

Tensions on the rise

Rarely is there a church without a bell tower in Switzerland. Now other religious communities are demanding the same privilege: Muslims are fighting for the right to build minarets on top of mosques. This has been the cause of a heated debate, due to peak on November 29 when Swiss voters will decide how far freedom of religion should go.

By Sven Gallinelli | National headlines were guaranteed: In mid-September, the Islamic Community of Lucerne went public with a demand that has added a new chapter to an already emotional debate. The Community stated it would like to be officially recognised as one of the national churches in Canton Lucerne. By doing so, the Community would gain the right to collect church taxes.

“That way, we would be able to get financial resources for social projects, for example in the area of integration,” said Petrit Alimi, Community vice president, in the *Neue Luzerner Zeitung*.

The Lucerne-based Muslims are the first in Switzerland to go to such an extent to achieve public recognition. It is not, however, the first attempt by Muslims to proclaim their rightful place within Swiss society. Based on the last census, 4.3 per cent of Swiss inhabitants (or about 310,800 people) belong to an Islamic community, according to the Federal Statistical Office.

Compared to Catholics (41.8 per cent) and Protestants (35.3 per cent), Islamic people are still a minority here. But they are also the third-biggest religious community in this country – a community that is lively and wants to express its presence by more than just gathering in the approximately 160 mosques across the country.

As no Swiss church would be complete without its bell tower, the final touch of any mosque is the minaret. It’s a simple thing that many encyclopaedias, such as the *Bertelsmann Universal Lexicon*, describe as a “tower for the Muezzin of the mosque”. Other sources, for example *Wikipedia*, call the minaret a “distinctive architectural feature of Islamic mosques”.

Just a feature? Not here. There is an intense debate going on in Switzerland about whether the erection of minarets should still be allowed or not. In fact, the debate has gone so far that the Swiss have to decide in a national referendum if minarets should be forbidden by the constitution.

Politics of religion

The minaret-ban initiative has its roots in the conservative circles of the country. It was mainly members from the right-wing Swiss People’s Party (SVP) who raised 114,900 signatures to get the topic put on the ballot. (100,000 signatures gathered in 18 months are required to force a referendum.)

Ulrich Schlüer, a member of the Swiss National Council (House of Representatives) from Zurich, set up the committee that is leading the fight against minarets. “A minaret has a politi-

cal and not a religious dimension,” says Schlüer. “It is a religious-political symbol of power; practicing faith is not its purpose.”

Schlüer maintains banning minarets would not interfere with the rights connected to freedom of religion. “Muslims can still build mosques, that’s not a problem. We just do not want that the mosques come with a minaret, a symbol for political Islamisation.”

But it is exactly Schlüer’s remark, that prohibiting minarets does not impact the human right to religious freedom, which has been the centre of big controversy. Opinions vary widely, depending which side of the political spectrum one is on.

The Swiss Government is clearly against a ban of minarets, as it stated during a press conference in August last year. However, when it had to decide if the initiative fulfilled all legal requirements, the government said, “a ban of minarets would not violate international law” but “could endanger the religious peace and is against the core philosophies of the Swiss constitution”. The matter is delicate enough that the Swiss government also fears explosive reactions from Islamic countries should the bill pass the vote; similar to the protests that broke out when the Mohammed caricatures were published in Danish newspapers.

Many well-known Swiss Muslims have stated that for them, the right to build minarets is equated with freedom of religion. Although, “we do take the fears of Swiss voters seriously”, says Hisham Maizar, president of the Federation of Islamic Umbrella Groups in Switzerland (FIDS).

He adds: “Muslims have to prove that they are ready to get involved in the essential discussions and that they are accountable for their actions.” Maizar disagrees with Schlüer’s point of view that the minaret is a political symbol. “This stands in contradiction to any logics of the Zeitgeist; the minaret today has a different function than it had during the period of Prophet Mohammed.” He says today, the minaret is seen as a symbol of orientation for many Muslims and reminds them to take part in the ritual duty of the Friday prayer.

However, as supportive as Maizar is of the minaret, he also advocates

a soft approach when it comes to the erection of these towers. He thinks that fears should be faced with a constant dialog, and does not support getting minarets built through confrontation.

Flash point

As of today, only four mosques in Switzerland have a minaret. Not all of them were easily built. Take for example the village Wangen bei Olten, in Canton Solothurn: It is seen as the example that started the whole conflict. The local Turkish Culture Group planned to extend its mosque with a minaret; an idea that was opposed by conservative local politicians from a very early stage. The Turkish Culture Group pushed the matter through all the judicial avenues – and a minaret has been on the roof of the building since January.

The Turkish Culture Group managed to achieve its targets, although this hasn’t earned the group a lot of sympathy in the village. However, President of the Turkish Culture Group Mustafa Karahan says: “Tensions in the village are not as high as they used to be. But as for the minaret referendum, people often raise the topic when they speak with us.”

But even within Muslim circles, not everybody is happy with what happened in Wangen. “I don’t think that example will be beneficial,” says Hisham Maizar, who thinks fighting a minaret project in courtrooms is the wrong approach.

What the example from Wangen shows is this: The minaret in Switzerland is no longer seen as a simple “feature” of a mosque. It is much more seen as a symbol of how much a religious community that does not have roots in Christianity should be able to follow its own principles in a liberal western country.

An issue of integration

“It may be the fear of the unknown and the fear of losing Christian values as well as the fear of a political and radical Islam,” says Hansjörg Leutwyler, the Secretary General of the Swiss Evangelical Alliance, of some reactions minarets provoke. The Alliance has tried to smooth relations between conservative politicians and the Islamic communities.

“It would have been essential for a calm discussion if both sides could have [taken] a step back,” says Leutwyler. “So we asked the anti-minaret committee not to pursue the referendum and we asked Islamic communities to put any minaret projects on a hold.” Not with much effect: neither side was willing to back down.

“The minaret is a symbol of Islamic values. To prohibit it neither helps the integration process, nor protects Swiss society and the Muslim community from a political Islam,” he says. For Leutwyler, there are other avenues to help everyone live together peacefully.

“It’s far more important to reach out to these people and to meet them on a personal level on the one hand, and to protect our society from an Islam that seeks political power and the legislation of sharia law for Muslims in Switzerland through appropriate laws on the other hand.” And that has nothing to do with having or not having minarets, says Leutwyler.

The minaret-ban proposal finds most support on the political right, while the three other main big Swiss parties – the Christian Democratic Party (CVP), the Radical Party (FDP) and the Social Democratic Party (SP) – are against such regulations. November 29 will show which opinion Swiss voters share.

