



"Minaret Initiative"

Position statement of the Federal Commission against Racism (FCR)

October 2008

The FCR'S Recommendations

1. The People's Initiative "Against the Construction of Minarets" (the "Minaret Initiative") should be rejected.
2. Contact between Muslims and non-Muslims should be more energetically encouraged. Anxieties among the non-Muslim majority of the population should be taken seriously, but this is not the way. Instead, prejudices should be broken down by countering them with realistic, jointly-devised approaches. This would demonstrate the diversity of each side to the other. The federal government, the cantons, local authorities, associations and the media must all help to promote mutual understanding.
3. Preventive conflict resolution must be supported. Developing conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims can be defused at an early stage by conducting a dialogue. Local authorities should take an active role in promoting a constructive climate, take a public stand against discrimination, and – when conflicts do arise – promote dialogue between the antagonists by calling in qualified intercultural moderators.
4. For an extended context, see the FCR's position statement *Majority and the Muslim minority in Switzerland*, 2006¹

¹ <http://www.ekr-cfr.ch/ekr/dokumentation/shop/00019/00190/index.html?lang=de>.

The Position of the FCR

The “Minaret Initiative”...

...defames Muslims and discriminates against them

1. The Initiative and the arguments² of its proponents constitute discrimination against persons of the Islamic faith. Whereas it proposes a blanket ban on the construction of minarets by Muslims, no parallel prohibition is to apply to Christians and members of other religious groups such as Hindus and Buddhists.
2. The “Minaret Initiative” creates and reinforces negative stereotypes of Islam, thus defaming Muslims. The minaret is seen purely as a symbolic claim to power³ that – according to the authors of the initiative – questions fundamental constitutional rights such as the equality of the sexes. The Initiative implies that danger emanates from a particular part of a religious building. It thus constitutes a blanket accusation – utterly unsupported by the facts – that all Muslims are guilty of behaviour that is dishonourable and even unlawful.

The “Minaret Initiative”...

...violates fundamental rights and human rights

3. The Initiative violates religious freedom⁴ as protected by human rights, as well as the freedoms of religious belief and conscience enshrined in Article 15 of the Swiss Federal Constitution. A minaret ban would restrict the right of Muslims to practise their religion as individuals and in groups. There are no public-interest grounds that might legitimize such a restriction.

² The arguments of the committee organizing the Initiative can be found at: <http://www.minarette.ch/index.php?id=5> (last consulted on 1 October 2008).

³ See the arguments of the committee organizing the Initiative, which can be downloaded from: <http://www.minarette.ch/index.php?id=5> (last consulted on 1 October 2008).

⁴ Art. 9 ECHR, Art. 18 UN Covenant II.

4. The Initiative violates the prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of religion that is embodied in both human and fundamental rights.⁵ It creates a distinction between the minaret, as a building belonging to Islam, and buildings associated with other religions such as church towers and Buddhist temples – without demonstrating any overriding legitimate reason for doing so. Applications for permission to build minarets should be assessed in accordance with the relevant planning and building regulations.
5. The Initiative conflicts with the principle of religious neutrality. The Parliament and the electorate have an overriding public interest in avoiding any declaration for or against a particular religion. Nor are they authorized to express any view about religious matters, because the symbols, rituals and characteristic features of a religion are defined internally, i.e. by the faith community itself. Whether or not a minaret is (or may be) an essential component of a mosque is therefore entirely a matter for Islamic faith communities to decide for themselves.

The “Minaret Initiative” ...

...incites fear and creates uncertainty

6. The Initiative creates anxiety among majority communities and minorities. It restricts the rights of Muslims, giving rise to concerns within Muslim communities about how much further such restrictions might go in future. Furthermore the advocates of the Initiative are deliberately creating fear among the majority population of “creeping Islamicization”, which is seen as constituting a threat. The fact that there are no serious integration problems with Muslims in Switzerland with regard to the practice of their religion⁶ is entirely ignored.

⁵ Art. 14 ECHR, Art. 2 para. 1 UN Covenant II, Art. 15 of the Swiss Federal Constitution.

⁶ See the Federal Council Integration Report of July 2006: *Problems of the Integration of Foreigners in Switzerland*. This can be downloaded from:

http://www.bfm.admin.ch/etc/medialib/data/migration/integration/berichte.Par.0001.File.tmp/Integrationsbericht_d.pdf (last consulted on 1 October 2008). See also the report on integration measures: *Report of the responsible federal agencies on the integration of foreigners as at 30 June 2007: the need for action and proposed measures*.

<http://www.bfm.admin.ch/etc/medialib/data/migration/integration/berichte.Par.0009.File.tmp/070630-ber-integrationsmassnahmen-d.pdf> (last consulted on 19 September 2008).

The “Minaret Initiative”...

...is hostile to integration

7. The proliferation of stereotypes encourages day-to-day forms of discrimination. Traineeship applicants with names suggesting that they may be Muslims are rejected because of fears that they could cause problems. Muslims are publicly abused. Anxieties and uncertainties lead to social exclusion. Repeated experiences of discrimination make people – particularly young people – less ready to integrate.
8. Signs of discrimination militate against the integration of *all* foreigners, not just Muslims. Switzerland is absolutely right to call on Muslim immigrants to abide by her laws, and to integrate into our state system. In return, it is incumbent on the majority society to treat immigrants with openness and tolerance, and to respect their fundamental and human rights. If the Minaret Initiative were to be passed, Swiss society would be sending Muslims very conflicting signals. Discrimination against their religious communities would have counter-productive effects on the objective of integrating Muslim immigrants.
9. In ten to twenty years' time, Muslims living in Switzerland will be Swiss citizens – if they are not already. They will constitute a permanent component of Swiss society. This is a natural demographic development. The consequence of migration, it has taken place again and again throughout history. The Muslim population makes an important contribution to this country's economic and social development. It is therefore essential to work with them to find forms and expressions of their religious beliefs that Swiss society considers appropriate. Switzerland's third-largest religious community must not be forced to worship in garages and back rooms. That would be unworthy of our state and of our concept of religion. Even if the discussion of the Minaret Initiative cannot be resolved on the basis of planning and building regulations alone, these do at least apply to all in equal measure.

Information on the “Minaret Initiative”

German:

<http://www.parlament.ch/D/dokumentation/do-dossiers-az/minarette/Seiten/minarette.aspx?>

French:

<http://www.parlament.ch/F/dokumentation/do-dossiers-az/minarette/Pages/minarette.aspx?>

Italian:

<http://www.parlament.ch/I/dokumentation/do-dossiers-az/minarette/Pagine/minarette.aspx?>