

Switzerland bans minarets

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In accordance with the result of a referendum held on November 29, Switzerland has banned the building of minarets, or prayer towers. The decision is a new high point in a European-wide campaign aimed at stirring up prejudices against Muslims and dividing the working class. Earlier steps in such a campaign were the publishing of caricatures of Mohammed in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten* and the ban on head scarves in schools for Muslim girls and women in France. The result of the Swiss referendum has been welcomed by reactionary forces across Europe.

On Sunday, 53.4 percent of the Swiss electorate voted, with 57.5 percent voting in favor of the ban, thereby achieving the necessary majority of Swiss cantons. The result of the referendum now means that Switzerland is the first country in the world to lay down a ban on minarets in its constitution.

The initiative for the referendum was launched by the so-called “Egerkinger Committee,” which is backed by the right-wing populist SVP (Swiss People's Party) and the equally right-wing EDU (Swiss Democratic Union). Ulrich Schlüer, the founder of the anti-minaret initiative, is a SVP deputy and former coworker of James Schwarzenbach, the initiator of the first Swiss campaign against the “inundation of the land by foreigners” in the 1970s, which sought to repatriate 300,000 immigrant workers and their families.

In its campaign for the referendum, the Egerkinger Committee used every trick in the book in order to spread fear and stir up prejudices. A poster pasted across the country depicts a black masked woman alongside several threatening minarets (black, without the usual half-moon), which shoot up like rockets against the background of the Swiss flag. A computer game has even developed permitting users to shoot down minarets that spring up on the computer screen.

The right-wing parties conducted an extensive campaign over a number of months, meeting little in the way of opposition from the country's established political parties. The campaign found a resonance in rural regions and central Switzerland, where comparatively few Muslims live. In Appenzell Innerroden (the canton that did not grant women the right to vote until 1990) the initiative against minarets was supported by over 70 percent of inhabitants. On the other hand, a majority rejected the initiative in the cantons of Waadt, Neuenburg, Geneva and the city of Basel.

Switzerland has around 8 million inhabitants, of whom 5 million are entitled to vote. The country has approximately 330,000 Muslims and 150 mosques—just four (!) of which have minarets.

In its campaign, the SVP maintained that the construction of additional mosques represented a claim to political power by

Muslims and encouraged the spread of the Sharia. The SVP claimed that the referendum was not aimed at limiting the constitutional right guaranteeing freedom of religion. In reality, the arguments of the SVP are completely disingenuous.

While the referendum does represent a blow against the right to religion, more significant is the openly xenophobic nature of the SVP-led campaign. On its homepage the initiative makes this clear and states: “Who ever builds minarets is intent on staying ... For the population mosques and minarets are the highly visible proof that immigrants want to stay.” This sentence is thoroughly revealing and makes clear that the campaign against minarets is linked to driving immigrants—and not just Muslims—out of the country.

The web site then continues with a hateful tirade against Islamism, claiming: “Classical Islamism [is] more than a religion in the modern Western sense... it is [rather] a religiously justified social order based on dominance.” It goes on to state that Islamism inevitably contradicts “the liberal democratic achievements of Switzerland.”

These are precisely the arguments so often used by the political elite to equate Islamism with violence, intolerance and terror. The same arguments have been used for years to justify the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—both countries with a predominantly Muslim population—although the real issues at stake center on oil and the strategic significance of the two countries. An additional central feature of the current campaign against Muslims is to facilitate the building up of the state apparatus for domestic purposes under the pretext of combating terror, while at the same time stepping up the deportation of immigrant workers and their families.

No principled opposition

The established Swiss political parties did little to oppose the right-wing campaign of the SVP. The Liberal Democrats, Christian Democrats, Social Democrats and Greens, together with the Swiss government, all expressed their opposition to the initiative and called for a “no” vote. But their arguments were entirely unprincipled.

Instead they concentrated on the importance of “Switzerland's image abroad” or the “consequences for the economy” of such ban. None of these politicians exposed the initiative for what it was, i.e., a deliberate provocation aimed at dividing the working population.

The social-democratic foreign minister, Micheline Calmy-Rey, for example, argued that the ban on minarets would undermine Switzerland's influence with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. It is "unwise," Calmy-Rey told a Swiss paper, to "confront our partners with a minaret prohibition." Switzerland's exports could also suffer, she maintained, because "Muslim countries are also among our customers."

It should be noted that the social-democratic Swiss Women's Federation have already publicly supported the campaign to ban the burqa. The Federal Council has until now rejected such a prohibition, but at the start of November Swiss Justice Minister Eveline Widmer Schlumpf (a former SVP member) indicated her approval for such a ban.

Widmer Schlumpf took over as justice minister two years ago with the support of deputies from the Greens and Social Democrats, who even organized a demonstration for her candidacy for the Federal Council in front of the federal parliament.

At that time Christoph Blocher, the billionaire industrialist and leader of the SVP, had been voted out of the country's seven-strong Federal Council. His place was taken by Widmer Schlumpf. Blocher then expelled Widmer Schlumpf from the SVP and announced he was going into opposition.

Already in 2007, the *World Socialist Web Site* had warned: "Growing social tensions can find no political outlet in a system in which all the major parties, including the social-democrats, cooperate in unison. Blocher has taken advantage of that fact."

Reactions abroad

Reactionary forces across Europe and internationally have welcomed the result of the Swiss referendum. One of the first to express his support for the result was the Dutch right-wing extremist Geert Wilders, chairman of the Freedom Party (PVV). He was jubilant, stating: "For the first time people in Europe have opposed Islamisation." In 2006, Wilders was the first individual to published on his homepage the anti-Muslim caricatures printed in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten*.

The Italian government minister, Roberto Calderoli, from the xenophobic Northern League, declared: "There has been a clear signal from Switzerland: Yes to the church tower, no to the minaret." In France, Marine Le Pen, the daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen and vice chairman of the extreme right-wing National Front, stated: "The French should also be allowed to vote on the building of local mosques." In Austria the two main extreme-right parties, the Freedom Party of Austria and the Alliance for the Future of Austria, have also called for a ban on minarets.

German politicians also welcomed the result of the referendum. Thilo Sarrazin (SPD), former Berlin finance senator and currently a member of the German Central Bank committee, expressed his support for the decision. Sarrazin told the finance paper *Handelsblatt*: "The Swiss referendum shows that the core of society thinks differently than the political class and the majority of the media want us to believe."

German Christian Democrat Wolfgang Bosbach demanded that popular fears of "Islamisation" had to be taken seriously. *Der Spiegel* cited Bosbach as saying that the architecture of mosques manifests the "Islamic drive for mastery."

Support for the Swiss referendum decision also came from the other side of the Atlantic. The *Wall Street Journal* devoted an editorial comment to a vicious tirade against Muslims and applauded the ban as an example of Swiss voters standing up to their political elites. The WSJ goes on to complain that the referendum "was a decidedly mild-mannered sort of protest" and implies that even more stringent measures are necessary to combat Swiss "fears" of "radical imams and terrorist acts."

Muslims living in Switzerland are seeking to challenge the ban on minarets and a number of legal experts have declared that the Swiss constitutional ban violates international law. The Bern-based professor for international law, Walter Kälin, has declared that Switzerland will be forced to revise the ban, which in his opinion contravenes international law.

In defending the ban, SVP leader Christoph Blocher told the "Daily Talk" television program that should other European powers try to force Switzerland to revise its decision then it would be necessary to take a leaf out of the book of the Italian head of government Silvio Berlusconi. Italy defied the European Union prohibition of crucifixes in classrooms with Berlusconi declaring: "We will do its anyway."

It is no coincidence that the current campaign against the "Islamisation of Christian Switzerland" takes place in the middle of a profound financial crisis and growing social polarization. Only recently the major Swiss bank UBS was rescued from bankruptcy with billions in taxpayers' funds. At the same time, recent strikes by workers at SBB Cargo and by construction workers are a clear sign of the growing divisions in Swiss society. The campaign against minarets is aimed at demonising the country's small Muslim community, turning it into a scapegoat in an effort to split the working population. An utterly hypocritical debate on establishing a "national identity" is being waged in order to divert attention from the profound class divisions in Swiss society.

Such developments have been made possible by the complete prostration of the so-called left in Switzerland, social democracy and the trade unions, which are quite prepared to allow immigrants to become first victims of attacks on social and democratic rights. Nothing could demonstrate more clearly the necessity to build a section of the Fourth International in Switzerland.



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