

Swiss xenophobia reflected in the vote to ban minarets

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The Swiss ban on the construction of new minarets has angered Muslims and human rights groups.

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The Swiss decision to ban the building of new minarets in Switzerland is sending shockwaves throughout the Muslim world.

Muslims and human rights groups have expressed outrage at the decision, depicting it as an attack on Islam and a setback for religious freedom.

More than 57% of Swiss voters approved the proposal Sunday in a nationwide referendum backed by Switzerland's right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP), widely associated with anti-immigration campaigns.

"It's an indication that fascist and far-right groups are growing in number and in strength," Sheikh Ibrahim Mogra, Assistant Secretary-General for the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and an imam for the Muslim community in Leicester told The Media Line.

"This should be very worrying for all decent Europeans who wish to see the diversity of our continent continue in order to help our communities be cohesive and peaceful," he said. "The MCB is extremely disappointed that a country in modern-day Europe has such a significant population with such a dislike for diversity, particularly for Islam and for Muslims."

There are concerns the referendum results will have a similar effect to the 2005 Danish political cartoons, in which depictions of the Prophet Muhammad sparked anti-Danish boycotts and violent demonstrations throughout the Muslim world.

"I would call upon all Muslims not to demonstrate or take to the streets," Mogra stressed. "This simply gives ammunition to those who wish to portray us as violent extremists. We need to be dignified and challenge this through the democratic process that we have available to us as Europeans."

Egyptian Mufti Ali Gomaa denounced the vote, calling it an "insult" to Muslims around the world and "provocative behavior," but urged Muslims to be restrained in their response.

The Washington-based Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) urged U.S. President Barack Obama to use his upcoming address at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point to speak out against the decision, calling it a move that is "a violation of religious freedom and a breach of international law."

The human rights advocacy group Amnesty International said it "deeply regrets" the decision, stating that it "violates both the freedom of religion of Muslims living in the country and the prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of religious belief, as set out in several international human rights

instruments, that Switzerland is a party to."

"The general prohibition of the construction of minarets violates the right of Muslims in Switzerland to manifest their religion," Amnesty said in a statement. "It can do lasting damage to their integration."

Claude Moniquet, Chief Executive of the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center said the Swiss were likely to receive negative reaction from around the world.

"It's very clear that the Swiss authorities could have problems inside Switzerland with local groups calling for terrorist attacks," Moniquet told The Media Line. "They will also likely face problems outside Switzerland, with Swiss interests put at risk in North Africa, in the Gulf, and in Muslim countries. It will be a huge challenge for them."

Moniquet was skeptical over concerns that the Swiss financial industry will suffer, with speculation that wealthy Arabs and Muslims might withdraw savings from Swiss bank accounts.

"When you're a billionaire and you want to put your money somewhere, Switzerland remains maybe the best place in the world," he said. "So it could marginally affect the economy of Switzerland but not in a fundamental way."

"Many people in Europe think we have a problem of integration with the Muslim minority and I think it's true," Moniquet added. "We have a problem, but banning the minarets cannot solve the problem. It will just raise the communities against each other. It will not help to resolve coexistence in the integration program."

Moniquet argued that the referendum stemmed from two factors.

"One is general, and you find it across Europe, and that's the fear of Islamists and the fear of Islam," he said. "The other is a pure Swiss problem: The Swiss always had a problem with foreigners and they don't like them...I call it Swiss racism."

An op-ed in the Qatari daily A-Raya said the referendum was the worst gift Muslims received for Eid Al-Adha.

"This indicates an increase in racism in Europe in general, and especially in Switzerland," it read. "It's odd that this racist tendency comes at a time when the Arab and Muslim streets are showing more awareness for the need to respect religious freedom of minorities and individuals and focus on values of tolerance and acknowledgment of the other."

Following the referendum, the government said it would respect the decision of the people and will not permit the construction of new minarets. The decision will not affect the building of mosques or the four existing minarets in the country.

Switzerland has a population of 7.6 million people, of whom more than 4% are Muslim, mostly from Turkey and the former Yugoslavia.

The minaret, a tower adjacent to a mosque, is a visible symbol of Islam. The call to prayer is made from the minaret, but this call is banned in Switzerland.

Right-wing Swiss parties have depicted the minarets as symbols of Islamic militancy.