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"My Compatriots' Vote to Ban Minarets is
Fuelled by Fear" by Tariq Ramadan*

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January Roundtable: Introduction

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January Roundtable: Introduction

Abstract

An annotation of:

"My compatriots' vote to ban minarets is fuelled by fear" by Tariq Ramadan. The Guardian. November 29, 2009.

Keywords

Human rights, Switzerland, Minarets, Freedom of religion, Political rights, Religious discrimination, Muslims

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["My compatriots' vote to ban minarets is fuelled by fear" by Tariq Ramadan. *The Guardian*. November 29, 2009.](#)

An Annotation

The recent vote in Switzerland (November 2009) to ban construction of minarets—the prayer towers for mosques—has raised many questions and concerns about its discriminatory nature, its violation of the right to freedom of religion, and its worrisome anti-Muslim sentiment. Tariq Ramadan describes how, **“For the first time since 1893 an initiative that singles out one community, with a clear discriminatory essence, has been approved in Switzerland. One can hope that the ban will be rejected at the European level, but that makes the result no less alarming.”**

The referendum marks a clear victory of the Rightist Swiss People’s Party, which proposed inserting a sentence into the Swiss constitution banning the construction of these towers. The ban is likely to face legal challenges not only in Switzerland but also from the European Court of Human Rights. Internationally, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has already condemned the vote as discriminatory and a violation of the right of religion. This month’s contributors discuss the political, human rights and legal aspects of this referendum.

Ramadan argues that, apart from the legal and human rights aspects of this vote, banning minaret construction represents a larger problem in twenty-first century Europe: an identity crisis. As he puts it, **“It is important...to understand what is really happening in Europe in general and in Switzerland in particular: while European countries and citizens are going through a real and deep identity crisis, the new visibility of Muslims is problematic – and it is scary.”** These fears fueled the strong rhetoric against Muslims during the campaign, which he describes in the following terms: **“Its media strategy was simple but effective. Provoke controversy wherever it can be inflamed. Spread a sense of victimhood among the Swiss people: we are under siege, the Muslims are silently colonising us and we are losing our very roots and culture. This strategy worked. The Swiss majority are sending a clear message to their Muslim fellow citizens: we do not trust you and the best Muslim for us is the Muslim we cannot see.”**

Who is to be blamed? Ramadan points first to the “invisibility” of the Muslim communities living in Western societies and to the seeming incapacity of those communities to be more proactive in terms of protecting their rights as citizens; second, he notes the lack of courage on the part of Swiss political parties that are unwilling to stop populist initiatives. Ramadan claims, **“We cannot blame the populists alone – it is a wider failure, a lack of courage, a terrible and narrow-minded lack of trust in their new Muslim citizens.”**

Our panelists take this analysis further by examining the efficacy of the democratic system to respond to these challenges, the link between banning the construction of minarets and human rights, the critical role of political leadership in promoting of tolerance and diversity, and how to generate better instruments to protect minorities and vulnerable groups.

These issues and others are considered in this month’s Roundtable.