

2013 Minority Forum of the UN Human Rights Council

Agenda Item V: Promotion of constructive interfaith dialogue, consultation and exchange

Statement of Tim Wood, LLB, BCL, Member of the New York Bar

I am a lawyer occasionally deployed on election observation missions. My ongoing research¹ relates to internationally enshrined participation rights—the rights to vote and stand for election—and corresponding obligations of political parties.

My first point is that political participation of religious minorities was the *first human right* to be enshrined internationally. It happened at the 1815 Vienna Congress, following the Napoleonic Wars, when Switzerland and the Netherlands were required to guarantee access to public office for all citizens regardless of religion. Such a long pedigree deserves emphasis at this Forum, as it speaks to the deep-rootedness of religious minorities' rights.

My second point is that although the human right of political participation has historically been asserted only against states, as at the Vienna Congress, there is increasing momentum to extend corresponding obligations *topolitical parties*. For example:

- A General Assembly resolution has underlined the “key role” that “political parties can and ought to play” in “combating...intolerance”.
- A regional treaty of the Commonwealth of Independent States explicitly forbids political parties to “use the methods of ... religious compulsion or calls for violence” in their campaigns.
- A European Union election report prepared at the request of Pakistan urged political parties in that country to “include religious minority issues in their manifestos”.
- And voluntary transnational associations, such as the Conference of Latin American Political Parties, insist that member parties respect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including the right to participate in government without discrimination on the basis of religion.

In closing, I urge this Forum to add its voice to the chorus of international and transnational actors exhorting political parties the world over to foster participation, tolerance and dialogue.

¹ Detailed information and references can be found in Tim Wood, *Extending International Human Rights Obligations to Political Parties*, 2(3) Cambridge Journal of International and Comparative Law 431 (2013). I can be contacted at timothy.wood@mail.mcgill.ca.