

# International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA) Answers the Swiss Ban on Minarets

## A Statement by John Graz, PhD, IRLA Secretary-General

Swiss voters overwhelmingly approved a constitutional ban on minarets on Sunday, November 29, barring construction of the iconic mosque towers. The initiative was approved by 57% of the 2.67 million voters. Like many Swiss citizens living outside the country, I was surprised by the results of the recent referendum. But is this a religious freedom issue or a simple question of zoning standards?

My first reaction in reading the results was to look at how my canton of origin, Geneva, voted. The Muslim population in Geneva is significant and there is a mosque with a minaret in the city. The canton voted against the ban on minarets. Three other French-speaking cantons did the same, as did the city of Basel. If the Muslims were as dangerous as those promoting the ban claim, the Swiss who live in close proximity to Muslims would, logically, be the first to support restrictions on the Muslim community. Thus, the vote of Geneva against the ban is indicative of the flaws in the logic underpinning the ban.

The majority of those interviewed, including those who supported the initiative, claim they do not harbor hostility towards Muslims. They point to the fact that the ban only applies to minarets, not to the building of mosques without a minaret. Further, it is claimed that the ban is not due to religious hostility, but rather a rejection of the Islamist political ideology. Supporters, therefore, largely do not believe the vote was a stroke against religious freedom.

Some supporters of the ban might add that in the last 10 years, more mosques were built in Switzerland than there were churches built in most of the Islamic countries around the world. Some may ask for reciprocity: "You will be allowed to build minarets in Switzerland as soon as you authorize Christians and believers of other faiths to build their churches and temples in predominantly Muslim countries." It is true that some predominantly Muslim nations impose extremely repressive policies against Christians, Hindus, Jews, Buddhists and Muslim believers who are not followers of the dominant branch of Islam in the nation. But it doesn't follow that Muslims who live in Switzerland are responsible for those repressive policies or that they could stop the repression even if they wanted to. Indeed, it is likely that many of the 400,000 Muslims living in Switzerland are there because they left a repressive nation in order to live in a free country.

The supporters of the ban did their best to frighten people. The poster showing minarets looking like missiles covering a Swiss flag is a good example. The debate became very emotional. It was no longer about authorizing a religion to build a house of worship with its symbol, the minaret. Rather, the discussion stoked fears that a wave from the 1.3 billion Muslims worldwide would wash over the country, and religious zealots would make Switzerland into another Iran. The vote became a way to show the world, its international organizations, and its politicians that in Switzerland the people don't want to change their tradition and their culture.

The Swiss operate through direct democracy. This means that, rather they rely on representatives (e.g. Members of Parliament or Members of Congress) to settle issues of national and local importance, people vote directly on the issues. It is, therefore, worth imagining what would happen if a vote on the building of structures for minority faiths were put to referendums around the world. How would people react? I travel around the world and I see religious minorities often looked upon as foreign religions. They are frequently accused of threatening the national and traditional culture. People tend to react against something which is not familiar and which, according to them, could change their landscape, values, and habits. The Swiss, through direct democracy, have expressed a level of intolerance that I fear has strong support across the world.

Those who defend religious freedom have to face such a reaction. The religion of minorities is often associated with foreign powers. It is presented by nationalists as a force to destabilize and annihilate the national culture. One of the big debates in Europe before Islam took the front page of the newspapers was regarding so-called "cults" and "sects." In France and Belgium, there were efforts to ban groups labeled as "sects," even though there was no evidence that the vast majority of the faiths targeted were dangerous in any manner.

Much of Europe is still not familiar with religious pluralism. Our history is full of religious persecution and intolerance. In Switzerland, we divided the country between Protestant cantons and Catholic cantons. When it became apparent that we could not eliminate the other side, the motto could have been, "We can live in one nation, but not in the same canton." Today it is no longer Protestant versus Catholic, but Islam is seen by some as a new religion which may, in the long term, threaten the traditional landscape.

There is an aspect the media did not focus on in the debate, and that is the intolerance associated with secularization. I live in the United States where I see more and more mosques and minarets being built.

Nobody, with the exception of a few extremists, seems to be frightened by them. Why? There are many other religious buildings. Religious diversity and pluralism is a fact. In Europe, the society is very secularized. Religion is no longer at the center of people's lives. The attitude is that you can believe whatever you want as long as you keep it to yourself, and conform to secular social norms. For some, a good religion is a dying religion. When Evangelicals or Pentecostals become too active, they face hostility from the public. Similarly, a new minaret is a visible expression of a living religion. For some, it is much too visible with the potential of looming even larger. A majority of Swiss showed they are not ready for this move.

Could the attitude change some day? Could Muslims in Switzerland be accepted as full citizens? My answer is, "Yes." Islam will become in Europe a religion like others, but there is work to do. Muslims should keep working with other religions and religious leaders for the wellbeing of all citizens, for religious freedom around the world, for more justice, and for less poverty. Leaders of faith communities must work to educate young people against violent religious extremism. Every time there is a terrorist attack fueled by religiously inspired hatred, whether it is in Madrid, London, Bali, Baghdad, Pakistan or New York, fear grows. The most effective means of calming these fears is to work together effectively to stop the religiously inspired violence.

The Swiss vote to ban minarets shows just how much work is needed to advance the cause of religious freedom – even in nations like Switzerland, which is one of the freest nations in the world. In nations like Iran, Saudi Arabia, North Korea, and many other repressive nations, the work is even more urgent and the violations of religious freedom much more extreme. Believers of all faiths should meet together, build bridges, and work for the common interests – not to achieve a false unity based on the lowest common denominator, but to support the full freedom of each faith to believe, practice and to proclaim their unique beliefs. Religious violence should be strongly disapproved, and religious dialogue and religious freedom should be encouraged and defended.

We live on the same planet and we must live together peaceably and help each other. It will be done if we accept the right and the freedom of each person to be different from others. It is a worthy objective for the coming years in Switzerland and throughout the world. And it is a project the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA) is proud to be leading.

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Chartered in 1893, the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA) is the oldest association dedicated to freedom of conscience for all people. In 2003, the IRLA was recognized by the United Nations Economic and Social Council and given the status of United Nations Non-Governmental Organization Category II.

The IRLA is incorporated as a tax-exempt, educational, not-for-profit organization in the District of Columbia. Originally organized by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the IRLA's purpose is the universal and non-sectarian promotion of religious freedom for all people everywhere. The IRLA does not identify with any political party anywhere, nor does it endorse candidates for political office.

Various religious traditions are represented on the Board of Directors. The president in 1989 was the former general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation. The current president (2001-present) is the recently retired general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance. The IRLA has no paid staff; officers and directors serve voluntarily. Funding for IRLA operations comes from organizations supportive of the association's purpose.