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Afghan convert controversy mirrors cartoons row

(Reuters)

23 March 2006

ROME - The strong Western response to a threatened death sentence for an Afghan convert to Christianity looks something like a mirror image of the Muslim reaction to the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) caricatures printed in the European Press.

There have been no riots or sackings of Afghan embassies, unlike the violence that marked the uproar in Muslim countries after the Danish cartoons were published, but the shock and mutual incomprehension expressed in both cases are similar.

The difference lies in the issues at stake. In the cartoons row, Muslims stressed the sanctity of the Prophet, whom they say nobody -- even non-Muslims -- can criticise. The subtext was resentment against perceived Western prejudice against Islam.

Now, Western governments and societies are speaking out for religious freedom and against the death penalty. The fact many Western troops now help defend the Afghan government against Al Qaeda and Taleban remnants heightened the outrage in the West.

Amin Farhang, the Afghan economy minister who lived in exile in Germany for 22 years before returning to Kabul in 2001, saw the parallels and warned against any escalation.

"Following the row about the cartoons, which has cost so many lives, we should look calmly at things and work for a fair solution," he told the German daily Koelner Stadt-Anzeiger.

But he stressed the gulf between western-style freedoms and traditional Muslim societies that consider conversion from Islam to be an insult punishable by death. "Afghanistan cannot switch suddenly from one extreme to the other," he said.

Freedom a norm, not an extreme

The uproar sparked off by the case of Abdur Rahman, now on



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trial in Kabul for renouncing Islam, showed that Westerners saw religious freedom as a norm and not an extreme.

"It is deeply troubling that a country we helped liberate would hold a person to account because they chose a particular religion over another," President George Bush said on Wednesday.

Some critics suggested NATO states withdraw their troops from Afghanistan. A few even suggested that Western troops kidnap Abdur Rahman and bring him along when they leave.

Among the strongest critics are evangelical Christians in the United States, a core constituency that has backed Bush so far on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"How can we congratulate ourselves for liberating Afghanistan from the rule of jihadists only to be ruled by Islamists who kill Christians?" Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council asked.

Another leading figure, Charles Colson, said: "If we can't guarantee fundamental religious freedoms in the countries where we establish democratic reforms, then the whole credibility of our foreign policy is thrown into serious question."

Canada's top Anglican prelate, Archbishop Andrew Hutchinson, said of the Islamic punishment for apostasy that Rahman faces: "I'm absolutely horrified to think that this kind of fanatical literalism would be applied in this day and age."

Bitter commentaries

European newspapers ran bitter commentaries. Munich's Sueddeutsche Zeitung said Kabul was "tolerant like the Taliban." Die Welt in Berlin wrote that Afghanistan faced "the dark ages of barbarity" if it executed Rahman.

"We have a duty not to cooperate in bringing back the burning of heretics at the stake," the Dutch daily Trouw wrote. Milan's Corriere della Sera said Western states helping Afghanistan should launch a movement to reform Islam there.

In Denmark, Jyllands-Posten, the daily that first ran the cartoons, quoted Syrian-born member of parliament Naser Khader saying: "If necessary, Danish troops should liberate Abdur Rahman and Denmark should offer him asylum.

"This matter underlines that Shariah (Islamic law) must be fought wherever it exists," he said.

France's Marianne magazine made clear Western critics might not be satisfied if the Kabul court arranges to avoid the death sentence by declaring Rahman insane and unfit for trial.

"If he is not tried, he will probably end up in a psychiatric hospital, which for a man of sound mind is sometimes worse than death," it commented.

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