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No to minarets – Yes to arms exports

The Swiss people and cantons have voted in favour of a ban on minarets by a surprisingly clear margin. However, they have rejected the initiative opposing arms exports. And finally, they have decided that jet-fuel duty should in future be used for the benefit of air traffic.

By René Lenzin

There were long faces after the Swiss federal referendum on 29 November. Despite opposition to the ban on minarets from the Federal Council, most political parties and associations as well as the national churches, 57.5% of voters and 22 of the 26 cantons supported the proposal. The clear winning margin came as even more of a shock as surveys conducted before the ballot indicated that the ban would be narrowly defeated. Only the Swiss People's Party and the Federal Democratic Union welcomed the verdict. They were the only parties in the Federal Assembly to have supported the ban.

The popular initiative for the banning of minarets was an issue that mattered to many Swiss people. 53% of those entitled to vote went to the polls, which represents a strong turnout. Generally, fewer than half the electorate vote in referenda. Only the cantons of Basel-Stadt, Geneva, Neuchâtel and Vaud voted against the initiative. There was no significant divide between German-speaking and French-speaking Switzerland as the three predominantly Catholic French-speaking cantons of Fribourg, Jura and Valais backed the initiative. Support for the

ban was particularly strong in the rural areas of central and eastern Switzerland as well as in Ticino. It is evident that the minaret ban won a lot of support in areas where there are disproportionately low numbers of foreigners and Muslims.

Ban on arms exports suffers overwhelming defeat

68.2% of voters rejected the Group for a Switzerland without an Army's popular initiative to ban arms exports. Not a single canton voted in favour. The initiative won most of its support in Geneva (48.2% in favour), Basel-Stadt (46.9% in favour) and Vaud (40.5% in favour). It picked up its least votes in Nidwalden (88% against), Uri (84.4% against) and Obwalden (80.9% against). Both supporters and opponents of the proposal said the economic crisis and fears over job losses had impacted on the result. The Federal Council and the conservative parties had warned prior to the referendum that a yes vote would put 5,000 to 10,000 jobs at risk.

Jet-fuel duty to be used for aviation

Two thirds of revenues from jet-fuel duty will in future be spent on air transport and not on roads. 65% of voters and all the cantons approved the constitutional amendment required. Federal government collects over CHF 60 million in jet-fuel duty each year. A third goes directly into the federal coffers. The remainder will now be used to improve the technical safety of air traffic, environmental conservation and the protection of air passengers against terrorist attacks. Precisely where the money will be spent must be decided by the Federal Council and Parliament at the legislative level.

Comment

A storm to clear the air

At the end of November the Swiss people voted on two popular initiatives for which the drafters were more interested in making a symbolic statement than any real political impact. The world would not become a better place if Switzerland were to decide to stop exporting weapons. And banning minarets is not going to resolve a single concrete issue relating to social co-existence with the Muslim minority. Why then were the ballot results produced by Swiss voters so at odds?

The decision to reject the ban on arms exports is easily explained. As previous referenda have shown, this proposal does not have majority support, and even less so in a time of economic difficulty when many jobs are already in jeopardy. The approval of a ban on minarets by a surprisingly clear margin is more difficult to account for. It should not be seen as an affront to Albanian neighbours or Turkish work colleagues, with whom Swiss people get on pretty well in everyday life and who are often not devout Muslims. It is much more the expression of a combination of specific and obscure fears. Fear of encroaching Islamisation, of a religion that is unfamiliar and has negative connotations for many people, such as the oppression of women, the burka, circumcision, the preaching of religious hatred and terrorism. The support for the ban on minarets can be interpreted as the Swiss people making a statement that they are not comfortable with developments taking place.

The initiative poses problems for Switzerland. It violates the constitutional article concerning freedom of worship and the European Convention on Human Rights. It is damaging to Switzerland's image as a tolerant constitutional state. It may also have negative repercussions for Swiss companies doing business in Muslim countries. Nevertheless, the government and Parliament must accept this majority decision. The will of the people must be taken into account, and not just through a PR campaign aimed at damage limitation abroad.

It would be a gross misjudgement to attribute the problem to direct democracy, as some commentators have done at home and abroad. Direct democracy will, of course, result in uncomfortable or even contradictory decisions from time to time. However, it generally produces well-judged, achievable policies that are in touch with the people. It also serves as an excellent early-warning system. It is better to have a storm to clear the air in a peaceful referendum than a constant build-up of tension, which eventually erupts in blazing suburbs.

RENÉ LENZIN

FURTHER INFORMATION

■ Official response from the government:

www.admin.ch (Aktuell/Volksabstimmung vom 29.11.2009) in German

www.ejpd.admin.ch (Documentation/Votes)

■ More information on the issue from Swissinfo:

www.swissinfo.ch/eng (Specials/Minaret Debate)