

Bishop's critique prompts German debate on Afghanistan

Paul Hockenos | Feb. 3, 2010



Bishop Margot Kässmann gives her New Year's sermon in the Frauenkirche church in Dresden, Germany, Jan. 1. (Newscom/Ralf Hirschberger)

BERLIN -- Merely by dint of her gender, Bishop Margot Kässmann took over the top post in Germany's powerful Protestant church with the image of a rebel. Last year the 51-year-old theologian became the first woman ever to assume the leadership of Martin Luther's church in the homeland of the great reformer.

But Kässmann's history-making election to head the Evangelical Church in Germany caused barely a ripple compared to the full-blown public imbroglio she unleashed with her blunt New Year's sermon critiquing Germany's military engagement in Afghanistan. "Nothing is good in Afghanistan," she said Jan. 1 in Dresden. "We've been using all sorts of strategies to kid ourselves. Weapons don't make peace. We need more imagination for peace." She invoked the mass peaceful demonstrations of the 1980s that felled communism. In other remarks, Kässmann said plainly that Germany should withdraw its troops from the Hindu Kush and that civilian development was being neglected in favor of military options.

The eight-year presence of Germany's armed forces, the Bundeswehr, in northern Afghanistan has been increasingly disputed here in Germany. The mission of the presently 4,200-strong German soldiers has long suffered from a vague mandate, tenuous popular support, and restricted rules of battlefield engagement. Politicians have been unable to convincingly explain why Germany is in its first shooting war outside of Europe since World War II. Moreover, popular opposition hardened recently in the wake of a German-ordered air strike in September that killed civilians. Yet while ordinary Germans' reservations about the war have surged (71 percent are against it), the political leadership -- both Germany's conservative government and most of the leftist opposition -- remain solidly behind the deployment.

Even if the foreign ministry responded politely ("Everyone is entitled to their opinion") to Kässmann's stand, backers of the center-right administration have taken her harshly to task. On Jan. 11, the Bundestag's military commissioner, Reinhold Robbe, called her remarks "irresponsible," especially as she had never even been to Afghanistan, and admonished her as a woman of the cloth to provide spiritual guidance to men in uniform as well as to pacifists.

In response to her call for more international cooperation, Berlin's finance minister, Wolfgang Schauble, reminded her that the Bundeswehr is in Afghanistan as part of an international coalition with a U.N. mandate.

On Jan. 2, the conservative daily *Die Welt* ridiculed the bishop for her naiveté: Candlelit marches, mass demonstrations and peace prayer sessions -- as in the Velvet Revolutions of 1989 -- aren't going to change anything in Central Asia.

Public intellectuals and just about every news media have jumped into the fray, turbocharging a debate that critics say has been much too long in coming. "To Kässmann's credit, she disturbed the peace," wrote the Munich daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Jan. 8. "She didn't intend to do this, but the time was ripe to talk about the war. What good is this mission that is looking more and more like a real war everyday?"

The outcry over the sermon, the leftist *Die Tageszeitung* opined Jan. 14, "shows that the bishop is, in principle, correct about Afghanistan. Everyone knows that if you measure the current results with the original goals in Afghanistan, the whole thing looks like a disaster."

The leading Catholic bishop, Robert Zollitsch, said it was "high time" for a fundamental debate over German security strategy. "So far, we've only been addressing individual questions."

There are 25 million Protestants in Germany.

The brouhaha in Germany comes at a conspicuous moment. Germans are still unsure how they will respond to U.S. President Barack Obama's new Afghanistan strategy unveiled late last year. According to sources in the German government, the Obama administration wants Germany to fortify its troop strength by 2,500 men, but, the sources say, it is unlikely that Germany will be able to add more than 1,000 to 1,500 soldiers. Moreover, the London Conference on Afghanistan, scheduled for Jan. 28, is expected to chart a new international strategy. The Germans, along with the British, have high hopes for the gathering to devise a long-term approach to the country, one that combines military and civilian components, and lays the basis for a withdrawal of Western troops in two or three years.

Kässmann met with German Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg Jan. 12 to talk about the Afghanistan mission and her remarks. The powwow resulted in smiles and reassurances that the minister and the bishop weren't in fact all that far apart. But Kässmann didn't back down altogether. She maintained that the way forward in Afghanistan is still seen primarily through a military lens at the exclusion of civilian options.

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