

KARACHI (AFP) - In Pakistan a row about Facebook, censorship and religious sacrilege means booming demand for replica Swedish, American and Israeli flags to go up in flames at protest rallies.



- [Swedish Mohammed cartoonist attacked](#) (video)
- [Sweden closes embassy in Pakistan](#) • [Brothers jailed for arson attack](#)

That means one thing for 31-year-old Mamoon ur Rasheed -- business -- and he is working long into the night to churn out the paraphernalia beloved of Islamic activists taking to the streets.

"I have nothing to do with any political party, but it is really enjoyable when you see your work on TV screens," a laughing Rasheed told AFP.

"I'm busy every day making banners and placards for different religious and political parties, but work gets a boost -- especially when international controversy concerning Muslims breaks out," he said.

When a Facebook user decided to organise an "Everyone Draw Mohammed Day" competition to promote "freedom of expression", it sparked a major backlash among Islamic activists in the South Asian country of 170 million.

Islam strictly prohibits the depiction of any prophet as blasphemous and the row sparked comparison with protests across the Muslim world over the publication of [satirical cartoons of Mohammed in Swedish](#) and other European newspapers in 2006.

Booming demand for Swedish flags - to burn

Written by Johan Nylander / AFP

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Several thousand Pakistanis have taken to the streets at the behest of right-wing religious groups, who turn to Rasheed when they need flags to burn and banners to write.

"Generally, we receive orders for banners for a couple of demonstrations a day, but due to the blasphemous drawings issue, the number of orders for flags and banners has increased by 10 to 12 per day," said Rasheed.

"Flags are made for burning. They symbolise what our clients want to express and we are paid for it, so I'm happy to see our work go up in flames."

Rasheed owns a workshop where he employs four craftsmen to paint flags and write calligraphy, and a small printing press.

"We have received continuous orders for American and Israeli flags. Normally we paint them but when demand surges into the hundreds we print these flags to get them to our clients in time," he said.

In the wake of the Prophet Mohammed controversy, Pakistan blocked hundreds of web pages to limit access to "blasphemous" material, banning access to US-based Facebook and YouTube -- the two most popular websites in the country.

A court in the eastern city of Lahore ordered the block on Facebook until at least May 31, when it is scheduled to hear a petition from Islamic lawyers.

Although none of the protests has mobilised the masses, sporadic demonstrators have continued to vent anger in Karachi and other cities.

Angry at Swedish artist Lars Vilks

Rasheed runs his business on times of stress. Different periods mean demand for the flags of India -- Pakistan's deepest rival with whom the country has fought three wars -- Norway and S

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weden

, and former colonial ruler Britain.

Four years ago, widespread protests broke out in the conservative Muslim nation over satirical cartoons of Mohammed that were published by a Danish newspaper and then reprinted in other European countries.

Then in 2008, thousands of Pakistani Islamists rallied against an anti-Koran film made by a far-right Dutch lawmaker.

Another focal point for anger has been Swedish artist Lars Vilks, who etched a blasphemous caricature. He sparked controversy by drawing Prophet Mohammed with the body of a dog. An Al-Qaeda front organisation then offered 100,000 dollars to anyone who murdered Vilks -- with an extra 50,000 if his throat was slit

In March Sweden's Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt protested against the burning of the Swedish flag and images of the artist Lars Vilks outside the Embassy of Sweden in Malaysia.

"We will continue our efforts to describe how our Swedish society works, with the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech, in which publishing decisions are separated from all political powers," Reinfeldt said.

Whenever elections approach or protests start, wholesalers stock huge quantities of cheap cloth and reap handsome rewards.

"We are getting bigger orders from scores of painters and printers nowadays," cloth merchant Mohammad Siddique said.

"Pakistan is the country of protests and for this Karachi is undoubtedly its capital and our

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business gets a boost in such circumstances," Siddique said.

Waqar Ahmed, owner of a printing press in Karachi's southern neighbourhood Pakistan Chowk, says orders are flooding in for posters, pamphlets and placards, temporarily overtaking his main business in books and wedding cards.

"I get orders for pamphlets and posters in the event of controversies or elections," Waqar says. May 15, when Palestinians marked Naqba day -- the so-called catastrophe of Israel's creation in 1948 -- is another landmark.

"I got some orders to print flags of Israel and United States -- 100 a piece -- during Naqba rallies. We have also sold some American and Swedish flags during the protests against Facebook," Ahmed said.

Protesters burning the Swedish Flag in Malaysia (in Swedish)