

6th Forum on Minority Issues

Oral Statement, International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF)

Agenda Item II: Legal Framework for the Protection of Religious Minorities

Thank you Mr Chairman for giving us the opportunity to speak. I shall speak on behalf of IARF, the International Association for Religious Freedom. The IARF is an international association with over 70 member groups who stand up for freedom of religion or faith, working in over thirty countries worldwide. I shall highlight the practical importance of working towards building a constitution that protects minorities and freedom of religion.

Switzerland, and more directly our Liberal Protestants Union of which I am president, can share historical experiences in the fight for a constitution that includes minorities. As we sought unanimity, the majority of our population lobbied for the minorities. Modern Switzerland is the product of a civil war between conservatives, the Catholics and reformers, the Protestants. The Constitution was therefore dictated by the victors in 1848, the Liberal Protestants. In fact the main objective of Guillaume Henri Dufour, General of the reformation troops and citizen of Geneva, was to provide protection and preservation of the fraternal enemy.

Our Union was founded when the Constitution underwent a major overhaul in 1871. The Protestant majority was committed to ensuring that minority groups have freedom of faith as well as freedom of conscience. Article 15 of the 1874 Constitution establishes freedom of religious belief and conscience. Our Union, Libref succeeded thanks to its long term vision. Our journey continues, our statutes are open to all non-revisionist faiths. For example, there are Muslims among our group. By doing so, we follow in the footsteps of another citizen of Geneva: Jean-Jacques Rousseau. For him, plurality was a type of unanimity. We hear not the voice of the majority, but the voice that represents the general will.

For the work of this Forum, we have three calls.

- 1) Commitment to the Constitution, the highest form of legal framework. The effort is considerable, but worthwhile.
- 2) The majority is encouraged to include the voice of minorities within the Constitution as it aims for unanimity, so as to protect the fraternal enemy.
- 3) A state does not and cannot have a conscience. We therefore encourage individuals and groups to express different consciences. It is their task, and indeed ours, to express this real conscience. It is the job of the State and its Constitution to protect them and grant them public space.