News



Markus Söder, Bavaria’s premier, hangs up a cross at the entrance of the state chancellery in Munich on April 24. (Peter Kneffel/dpa via AP)

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Remember those controversies as some U.S. state officials installed Ten Commandments monuments in their courts and schools? Imagine the uproar if instead the government had ordered the Christian cross to be installed in all state buildings.

The conservative governor of Bavaria, in southern Germany, has done just that, ordering that crosses be displayed at the entrances to government buildings across his state.

The result, predictably, has been confusing and controversial.

Bavaria's premier, Markus Söder, has presented the move not as a religious dictate, but merely a reflection of the values his fellow Bavarians share. The cross, he says, "has a defining effect on the identity of our society," and hanging it in public offices shows "our Bavarian identity and way of life."

Critics have denounced the order as a bald effort to woo Bavaria's traditionally pious and heavily Catholic conservative voters away from the far-right Alternative for Germany, or AfD, an anti-immigrant party that claimed 94 seats in the country's Parliament in federal elections last year. AfD's fortunes have risen on a backlash against the influx of over a million migrants since 2015, mostly Muslims fleeing the Middle East.

Unfortunately for Söder, even the national heads of Germany's Roman Catholic and Protestant churches — who both live in the Bavarian capital, Munich, and have spoken out on immigrants' behalf — have condemned his Kreuzerlass ("cross edict").

"The cross can't be ordered from above," Cardinal Reinhard Marx, the Catholic archbishop of Munich and chairman of the German Bishops Conference, declared.

"If the cross is seen only as a cultural symbol, then it's been misunderstood," the cardinal added, noting that Söder's decision had brought "division, agitation and

confrontation."



Markus Söder (Photo courtesy of Creative Commons)

Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, Munich's Lutheran bishop and head of the Evangelical Church in Germany, or EKD, said ordering the cross to be displayed as a symbol of political identity degraded the meaning of the cross.

"That means loving your enemy, helping the weak, a commandment of love for all, instead of using the cross to ward off others," he said in a veiled jab at politicians

fanning the anti-immigrant mood in Bavaria.

Politicians in Söder's Christian Social Union party jumped aboard his cross campaign, denying that it excluded anyone, including non-Christians.

While a national poll showed that two-thirds of Germans rejected Söder's new rule, polls of Bavarian voters indicate that 53 percent support the cross mandate against 42 percent who oppose it.

Even some church figures echoed their support, despite their leaders' criticism. Bamberg's Catholic Archbishop Ludwig Schick tweeted his approval and called the cross "a sign of unity, reconciliation, peace, brotherhood and solidarity."

Some 80 Catholic and Protestant theologians issued an ecumenical statement of support, saying: "The cross stands for human dignity founded in God."

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Bavaria already had many crosses on public squares, on mountaintops and in public offices, so extending this to all offices was a natural step, they said.

Söder, 51, became premier of the majority Catholic state in March after a bruising internal power struggle within the archconservative CSU. He faces a strong challenge from the AfD at state elections due in October.

Opinion polls say the AfD, in its first try for the state legislature, looks set to win a hefty 13 percent of the vote — a greater percentage than it took in the national election in October. The once all-powerful CSU, the state's largest party, could lose its absolute majority and end up with only 42 percent, forcing it into a coalition with another small party.

Many AfD supporters are former CSU voters looking for an even tougher line on migrants than Söder has been taking. So, his critics say, the governor is trying to woo them back with symbolic acts such as displaying crosses and tough measures including a broad expansion of police powers.

On June 1, the day the cross edict went into effect, Söder doubled down on the symbolism by traveling to the Vatican for an audience with Pope Francis and meeting with Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, a fellow Bavarian.

Söder, an active member of Bavaria's minority Lutheran church, later told journalists he did not discuss his cross decision with Francis, but said that Benedict had expressed support for it. The Vatican gave no details of their talks.

The controversy has pointed up the unintended consequences of championing a religious identity. A judge in Miesbach, south of Munich, removed a large cross from his courtroom wall before the trial of a young Afghan Islamist accused of threatening to kill another refugee who converted to Christianity.

"How can I get him to stop thinking there is a jihad between Christians and Islamists?" Klaus-Jürgen Schmid asked. "I didn't think it was right to sentence him while visibly sitting beneath a cross."

Aiman Mazyek, chairman of a national Islamic association, said Muslims had no problems with displaying religious symbols in public, but he noted that minority faiths don't always feel they have the same right to do so as Christians.

"The double standard of accepting Christian symbols but barring Muslim, Jewish or other ones from the public sphere is unacceptable," he said.



Catholic Cardinal Reinhard Marx, left, and Lutheran Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm share a moment at Kirchentag 2017, the German Protestant church congress, in Berlin in May 2017. (Photo by Maik Meid/Creative Commons)

Jewish leader Josef Schuster also had no fundamental objection to crosses in public buildings but wondered why they should be displayed in offices also used by non-Christians. "What is this cross supposed to mean?" he asked.

Strong pushback from critics of the cross decision has prompted the Bavarian government to grant exemptions to three state-financed institutions most likely to defy the rule — universities, theaters and museums.

Bavaria's police stations, tax offices, courts and other government offices are still supposed to display a cross near their entrance.

The state interior ministry, which is responsible for applying Söder's order, has said it would not send agents around to check on compliance.

The Munich-based Süddeutsche Zeitung, one of Germany's leading newspapers, wrote in an editorial that if the Bavarian government wanted to preach Christian values, it should follow Pope Francis' practice of helping refugees, the homeless and the poor.

"Whoever puts a cross on the wall must expect to be nailed to it," the paper said.