

Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting: Freedom of religion or belief

9 - 10 July 2009

Hofburg, Vienna



COJEP International has repeatedly expressed its concerns about the on-going public discourse calling for the restriction of some minorities' right to freedom of religion or belief on the basis that the presence of these minorities allegedly threatens the cultural identity of some OSCE participating States. Therefore, we urged national and international human rights organizations, specialized bodies and politicians, to take a stronger stance against such acts of intolerance and xenophobia, in particular during the times of elections when chauvinistic and anti-immigrant rhetoric has reached in the peak.

The last European elections have unfortunately confirmed our concerns by worsening the climate of tolerance towards various minority communities, including Muslim in many parts of the OSCE region. We observed that xenophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric against Muslims was particularly high during the election campaigns in The Netherlands and Austria. Discussions on banning Quran and construction of mosques set the tone of political discourse in relation to the place of immigrants in the society.

Based on these findings, our organization urges the OSCE Chairman in Office's Personal Representatives on tolerance and non-discrimination issues, in particular the one addressing intolerance and discrimination against Muslims strongly condemn such manifestations of hatred and raise awareness about the fact that there is a need for ODIHR's monitoring of elections also from the point of the use of racist and xenophobic propaganda.

In this context, we make the following recommendations:

1 - The right to express and practice one's religion and belief is a one of fundamental human rights and freedoms which is recognized by all OSCE participating States. This obliges participating States to create necessary conditions for the exercise of such a right without being subject to any negative consequences.

2 - However, in Europe we observe that Muslims have been increasingly facing arbitrary and discriminatory restrictions on their right to manifest and practice their religions. The referendum process to ban the building of minarets in Switzerland and the recent law adopted for the same purpose in the Carinthia province of Austria are two examples of this worrying situation. Muslims are also concerned about intervention of their internal religious affairs, especially when they were not allowed to choose their own imams or muftis.

3 We hope that ODIHR will pay more attention to these challenges that Muslims have been facing. However, we recently observed a sharp decline of funding for support of the Muslim NGOs which necessary for them to attend OSCE human dimension events and make their voice to be heard. We would like to emphasise that in order to ensure a more balanced participation of all communities in the OSCE region, ODIHR should promote the participation of Muslim NGOs more.

4 We would like to also recommend that ODIHR's Panel of Experts on Religious Freedom should have a more balanced approach towards to all regions of OSCE and all religious groups and believers and non-believers. For this purpose, we would like to propose to ODIHR to include at least one expert with a Muslim minority background.

5 - Finally, today we call for the upcoming Kazakh chairmanship direct OSCE towards more balanced approach in relation to all forms of intolerance and discrimination.

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