

(The National Interest, 08.12.2009)



The normally placid Swiss created an international frenzy when they voted to ban the construction of minarets on mosques. Elite European opinion was unanimously negative, leavened with the oft expressed hope that the European Court of Human Rights would overturn the measure if necessary. Hostility among Muslims around the world was even greater.

Western engagement with Islam remains fraught with difficulty. President Barack Obama pushed for greater understanding when he spoke in Cairo earlier this year, but the practical results of his appeal remain few.

The West—and America—are not without blame. Recent U.S. policy, in particular, has been seen as anti-Muslim. To have America's UN Ambassador, then Madeleine Albright, declare that "we think the price is worth it" when challenged over the alleged death of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children from sanctions highlighted the U.S. government's reputation for arrogance and callousness. Moreover, as evident in the Swiss example, the West has not always lived up to its claim to respect freedom of religion.

Nevertheless, Islamic governments have little credibility to complain. In the main Muslim nations are authoritarian, distrustful of any form of freedom, whether civil, political, personal or religious. Some have tolerated and even supported terrorism as long as it was not directed at them. Finally, Muslim regimes are among the most virulent persecutors of members of minority faiths.

The latter is of particular note given Islamic criticism of Switzerland. The Swiss vote was wrong in my view, an attack on religious freedom by an otherwise free state. It is fair to criticize—though not demonize—the Swiss electorate for its decision.

But Muslims living in nations that routinely oppress religious minorities should concentrate on freeing their own societies from often onerous, even brutal discrimination against religious minorities before challenging the modest if unjustified Swiss restriction. As Jesus instructed, you

should remove the plank from your own eye before seeking to remove the speck from your brother's eye (Matthew 7:5).

This point has been lost on many Muslim leaders, however. For instance, Ali Gomaa, Egypt's top cleric, complained that the referendum was an "insult" to Muslims, not "just an attack on freedom of beliefs, but also an attempt to insult the feelings of the Muslim community in and outside Switzerland." Mohammed Mahdi Akef, "supreme guide" of the Muslim Brotherhood, said the vote ran against international customs, human rights, and religious freedom.

Maskuri Abdillah, head of Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, argued that the election result was a sign of the "hatred of Swiss people against Muslim communities. They don't want to see a Muslim presence in their country and this intense dislike has made them intolerant."

In Pakistan Khurshid Ahmad, vice president of the Islamic party Jamaat-e-Islami, said the restriction "reflects extreme Islamophobia" and "represents very serious discrimination against Muslims." Indeed, he continued, it is "an effort to provoke Muslims and prompt a clash between Islam and the West." Yahya Mujahid, spokesman for the Islamic charity Jamaat-ud-Dawa, complained that "This new decision violates the principles of mutual understanding and religious tolerance."

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said the vote was a "sign of an increasing racist and fascist stance in Europe" and evidence of Islamophobia, which was a "crime against humanity." Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, secretary general of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, called the vote an "example of growing anti-Islamic incitements in Europe by extremist, anti-immigrant, xenophobic, racist, scare-mongering ultraright politicians who reign over common sense, wisdom and universal values." He called for "genuine dialogue at the grass-roots level to alleviate all misunderstandings and misinformation that lead to intolerance and misconceptions." These hyperbolic claims ignore the behavior of governments in Muslim lands.

Religious persecution is common overseas. It is most likely to occur in authoritarian regimes with a communist heritage or Islamic nations. While it's hard to find a nominally Christian country which discriminates, let alone persecutes—the Russian government favors the Orthodox Church; the Fiji police commissioner has been requiring his officers to attend Christian rallies—only the rare Muslim nation does not favor Islam, often actively and sometimes

forcefully.

Egypt is one of the worst offenders. For instance, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom observes “serious problems of discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations against members of religious minorities, as well as non-conforming Muslims remain widespread.” In its [most recent report](#) on religious freedom, the State Department notes that “the status of respect of religious freedom by the Government declined somewhat during the reporting period” and decries the Egyptian government’s “failure to investigate and prosecute perpetrators of increased incidents of sectarian violence.” Anti-Semitism also is widespread in the government-controlled media. The Commission has placed Egypt on its Watch List.

The Indonesian government formally respects religious liberty but, notes State, “ongoing government restrictions, particularly among unrecognized religions and sects of the recognized religions considered ‘deviant’ were significant exceptions to respect for religious freedom.” The USCIRF notes progress in government responses to sectarian violence, but adds: “Over the past several years, minority religious groups have faced increased discrimination, harassment, and even violence perpetrated by extremist groups, state agencies, and community organizations.” Recent government regulations make it harder to open churches (let alone adorn them with a cross or steeple, a la the Swiss vote).

Pakistan is far worse. International Christian Concern places this government in its Hall of Shame. Explains ICC: “Since independence, Pakistan has increasingly cut away at the rights of the Christian minority, treating them as second-class citizens and largely relegating them to a life of poverty. Attacks on Christians are commonplace and often go unreported as local police, and even the national government, have shown reluctance in upholding the rights of minorities.”

The Commission believes Pakistan should be designated as a Country of Particular Concern, warranting special attention by the U.S. government. The USCIRF notes “continuing sectarian and religiously-motivated violence and the government’s inadequate response,” as well as laws which “abridge freedom of religion or belief.” While the Obama administration might prefer to go easy on an important ally, State points to a variety of “serious problems”:

Law enforcement personnel abused religious minorities in custody. Security forces and other government agencies did not adequately prevent or address societal abuse against minorities. Discriminatory legislation and the government’s failure to take action against societal forces

hostile to those who practice a different religious belief fostered religious intolerance, acts of violence, and intimidation against religious minorities.

Turkey does a better job at respecting the freedom to worship, but still remains far behind Switzerland and other Western countries. Notes the State Department: “The government continued to impose limitations on Islamic and other religious groups.” Moreover, “religious minorities said they were effectively blocked from careers in state institutions because of their faith.” Non-Muslims also were subject to discrimination, harassment, and even violence on occasion.

In all of these cases Switzerland is a beacon of liberty and reason compared to the Muslim nations. The contrast is even more dramatic compared to the fifty-seven members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Of those at least twenty actively, and sometimes brutally, persecute members of minority faiths (Iran, Saudi Arabia), systematically discriminate against non-Muslims (Egypt, Pakistan) or acquiesce in attacks on, and sometimes murder of, members of religious faiths (Indonesia, Iraq).

Even the best cases, such as Kuwait and Morocco, restrict the activities of non-Muslims in various ways. And the worst are truly awful. Saudi Arabia makes no pretense of respecting anyone’s religious liberty. There is no guarantee that the government, or the “virtue police,” will even leave non-Muslims free to worship in their own homes. For anyone associated with the OIC to criticize the commitment of other nations to religious liberty—and campaign against the “defamation of religion,” an OIC objective at the United Nations—is truly obscene.

Swiss voters underestimated the impact on religious liberty when they voted to ban minaret construction. But Muslims whose nations persecute Christians, Jews, and other religious minorities have no standing to complain. The Islamic world needs to respect religious liberty at home before lecturing the West about intolerance, racism, hatred and Islamophobia.

(Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Reagan, he is the author of *Beyond Good Intentions: A Biblical View of Politics*)