

Swiss ban on minarets a giant step backward and blatant expression of intolerance

by Louay M. Safi
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"It is a sad moment for all people who cherish religious freedom to see a discriminatory law receive wide popular support in the country that witnessed the birth of modern democracy. It is also ironic that such a blatant expression of intolerance is taking place in the birthplace of Jean-Jacques Rousseau who drew on his Swiss experience to call on Europe to embrace freedom and shun arbitrary rule."

The Swiss news agency ATS reported today that the ban on the construction of minarets has been approved by 57% of the voters who supported this draconian measure. The referendum that proposed the ban was backed by the right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP).



A minaret of a mosque and a steeple of a church are pictured in Wangen bei Olten, Switzerland.

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Switzerland has made today a giant step backward in the direction of the religious intolerance of medieval Europe. The measure might have appeared to the Swiss who succumbed to the far-right propaganda inconsequential, but it will certainly empower extremists in both Muslim and Western countries, and will take the world on a downward spiral.

The vote was surprising to many as it is diametrically opposed to the democratic values and the enlightenment spirit that are the source of a great pride to Swiss society, and to the very image of Switzerland as an open and tolerant society that cherished diversity.

The decision to ban mosque minarets is an act of religious discrimination and intolerance pure and simple. It simply means everyone but Muslims are free to build their house of

worship using their preferred architectural style. My advice to the Swiss is to go and read the *Social Contract*, written by their most prominent political philosopher who made his long lasting contribution to modern society by celebrating freedom, and who proudly introduced himself on the cover of his book as “the citizen of Geneive.”

Rousseau is now turning in his grave as his country of origin succumb to the intimidation and fear mongering of the Swiss People’s Party. The *Social Contract* makes a moving intellectual appeal for the establishment of a free society, governed by a common will directed towards protecting the rights and dignity of all citizens. The first sentence of the book celebrates freedom as the birth right of all people: “Man was born free but is everywhere is bondage.” He, however, reminds those who care about freedom that it can only be maintained through a commitment to the principle of equality rights and dignity of all people. Chapter eleven of the book begins with the admonishment that “liberty cannot subsist without equality.”

The decision to ban the construction of minarets is a source of great concern for Western Muslims to see European commitment to democracy and human rights unravel in the face of extremist threats on one side and extremist fear mongering on the other. The Swiss vote will undoubtedly invigorate the European far right, who will see this as a green light to further isolate and marginalize European Muslims. The move will be also celebrated by extremist voices in Muslim society, who will use the incident to support their claims that Western countries harbor anti-Islamic sentiments.

It is now the time for liberal voices in Switzerland, indeed in Europe and beyond, and all those who care about the future of freedom to show their true metal and challenge this draconian measure. Swiss and European Muslims should challenge the law in Swiss and European courts and make sure that this palpable discrimination against the free exercise of religion does not stand.

Failing that the Swiss would have traded future freedom and stability for an illusory security. Failing that they would have undoubtedly failed to learn from the wisdom of Rousseau who grew up in their midst and was able to persuade the whole of Europe to follow the route of liberty. They would have also missed the wisdom of a brave American, Benjamin Franklin, who learned the hard way the important of freedom and whose reminder should resound with all free spirits: “those who give up freedom for security deserve neither.”

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