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## In Switzerland, Xenophobia is Thriving

In peaceful Switzerland, xenophobia is thriving.

By William Underhill and Tracy McNicoll

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Oct. 1, 2007 issue - The image is simple but striking: three white sheep stand on the Swiss flag, while a fourth—a black one—is booted away. The caption: "For greater security." But the message is hotly debated. The Swiss People's Party (SVP) which put up about 200,000 copies of the poster in the runup to the October parliamentary elections, says the poster promotes the party's plan to deport foreigners convicted of crimes. Others say it promotes racism. Andrew Katumba, a naturalized Swiss with a Ugandan father, now standing for parliament as a Social Democrat, says "the symbolism is awful and unacceptable."

Europe is seeing such controversies more and more often, as parties on the far right and left attack a "rising tide" of immigrants from Africa and the East. Anti-immigrant rhetoric has helped the Danish People's Party emerge as an influential force with a rising share of the vote. The new right-wing Freedom Party is gaining ground in the Netherlands on a similar platform. And in France, National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen's popularity rose to 31 percent in April. But the Swiss case is different. The SVP is an established power with the largest number of seats in Parliament. Small wonder, then, that its black-sheep campaign has drawn condemnation from the United Nations' special rapporteur on racism, who says it "provokes racial and religious hatred" and should be withdrawn to restore "the image of Switzerland as a country respectful of human rights."

But the SVP's experience shows that at least in Switzerland, an aggressive anti-immigrant line plays well. In 2003, the party abandoned the traditional confrontation-lite approach to campaigning in favor of a harsh populist message. Result: a rare upheaval in Swiss politics. The SVP, once sidelined as a largely rural party, won 26 percent of the vote, raising its tally of M.P.s by nearly half and earning it a second seat on the ruling seven-member Federal Council, at the expense of the Social Democrats. Its charismatic leader, Christoph Blocher, serves in the influential post of justice minister. And the party is now proposing initiatives that include a ban on minarets on mosques, which SVP parliamentarian Ulrich Schlüer decries as the Muslim symbol of a demand for "power that calls into question fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution." Muslims, he suggests, are trying to impose Islamic law on Switzerland.

The SVP is tapping into deep anxieties about Swiss identity. The Swiss have long guarded their independence and neutrality. But these ideals coexist uneasily with a dependence on cheap foreign labor. Like many of its European neighbors, Switzerland has seen a steep rise in the number of immigrants, among them Muslim refugees from the Balkans. One quarter of the work force is now made up of foreign nationals—the highest proportion in Europe outside Luxembourg—raising concerns about their impact on a stable, wealthy way of life. Online forums indicate deep support for the SVP's moves to deport not only foreigners convicted of crimes, but also, in some cases, their families. The pace of change, as Switzerland edges away from its old isolationism, has also unsettled many of the party's supporters. "Some people say they are the losers from the globalization," says Boris Zürcher, an economist at Avenir Suisse, a Zurich think tank.

Anti-racism campaigners now talk of a rising level of intolerance. They say immigrants have been spat upon or had their cars damaged in attacks. Some SVP opponents are no better. They have vandalized an SVP office, and one bit an SVP supporter who defended the sheep poster. But the SVP is undaunted. Party spokesman Roman Jaggi says the U.N. critics don't "understand Swiss politics," or the sheep campaign: "It's a very nice poster and we receive a lot of requests from children who want to cut out the pictures of the sheep." Yet polls show the party may not make much headway in the election. Evidence from elsewhere in Europe suggests voters hesitate to reward anti-immigrant parties, if only because their cause is often taken up by center-right parties. National Front leader Le Pen's high popularity in France, for instance, didn't translate into votes because Nicolas Sarkozy proved to be a formidable right-wing opponent. Still, charming little Switzerland will retain this dubious distinction: the nation with the most powerful party of angry isolationists in Europe.

*With Jessica Au in London*

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