



PERMANENT DELEGATION OF NORWAY TO THE OSCE

STATEMENT BY AMBASSADOR ROBERT KVILE ON PROMOTION OF TOLERANCE AND NON-DISCRIMINATION THROUGH COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA POLICIES

Freedom of Expression for Tolerance and Non-Discrimination, Session 3
Hofburg, 18 December 2014

Ladies and gentlemen,

From January to March 2010, one single issue dominated my work as Norway's ambassador to Pakistan: Satirical drawings of Prophet Mohammad.

The controversy gave me a lesson in practical diplomacy. It illustrated the relationship between freedom of expression and tolerance.

Background

Let me first remind you of the background. In September 2005, the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten published cartoons of Prophet Mohammad, created by the Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard.

These drawings were later published by a number of newspapers in many countries, including in Norway.

They met with strong reactions from Muslims worldwide. They led to violence, arrests and inter-governmental tensions. The Norwegian Embassy in Damascus was set on fire.

Pakistan January to March 2010

On 8th January 2010 a leading Norwegian newspaper published an article on a brutal attack on the Danish cartoonist. To illustrate the background of the attack a facsimile of Mr Westergaard's drawings was also printed.

In most Muslim countries the article went unnoticed. Not in Pakistan.

It was like a tsunami of hatred that came towards Norway and our Embassy in Islamabad. The Norwegian flag was set on fire in the streets of Lahore. Many demanded that Norway's ambassador to Pakistan be expelled.

Our local staff at the Embassy made sure not to disclose to anybody beyond their families that they worked at the Norwegian Embassy.

I asked for guidance from the Foreign Ministry in Oslo on what to say to the media and others who wanted to know why a Norwegian newspaper again had published these cartoons.

The Ministry in Oslo must of course take as their point of departure the international legal framework and international standards. Our position is that freedom of expression should be as wide as possible, and only exceptionally be limited in accordance with well established criteria.

My colleagues in Oslo were fully aware of the impact printing of such cartoons has in many Muslim countries, but they also held the firm view that the right to publish them must be defended.

The Ministry, therefore, instructed me to defend the freedom of expression and freedom of the media and to underline that a government cannot interfere in the work of the editor.

The Ministry also explicitly made the point that I may not say what the Pakistanis desperately wanted to hear, namely that we regret that the cartoons had been published. I was instructed not to go beyond saying that the freedom of expression must be exercised in a responsible way, in other words that an editor should take into consideration the impact of what he publishes.

I knew that these guidelines would be of little help, since the issue for most Pakistanis had nothing to do with freedom of expression and freedom of the media. For them the issue was simple. A newspaper had trampled upon something that for them is sacred. Once again the West had shown contempt towards Islam.

To reach out to a broad audience in a country like Pakistan is very difficult. But I could reach out to religious leaders of the main schools of thought. I was lucky that the Embassy already had a well developed network among religious leaders.

I invited them to my office and I visited them in their mosques and madrasahs. A member of the Pakistani government organized for me a public meeting with several hundred participants in a town in the part of Punjab where the majority of Pakistani Norwegians come from.

I wanted to meet people and talk to them directly. Communication through the media would not create the dialogue I wanted.

I will never forget my first meeting with a group of mullahs on the cartoon issue. That was also the first occasion for me to try out the guidelines I had received from Oslo. I made my points, they listened attentively, nodded, and then one of them said: We agree, but can't you simply ban that newspaper? They also had a follow-up question: Can you guarantee that your government is not responsible for the publishing of these drawings of the Holy Prophet, peace be upon him?

I had anticipated that my instructions would not impress them, but this went beyond what I had expected.

I then went on to use narratives I had developed for myself, narratives I hoped would give my interlocutors *positive* associations about Norway.

I talked about *Norway in Pakistan*, about our development assistance programs, our humanitarian relief activities. I mentioned the size of our budget.

I talked about *Pakistan in Norway*, I gave examples of successful Pakistanis among the 35.000 that have settled down in my country. I said that those who believe that we are Islamophobes should know that the Deputy Speaker of the Norwegian Parliament is a Muslim – who grew up in Lahore! I said that all registered religious congregations in Norway are supported economically by the authorities, that all mosques in Norway receive the equivalent of 5000 rupees per member per year. 5000 rupees is a decent monthly salary in Pakistan.

I talked about Norway's relations to other Muslim countries. I said that the biggest recipients of development assistance from Norway are Afghanistan and Palestine – both received at that time around 100 million dollars annually. In particular my reference to Palestine made a huge impact.

It was also important that I could give my interlocutors my personal respect. It helped me a lot that I could say that I have read the Koran, from the first to the last page, and that I was able to underscore some of my points with quotations from it.

It worked. One of my finest moments as a diplomat was when a mullah sitting in my office in Islamabad said: *We came with a broken heart. It is not broken anymore.*

My cartoon crisis never turned violent and it was first and foremost a Pakistani phenomenon.

The Danish cartoons, and other similar cartoons, have been published in many newspapers and they are easy to find on the Internet. Few bother anymore. In Pakistan, however, they do.

The Norwegian editor did not intend to offend when he decided to reprint the Danish cartoons in January 2010. But he failed to understand that the printing of them would be *perceived* as an expressions of intolerance and contempt.

The controversy faded out after a couple of months and I could turn my attention to other issues. Did my outreach activities have any effect? I believe so. How many did I reach with my message? Very few directly, but many more through the many religious leaders I met.

Thank you for your attention.