans voted 59.7% in favour, and the Italians were massively opposed with 68%.

Really, the opposition to this measure is urban and liberal, as shown by its large rejection in places like Lausanne or Geneva. Rural Switzerland, even the more liberal rural Francophones, voted in favour. The breakdown of the vote shows the support of 54% of voters in urban areas, and 66% support in rural areas. Further breakdown shows the support was lowest in the largest urban centres, with only 39% support, and in wealthy urban areas, with 48% support.

Cantons	Yes (%)
Schweiz	57.5
Affoltern	53.9

Andelfingen	64.4
Bülach	61.0
Dielsdorf	65.8
Hinwil	64.7
Horgen	50.2
Meilen	48.2
Pfäffikon	62.5
Uster	56.0
Winterthur	52.9
Dietikon	57.8
Zürich	36.3
Aarberg	66.0
Aarwangen	66.2
Bern	43.6
Biel	56.1
Büren	73.4
Burgdorf	64.1
Courtelary	65.2
Erlach	65.9
Fraubrunnen	61.3
Frutigen	76.2
Interlaken	66.9
Konolfingen	62.5
Laupen	64.1
Moutier	67.3
La Neuveville	54.3
Nidau	69.8
Niedersimmental	69.4
Oberhasli	67.4
Obersimmental	73.9

Saanen	70.3
Schwarzenburg	67.3
Seftigen	65.3
Signau	70.1
Thun	65.9
Trachselwald	73.1
Wangen	71.9
Entlebuch	72.4
Hochdorf	65.3
Luzern	53.9
Sursee	64.8
Willisau	72.7
Kt. Uri	63.8
Einsiedeln	66.8
Gersau	62.5
Höfe	60.6
Küssnacht (SZ)	61.4
March	69.8
Schwyz	68.1
Kt. Obwalden	62.4
Kt. Nidwalden	62.8
Kt. Glarus	68.8
Kt. Zug	56.7
La Broye	59.8
La Glâne	58.3
La Gruyère	56.8
La Sarine	46.7
See/Lac	60.8
Sense	66.2
La Veveyse	55.8

Gäu	71.5
Thal	72.6
Bucheggberg	67.1
Dorneck	56.9
Gösgen	65.5
Wasseramt	65.2
Lebern	67.3
Olten	61.1
Solothurn	44.8
Thierstein	68.7
Kt. Basel-Stadt	48.7
Arlesheim	55.5
Laufen	67.6
Liestal	61.9
Sissach	66.4
Waldenburg	71.2
Oberklettgau	68.3
Reiat	71.0
Schaffhausen	60.2
Schleitheim	71.3
Stein	64.1
Unterklettgau	71.0
Hinterland	68.5
Mittelland	57.3
Vorderland	64.3
Kt. Appenzell Innerrhoden	71.8
St. Gallen	57.9
Rorschach	67.1
Rheintal	73.9
Werdenberg	70.8

Sarganserland	70.1
See-Gaster	62.3
Toggenburg	68.3
Wil	68.0
Albula	57.0
Bernina	60.6
Hinterrhein	55.9
Imboden	57.7
Inn	55.5
Landquart	61.6
Maloja	54.2
Moesa	72.4
Plessur	54.2
Prättigau-Davos	64.8
Surselva	56.8
Aarau	60.5
Baden	56.9
Bremgarten	63.2
Brugg	62.1
Kulm	77.8
Laufenburg	64.6
Lenzburg	65.4
Muri	67.5
Rheinfelden	63.0
Zofingen	71.1
Zurzach	67.3
Arbon	70.1
Bischofszell	73.8
Diessenhofen	72.0
Frauenfeld	57.1

Kreuzlingen	63.8
Münchwilen	73.1
Steckborn	68.5
Weinfelden	70.5
Bellinzona	67.7
Blenio	72.9
Leventina	71.8
Locarno	64.8
Lugano	68.4
Mendrisio	69.6
Riviera	75.5
Vallemaggia	59.2
Aigle	53.1
Broye-Vully	57.0
Gros-de-Vaud	54.8
Jura-Nord vaudois	53.2
Lausanne	39.4
Lavaux-Oron	43.7
Morges	46.6
Nyon	42.7
Ouest lausannois	49.8
Riviera-Pays-d'Enhaut	46.2
Brig	65.0
Conthey	55.7
Entremont	56.8
Goms	58.2
Hérens	55.6
Leuk	66.6
Martigny	56.3
Monthey	58.6

Raron	65.1
Saint-Maurice	53.4
Sierre	54.1
Sion	51.6
Visp	68.0
Boudry	48.9
La Chaux-de-Fonds	48.8
Le Locle	56.1
Neuchâtel	44.0
Val-de-Ruz	51.5
Val-de-Travers	60.9
Canton de Genève	40.3
Delémont	49.6
Franches-Montagnes	47.7
Porrentruy	54.9
LU-Ausland-Chaudhary	40.9
BS-Ausland-Chaudhary	40.1
AI-Ausland-Chaudhary	55.3
VD-Ausland-Chaudhary	45.8
GE-Ausland-Chaudhary	40.9

## **4. Supporters**

### **Egerkinger committee**

The Egerkinger committee is made up of members of the Swiss People's Party and the Federal Democratic Union. The committee opines that the interests of residents, who are disturbed by specific kinds of religious land uses, are to be taken seriously. Moreover, it argues that Swiss residents should be able to block unwanted and unusual projects such as the erection of Islamic minarets. The committee alleges, inter alia, that "the construction of a minaret has no religious meaning. Neither in the Quran, nor in any other

holy scripture of Islam is the minaret expressly mentioned at any rate. The minaret is far more a symbol of religious-political power claim [...]. "The initiators justify their point of view by stating parts of later Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's 1997 speech, which holds: "Mosques are our barracks, domes our helmets, minarets our bayonets, believers our soldiers. This holy army guards my religion." Ulrich Schluer, who is one of the Egerkinger committee's most prominent exponents, states in this respect: "A minaret has nothing to do with religion: It just symbolises a place where Islamic law is established." The members of the Egerkinger committee included, among others, Ulrich Schluer; Christian Waber; Walter Wobmann; Jasmin Hutter; Oskar Freysinger; Eric Bonjour; Sylvia Flückiger; Lukas Reimann; Natalie Rickli.

### Poster campaign



First poster (in German); showing a woman wearing an abaya and niqab. The text reads, "Stop", "Yes to the minaret ban".  
 Second poster (in French); after some municipalities refused to allow posting of the original version on public ground, the second poster reads "Censorship, one more reason to say yes to the minaret ban".

The committee's campaign featured provocative posters featuring a drawing of a Muslim woman in an abaya and niqab, next to a number of minarets on a Swiss flag pictured in a way "reminiscent of missiles". The Swiss People's Party also published a similar poster with the minarets protruding through a Swiss flag. On the election day, campaigners drove a vehicle near Geneva Mosque imitating call to prayer using loudspeakers.

## **Feminists**

The British newspaper The Times cited support of the minaret ban by "radical feminists" who oppose the oppression of women in Islamic societies. Among these were noted feminist Ayaan Hirsi Ali who in December gave her support for the ban with the article titled "Swiss ban on minarets was a vote for tolerance and inclusion". The Times further reported that Swiss women supported the ban, in pre-election polling, by a greater percentage than did Swiss men.

## **5. Oppositionists**

On the evening of the vote, demonstrations against the result were held in Switzerland's major cities. The banner beneath the makeshift minarets reads: "Integrate rather than exclude."

## **The Swiss Government**

The Swiss Federal Council opposes a building ban on minarets. It says that popular initiative against the construction of minarets has been submitted in accordance with the applicable regulations, but infringes guaranteed international human rights and contradicts the core values of the Swiss Federal Constitution. It believes a ban would endanger peace between religions and would not help to prevent the spread of fundamentalist Islamic beliefs. In its opinion the Federal Council therefore recommends that the Swiss people reject the initiative. The Federal Commission against Racism criticised the people's initiative. It claims that the initiative defames Muslims and violates religious freedom, which is protected by fundamental and human rights and the ban on discrimination.

## **Parliament**

The Federal Assembly recommended (by 129 to 50 votes) in spring of 2009 that the Swiss people reject the minaret ban initiative.

### **Non-governmental organizations**

On 8 December, a mock minaret was erected over an industrial storage facility in Bussigny, in protest against the referendum

The Society for Minorities in Switzerland calls for freedom and equality. It started an internet-based campaign in order to gather as many symbolic signatures as possible against a possible minaret ban. Amnesty International warned the minaret ban aims to exploit fears of Muslims and encourage xenophobia for political gains. "This initiative claims to be a defense against rampant Islamification of Switzerland," Daniel Bolomey, the head of Amnesty's Swiss office, said in a statement cited by Agence France-Presse (AFP). "But it seeks to discredit Muslims and defames them, pure and simple." Economiesuisse finds an absolute construction ban would hit Swiss foreign interests negatively. It points to the fact that only the launch of the initiative caused turmoil in the Islamic world.[citation needed] The Swiss-based "Unser Recht" association publishes a number of articles against a minaret ban. In autumn 2009, the Swiss Journal of Religious Freedom launched a public campaign for religious harmony, security, and justice in Switzerland. It distributed several thousand stickers in the streets of Zürich for the right to religious freedom.

### **Religious organizations**

Catholic bishops oppose a minaret ban. A statement from the Swiss Bishops Conference said that a ban would hinder interreligious dialogue and added that the construction and operation of minarets were already regulated by Swiss building codes. The statement requested that "the initiative to be rejected is based on our Christian values and the democratic principles in our country." The official journal of the Catholic Church in Switzerland publishes a series of articles on the minaret controversy. The Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches holds that the popular initiative is not about minarets, but is rather an expression of the initiators' concern and fear of Islam. It views a minaret ban as a wrong approach to overcome such objections. The Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities are also against any ban on building minarets. Says Dr Herbert Winter, the president of the Federation: "As Jews we have our own experience. For centuries we were excluded: we were not allowed to construct synagogues or cupola roofs. We do not

want that kind of exclusion repeated.” Many other religious organisations find the idea of a complete minaret ban as lamentable. These are: the Association of Evangelical Free Churches and Communities in Switzerland; the Swiss Evangelical Alliance; the Old Catholic Church in Switzerland; the Covenant of Swiss Baptists; the Salvation Army; the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Switzerland; the Orthodox Diocese the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople; the Serbian Orthodox Church in Switzerland; and the Anglican Church in Switzerland.

### **Individual legal experts**

Marcel Stüssi argues that any ban would be incompatible with articles of international law to which Switzerland is a signatory. In any case, cantonal zoning laws already prohibit the construction of buildings that do not match their surroundings. "Right-wing initiatives like the minaret one can misuse the system," says Stüssi. He calls the initiative "obsolete and unnecessary" but adds that the public discourse on the issue could put Switzerland in a positive light, at least for the majority who at this point oppose a ban. In July 2008, before the popular initiative, he argued that "crisis always creates an opportunity. A popular vote against a proposed ban would be the highest declaration for the recognition of the Swiss Muslim community." "It would also be an expressed statement that anybody is equally subject to the law and to the political process," Stüssi said in an interview with World Radio Switzerland. Heinrich Koller, states that "Switzerland must abide by international law because both systems together form a unity." Giuseppe Nay states that from an objective viewpoint *jus cogens* is to be read and given effect in association with fundamental norms of international law. According to Nay, this interpretation means that any state action must be in accordance with fundamental material justice, and applies not only to interpretations of applicable law, but also to new law. Erwin Tanner sees the initiative as breaching not only the constitutionally entrenched right to religious freedom, but also the right to freedom of expression, enjoyment of property, and equality. The editorial board of the *Revue de Droit Suisse* called for invalidation of the initiative as "it appears that the material content of popular initiatives is subject to ill-considered draftsmanship because the drafters are affected by particular emotions that merely last for snatches."

## **6. Implementation and the Langenthal minaret**

The ban on new minarets may be put to the test in the case of a pending project of building a minaret for a mosque in Langenthal, canton of Berne. The Islamic community of Langenthal has announced their intention of taking their case to the Federal Supreme Court of Switzerland and if necessary further to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The attorney of the community has also announced doubts on whether the ban can be taken to affect the Langenthal project because the application for planning permission had been handed to the authorities in 2006, it may be argued that the ban cannot be taken to apply to this project *ex post facto*. On the other hand, Bernese officials and Rainer Schweizer, law professor at St. Gallen University, have expressed their opinion that the ban renders the Langenthal project obsolete.

Whether the Langenthal mosque is affected may depend on the details of the eventual implementation. According to Alexander Ruch, professor of building law at ETH Zurich, there is so far no official definition of minarets, leaving open the handling of hypothetical cases such as the chimney of a factory building that is converted into a mosque. In the case of Langenthal it has even been argued that the planned structure is a minaret-like tower rather than a minaret. In fact, calls to prayer have been a frequent argument against minarets, and the planned tower in Langenthal cannot be used for that purpose. In the case of the Islamic center in Frauenfeld, canton of Thurgau, there is a ventilation shaft that was adorned with a sheet metal cone topped with a crescent moon. The Frauenfeld city council has declined treating the structure as a "minaret", saying that it had been officially declared a ventilation shaft, and that the added crescent moon had not been giving cause for comment during the six years since its installation.

The surprisingly clear vote in favour of banning minarets expresses an unease with various causes. The implications too will no doubt be controversial. One thing is for sure: Switzerland's politicians have underestimated immaterial concerns. Christoph Wehrli has the background

The subject of minarets mobilised 53.4 percent of the Swiss electorate – more than voted on freedom of movement last February, for example – and a clear majority of 57.5 percent said yes to banning new constructions of this type. The cantons of Vaud,

Neuchâtel, Geneva und Basel-City are exceptions and the decision was relatively close in Zurich, yet these do not change the very clear overall picture.

## **7. International Community's Reactions**

To start on a positive note there were no serious incidents during the referendum campaign. Otherwise par for the course in Switzerland, in this case the routine procedure was unexpected. Individual extremists or foreign intervention might easily have heightened emotions even more. Instead, Muslim representatives refused to leave the path of dialogue, even in the face of provocations on the part of the initiators. And the two Islamic umbrella organisations reacted judiciously to the result, proving their great familiarity with the customs of Swiss-style democracy. Another positive factor was the broad discussion before the referendum. It may not always have been unemotional and objective, but it showed that public involvement in politics is not restricted to issues of tangible interest. The established political organisations have failed to realise this fact.

Most parties and heavyweight organisations were relatively absent from the debate. The question is less what a larger-scale counter-campaign might have achieved, than whether the unease that has now surfaced has been given sufficient political attention in the past.

It would appear that the political caste has grown all too accustomed to smothering fears of too many foreigners with economic arguments – we need foreign labour – or channelling that fear under the buzzword "asylum abuse".

### **Few direct consequences**

The direct consequences of the referendum are limited. Existing minarets are not affected, while new ones were not expected in large numbers. The Islamic Centre in Langenthal, held up in its plan to build a minaret by a public objection, intends to go before the European Court of Human Rights if need be.

The popular support for the anti-minaret initiative has put Switzerland in the pillory among the international community, says the Bern-based expert on religion Rifa'at Lenzin. Switzerland is now in the vanguard of Islamophobia, she comments. Legal experts see good chances of success for their case. Should they win, a tide of protest over "disregard for the public will" is more than likely. Following huge controversy over a previous referendum on lifetime custody for certain criminals, which is considered incompatible with human rights legislation, another unviable referendum would raise public ire. Yet it is the responsibility of the initiators to assure a referendum conforms to overriding legislation; in this case they have knowingly risked such a conflict.

The discussion on new criteria for the validity of referenda will no doubt flare up again now. It would be up to the Swiss people and the cantons to decide on major changes to the democratic decision-making process, however. The ban has no effect on mosques without minarets. Planning departments must abide by the letter of the law on this matter too; planning applications must be dealt with according to the usual rules, with no discrimination.

### **Integration – but in what form?**

The more significant aspect is the indirect consequences of the vote and the atmosphere it has caused. Switzerland is not in a situation in which its image abroad is of no import. In some quarters, the ban on minarets may be registered with a shrug or even applauded. On the whole, however, Switzerland's reputation as a nation of liberal freedom and diversity and the credibility of its human rights policies will suffer.

Campaign of fear and distrust: Switzerland's reputation as a nation of diversity and the credibility of its human rights policies will suffer in the wake of the referendum, writes Christoph Wehrli. The social climate for Muslims has grown colder in Switzerland. Yet there seems to be some extent of political will to avoid opening up further unnecessary trenches, instead continuing the bilateral efforts towards dialogue and integration. Deriving specific consequences from the referendum, however, is not quite simple. Even beforehand, there was no argument over the fact that the Swiss legal system was not

up for debate, that forced marriages and extremists should be combated. Efforts to grant Muslim organisations status subject to public law and thereby subject them to certain conditions are likely to prove difficult. There are very many different Muslim groupings, and such a move would be very unpopular with the type of circles with fixed mental schemes of "them and us". The same might also apply to the idea of training more imams in Switzerland (or the neighbouring states). Nevertheless, this is a sensible path that should not be abandoned in the future.

The outcome of the referendum presumably also reflects moods and views which have little to do with the Muslims themselves, opening up much scope for interpretation and deductions. Was it actually immigration on the agenda? The lack of spiritual orientation? The uncontrolled events in the global and local economy? For the time being, this is all mere conjecture.

The government and the parties would do well to trace voters' motives rather than mechanically claiming they "take their fears seriously". One interesting phenomenon, however, is that the urban regions where society is more pluralised were less in favour of the initiative. On the first Sunday of Advent, Switzerland made a statement against a religious minority. In the long term, Swiss politics cannot rely on occasions like this for the electorate to vent its anger. Switzerland forbids minarets in referendum: What a sad day!

Europe in the 21st century is a multicultural continent, with multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-religions societies (including non-religious people) - and Switzerland doesn't seem to belong to Europe today. The Swiss have shown that they truly don't want to belong to this continent by rejecting that minarets may be built together with mosques. They have shown to the world that they want to be a place apart from European values.

These values might have evolved in societies where the majorities were and are Christians, but they have also evolved on a continent that seemed to have learned that religious freedom - the freedom to believe or not to believe whatever one wants - as other individual and collective freedoms need to be respected. These values have evolved in a continent where migrants and children of migrants and grandchildren of migrant are not a

small minority anymore but an integral part of this our common society. In this society, having churches, church towers and their church bells must be as possible as having a minaret with a mosque - or as drawing satirical cartoons about Jesus and Mohammed.

The Swiss referendum rejects this European history and these European values, it is a rejection of the Europe of the 21st century, a Europe where majorities don't rule over the rights of minorities, where minorities are not threatened by what is "normal" or "acceptable" for the majority.

In the Europe we live in today, we try to find common solutions that allow the respect for the freedom and dignity of each and everyone, although this is hard sometimes. Yes, it might be necessary to debate about the shape of a free and multicultural society, but rejecting religious freedom including the right to build appropriate buildings in which this religion may be performed is not the solution.

This victory of xenophobia in Switzerland proves how much we have to fight for the rights of every citizen and person on this continent, it proves that what we regard as given today may be lost tomorrow - and I as a German think I know what I am talking about.

The Europe the Swiss have voted for today is not my Europe, and I hope no country of the European Union will ever follow this sad example!

*PS.: And regarding the argument that "this is democracy", I just want to add that decisions against particular groups are decision against equal rights, thus against the foundation of democracy. Had the Swiss voted against all high towers representing a religious or non-religious belief, this would have been a democratic decision respecting its own foundations - forbidding just minarets is discrimination.*

**Prof.Dr. Ramazan Gözen of Ankara's Çankaya University.**

A surprise result came out of the Swiss referendum, held in Switzerland on November 29, 2009, on minaret-building. Contrary to the public surveys conducted prior to the referendum, 57.7 % of the participants, and 22 out of 26 cantons in the country, favoured the banning of minarets. The referendum was held on the initiation of Egerkingen Committee, comprising of far rightist parties, however, was opposed by the Swiss

government, business circles and religious associations in the country. The world public also displayed a negative response to the referendum in question.

As we begin it should be said that the referendum and its outcomes constitute a considerably negative situation. For, matters of religious concern such as minaret-building, are included in the religious rights and freedom of expression affirmed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. Attempting to determine these kinds of issues through referendums doesn't reconcile both with the international law and the human rights law. Of course, it is only natural for states to discuss any topic and reach conclusions according to their interests. Yet, the right of sovereignty can not be exercised in a way to prevent citizens from using their rights originating from the natural law or the international law. For, such restraints mean the violation of basic human rights and freedoms, and have the potential to cause national and international problems.

No matter which side wins these referendums, the results usually harm the relations between distinct cultural and religious groups in the country. Within this context, the recent minaret-referendum in Switzerland created a sense of discrimination between 400 thousand-strong Muslim community and other religious groups. It is inevitable for that sense to create a deep socio-psychological discomfort in Switzerland. And the building up of Islamophobia will certainly damage the credibility and interests of this country.

Even worse, this trend might spread to other European countries. Far rightist parties in the Netherlands have already called for a similar referendum in the country. These developments have increased the risk of deepening Islamophobia, or the fear of Islam, across Europe.

The ban on minarets appears to be the last link of the Islamophobia problem, as seen in Salman Rushdie incident in Britain and the caricature crisis in Denmark. Islamophobia is one of the gravest social problems that the European Union, with its 40 million Muslim inhabitants, is facing. This problem both tarnishes the values that the EU espouses, such as equality, human rights, freedoms and multiculturalism, and causes the Union to lose its global credibility and prestige. It deteriorates the relations of Muslims, who are either

EU citizens or migrants, with members of other religious communities. More importantly, it mars EU's ties with all Muslim countries, chiefly Turkey.

Such a development has the capacity to create negativities both in the European zone and in ties among Western and Islamic worlds. Political rivalry triggered by cultural and religious differences do not only concern humanity but also have repercussions for international security and peace.

It increases the odds for revival of the well known "clash of civilisations" thesis. Retaliatory actions, or in other words unfavourable practices regarding the rights of Christians or other religious groups in Muslim countries, could further deepen this rift.

Fortunately, some positive events also took place after the referendum. The referendum and the results pertaining to it drew huge reactions from all over the world, including Switzerland itself and the European Union.

Muslim people, the Green Party of Switzerland, institutions backing the interreligious dialogue and representatives of the business circles said the outcomes of the said referendum would be harmful for the inner peace and stability of Switzerland. But a stronger reaction came from the representatives of the European Union member states. Officials of the EU Term President, Sweden, said putting a topic, such as this, to a vote is wholly wrong, while French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner described the current event as a case of intolerance, adding he hated intolerance. Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini said the result of the referendum was a "violation of religious rights".

The reactions of international institutions were no less than that of EU member states. Amnesty International argued that the ban was against the freedom of belief and it will be undone by Swiss Court of Constitution or the European court of Human Rights.

Criticisms voiced by the United Nations and the Organisation of Islamic Conference show that the ban and its possible outcomes have created worldwide anxiety. It can be said at this point that at least the world public is sensitive about religious freedoms and

Islamophobia.

Consequently, it is a pleasing fact that people with reason and common sense exist both in Europe and Muslim countries.

The Alliance of Civilizations initiative, forged and conducted jointly by Turkey and Spain under the auspices of the United Nations, is an exemplary effort to this end. Our hope is that such efforts grow and produce positive results.

### **Swiss referendum – a mockery of democracy**

In a referendum held on 29.11.2009, the citizens of Switzerland have voted in favor of ban of construction of minarets in the places of worship of Muslims. The right wing conservative groups have won this campaign much against the wishes of the Government and the business lobbies with 57.5 % of voters casting their votes to ban construction of Minarets. Only 5% of the population of this country follows Islam out of the 7.6 million strong population predominantly following Christianity.

All over the world the popular impression about Switzerland has been that it is a liberal multilingual country with religious tolerance. But the referendum has exposed the undercurrents in the Swiss society.

It started in 2005 when the Turkish cultural association applied for a construction permit to erect a 6-metre-high minaret on the roof of its Islamic community centre in a small municipality which was opposed by the local community. After appeals and court cases the 6m Minaret was constructed in July 2009.

This has snowballed in to a controversy and has become a political issue with the right-wing parties projecting the Minarets as symbols of Islamic militancy.

The Egerkinger committee made up of members of the Swiss People's Party, the largest party in the Swiss parliament and the Federal Democratic Union alleged

“The construction of a minaret has no religious meaning. Neither in the Qur’an, nor in any other holy scripture of Islam is the minaret expressly mentioned at any rate. The minaret is far more a symbol of religious-political power claim”

One of the parliamentarians says

“We don’t have anything against Muslims, But we don’t want minarets. The minaret is a symbol of a political and aggressive Islam, it’s a symbol of Islamic law. The minute you have minarets in Europe it means Islam will have taken over.”

The opinion of majority of the people of Switzerland appears to be swayed by the trend elsewhere around the world.

One cannot resist inviting a reference to the demolition of Babri Masjid in India by the Hindu nationalists based on similar accusations against the minority Muslims. After the demolition, the right wing groups were elected to rule India for five years. We should wonder whether the votes of the people in the subsequent national election in favour of the Hindu nationalist parties were a public ratification of the demolition of the Masjid. The Liberhan inquiry commission which went into the incident has recently recommended no punitive action against the people who demolished the Masjid. This confirms the rule of the majority where crimes can be voted and justified. The issue is still pending in the courts. India survives based on a well drafted Constitution which is still inspiring the people to amend the mistakes.

In Malaysia with Muslim majority, the minority Hindu groups allege demolition of Hindu temples. The same problem can be seen in Pakistan or Afganistan, the countries where a number of Hindu cultural and Historic religious places are located

The result of the referendum to ban Minaret in Switzerland has anguished the 400,000 strong Muslims community in Switzerland who originated from former Yugoslavia and Turkey. Further it has caused outrage and anger of the Muslims all over the world.

Egypt's Grand Mufti Sheikh Ali Gomaa has already condemned Switzerland's decision saying

“We received this initiative in sorrow and it is considered as a humiliation for the Muslim community in and out of Switzerland.”

There is no doubt that the repercussion of the ban will be felt more in future and the Swiss society will be compelled to learn more by the developments inside and outside the country. Mr Reinhard Schulze, professor of Islamic Studies at Berne University says

“I think Swiss Muslims will be angry and bitter over this. And we know that anger and bitterness among a community can lead to radicalisation, even to militancy.”

The world shall be now flooded with ideas in favor and against this practice of conducting a referendum against the rights of minorities.

But the very first logic behind conducting a referendum about the rights of minority by majority people appears to be foolish. Why should we conduct a referendum on an issue which everyone knows can polarize the people? A victory of majority is always pre determined in a Democracy. The decision of the referendum in Switzerland clearly shows the fear expressed by a majority community against a tiny minority. This is more a response to the terrorist activities of Islamic fundamentalists in other countries than the growing influence of Islam in Switzerland.

If Muslim minarets are to be buried underground how can a Christian Church or Hindu temple touch the heaven? If the Swiss conservatives want to question the growth of Islam, they should fight Islam philosophically.

If referendums can be used as a tool by the majority people to determine the rights of the minorities anything can happen to minorities in any country and that is just making fun of democracy where only the number rules over the principles. It goes against the civilization and the moral concepts developed by civilized societies.

Since the decision of the Swiss referendum is clearly against the universally accepted principles of democracy, it should be held illegal by the international court and should be rejected by world community.

In Singapore we can see the four languages Chinese, Malay, Tamil and English adopted as official languages equally irrespective of the number of speakers; A Hindu temple can share a common compound with a mosque or church although Hindus constitute only 7 percent of the total population where Chinese are in majority. Singapore is an example of a multilingual and multi religious society which has evolved in to a successful progressive state.

In Srilanka the majority Buddhist Sinhalese have tried every trick by framing their constitution to their will to discriminate against the Hindu Tamil minority. They adopted executive presidential system to suppress the powers of minority in Parliament. This has led to a civil war which is at present temporarily stopped due to clandestine intervention of big powers in favour of Majority rulers. At present Sri Lanka is becoming a failed state with no concern for human rights, civil liberties, press freedom and rights of minorities and is preparing itself for a democratic election where the people are left with a choice to choose any one of the two war criminals. If Switzerland continues with the implementation of majoritarian policies, it is indeed more likely to become the Srilanka of Europe. The tears of the people out of unbearable oppression shall ruin the economy of a state.

### **Press releases**

Head of OSCE human rights office expresses concern about outcome of Swiss minaret ban referendum

ATHENS, 30 November 2009 - The director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Ambassador Janez Lenarcic, expressed concern today at the outcome of the referendum held in Switzerland on Sunday on the ban of the construction of minarets.

"A blanket prohibition of minarets is not consistent with OSCE commitments on freedom of religion or belief and the principle of non-discrimination based on religion," Lenarcic said in Athens, where he will participate in the OSCE Ministerial Council, to be held tomorrow and Wednesday.

The referendum, launched by the Swiss People's Party and the Federal Democratic Union, was backed by 57.5 per cent of voters and a majority of cantons.

Members of the Advisory Council of ODIHR's Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief also expressed concern.

"The claim that the approved constitutional amendment does not limit freedom of religion or belief because it only affects the construction of minarets rather than mosques, and that minarets have no religious significance, is seriously flawed," said Jakob Finci, President of Jewish Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina and a member of the ODIHR Advisory Council.

Gerhard Robbers, another member of the Council and Professor of Law at Trier University in Germany said religious buildings must conform to planning laws, like all buildings.

"However, such laws must be non-discriminatory and it is difficult to see how banning the construction of minarets is compatible with this," he said. "According to international norms on freedom of religion or belief, the contents of a religion and its manifestation, including the question of minarets, should be defined by the worshippers themselves and not by states."

Lenarcic added:

"By singling out a specific community, the outcome of this referendum has the potential to create tensions and generate a climate of intolerance against Muslims. OSCE commitments call for fostering mutual understanding and respect between believers of different communities."

The Advisory Council is a consultative body of OSCE/ODIHR with acknowledged expertise on freedom of religion or belief, consisting of members from many OSCE participating States and from diverse backgrounds. The Advisory Council advises ODIHR and participating States on pertinent issues and provides legislative reviews and expert opinions.

**STATEMENT BY MS. MICHELINE CALMY-REY,  
FEDERAL COUNCILLOR AND HEAD OF THE DEPARTMENT OF  
FOREIGN AFFAIRS, AT THE SEVENTEENTH MEETING OF THE  
OSCE MINISTERIAL COUNCIL**

Athens, 1 December 2009

Mr. Chairman,

Colleagues,

The chief aim of the OSCE is to safeguard security on the European continent and this is far from being merely a military issue.

One of the issues facing the European continent is the peaceful coexistence of different languages, cultures and religions, as it is evident that if we cannot live together harmoniously, our security can no longer be guaranteed.

Switzerland is experiencing this situation in very concrete terms. Last Sunday, against the recommendation of the government and the parliament, a popular initiative against the construction of new minarets was approved by the people of Switzerland. This result No doubt reflects fears and concerns aroused by the omnipresence of images of extremist excesses. It is a reaction of withdrawal and defence in a world characterized by globalization, economic crisis and rising unemployment. We are living in a period of transition, and the pressure that change exerts on people is strong. The majority who voted on Sunday were not opposed to the Muslim community established in our country but are rather calling the government to witness its profound unease.

The construction of new minarets in Switzerland is now prohibited, but not the construction of new mosques. The Muslims in Switzerland are well integrated and will continue to attend the 200 mosques in the country. The fact remains, however, that the

freedom to practice the Muslim religion is restricted in terms of its public expression. If an appeal were to be made to the European Court of Human Rights, it would be up to that court to decide whether the new Swiss constitutional norm is compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights.

This referendum does not in any way change Switzerland's foreign policy objectives.

Switzerland maintains close social, political and economic relations with all of the Muslim countries. On the contrary, it will motivate us to continue even further to seek openness and partnership between Muslim and non-Muslim countries.

- 2 - MC.DEL/21/09

1 December 2009

At all events, this referendum has given us cause for concern. The reality within our societies, in Europe and in the world, each setback to the coexistence of different cultures and religions, also poses a threat to our security. Provocation could engender further provocation and outrage could stir up extremism. It is for all of us to seek a solution to this problem, European and non-European countries, regardless of our religious diversity and our choice of society. This clearly shows that the multidimensional concept of security on which the OSCE is based is more relevant than ever.

Mr. Chairman,

Colleagues,

Thanks to the Greek Chairmanship, we all met five months ago on the island of Corfu.

At the end of the current phase, we need to arrive at a political declaration here in Athens on the renewal of European security dialogue. In this regard, we are interested to note the Russian draft Treaty on European Security that we have just received. We shall study this text carefully as it will provide a rich basis for discussion within our Organization.

If we are to confirm the importance of the OSCE as the sole platform for dialogue on security policy, we need to hone the instruments available to our Organization for conflict prevention and management.

It is important once again to reaffirm the political will to co-operate, particularly with respect to negotiations on unresolved conflicts. In this regard, Switzerland welcomes the resumption of the "5+2" talks and the recent progress in the Minsk process.

Mr. Chairman,

Colleagues,

Protection of human rights, promotion of democracy and development of the rule of law are essential conditions for maintaining international stability. These vital tasks are at the core of the mandate of another regional organization to which most OSCE participating States belong, namely the Council of Europe.

On 18 November Switzerland had the honour of taking over the chairmanship of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers for six months. In my capacity as chairperson, I shall ensure that co-operation between the Council of Europe and the OSCE is strengthened. In fact, thanks to their specific assets, these two organizations complement each other ideally.

In conclusion, I should like to express my warm thanks to the Greek Chairmanship for organizing this meeting and particularly for the considerable efforts it has devoted to promoting the Corfu Process. We wish every success to its successor, Kazakhstan, in furthering European security dialogue within our Organization.

### **Swiss minaret ban discriminates against Muslims, says UN expert**

30 November 2009 – An independent United Nations expert on religious freedom today voiced regret at the Swiss vote to ban the construction of new minarets, stating that such a prohibition clearly discriminates against Muslims.

“I have deep concerns at the negative consequences that the outcome of the vote will have on the freedom of religion or belief of members of the Muslim community in Switzerland,” Asma Jahangir, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, stated in a news release.

“Indeed, a ban on minarets amounts to an undue restriction of the freedom to manifest one’s religion and constitutes a clear discrimination against members of the Muslim community in Switzerland,” she added, also noting that the UN Human Rights Committee stated a month ago that such a ban is contrary to the country’s obligations under international human rights law.

“This vote reminds us that no societies are immune to religious intolerance,” stressed Ms. Jahangir, adding that “it is therefore more than ever necessary to continue raising awareness and educating people about religious diversity, enabling all societies to adopt an enlightened and progressive attitude towards the beliefs of other communities.”

Doing so will help to eliminate the grounds for “irrational fears” towards Muslims, which have been exploited in Switzerland for political purposes,” she warned.

The Special Rapporteur urged authorities in Switzerland, which has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to take the necessary measures to fully protect the right to freedom of religion or belief for the Muslim community.

Ms. Jahangir, who carries out her work in an independent and unpaid capacity, reports to the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council.