

The Best to the East.

[Back to Article](#)[Click to Print](#)

Friday, Oct. 19, 2007

Immigration Dominates Swiss Vote

By Vivienne Walt/Zurich

Above the sound of clinking coffee cups in a Zurich café, Andrew Katumba, 36, a Socialist candidate for parliament in Switzerland's national elections on Sunday, is outlining what he sees as the country's most urgent problem. "Switzerland is one of the strongest democracies in Europe, and yet one in five people cannot vote," says Katumba, whose father fled Uganda to Switzerland during Idi Amin's reign of terror, when Andrew was 3. "We are not integrating foreigners."

Overhearing Katumba from the next table, Peter Gaehler raps his cane on the floor and erupts. "These foreigners come here and abuse our social system! Half of them don't speak our language," says Gaehler, 78, as several nearby people listen in and nod in agreement. "Why should we give them passports?"

That brief exchange between strangers captured the gist of an election campaign that has roiled this prosperous country of 7.5 million in recent months. Though Switzerland's image remains one of idyllic mountains and peaceful chalets, the recent campaign has been loud and ugly.

At the heart of the controversy is the Swiss People's Party (SVP), the dominant force in the outgoing parliament. Last month it pasted thousands of posters across the country depicting three white sheep kicking out one black sheep from a paddock, with the slogan: "For more security." The poster became the parade example for furious accusations that the SVP was fomenting racism. Early this month, at a demonstration in the capital, Bern, hundreds of protesters pelted SVP members with rocks; police fired tear gas to disperse the crowd.

Yet the SVP's message seems to have hit home with voters. The party has widened its lead since the poster campaign rolled out, according to the Gfs Research Institute, whose October 14 poll put the SVP ahead at 27.3%, compared with its nearest rival, the Social Democratic Party, at 21.7%. Of the 2,021 voters polled by the organization for the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation, 39.9% said they intended to vote for one of two center-right parties, and 10% said they would vote for the Greens. Ultimately Switzerland is likely to remain governed by four major parties, even if the SVP emerges victorious on Sunday; the government comprises a seven-person Federal Council, with party representation in

proportion to the election votes. The president's position rotates yearly among the parties.

People's Party officials say they are not surprised by their strong lead. They say they are voicing what millions of voters believe: that Switzerland's large immigrant population of 1.5 million people — roughly 22% of the population — is causing social strains and a rise in crime. Ulrich Schlüer, a leading Swiss People's Party legislator and a newspaper editor, claims that no other country in Europe has such a high proportion of foreigners. He acknowledges that the party's support is weighted heavily towards German-speaking east and northern Switzerland, but says: "Everybody in Switzerland understands the poster."

The cultural discordance the large numbers of immigrants has brought is familiar to many European countries. "I'm the only Swiss citizen in my apartment building," says Juliana Hochstrasser, 68, shopping near her home in the middle-class Zurich suburb of Dübendorf. "If I put up a notice in the laundry, my neighbors cannot even read it," she says, adding that she had already mailed in her vote for the People's Party.

Foreigners in Switzerland face an added burden over those elsewhere in Europe: Under Swiss law, immigrants can apply for naturalization only after 12 years — a far longer wait than the five to seven-year years that are most prevalent in the the rest of Western Europe. The process is also arduous: would-be immigrants are vetted first in their local communes by regular citizens, than at the canton level, before being approved by federal authorities. "I came here when I was seven. I got my Swiss passport only two years ago," says Kocakir Abdurrahman, 37, a Turkish taxi driver in Zurich. Abdurrahman said he had mailed his ballot last week, in his first vote as a Swiss citizen — for the Social Democrats. Explaining his choice, he says: "The SVP is racist."

The SVP says their target is not all foreigners, but those who commit serious crimes like rape and murder; they point out that about 70% of those in Swiss prisons are foreign-born residents. Schlüer says that the waves of African and Balkan refugees during the past two decades are evidence enough of Switzerland's openness. "Integration is a success," he says. Yet it is largely because of its anti-immigrant stance that the party's ranks have soared; the SVP has nearly doubled its members of parliament since 1995, from 29 to 55 this year. That number could increase further after Sunday. Its opponents say the party has exploited raw Swiss fear of foreigners in order to expand its support. "This election is a competition between right and left," says Georg Kreis, president of the Federal Commission against Racism. "Foreigners are used as a scapegoat."

If so, that strategy might be working. More than 200,000 Swiss have signed a People's Party initiative — the first step towards debating a new law in parliament — to deport immigrants who commit violent crimes, even after they have served prison sentences, and to deport entire families of immigrants, if the accused is under 18 years.

The party has also proposed banning Muslims from erecting minarets, which Schlüer says is "a political symbol." More than 50,000 people have already signed that petition. And Schlüer says the party is keen

to abolish a federal law banning racial incitement and discrimination, and to ban Muslim girls from wearing headscarves in public schools. "In school we want to see their faces," Schlüer says, adding: "And it is part of our constitution that everybody is equal."

That sense — battered during recent months — is what drew Katumba's father to flee Uganda to this country of mountains and wooden chalets decades ago, in search of a serene future. Come Sunday, immigrants will be wondering if that future includes them.

 [Click to Print](#)

Find this article at:

<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1673669,00.html>

Copyright © 2007 Time Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited.

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Add TIME Headlines to your Site](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Customer Service](#)