

## Rebel in the House of Luther

Germany's top Protestant ignites storm of controversy over intervention in Afghanistan

Paul Hockens | **Margot Kässmann, the new head of Germany's biggest Protestant organization, has come out strongly against Germany's military mission in Afghanistan. The committed pacifist has stuck to her guns in the face of a withering backlash.**

Merely by dint of her gender, the Evangelical 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 from Hanover became the first woman ever to assume the leadership of Luther's church in the homeland of the great reformer.

But Kässmann's history-making election 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. "We've been using all sorts of strategies to kid ourselves. Weapons don't make peace. We need more imagination to achieve 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 develop-

ment was being neglected in favor of military options. In defense of pacifism, she even maintained that Nazi Germany could have been defeated by non-violent means.

The bishop's barbs have caused such uproar because the eight-year presence of Germany's armed forces, the Bundeswehr, in northern Afghanistan has grown 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 German 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 2009 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”), backers of the center-right administration have taken Kässmann harshly to task. The Bundestag's military commissioner 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 pacifists. In response to her call for more international cooperation, Berlin's finance minister reminded her that the Bundeswehr is in Afghanistan as part of an international coalition with a UN mandate. The conservative daily *Die Welt* ridiculed the bishop for her naïveté: Candle-lit marches, mass demonstrations, and peace prayer sessions—as in the Velvet Revolutions of 1989—were not going to budge anything on the Hindukush.

Public intellectuals and just about every news media has jumped into the fray, turbo-charging 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*. “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, opines the leftist *Die Tageszeitung*, “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 things looks like a disaster.”

The brouhaha in Germany comes at a conspicuous moment. The Germans are still unsure how they will respond to Obama's new Afghanistan strategy unveiled at West Point late last year. While the Americans are said to want Germany to fortify its troop strength by 2,500 men, German sources say it is unlikely that they will be able to add more than 1,000 to 1,500 soldiers. Moreover, the London Conference on Afghanistan [Jan. 31-Feb. 1] is expected to chart a new international strategy for Afghanistan. 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 com-

ponents, and lays The Germans are still the basis for a unsure how they will respond withdrawal of to Obama's new Afghanistan Western troops in strategy. two or three years.

Since her sermon, Kässmann has met with Germany's defense minister to talk about the Afghanistan mission and her remarks. The powwow resulted in smiles and reassurances that the minister and the bishop were not in fact all that far apart. But Kässmann did not back down altogether. She maintained that the ways forward in Afghanistan were still seen primarily through a military lens at the exclusion of civilian options.

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