

# The Misrecognition of Muslims in Danish Television News

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## **Introduction**

This is a case study of how the Danish media dealt with the appearance of young Muslims in one of the two political parties in government in the summer of 2001. The case is an example of a bad practice that began on May 17, 2001, when the public service station, Denmark's Radio, broadcasted its television news, *TV-avisen*, at 9 pm. Two Muslim politicians, Mona Sheikh and Babar Baig, were seeking candidacy for the Parliament (*Folketinget*) and the City Council of Copenhagen through the political party, *Det Radikale Venstre* (from here on abbreviated DRV). Other Muslims were already nominated but now came under close scrutiny. The first thirteen minutes of that day's news were devoted to this story that was presented as an infiltration by members of an international Muslim organization, Minhaj-ul-Quran, that allegedly supported the Taliban and the regime of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini. This national news broadcast began a comprehensive coverage and debate in the media that only slowed down after Mona Sheikh was denied access to the candidacy for a seat in the Parliament with references to a concern about her affiliation with a Muslim organization and Babar Baig decided to withdraw his candidacy.

## **Background**

An EUMC report based on available research on cultural diversity 1995-2000 showed that the Danish press coverage of ethnic minorities was saturated by a crude "us" "them" division. On the one side "us", or "we", the indigenous Danes, those who see themselves as rightfully belonging to Denmark, and on the other, "they", or "the other", "the foreigners" (*fremmede* in Danish, lit. 'aliens' or 'strangers'), those who do not rightfully belong. In both newspapers and in the mainstream media, Muslims were

increasingly positioned as the essential symbol of "otherness", i.e., the binary opposite of the "Danes." (Hussain 2000; 2002, Hervik 1999). Studies have shown how the enemy image of Islam has been formed during the 1990's as part of the emergence of the neonationalism and new racism (Hervik 2002b). By the end of the 1990's Muslims were seen as irreconcilably different by most Danes, including politicians who were wrestling with the issue of how to approach persons born in Denmark by immigrant parents, who wished to be accepted by the Danish society as Danish, Muslim and ethnic.

One example of the motivational force of the enemy image of Muslims is a case taken from the media in January 2001. At that time The Conservative People's Party began to pursue a legislation that would force Muslim children into taking classes on Christianity in primary and secondary schools. At the same time the conservatives insisted that teaching Christianity did not imply attempts of religious conversion but refer to Denmark's history as a Christian nation. The right to refuse participation in these classes had been in effect since the 1930's. However, later survey showed that only 2.8 % of the country's Muslims had in fact asked for exemption from these classes in Christianity, thus underscoring not only the lack of information on the part of the conservatives but more importantly the ideological and nationalistic nature of the proposal.

When the story about the young Muslims broke out on May 17, 2001, the Danish media did not seem prepared on how to handle the ever growing and ubiquitous dichotomization of "us", the "Danes", and "they", "the foreigners" in the coverage of ethnic minority issues. More than anything such dichotomization with its extreme generalizations seldom does justice to the more complex forces in play when newcomers meet the established residents.

Based on a tabloid paper's first coverage of a lurking conflict in DRV (Ekstra Bladet April 11, 2001), various background analysis two weeks after the story was first published (including Berlingske Tidende June 3, 2001) and the author's own analysis of the story (Hervik 2002c), we get a glimpse of a power struggle that involves more people than those who are dealt with here. The struggle for power and political influ-

ence in the party revolves around who is to be nominated in a constituency in Copenhagen called Øster Storkreds, where a nomination as a top candidate will give that person a good chance of being elected for the Danish parliament, *Folketinget*. In 2001 Inger Marie Bruun-Vierø was a member of parliament (she substituted resigning member Jørgen Estrup), but lost the party's top spot in the nomination to upcoming politician, Naser Khader, a politician with a Syrian ethnic background. According to Ekstra Bladet (April 11, 2001), Naser Khader is a popular figure among the leadership.

But Khader is not popular in the ethnic community especially among Muslims who feel that he has turned his back towards Islam and condemned his cultural background in order to obtain non-ethnic Danish votes (Ekstra Bladet April 11, 2001, Hervik 2002c). Khader has declared himself a "cultural" but not a "practicing" Muslim (Hervik 2002c). Armed with this knowledge of Khader's unpopular status among ethnic minorities (except young non-believers) and her recent defeat for nomination, Bruun-Vierø teamed up with a Muslim member of the party with Pakistani background, Tanveer Sharif to compete with Naser Khader for the final nomination in the constituency. They brought along a 22-year old, university student, Mona Sheikh, who is a Muslim of Pakistani background, figuring that she would attract many ethnic minority voters and in the end perhaps be elected for *Folketinget* instead of Naser Khader. In the case of a deadlock between Sheikh and Khader, Bruun-Vierø would appear as a choice of compromise (Ekstra Bladet April 11, 2001, Berlingske Tidende June 3, 2001, and Hervik 2002c).

Fearing that Sheikh could mobilize a substantial number of voters with ethnic minority background, Naser Khader - according to himself - told members of the party about Sheikh's membership of a Muslim, fundamentalist organization called Minhaj-ul-Quran implying that her view on the death penalty would be at odds with political ideals of DRV (the political party *Det Radikale Venstre*) (Berlingske Tidende June 3, 2001). Khader had received this knowledge from member of the Danish liberal party (Venstre), Wallait Khan, who saw competition in his own constituency from another young Muslim with Pakistani background, Tanwir Ahmed. Khader's word of caution had its effect and members began talking about how they could change the party's by-laws and to seek documentation to show how the membership of Minhaj-ul-Quran was

at variance with membership of DRV (Ekstra Bladet April 11, 2001, Berlingske Tidende June 3, 2001). In the end, the result of the investigation was taken over by the television news on May 17, 2001.

### ***The coverage of the Mona Sheikh story***

Young new Danes (nydanskere) determined to get influence through political parties. At the same time they work for a Muslim movement whose purpose is to spread Islam to the whole world. (*TV-avisen* May 17, 2001).

With these words, *TV-avisen*, the national television news of Denmark's Radio, one of the country's two public service stations, introduced that day's main news story. After presenting the evening's other headlines, the anchorperson returned to the main story saying:

More young new Danes work determinedly to be nominated by the political parties. At the same time they are members of a Muslim movement from Pakistan. And that raises the question about which goal they really pursue.

In the first visualization, children were shown reading the Koran, while the journalist in charge of the story, explained about the "foreign" religion Islam. The journalist borrowed the formulations used by two tabloid papers (Ekstra Bladet April 11, 2001 and B.T. April 22, 2001) revealing that several young politicians of Pakistani background was recently accused of "infiltrating" political parties in particular DRV. The party had now examined the Minhaj-ul-Quran movement – of which the young politicians were members – and found it fundamentalist (*TV-avisen* May 17, 2001).

Several experts and key figures in the story were interviewed. One official of DRV, and one of the young Muslim politicians, Babar Baig exchanged views. The official accused Baig of being member of a Muslim fundamentalist organization, while Baig

denied the charges. An expert on Islam was also included in the news broadcast but not on the Minhaj movement. The key source for this information was introduced as another Pakistani Muslim “with no connections to Minhaj-ul-Quran” (*TV-avisen* cit. in Hervik 2002c), who had lived in Denmark for 25 years and worked for Denmark’s Radio. This source repeated several times that the movement was seeking to introduce Islam all over the world and that one could not trust this movement. The viewers were told that additional insight information had been obtained from members of the Minhaj who wished to be anonymous but nevertheless explained that “In the beginning of your membership, you participate in the prayers on Fridays and if you win the confidence of the movement you are invited to evenings with videos showing the religious leader from Pakistan. “These videos” the reporter told:

Are copied over and over, but the message is clear. (...) In the movement’s many books and writings one can read how the movement celebrates the late Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran and supports the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. This is the movement, the young politicians have forgotten to tell their new political party about.

After these news items and comments the cameras again focused on the anchor in the studio. The anchor had invited one of the young Muslims, Mona Sheikh, into the studio. Since Sheikh was not a member of Minhaj-ul-Quran, she was presented as a member of an organization called Women Youth League and a university student.

Anchor: Mona Sheikh, you are a member of a subunit of Minhaj, who works for Muslim supremacy, and you are also member of DRV. How can these two things go together?

MS: I am not a member of any movement that works for Muslim supremacy.

Anchor: You are a member of Woman Youth League?

MS: Yes, but ..

Anchor: which is a branch of Minhaj.

MS: Yes, but ... it works for Muslim supremacy; I would like to see that documented.

Anchor: But it actual says so on the web, it says on the American website, which has been referred to in many places.

MS: No, on the main website it says it says that that the movement works for the introduction of democracy, human rights and to eliminate illiteracy in Pakistan, [improvement of the] educational infrastructure ..

Anchor: It actually says so on the American website, which is being referred to in many places that it works to rebuild the supremacy of the Islamic belief over other ideologies. It says so.

MS: In what context?

Anchor: this is the goal given on the website.

MS. Well, one thing is that there is declared ideological agenda of the movement in Pakistan. Another thing is that I am a member of a branch called Women Youth league, which works in a Danish context and gives lectures and works for a cross-cultural dialogue and understanding, and I do not se how my membership of a youth organization that has worked for the last 5-10 years ..

[Anchor tries to interrupt]

MS: you have to listen to what I have to say. So my political membership engagement is taken insofar as I am a fellow citizen in the Danish society. A Danish society that I feel responsible for. My Muslim religion and my affiliation with the Women Youth League are something else. I have never denied being a member of the Women Youth League, when I signed op to be nominated for DRV, which by the way is not something the movement has pressured me to do or anything like that.

Anchor: But it is still a subunit of Minhaj, which one must assume is conducting the same politics as the main organization.

MS: It is not a political organization, Women Youth League is not a political party. It is a political party in Pakistan, yes, but that does not have anything to do with the organization, I am a member of.

Anchor: But the leader of the Minhaj movement is the same, who is the founder of the political party also, and you are a member of a subunit. One would have to assume that the politics and the objectives are somewhat the same.

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Before going into the analysis, I will turn to another focal point of this case of bad practice. While the television news of May 17 made the media coverage literally explode in the following weeks, much subsequent coverage revolved around the Muslims' response to the death penalty. The key article delivering the news of one candidate's supposedly ambivalent talk about the death penalty consisted of an interview brought in the nation's third largest newspaper Berlingske Tidende on May 19. This interview can best be seen as a spin-off from the television news, because it covers an aspect of that larger case.

### ***Representing a Muslim view of the death penalty***

The press release sent out on May 17 before the television news went on the air stated that one of the young Muslims, Mona Sheikh, was against the death penalty, yet her membership of the Minhaj umbrella revealed that this could not be true. In the television news Minhaj-ul-Quran was presented as a fundamentalist organization, which then by implications was taken to mean being supportive of the death penalty. On the

May 19, 2001 the death penalty was discussed explicitly in an interview with Mona Sheikh. Subsequent treatments all refer back to an interview published May 19 by Berlingske Tidende.

In the following presentation of the article, called “Syv skarpe skud” (Seven tough questions) the italics refer to the two journalists' own words.

MS: I am not a member of Minhaj-ul-Quran. I am a member of Women Youth League, *who emphasizes that it is an organization in Denmark that works for the integration and the cross-cultural dialogue between Muslims and the Danish society.*

Interviewer: But the organization that you are a member of build on the same foundation as Minhaj-ul-Quran, right?

MS: Well, we are Muslims in both organizations that is all. It is an umbrella organization.

I: On Women Youth League's website there is a reference to courses in the Sharía – the Islamic law. Do you support the Sharía law?

MS: In Denmark I support the Danish constitution.

I: But what about elsewhere? Do you ideologically support the Sharía?

MS: It is not a package, that you either says “yes” or “no” to. Sharía is a question for the people to choose or not choose. You cannot say in this way: Do you support the Danish judicial system, or not, unless it is the people who have chosen these rules.

I: To take something specific according to Islamic law, the death penalty, are you in favor of it?

MS: No, and I have said so several times.

I: Under no circumstances anywhere?

MS: If a population decides in favor of the death penalty it is a democratic choice – like in the USA. If the people choose the death penalty that is fine, but personally I cannot accept it. Evidently, I have to answer this several times.

I: You can just say, that you are against the death penalty under any circumstance.

MS: But not under any circumstance. Death penalty is a democratic choice.

I: Why can't you understand the fear that some members of DRV has accepting you as a nominee? That they may choose someone who supports the suppression of women and the death penalty?

MS: Yes, if they had any reason to believe so. But I do not support these things. I am born and raised in this country and my political objectives are not suspicious.

The interview triggered new outburst of news articles on this issue. Sheikh also responded by claiming they she had not been rendered correctly. To meet her critique the two interviewers wrote a new story published on May 21, 2001, where they provided additional quotes from their taped interview, because they wished the readers should understand that they wanted “to document that the newspaper had been meticulous in their interview” (Berlingske Tidende May 21, 2001) with Sheikh about her position vis-à-vis the death penalty.

## ***Analysis***

### **Television news**

The headline of the television news and the introduction to the story about Mona Sheikh embodies the assumption that it is not possible to be a member of a political party and a Muslim organization at the same time. In the introduction the anchor described this double membership and then added: “And that raises the question about

which goal they really pursue.” This assumption is further strengthened by the choice of calling these Muslim politicians “new Danes” (*nydanskere*), which is a term that embodies the assumption that one is not really from Denmark. The Muslim politicians are not immigrants, but born and raised in Denmark where they have resided all their lives going to public school, gymnasium and university. Now portrayed as “new Danes” their activities are referred to as “infiltrating” and “invading.” This narration is adopted from the two tabloid papers Ekstra Bladet and B.T., who had run the story a month earlier without the same attention that comes with the national public service station Denmark’s Radio. The tabloid papers’ language and approach was taken over and appeared in the transition between two news items:

But let us look at what kind of movement that is so actively working on placing its members on central positions in Danish politics (*TV-avisen* May 17, 2001).

The emphasis of the category “new Danes” (not really Danes but foreigners), who are agents of a Pakistani Muslim movement, implies that they are not seen as independent minded individuals. If the young politicians had been described without the marked qualifiers “new Danes” or “Muslim”, they could hardly be regarded as being directed by foreign interests. Only by the association with foreign interests does the focus of the story receive its sense of sensation. The story reveals a perspective, which only works since the new politicians are presented as persons who do belong in DRV and Denmark, but are subordinated to the power of others and therefore suspicious and untrustworthy.

The confrontational focus also comes out in the use of “experts.” One of the key experts on Minhaj-ul-Quran is a journalist of Pakistani background and a colleague of the journalists behind *TV-avisen*. Viewers were not told that this source is an Ahmadiyya Muslim, although this is highly relevant for the case. Historically the relationship between Ahmadiyya and Minhaj-ul-Quran is antagonistic. Whereas Minhaj (and Islam generally) considers Mohammad (Apr. 570-632) to be the last of many prophets, the Ahmadiyya movement consider Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908) a prophet (*Religionsguiden* 2000).

Another source used in the television news is anonymous but referred to in Denmark's Radios report to the Press Council\* as:

A former member - with a profound knowledge of Minhaj - has described the strategies and considerations in detail behind the placement of the young political candidates in different political parties in order to gain quick influence and nomination (Press Council February 6, 2002).

More articulate and presenting the same information a week into the story was Wallait Khan, a politician of Pakistani background from the liberal party, Venstre. Khan who is a former member of the Minhaj-ul-Quran claimed in several papers and in *TV-avisen* that Minhaj was a fundamentalist organization and their followers were rooting for the death penalty (B.T. May 25, 2001, *TV-avisen* May 27, 2001). At the time Khan had been challenged by young Muslim, Tanwir Ahmed (also a Minhaj member), who had been nominated for the City Council of Copenhagen by his party DRV. By exposing Tanwir Ahmed's membership of Minhaj, Khan could, according to the media analysis, pursue his political interest by discrediting his opponent. Moreover, Khan's own former membership of Minhaj had been uncovered publicly forcing him to criticize Minhaj in order to regain confidence among voters of the Pakistani community most of whom are not members of Muslim organization (Berlingske Tidende June 3, 2001).

According to another ethnic politician Naser Khader, he, Khader, had been told by Wallait Khan weeks prior to May 17, about the young Muslim politician's (Mona Sheikh, Babar Baig and Tanwir Ahmed) membership of Minhaj. It was this information Khader passed on to other DRV members triggering an investigation to establish the membership of Minhaj and its implications for future membership of the party (Berlingske Tidende June 3, 2001, Hervik 2002c).

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\* After the news broadcast one of the Muslim politicians complained about the news coverage to the Danish Press Council. Their ruling came six month later and was published with the complaint and Denmark's Radio's response to the complaint.

If indeed Khan was the anonymous source used by *TV-avisen*, then it illustrates the murky side of the media's protection of its sources, since the media can use the protection to hide unpleasant facts about sources who have a personal interest in the story and the intent of bringing harm to others. This is not an argument against the protection of sources, but simply stating that there is an inherent weakness in this protection.

The relationship between the people behind the story on the young Muslims and the DRV investigators is a friendly one if not forming a symbiotic relationship. On the one hand, the journalist in charge of the story for *TV-avisen*, and the politician Naser Khader meet regularly to discuss politics in what they both referred to in the media as a club for drinkers of Whiskey. Both refused that their friendship had been a factor in the presentation of the news story (Politiken May 23; 27, 2001).

Regardless of their relationship the news broadcast on May 17, *TV-avisen* does take over some of the DRV investigators' sources and results. The close relationship between the DRV and *TV-avisen* is apparent in the press release sent out to the Danish press a few hours before the story went on the air. The press release gave details of that evening's main news story and its documentation. However, it was not signed by Denmark's Radio but by two DRV investigators holding local leadership positions in DRV. The news broadcast did not mention or explain the relationship between *TV-avisen* and the DRV investigators. Neither did it mention the prevailing struggle for power within the party including the various interests at stake in the positioning of the young Muslims as fundamentalist supporters of the Taliban. Instead, the focus is exclusively on the Muslims' membership of the religious organization Minhaj-ul-Quran and DRV.

One crucial piece of information is taken over by *TV-avisen* directly from the DRV investigators and also mentioned on the press release. Out of literally thousands of books, articles and other publications by the Minhaj-ul-Quran movement both the investigators and *TV-avisen* chose a recently launched newsletter, *The Revival*, published by the British Muslim Youth League, a subunit of Minhaj organization. In the newsletter an appeal is written to Muslims all over the world to support the Taliban

against increased American military presence in Afghanistan (The Revival 2000). This source is used by the DRV investigators, Denmark's Radio and others as a viable documentation for the Minhaj movements support of the Taliban. Nonetheless a handful of sources had also been made available to *TV-avisen* stating that Minhaj did not support the Taliban, for instance, the various statements put forward by the Minhaj leader, Tahir-ul-Quadri. Instead, *TV-avisen* chose to believe the documentation presented by the DRV investigators consisting of the newsletter of the British youth organization of Minhaj. A thorough journalistic investigation would normally disqualify the use of this single, debatable source.

Six month later the Danish Press Council concluded that the *TV-avisen*, had not provided adequate research for the alleged connection between the young Muslim politicians and the Taliban (Press Council February 6, 2001). The Press Council's criticism covered the news broadcast May 17 and the repetitions of the alleged Minhaj/Taliban connection by Denmark's Radio until May 27, 2001. Despite the Council's declaration harm had already been done to the involved Muslims. In addition, the Council's ruling did not affect those journalists, politicians and commentators who based their articles in the media on this connection are not forced to correct their mistakes.

The TV-anchor's interview with Muslim politician Mona Sheikh provides another example of vague documentation. During the interview the host repeatedly referred to an American website as documentation for Minhaj-ul-Quran's objective to reach world supremacy. To begin with the use of an American website as the reporter's documentation for the Pakistani movement's objective (and by implication using this to argue that members of a Danish branch of this movement is at odds with the program of a Danish political party) seems farfetched. Then, this documentation goes awry when it turns out that the website, reached through a link on several websites of Minhaj, was made by a student in Florida (Hervik 2002c). It would have been more convincing if the reporter's research and questions began with the by-laws of the organization which the guest in the studio had official membership: Women Youth League. One editor-in-chief, Peter Wivel, wrote about this documentation used by the TV newsmakers:

They have investigated obscure websites in the darkest corners of the Internet, this global trash bin, in the hope of revealing, what she [Mona Sheikh] was thinking as a private person. (Berlingske Tidende May 27 2001)

The news story about the young Muslims in DRV is not only remembered for the characterization as fundamentalist and supporting the Taliban, but also for Muslims stand on the issue of the death penalty.

### Berlingske Tidende

The interview with the headline “Syv skarpe skud,” (May 19) and an article "Historien om et fejlцитat" ("The story about a misquote") with additional citations of the interview (May 21), showed a tense relationship between the interviewers and their interviewee, Mona Sheikh. The interview goes against the criteria for good reporting outlined in textbooks of journalism. For instance: “Be attentive. Listen and try to understand, what your source is saying” and “No discussion: Maintain your position as interviewer. Ask, but do not discuss with your source. A discussion can destroy the entire interview.” (Mejlby 1999:218). Three questions by the interviewers support infringement of basic guidelines:

- 1) "Why can't you just say that you are against the death penalty under any circumstance?"
- 2) "You can just say that you are opposed to the death penalty?"
- 3) "If you are an opponent of the death penalty under any circumstance, you can just answer yes – I am an opponent also in an Islamic society." (Berlingske Tidende 19; 21, 2001).

In the interview Sheikh insisted that the issue of the death penalty was more complicated than a simple “yes” or “no” answer would reveal. Despite their wish to be meticulous, the journalists attempted to impose a simplified political and moral opinion on the death penalty issue. They ignored this complicated issue of the death penalty in

democratic societies, where the largest and most powerful Western country has the death penalty, because a majority of the population wants it, and the possible re-emergence of the death penalty in case of war. This brings out a new question and further complication. When is a country at war? Does sending 500 soldiers to Afghanistan suffice to state, this country is at war?

Instead, the interviewing journalists ignored the complicated issue of the death penalty in democratic societies. They concluded that Sheikh's response was ambivalent reflection her position as been stuck between membership of DRV, where she had to speak against the death penalty and her membership of a Muslim organization, which in the journalists and DRV investigators' eyes implied she was in favor of the death penalty.

This interpretation of the interview appeared in two other articles also published by Berlingske Tidende on May 19 and by the same two reporters. In these articles, they presented their interpretation of the interview with Mona Sheikh to a leading politician of DRV and spokesmen on this issue, Minister of Church Affairs, Johannes Lebech for a comment. They wrote:

And a lack of general opposition to the death penalty by for instance Mona Sheikh – who says she is not against the death penalty “under any circumstance”. Lebech called Mona Sheikh's statement an ‘elusive strategy to avoid the discussion of the death penalty’ (Berlingske Tidende May 19, 2001).

The phrasing “not an opponent of the death penalty” was the interpretation presented by the two reporters. “Under any circumstance” is Sheikh’s wording. However, the contexts of the words “under any circumstance” refers to the American democracy, but is left out of the questions posed to Johannes Lebech. This is misleading. Lebech does not know that Sheikh is talking about the death penalty and democracy in the USA. Therefore his answer will also be misleading. The reader is left to speculate what the minister would answer, if he had been asked about the democratic right in the USA to choose the death penalty. Moreover, the reporters do not pose critical questions to Lebech about the role of the internal conflict in the DRV that lead to other

DRV officials and *TV-avisen* to describe the Muslim politicians from DRV as fundamentalist, supporters of Taliban, the death penalty and so on.

Two days later Lebech's political strategy for dealing with the Mona Sheikh case could be read from a statement, he made to two newspapers. Lebech argued that when the media covers such a vital story where members are presented as “invaders” and “infiltrators” he – the DRV spokesperson - needed to react to the story in the media. The question could not be solved through talking with the candidacy but through sending signals in the media about what was acceptable to the party and what was not and that in this case the young Muslim politicians needed to explain themselves (Politiken May 21, Ekstra Bladet May 21 2001). Accordingly, the problem within the party between competing candidates for political office was now being solved externally in the media by accusations about what membership of a Muslim organization entails. What began as a competition for the nomination became a moral question on what is right and wrong with Muslim values and discussed in the media.

When other journalists afterwards wrote that Sheikh had expressed ambivalence about her position on the death penalty issue, they referred generally to the “interview” in Berlingske Tidende May 19. But since these writers also ignored the context (democratic rights to choose the death penalty), it becomes clear that they do not look at the original interview, but at the journalists' interpretation of the interview in the two other articles from the same day.

The analysis has revealed that the original interview conveyed in the article "Syv skarpe skud" was not an interview of particular good quality. Yet, this interview - as I have indicated - becomes the basis for an enduring assertion that the Muslim politicians support the death penalty despite what they say. I would further argue that this powerful effect based on poor quality interviewing could not have had such an impact, if the journalists and commentators, who based their publications on this one article, to begin with, were biased by the omnipresence in the Danish society of an enemy image of Islam.

Again, I wish to emphasize that this conclusion does not speak to the issue of what is right and wrong in terms of the death penalty. Instead the interview, the simplified and distorted rendering of the interview, the uncritical use of other journalists' interpretations produce a news coverage that is not only one-sided but also does not get to the bottom of the issue seen from a Muslim point of view. What dilemmas do Muslims face concerning the issue of the death penalty and how is the issue discussed within Muslim groups?

### Comments about why the story got out of hand

In the beginning of the new millennium Denmark is experiencing the evolution of clashes between aspects of migrant culture that is associated, sometimes rightfully and sometimes not, with Islam, and requirements made by the Danish society. In addition, more and more politicians build at least part of their public support on the basis of anti-Muslim statements. The country is characterized by new nationalism and new racism that has been evolving in the Danish society since the mid 1990's and that has been building its strength upon an enemy image of Islam (Hervik 2002a, 2002b). To a large degree the media coverage of Islam will reflect these evolutions in society. Nevertheless the media coverage of the Mona Sheikh story - with the focal points being the television news May 17 and the spin-off story on May 19, 2001 - is also an example of a bad practice within the media coverage in its own right.

The media did not seem prepared in May 2001 to transcend the growing anti-immigrant stand and the evolving enemy image of Islam. Once the television had aired its story on May 17 it exploded and got out of hand. Within a few weeks hundreds of articles and hours of TV-coverage based on the initial accusations launched by the two media were never questioned (Hervik 2002c). Although the journalists and the news agencies claim their good intentions of strictly following journalistic criteria for reporting, these intentions and the criteria vanished as everyone strove to get a piece of the cake. At the same time it must be pointed out that the media did provide articles with solid background information and analysis, but the news about "infiltrators" and "invaders" too often fail to provide adequate, critical and balanced news reporting

which had devastating consequences for the involved candidates, Muslims and more generally members of ethnic minorities aspiring to enter Danish politics.

### ***Actors and stakeholders***

The different actors in the story make up three roughly divided and partly overlapping groups: Politicians representing the DRV, the involved journalists in the television news and the Muslim politicians of ethnic minority background. Although this case study focuses on the media, the story told by the media originates within a political party, DRV. These politicians hold official positions within the DRV and include a member of the cabinet, members of the City Council of Copenhagen and representatives of DRV constituencies associations.

The politicians representing the DRV are powerful figures, who are gatekeepers regulating access to the party and by extension the larger political system including the City Council of Copenhagen and *Folketinget*. At stake is the number of votes the party can attract.

In this case study the DRV spokesperson Johannes Lebech reacted to the national television news portrayal of candidates as Islamic fundamentalist by telling the media that such values could not be accepted by DRV. Accordingly, a few days into the story *TV-avisen* could tell the viewers that one candidate seeking nomination for a seat in Folketinget, Mona Sheikh, would, all things considered, not be elected as the party's top candidate for this seat (*TV-avisen* May 19, 2001).

This case study has shown that members of the DRV played a significant role in creating the story and taking it to the media. The story can not be separated from an internal struggle for power within the political party. And the media story was based partly on subjective facts supplied by a group of party members. Their initiative was successful. Rather than going into a dialogue with the candidates themselves, the party officials went to the media to announce and publicize their alleged fundamentalist connections and aspirations.

In this manner DRV representatives denied Muslims access to the crucial nomination of the upper echelon's of political system: *Folketinget*. At stake is also the control of public recognition of ethnic minority groups born in Denmark, who strive for political influence on the basis of their identities as Danish and Muslim with ethnic minority background. Public recognition is more forcefully denied in the second group of stakeholders: the national media.

The national media is here narrowed to *TV-avisen*, the news program of Denmark's Radio, who took up the story on May 17. At stake for this television news programme is primarily competition for viewers. Second to the struggle for the competitive edge is credibility. The Mona Sheikh story was an ideal story for the media, because the newsmakers could highlight spectacular elements and conflict. Furthermore, representing the case, as a case of penetration of foreign interest, contains a nationalistic and sensational appeal. For this reason the loss of credibility is hardly at stake. Viewers have little in their experience that would contradict the media presentation (Hervik 2002c).

*TV-avisen* presented their version of the story in a manner that clearly suggests a close relationship between the DRV investigation and the focus and use of sources. In the coverage May 17, *TV-avisen* did not question the relationship to DRV or focus on the internal struggle for power within DRV for the nomination in the Copenhagen constituency and *Folketinget*.

In this case study the media is doing the dirty work of DRV politicians.

The third group of actors consists of the political candidates in the DRV with ethnic minority and Muslim background. These members of minority groups are not part of institutions such as the political system or institutions that produce news, but are outside seeking political influence as citizens born in the country. What is at stake for them can best be described as the opportunity to gain political influence at the top levels of politics. However, their access to the political power in the Danish democratic system and to public recognition are being discredited by being positioned as funda-

mentalists, who's goal is to bring about a Muslim state by seeking influence through politics.

In addition to the three groups of stakeholders, viewers, voters and ethnic minorities in general are also involved as consumers of the media. Once the media got involved, the story gained momentum and followed its own paths of development that could not be reversed, regardless of the Press Council's declaration that the original story was based partly on an undocumented research. At first the story seemed to treat a specific relationship between a few Muslim politicians born in Denmark of Pakistani parents who had joined DRV and now candidated for political office. Through the involvement of journalist, commentators and others, the level of abstraction moved up and became an issue of Muslim values against Danish ones. In the end this dichotomy was taken to a global scale when it was explained as a specific case of Islam against the West. Muslims of DRV became linked not only to Islam more generally but also to the political fundamentalists and terrorists.

The readers, listeners and viewers who are exposed to the dichotomization and leads to further reproduction of the already antagonistic relations between “Danes” and “Muslims” that is portrayed along national and cultural lines are likely to turn persons of Muslim and ethnic minority background into outsiders and suspects. In a reformulation of the words of two Belgian scholars, Jan Blommaert and Jef Verschueren (1998), we may ask: How can one ever bring about ‘Integration’ if the members of the target group are fundamentally considered as outsiders and enemies and are subjected to a process that the media and the majority controls?” “How can racism be fought if the premises of a racist discourse are accepted, in particular the idea that homogeneity and resistance against heterogeneity are normal?”

### ***A response from Muslim readers and viewers***

Research carried out for The Danish Board for Ethnic Equality in Copenhagen included the response to the Mona Sheikh story and other stories in the Summer of 2002, by 47 readers and viewers, 19 of which were Muslim citizens of Denmark. Most of

them born and raised in Denmark, knowing Danish history, language and culture far better than that of the countries where their parents had immigrated from.

Almost all of these Muslims found that the television coverage was inadequate, subjective and poorly researched. They did not recognize themselves in the way the young Muslims were portrayed. The Muslims insisted that they did not see a contradiction between being Danish and Muslim. Several remarked that they no longer read newspapers or watched news on television for these same reasons.

One Muslim student explained that most viewers of *TV-avisen's* coverage on May 17, were unable to see the differences between political fundamentalists and ordinary, Muslim practitioners. When it comes to Islam it seems like almost anything goes. Listeners would believe almost everything (Kaamil, 26).

Another Muslim found the use of visual news disturbing. While the viewers heard a description of Islam, they saw footage with militant images from Pakistan (Karim 22).

A third Muslim claimed that the Muslim politicians seeking influence in DRV were simply pawns, whose case - if they had not been Muslims - would have been solved within the DRV (Sarah 25).

Other viewers criticized the poor quality research, pointing to specific erroneous claims. For instance the Minhaj-ul-Quran movements association with the Ayatollah Khomeini's regime in Iran in the early 1980's. At the time this would have been almost impossible for specific political reasons and since the Minhaj represents Sunni Muslims and Khomeini the Shia Muslims.

One Muslim explained that it seemed strange to him that the Minhaj-ul-Quran was accused of being fundamentalist and supporting the Taliban. After September 11, 2001, they turned out to be the most moderate organization in Pakistan whose supporters went against Osama bin Laden and the political party. Minhaj, did not like other religiously based parties, demonstrate against the USA after the attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon (Ahmed, 22).

Almost every Muslim noted and condemned the use of journalist and colleagues from the same workplace as a reliable source.

The Muslim response to the media coverage of the Mona Sheikh story shows that these Muslims do not recognized themselves in the media's representation (see also Hervik 2002c).

### ***Perspectives***

The effect of the media coverage of the Mona Sheikh story on popular consciousness comes from its constant repetition and its appeal to the sensations and emotions. To further contribute negatively is the fact that few readers know Muslims themselves and therefore will have little primary experience to contradict the media coverage. The lack of basic knowledge about Islam makes the readers and viewers even more vulnerable to one-sided media coverage. More than 80% of the Danes are said to support policies based on a anti-Islamic basis (See Hervik 2002c). The long term effect of the negative exposition of Muslims on the readers is that the antagonistic relationship between "us" Danes and "they" Muslims no longer is perceived as a matter of choice of opinions or attitude, but see as "part of reality" which is more difficult to change.

Through the media coverage of the story on Muslim politicians the choice of language (metaphors of war dominating) show that the language is taken to extreme. When language about ethnic minorities are taken to it's extreme the limits of Freedom of Speech will be reached with the anticipated development being that growing linguistic resistance to the minorities with ethnic and Muslim background being the target of both legal and physical contestation.

One implication of this profound, enduring, and antagonistic view of Muslims inevitable make the public recognition of people who are Danes, ethnic and Muslim more and more difficult. Instead of public recognition, *misrecognition* becomes the order of the day. This act of public misrecognition will according to Charles Taylor, eventually

lead to a person or groups suffering real damage. "Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being." (Taylor 1994:25).

More specifically, another implication is pointed out by the Muslim informants responding on the Mona Sheikh story. Informants explained that one of the most serious consequence of the media coverage that they had experienced was that it has become almost impossible for politicians with ethnic/Muslim minority background to enter the national political realm while maintaining identities as both Muslim, Danish and ethnic.

### ***Recommendations***

- 1) Studies have shown that few people with ethnic minority background, including Muslims, work in the Danish news media or are motivated to do so. Measures that will change this situation should be further encouraged.
- 2) Motivating, educating and hiring more journalists with ethnic minority background however, will not do the job in and by itself. Being ethnic does not make a person an expert on ethnicity. Being discriminated does not make you an expert on discrimination. Additional professional training should be offered to journalist regardless of their background, preparing them to transcend the omnipresent nationalistic dichotomization of "us" and "them" that is guiding much of the media's news coverage of ethnic minority issues often without the reporter being fully aware. Such training should not stand alone but should be supplemented by:
- 3) Initiatives that form a dialogue between professionals and the media as close to the actual production of news as possible.
- 4) The viewers, readers and listeners' general lack of basic knowledge about people with ethnic and Muslim minority background should be addressed, since much of this knowledge comes through the media.

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