

Swiss faith leaders oppose national ban on minarets: Issue will be decided in November referendum

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The Swiss Council of Religions, which includes Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders, has gone on record rejecting a call for a nationwide ban on the construction of minarets at mosques. Some Swiss groups want to ban minarets out of fear of Europe's growing Muslim population.

"For the members of a religious community, religious buildings are not only places to gather but also a symbol of their faith and an expression of their reverence for God. For many Muslims, therefore, mosques need to have minarets," the council said in a statement issued September 2.

"The prohibition of minarets would injure these people in their dignity and their basic right to practice their religion," the council warned.

The proposal to ban the construction of minarets was submitted in July 2008 with just under 115,000 signatures. The issue will be decided in a national referendum on November 29.

If passed, the measure would amend the country's federal constitution to include a new article stating, "The construction of minarets is prohibited."

The five-page response by the Council of Religions represents the first time the national body has issued a joint statement about a national referendum, council leaders said in Bern.

The Swiss Protestant news agency ProtestInfo quoted Thomas Wipf, president of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches and a member of the religions council, as saying, "Cultural diversity is a characteristic of Swiss identity. It makes Switzerland strong."

The council said that it seeks to protect religious peace in Switzerland and that the initiative to ban the building of minarets would cause dissension.

“Everyone has the right in this country to live their faith visibly, freely and in a community within the framework of the public order,” it stated. “This also includes the construction of places of worship that are typical for their respective religions.” – *Ecumenical News International, Religion News Service*