

Review: CBC Radio reports about rape conviction of former Israeli president Moshe Katsav

March 10, 2011

I am writing with regard to your December 31, 2010, complaint and request January 17, 2011, for a review by this Office concerning CBC Radio reports on the rape conviction of former Israeli president Moshe Katsav.

Thank you for your patience in this matter.

REVIEW

CBC Radio carried a BBC report December 30, 2010, that the former president of Israel, Moshe Katsav, had been convicted of raping an employee while he was a cabinet minister. It was the most serious criminal charge brought against an Israeli official.

Katsav was convicted on two counts of rapes that took place when he was the minister of tourism and on lesser counts of sexual harassment and indecent acts involving employees when he was Israeli president.

Katsav stepped down as president in 2007 shortly before his term was due to end when he was offered and accepted a plea bargain that would have kept him out of jail. But in 2009 he decided to proceed to trial with no such bargain in order to clear his name.

Correspondent Irris Makler chronicled the conviction in several reports that day. She said the Tel Aviv court had branded Katsav “a rapist and a liar” and noted that he “only went to trial at his insistence” and had been offered an opportunity earlier to be convicted on a lesser charge.

Katsav faces a mandatory prison sentence unless he successfully appeals the conviction or receives a presidential pardon.

The complainant, Gary Gerofsky, asserted that the reports were inaccurate and reflective of a deliberate strategy to disrespect Israel. He wrote: “Every speck of criticism against Israel turns into a feeding frenzy in support of the Islamic agenda to destroy Israel, lie about its every action and then punish it through whatever means possible — that is the CBC agenda.”

He urged CBC to more thoroughly review such reports before they are aired. “Otherwise, I will assume that it is CBC policy to excoriate Israel in a way that other countries would never be treated.”

The complainant said CBC was “repeatedly and with malice damning an entire people with lies and exaggerations and with a level of venomous reporting that is leading to widespread anti-Semitism.”

The executive editor of CBC News, Esther Enkin, wrote back January 17, 2011, to say that none of Makler’s reports could reasonably “be said to suggest that all Israelis shared Mr. Katsav’s guilt.”

On the contrary, Enkin wrote, “in many of her reports that day Ms. Makler cited some of Israel’s leading politicians describing the conviction in a more positive light.” In particular, the Israeli defence minister said the conviction was evidence of the strength of Israeli democracy.

The complainant wrote back to say he wasn’t satisfied with that response.

[CBC’s Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) encourage accuracy, fairness, balance and integrity.

On the particular issue of fairness, the policy demands that “*in our information gathering and reporting, we treat individuals and organizations with openness and respect. We are mindful of their rights. We treat them even-handedly.*”

On the issue of respect and absence of prejudice, the policy states: “*We avoid generalizations, stereotypes and any degrading or offensive words or images that could feed prejudice or expose people to hatred of contempt.*”

CONCLUSION

It is true that individual scandal in high places can imply a more generalized lack of integrity. Reported inelegantly, it can typecast. Without appropriate context, the result can be damaging. Substandard reporting creates stereotypes.

In this instance, the complainant viewed the reports on the former president’s conviction as emblematic of a substantive campaign to discredit a country and cast aspersions on Israelis.

From time to time, it has to be acknowledged there will be inaccuracies and issues of balance in some reports. The most important measurement is on a body of work and on the journalistic culture that provides fair reporting. I am finding no evidence of a conscious effort or an unconscious outcome that wages the sort of campaign described in the complaint.

The major development of Moshe Katsav's conviction was handled fairly in Iris Makler's reports. The neutral script language was restrained. And I could find nothing to suggest the personal portrayal could be applied to anyone other than Katsav. Indeed, her reports included official reaction that praised the justice process and Israel's democracy, matters that hardly discredit.

There was no violation of CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices.

Kirk LaPointe
CBC Ombudsman