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Anxieties, banning minarets and populist politics in Switzerland – a preliminary analysis

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The majority vote to ban the building of minarets is not a single and exceptional result. Rather, it is a dramatized culmination of Swiss politics shifting from long practised equilibrium to populist polarization and aggressive exclusion of minorities.

Referendum to ban the building of minarets

It was a surprise to all. Liberal and progressive people expected a most likely defeat of the anti-minaret campaign and Muslims hoped for a clear no; conservative and right-wing voters did not expect their championed ban to pass the plebiscite. Pre-election polls repeatedly predicted a majority to reject the ban of minarets and a minority of some 35 percent to vote in favour of it. Sunday afternoon, November 29th, however, election results of a strong 57.5 percent majority in favour of the initiative turned the previous polls to the contrary. Only a minority of 42.5 percent voted to turn down the referendum initiated by spokespersons of the right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP) and the evangelical Federal Democratic Union (EDU). The plebiscite, based on grassroots democratic procedures emblematic for Switzerland, created head news in European neighbouring states, in North America, Australia and elsewhere. Foreign ministers, Amnesty International and others spoke of a violation of the freedom of religious expression as guaranteed in the Swiss constitution (§ 5) and the Human Rights Declaration as well of a hostile discrimination of the Muslim minority in Switzerland.

The rise of a nationalist right-wing party and Islamophobia

The result is a surprise at first sight, but it has a pre-history and can be judged as an emotion-laden culmination of debates about so-called "foreigners" (Ausländer), and Muslim people in particular in both Switzerland and in Europe as a whole. The populist right-wing

SVP has developed into an increasingly strong party since the late 1990s. The 2007 federal elections brought the party with 29 percent to the strongest party. Championing conservative and nationalist values, praising the autonomy of Switzerland and its attributed values and heritage as well as polemically politicizing against foreigners, the party met the feelings and hidden attitudes of many Swiss people. In addition, in previous votes such as the 2004 initiative to enable an easier nationalization of second-generation foreigners, the right-wing party created an image of a majority of Muslim people in Switzerland. The party argued that the Muslim population in Switzerland doubles every 10 years and that Muslim families have a much higher fertility rate than average families in Switzerland. Islam and the assertion of a creeping Muslim infiltration of Swiss society were a major argument of the party to defeat the 2004 election and reject any change of law.¹ Likewise, in 2006 the right-wing SVP aggressively campaigned to tighten Swiss asylum law, resulting in an aggravation of admission of asylum seekers. Furthermore, the 2007 federal elections polarized the country as this right-and-order party produced posters openly discriminatory against immigrants and foreigners.

The November 2009 plebiscite based its argumentation on the negative image of "Islam" as spread in the media since 9/11 and further terrorist attacks. Further issues, such as attributed Islamic suppression of women, genital mutilation, forced marriages and compulsory wearing of the scarf for Muslim women poured further fuel into political fire. Right-wing politicians painted a picture of oppressive, aggressive and intolerant Islam in Switzerland, embarking on a sinister infiltration of homogeneous and harmonious Swiss society. The strikingly negative picture was further darkened by developments and events outside Switzerland, such as restricted freedom of Christians in Muslim dominated countries, an assumed "holy war" (*jihad*), and ambitions to introduce the Shariah worldwide. The stereotyped picture did not match the existing presence of the current about 400,000 Muslim people (5.3 percent of the Swiss population), coming from ex-Yugoslavia (56 percent), Turkey (20 percent) and the African continent (6 percent).²

¹ See Peter Voll, "Viele Götter, eine Demokratie: Religiöse Pluralität und Politik", in: Martin Baumann, Jörg Stolz (eds.), *Eine Schweiz – viele Religionen. Risiken und Chancen des Zusammenlebens in der Schweiz*, Bielefeld: transcript 2007, 313-326, in particular 322-324.

² Samuel M. Behloul, "From 'problematic' Foreigners to 'unproblematic' Muslims. Bosniaks in the Swiss Islam-Discourse", in: *The Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 26, 2 (2007) 22-36, and Behloul, "Discours-total Débat sur Islam en Suisse et la construction d'une religion publique", in: Mallory Schnewly Purdie (ed.), *Les musulmans de Suisse entre réalités sociales, culturelle, politiques et légales*, Genève: Labor et Fides 2009. See also the 2004 research report by Behloul on Muslims in Central

The right-wing party targeted plans of local Muslim societies to build new minarets as a symbol and emblem of the march forward of "Islam" in Switzerland. Spokespersons and downright hardliners of the party declared that the minaret was not a religious symbol, but rather a political sign of gaining power in a territory. The party was quick to assure that it would certainly not touch the fundamental right of freedom of religion, and that the referendum is not directed against Muslims and Islam in general. However, the SVP and a conservative Evangelical party opted that the thus attributed "political symbol" of the minaret should not be built any more in Switzerland. They argued that a minaret would not only be in visual non-conformity to Swiss towns, but that generally a minaret would give evidence of the threat of the 'schleichende Unterwanderung durch den Islam' (creeping infiltration by Islam); quite obviously a minaret would be nothing 'Schweizerisches' (Swiss).³ Evidently, political discourse strove to draw the borders whether symbols are valued as religious or non-religious (here: political), whether they are a part of "us" or of "them" (of the outsiders).

To further strengthen their case, right-wing hardliners of the SVP initiated a referendum to inscribe the ban of minarets into the federal constitution. They gathered more than 100,000 signatures of Swiss citizens and thus the government and parliament had to set up the plebiscite. The campaign turned out to be very emotion-laden, polemic and controversial, similar to previous electoral controversies. Left-wing parties, the main Churches, and liberal voices strongly rejected the campaign. They accused the SVP to violate religious freedom and damage the image of Switzerland as a politically neutral, free and tolerant nation state. Such liberal voices emphasised that the Swiss state and its laws would be strong enough to deal with new developments such as the growth of a Muslim minority and the emergent plurality of religions. They underscored that current laws proved sufficiently well as functioning regulators. On the other side, the SVP and the Evangelical party argued that they were the only remaining custodians of Swiss culture and Swiss heritage. They were the ones to engage in saving the "occidental Christian heritage" and the rights of Swiss people in their own land.

Switzerland, a documentary sponsored by the Pluralism Project
(<http://www.pluralism.org/affiliates/baumann/report.pdf>)

³ See in more detail, Martin Baumann, "Temples, cupolas, minarets: Public Space as Contested Terrain in Contemporary Switzerland", in: *RELIGIO: Revue pro religionistiku*, 4 (2009).

Increasing uncertainties and failure of civil engagement

What are main reasons for the strong majority to introduce the ban on the building of minarets in Switzerland?

First of all, many conservative Swiss people feel threatened by foreigners, in particular in economically insecure times. A widely spread uncertainty and anxiety of a threat to Swiss values matched with an underlying reservation towards outsiders (turning into xenophobia at times). In particular, people in rural regions, elderly and those with less education strongly supported the referendum: They wanted to set a strong sign of the limits of Swiss tolerance; a tolerance being stretched too far already according to many. The ideology and campaign of nationalist-conservative parties achieved a mobilization in favour of the ban. The minaret and in the same run the Muslim minority turned out to be a valve to voice frustrations and anxieties and set a sign to further liberalizations of cultural and religious plurality.

Secondly, moderate, liberal and left-wing parties seem to have been too secure that the initiative would be defeated. They did not oppose the polemical campaign of the right-wing hardliners strongly and engaged enough – the failed mobilization manifests a failure of civil society. Furthermore, mainstream, moderate parties increasingly aligned to positions similar to the nationalist-conservative ones, thus strengthening than weakening worries.

Thirdly, Muslim groups and organisations turned out to be strikingly passive. Well before the election many opted not to engage in the campaign and remain inactive. Now, after the legal ban and the excluding symbol sent, Muslim organisations will have to rethink their strategy of low profile and reflect on more actively engaging in Swiss society. They need to accentuate their contribution towards the welfare of Switzerland – a country and majority of people which declared a strong reservation and, in some parts, hostility and Islamophobia.

The current surprise of the vote and the strong negative reactions globally - but also applause from far right parties in Europe -, will have to move forward. Political parties, the Christian churches and Muslim organizations need to reflect on ways to come to terms with the Swiss attitude towards foreigners and future steps of societal incorporation of Muslim people and Islam in Switzerland – and in Europe as a whole. Unfortunately, before and during the campaign, a central phrase from the preamble of the Swiss constitution rarely found citation; it states that "free is but who uses its freedom, and that the strength of the nation is determined by the good of the weak".