

# Switzerland votes to ban the burqa

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Swiss voters on Sunday narrowly approved a Verhüllungsverbot (veiling ban) that prohibits Muslim women from covering their faces in public and wearing a niqab or burqa.

A total of 1.43 million voted in favour of the ban. That is only one in six of the country's 8.7 million inhabitants, of whom 2.2 million do not hold a Swiss passport and 1.7 million are minors. But with a turnout of just over 50 percent, this was enough for the ban to be accepted with 51.2 percent of the vote.

The constitutional initiative and the campaign for it has served to fuel racist and anti-Muslim sentiments. According to research, only 30 women wear the niqab in the whole of Switzerland. Also, there are several hundred female tourists from Arab countries. There are no female burqa wearers at all.

The referendum was launched by the so-called Egerkingen Committee, in which politicians of the right-wing populist Swiss Peoples Party (SVP) and blatant fascists set the tone. The committee, which according to the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ) has over 4,500 sympathisers, was already successful in 2009 with a legal initiative banning the construction of minarets in Switzerland.

The managing director of the Egerkingen Committee, 31-year-old Anian Liebrand, describes himself as a “man of conviction.” He had joined the SVP at 16 and pursues the goal of breaking the alleged “left-wing mainstream” in the country. “To influence society in such a way that the trend turns back to the right: that is one of my greatest goals,” he told the NZZ.

Liebrand was convicted of multiple counts of defamation for publishing photos of young left-wing politicians on an SVP website and denouncing them as “cowardly slobs,” “wretched creatures” and perpetrators of violence. He is also active in initiatives against same-sex marriage and sex education in schools. His greatest fear, writes the NZZ, is “that the Swiss are dying out.” Because of foreign infiltration and too few births of Swiss children.” He has called Holocaust Remembrance Day a

“guilt inculcation programme” meant to “re-educate” the Swiss in schools.

Liebrand is not the only leading member of the Egerkingen Committee to espouse fascist ideas. Twenty-four-year-old Nils Fiechter, also a member of the SVP, was convicted of violating the Racial Discrimination Act for designing an inflammatory poster that read: “Millions in costs for construction and maintenance, dirt, faeces, noise, theft, etc. We say no to transit places for foreign gypsies!” In the campaign for the burqa ban, he appeared dressed as a suicide bomber wearing an explosive belt under the burqa.

The campaign posters were also reminiscent of Nazi propaganda in style, form and content: two dangerous-looking eyes behind a niqab, black on a red background, with the words “Stop extremism!”

The Egerkingen Committee also includes many veterans of earlier xenophobic campaigns by the SVP and its environs. Its president is National Councillor (member of the lower house of the Swiss parliament) Walter Wobmann, who is on the right wing of the SVP. The SVP has been initiating plebiscites against immigrants, refugees and Muslims for many years and has had some success with them.

The last time it succeeded was seven years ago with the so-called mass immigration initiative, which was adopted by an extremely narrow majority. It obliged the Swiss government to renegotiate the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons with the EU within three years. Since then, corresponding initiatives have failed, and the SVP's influence has declined somewhat. The fact that the burqa ban initiative has now succeeded again is mainly due to the support of some liberals and feminists who made common cause with the far-right.

For example, a women's committee was formed for the burqa initiative. Writer Gisela Widmer explained in the *Tages-Anzeiger* that she had no sympathy for the initiators but would vote yes. It was not about the political agenda, but “only about the question: ‘Ban the veil, yes or no?’” she said. And a left-liberal would have to answer this

question in the affirmative. Because the niqab was “the habit of political Islam.” Regina Probst, former staff member of Terre de femmes, also told *Der Spiegel* that she would vote yes.

The German feminist Alice Schwarzer, who had already been agitating against Muslim men in the refugee crisis, spoke out in the NZZ and supported the initiative, saying, “Is this what we want after 200 years of enlightenment and 50 years of fighting for equal rights? Conditions in which a woman has to be invisible to protect herself from male gaze?”

However, there were many other voices denouncing the racism of the campaign and condemning the ban as an attack on the democratic right to freedom of religion and expression, which discriminates against Muslim women, who are the only ones who would be punished if they violate it, whether voluntarily or under duress.

Even if not everyone who voted for the burqa ban is a convinced right-wing extremist, the adoption of this undemocratic and discriminatory initiative shows that even Switzerland is not immune to the return of fascist currents, as they are making themselves heard in the US (Trump and his followers), Germany (Alternative for Germany, AfD), Spain (Vox) and numerous other countries.

Switzerland is often portrayed as having always been an oasis of democracy immune to fascism and Nazism. But this is not true. Around 1930, an extensive Frontenbewegung (Front Movement) developed in Switzerland as well, advocating völkisch (Swiss-ethnic), anti-Semitic and fascist goals. It gave rise to the National Front party, which reached its peak in 1935 with 9,000 members and was represented in the Swiss parliament with its own deputies.

A direct line leads from the National Front to the Egerkingen Committee. Ulrich Schlüer, the political supporter of Anian Liebrand, who co-founded the committee and was in charge of the minaret initiative, had worked as a secretary for James Schwarzenbach in the 1970s. Schwarzenbach, a member of the Swiss National Council, launched the “National Action against the Alienation of the People and the Homeland” in 1968, which sought to limit the proportion of foreigners in each canton to a maximum of 10 percent. A corresponding initiative was rejected by 54 percent after a bitter referendum campaign. If it had been accepted, 300,000 to 400,000 people would have had to leave Switzerland.

In his youth, Schwarzenbach had admired Spanish dictator Francisco Franco and had been a member and

later even party leader of the National Front. In November 1934, he was recorded as having taken part in a raid on the Cabaret Pfeffermühle. The cabaret had been founded in Munich by Erika and Klaus Mann, the children of the famous writer Thomas Mann, and had moved to Zurich because of Nazi persecution. Schwarzenbach justified the raid by saying that it was time to show emigrants and Jews that there was no place for them in Switzerland if they abused the right of hospitality.

The return of these fascist forces is a reaction to the deep crisis of capitalism, which has not spared Switzerland either. Measured by GDP per inhabitant, the country may be one of the richest in the world, but it is also, more than almost any other country, dependent on the world economy. The oversized banking sector, tourism for the upper class and highly specialised industry respond extremely sensitively to economic fluctuations.

Added to this is the sharp social polarisation—ranging from a filthy rich upper class to seasonal workers without permanent residency status—and an underdeveloped welfare system. The coronavirus crisis has exacerbated these contrasts. Despite high infection rates, the government puts the interests of the economy above the lives of the people. Ski resorts, hotels and restaurants have remained mostly open, as have factories. As a result, 565,000 people have been infected with COVID-19, more than twice as many as in Germany in terms of population. More than 10,000 have died.

As everywhere else in the world, the ruling class is preparing for fierce class struggles in Switzerland by promoting fascist forces.



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