

# Human Rights & Human Welfare

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Volume 10

Issue 2 *January Roundtable: An Annotation of  
"My Compatriots' Vote to Ban Minarets is  
Fuelled by Fear" by Tariq Ramadan*

Article 2

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1-1-2010

## Democracy and Flame-Fanning Populists: An Undesirable Yet Inevitable Combination

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### Recommended Citation

Burchill, Richard (2010) "Democracy and Flame-Fanning Populists: An Undesirable Yet Inevitable Combination," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 10: Iss. 2, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol10/iss2/2>



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## Democracy and Flame-Fanning Populists: An Undesirable Yet Inevitable Combination

### Abstract

Tariq Ramadan views the recent referendum in Switzerland inserting a ban against the building of minarets into the Swiss Constitution, as a vote against Muslims not only in Switzerland, but across Europe. Those of a more tolerant sensibility will of course agree with Ramadan on this issue and will easily criticize the Swiss for “getting it wrong” by voting in favor of this constitutional amendment. There is no question that a constitutional vote on what is essentially an issue of local planning permission is, as Ramadan describes it, a silly initiative. However, this is also the nature of democracy as a system where society, including the flame-fanning populists, has the opportunity to express their views and desires, even if they are undesirable. We must also keep in mind that just because a democratic system has been used to arrive at a decision, not every decision taken through the democratic process will be acceptable.

### Keywords

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

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## Democracy and Flame-Fanning Populists: An Undesirable Yet Inevitable Combination

by Richard Burchill

Tariq Ramadan views the recent referendum in Switzerland inserting a ban against the building of minarets into the Swiss Constitution, as a vote against Muslims not only in Switzerland, but across Europe. Those of a more tolerant sensibility will of course agree with Ramadan on this issue and will easily criticize the Swiss for “getting it wrong” by voting in favor of this constitutional amendment. There is no question that a constitutional vote on what is essentially an issue of local planning permission is, as Ramadan describes it, a silly initiative. However, this is also the nature of democracy as a system where society, including the flame-fanning populists, has the opportunity to express their views and desires, even if they are undesirable. We must also keep in mind that just because a democratic system has been used to arrive at a decision, not every decision taken through the democratic process will be acceptable.

The Swiss version of democracy is seen as unique due to the high degree of self-determination that is possible through direct democracy initiatives. In a system such as this it is inevitable that undesirable decisions will be arrived at. But let's keep in mind that the Swiss are not alone in coming to, in the view of outsiders and those in the minority, the wrong decision. In 1999, 27 percent of the Austrian population got it wrong by voting for the Freedom Party. In 2002 the French did not know what they were doing when Jean-Marie Le Pen came in second in the first round of presidential voting. And in 2004 the US came to the wrong decision in re-electing George W. Bush as president. How do we know these are the “wrong” decisions? Because they involve large sections of a population exercising their free choice in a question before them, but to the rational and reasonable outsiders and minorities, who somehow know better, the wrong choice has been made.

What the Swiss situation shows is that our belief in democracy as the most legitimate way, or least as the most preferred manner, for coming to decisions means that unpopular decisions may result. Democracy is a process in which widespread and active participation is necessary and the Swiss system provides for this level of efficacy. What seems to be forgotten is that the democratic process does not necessarily ensure desired outcomes, which is why widespread and active participation has often been viewed as a major shortcoming of democracy. Commonly democracy is understood as government or rule by the people or the *demos*. But *demos* has also been interpreted as the masses or the mob; essentially those who cannot be relied upon to make appropriate decisions for the common good as understood by those who apparently know better. This is democracy's dilemma—we all want to have our say but we also want to make sure those whose ideas are undesirable do not have a say.

Ramadan calls the process leading to the vote as “shocking” and he is right. It is shocking that a constitutional system can be used for a “silly initiative” like this. The result is the expression of negative views against Muslims but political debate and discussion often leads to views being expressed that some or many view as undesirable. However, the Swiss vote is not a major inroad into religious freedom as it involves a building issue rather than an explicit denial of human rights. The various legal challenges to the result will clarify this issue further. The referendum did not result in a ban on the building of mosques or other religious buildings. It is important to recognize the practical limits to this initiative because the democratic process is not absolute or

unbridled in the sense that whatever it comes up with must be accepted. There could be no constitutional initiative banning all Muslims and expressions of the Muslim faith from Switzerland because democracy is not just about voting, it is also about substantive values that apply to society as a whole and there are legal mechanisms in place to keep a check on this.

Tariq Ramadan feels we need to look beyond the vote itself and understand what is really happening. There is substantial evidence of hostile views being expressed towards Muslims, but this is not unique in Europe or anywhere else—democracy will always allow for the targeting of the "other" that is feared or undesired. The supporters of the Swiss initiative argued that if a minaret were to be built in Switzerland, the country would become Islamic. This is flame-fanning populism at its best (worst?) but once it is recognized how silly the entire matter is then it will be forgotten or overturned—remember the Swiss system allows for the ban to be thrown out through the same democratic process. Various legal challenges to the initiative are being lodged and are likely to succeed because it has resulted in acts contrary to the Swiss constitution, such as upholding the values expressed in the preamble regarding diversity and freedom. An essential element of democracy is having the freedom to live a life of one's choice provided one respects the choices of others.

The Swiss Constitution recognizes this freedom through its inclusion of fundamental rights and clear statements of its compatibility with international human rights law, all of which will prevent any flame-fanning populists from trampling on the basic human rights of others. We must keep in mind that even though the flame-fanning populists are disagreeable to us who somehow know better, democracy means they can express their views and pursue desired objectives.

My personal view is that the referendum is regrettable, but it is also the popular choice of the Swiss people today. Like all populist movements today that are based on outright discrimination and hate, this decision will fade away once the Swiss people realize how silly it all is. But we must remember it is not the system of democracy that is to be blamed but those that are using it. Switzerland has always laid claim to a unique democratic system, they still have it but one that has been exposed as uniquely silly.

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