To Vote or not to Vote: The Politicization of American Islam

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The twentieth century witnessed a dramatic increase in the migration of Muslims to the American shores. As Muslims migrated here in waves, Islam became an integral part of the American religious landscape and gradually, Muslims became a visible part of the fabric of American society. [1]

Between 1900 and 1914, several hundred settlers comprising diverse religious backgrounds migrated from the Middle East. Many of these migrants came from Lebanon and settled in Detroit to work in the Ford Motor Company. [2] Thereafter, migration by members of the Lebanese community increased further between 1918 and 1922.[3]

The second wave of immigrants arrived after the end of World War II, when the United States encouraged students from the newly independent Arab states to study at American universities with the expectation that once they returned to their home countries, they would constitute an important asset to United States interests.[4] Later on, migrants came from other parts of the Muslim world. Given the more favorable economic and political circumstances, many of them decided to settle in the United States.

Immigrant Islam and the "Back-Home" Phenomenon

Whereas the early Muslims came primarily from the Arab world, post war immigrants represented a wide array of linguistic, cultural and national origins. Increased immigration from various parts of the world has resulted in the American Muslim community becoming more fragmented as bonds of common faith are replaced by efficacious ties to common origins, ethnicity and culture. The process of ethnicization

involves the formation of associations that are bound by distinctive cultural and ethnic characteristics. These include shared language, cultural norms, and the affirmation of a common history of a people. It is these homeland settings that construct social identities among Muslims in America.

As newer immigrants held nostalgic views regarding their homeland, the 'back-home' phenomenon became intertwined with the 'myth of return'. As a matter of fact, many Muslim immigrants refused to accept America as their permanent home and hoped to return to their native lands after significant economic gains. While in America, they continued to speak their native languages, refused to integrate in the mainstream American society, and often restricted their interaction to members of their own ethnic or faith groups, establishing, in the process, ethnic islands within America. Many immigrants also imposed a conservative and extraneous expression of Islam and exhibited a general disdain of American culture and norms.

Apart from cherishing the dream of returning to their homeland countries, the 'back-home' phenomenon also meant that immigrant Muslims fashioned Islam in America along the same lines as it was practiced back home. America was seen as a temporary residence, one in which the traditional expression of Islam was to be imposed and perpetuated. In addition, to protect the younger generation from the perceived corrupt, secular American society, it was deemed important to practice Islam the way it was done back home. Hence, it is correct to state that the major characteristic of immigrant Islam is that it universalizes the 'back-home Islam' and imposes its understanding of Islam as the only possible construction of the Islamic ethos. Any other expression of Islam is construed as invalid and even heretical. In the view of the

immigrants, immigrant Islam is not subject to interpretation or reformulation. It can only be transferred from one location to another in an unadulterated form.[5]

Immigrant Muslims tend to experience Islam through a cultural prism that is highly resistant to change. In their centers, Islam is mediated in a culturally conditioned form. They decide on how the mosques are to be run, what is an acceptable dress code, language, and political behavior. In addition, they have imposed their authority on indigenous Muslims especially as many African Americans had no authoritative spokesman to speak about Islam. Thus, the increase in immigrant Muslims meant that all that was alien to immigrants was seen as alien to Islam itself.[6] Before the 1970s, Islam in America was defined and understood through the prism of indigenous Muslims, primarily the Nation of Islam. Increased migration of Muslims meant that the African American community largely lost its interpretive voice.

Even after their arrival in America, immigrant Muslims were more concerned with addressing foreign rather than domestic issues. The "back-home" mentality meant that American issues like those of affirmative action, racism, joblessness, education, housing, and urban violence were replaced by foreign issues like Palestine, Kashmir, and lately Iraq. This emphasis was compounded by the importation of political ideas through foreign movements whose vision did not enhance Muslim participation in the American political culture. Their vision was focused on topics like the establishment of an Islamic state, implementation of the *shari*'*a*, removal of *Jahiliyya*, abstinence from an infidel culture, etc. Muslim aversion to involvement in American social and political discourse was accentuated by the fact that many Muslims saw America as *dar al-kufr*, the abode of infidels. Hence, any participation in the American domestic agenda was construed as being involved in an infidel government, one that contravened Islamic jurisprudence.

Ironically, Islam became the cause rather than solution to the lack of Muslim political activism.[7] Such a position undermined Muslim ability to assert any influence in the American political culture. Voting, lobbying, and holding political office were all frowned upon, if not proscribed.

The Indigenization of American Islam

In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson ratified an Immigration Act increasing quotas from non-European countries. The new immigration laws allowed immigrants to migrate from all areas of the Arab and Muslim world. New immigrants were more representative of the ethnic, national, and religious diversity of the Muslim world. In addition, there was a gradual change in the Muslim constituency. Conversion rates to Islam increased as did the number of Muslims born or raised in America.

As the immigrants settled here and the Muslim population increased, Muslims came to identify America as their permanent home. They realized that they could not remain socially invisible or politically neutral. In addition, the Islam that was transposed from abroad was challenged not only by converts but also by Muslim youth who appropriated a distinctly American culture. In many Islamic centers, services were conducted by immigrants along the same lines that were held in their own countries, with little or no concern for the needs of the members in this milieu. The imposition of an alien culture in the centers estranged the youth in the Muslim community. As one youth states: "We are less likely to identify with the home-sick mosque culture and more likely to assert a very active political role for the Islamic center, and to do it as an American Muslim community – not as Egyptian, Pakistani or Malaysian Expatriates, but as Americans."[8]

There was another factor that made Muslims accentuate their American as opposed to their homeland identity. This was the threat posed by the characterization in the media of Islam as a militant and violent religion, a depiction that has become increasingly apparent in the past fifteen years. Attacks against Israel and other American interests abroad revived American prejudices of Islam as a religion that promotes violence and of Muslims as an inherently militant and irrational people.

In recent times, the American global war on terror and the invasion of Iraq have further revived the stereotypes and suspicions against Muslims, especially those of Middle Eastern origins. Furthermore, the vitriolic attacks on Islam and the Qur'an by some Christian fundamentalists have clearly exacerbated the current conflict in America. They have projected Islam as inherently violent and incompatible with Western values and norms. Such attacks tend to destroy rather than build bridges and engender hatred.

Due to the activities of terrorists, American Muslims have come to the realization that both their Islamic identity and American citizenship are at stake. The Muslim community has acknowledged that the silent majority syndrome has to end simply because Muslim acquiesce has encouraged an extremist expression of Islam. Thus, many Muslims have felt the need to integrate themselves in the mainstream American society so as to make their voices heard. This indigenization of American Islam represents a silent revolution that many Muslims have been engaged in.[9]

Indigenization of American Islam is the process of identifying, understanding, and relating to the culture, heritage, and the history of America. Indigenization also means carving out a space for oneself in American society, being more appreciative of American values while remaining authentic to Islam. An essential element of the indigenization of American Islam is the Muslims' identification with American culture and values, and

their distancing themselves from the back-home mentality. Indigenization also means viewing American secular culture as a challenge to be comprehended and tolerated rather than a threat to be confronted, for the latter approach can breed a culture of negative isolation and fear of the other.

Indigenization of American Islam does not mean the Arabization or Indianization of Islam; rather, it means interpreting its message so that it is suitable to the American Muslim without sacrificing its doctrinal integrity. Thus, it is correct to state that indigenization is an internal process, one that cannot be imposed from abroad.[10] It has to be formulated, articulated, and expressed by those Muslims who are familiar with the American milieu and culture.

Indigenization has also meant that American Muslims have increasingly expressed themselves through a properly articulated intellectual discourse, so that they can be both physically and intellectually visible. Thus, American Muslims have sought to go beyond the history of hostility, caricature, and power struggles that have characterized relations between Christians and Muslims in the past. It is correct to state that the Muslims' struggle in America has been not only to co-exist with the other, but also to make themselves comprehensible in the American milieu, to de-mythify and de-code Islam and to challenge the negative characterization of Islam.

The process of the indigenization of American Islam is intertwined with the construction of a distinctly American Islamic civic identity. This process has expressed itself in a myriad of forms. Muslims have joined forces with various peace and anti-racist movements. In addition, since September 11, 2001, various Islamic centers have facilitated "open-mosques" hours and have tried to become more "people friendly" by encouraging their non-Muslim neighbors to visit mosques.

Instead of denouncing American society and values, Friday sermons delivered in many mosques have focused on devotional, ethical, and historical topics. The community has also embarked on coalition building with human rights, religious rights, and civil rights groups. Muslim groups have been involved in various social programs like food drives and have sought to help homeless Americans.

Indigenization has also meant that rather than focusing on American foreign policy, Muslims now tend to concentrate more on reconstituting their identity as American Muslims. In all probability, this is because as the second generation of Muslims in America identify with and assimilate in American culture, they develop a sense of patriotism leading to a greater politicization of the community and a sense of American national consciousness. Furthermore, Muslims have realized that unless they become more vocal and American, they could become foreigners in their adopted homeland.

Muslim Institutions in America

Since the early immigrants did not intend to stay in America, they did not invest in any religious or socio-political leadership that could offer an intellectual or political vision to the community. Thus, the early Muslim institutions did not engage in political activity. Rather, most of the early Muslim organizations were social, ethnic, or religious in nature. Societies like the Syrian and Lebanese American Federation of the Eastern States and the National Association of Syrian and Lebanese-American Organizations (formed in 1932) and the National Association of Federations were quite indifferent to US foreign or domestic policies. In 1952, under the leadership of Abdullah Ingram, immigrants from the Middle East formed the Federation of Islamic Associations in the United States (FIA). This was meant to be an umbrella body that would unite twenty immigrant associations

and provide for the social, cultural, and religious needs of the community. However, it did not raise Arab political consciousness.[11] Until the 1960s, there is little evidence to indicate that the majority of Muslims had any awareness of events overseas or the geography of the Middle East.[12]

However, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict forced American Muslims to reconsider their apolitical stance. American hostility towards Arabs during the 1967 war and the ignorance of the American public regarding the Middle East conflict led to the formation of the Association of Arab-American University Graduates, (AAUG) in 1967. The AAUG was established by graduate students, professionals, university professors, lawyers, doctors, and veterans of the Organization of Arab Students (OAS).[13] Most of the organizations were formed by American-Arabs who sought to establish a platform where the Arab-Muslim voice could be expressed. They also tried to have an input into the shaping of American foreign policy.[14]

In the 1970s, other organizations were founded with the intention of informing and educating the American public about the Arab world. In 1971, Lebanese-Americans organized the National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA). The leadership sought to educate Arab Americans about the political process as well as arrange for them to meet with members of Congress to discuss issues that concerned the community. The American-Arab Anti Discrimination Committee (ADC) was founded by former Senator James Aburezk and James Zoghby, both of Christian Lebanese origin. The Arab American Institute (AAI) was established in 1984 when James Zoghby split from the ADC. It encourages Arab Americans to participate in the American political system, working to get Arab-Americans to vote and to run for office.[15]

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed increased animosity towards Arabs and Muslims in the United States. In all probability, domestic groups like the conservative wing of the Republican Party, Christian fundamentalist groups, and the pro-Israel lobby were responsible for encouraging the anti-Islamic rhetoric. American hostility toward Islam and Muslims was also precipitated by various events oversees. These included: the six day war in 1967, the Yom Kippur war and oil embargo of 1973, the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the hostage crisis in Iran and Lebanon, PLO attacks against Israeli targets, the Rushdie affair of 1989, and the Gulf Wars. Such events precipitated measures that led to the targeting and racial profiling of Arabs and Muslims, along with a growing atmosphere of hostility towards Islam. As a matter of fact, a scheme known as Operation Boulder placed Arab-Americans under FBI surveillance in the early 1970s.[16]

Increased government surveillance and discriminatory policies forced Muslims to abandon their traditional ambivalent stance toward political intervention. They quickly realized that it was only by participation in the American constitutional order that Muslims could enjoy protection against government agencies that disregard the constitution and violate civil liberties. Political activism could also persuade policymakers to counteract American resentment against Muslims. In addition, the Muslim community perceived the need to bring its members closer, especially as many of them had settled in remote parts of America. These factors led to the establishment of various Islamic institutions.

In 1963, the Muslim Student Association (MSA) was formed by students at the University of Illinois-Urbana. By the 1970s, the MSA had helped to establish branches on college campuses throughout the United States. In 1981, the MSA established the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). Unlike earlier institutions which catered

primarily to the Arab-American community, organizations such as ISNA assisted individuals from different ethnic groups to meet in its conferences and encouraged its members to associate with other ethnically defined Muslims. Soon, other immigrant organizations, such as the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) and the Islamic Association of North America (IANA) were established. They held annual conventions, published magazines, built mosques and Islamic centers, reaching out, in the process, to hundreds of thousands of American Muslims.

As Muslims continued to experience intimidation, discrimination, misunderstanding, and even hatred, they saw the need to educate Americans about Islam, correct some of the anti-Islamic stereotypical images portrayed in the media, and protect the interests of the Muslim community. Hence, more Muslims organizations were established in the 1980s and 1990s. Their aim was not confined to educate Americans about the Arab-Israeli conflict. Rather, these institutions encouraged Muslims to address political and civil right issues that impacted the rights of the growing community.

In 1988 the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) was established by the multi-ethnic Islamic center of South California in Los Angeles. This political lobby has made important contributions in the last few years. It has established close ties with Hillary Clinton and with officials at the Department of State. Through its efforts, the First Lady hosted two events to celebrate the end of the month of fasting of Ramadan *(eid al-fitr)* events.

In 1989, the American Muslim Alliance (AMA) was established in Northern California by a political scientist of Pakistani origin. The goal of the American Muslim Alliance (AMA) was to empower Muslims to become politically active by voting and running for office. On the East Coast, the American Muslim Council (AMC) was

established in 1990 in Washington, D.C. The AMC has established relations with various branches of the government. It has also sought to have Muslim religious leaders invited to offer an opening prayer before congressional deliberations.

At the national level, the Council for American Islamic Relations (CAIR), which was established in June 1994, has challenged the misrepresentation and defamation of Islam and Muslims in the workplace. Since 1996, CAIR has issued an annual report documenting incidents of anti-Muslim discrimination and violence. CAIR's 1999 report noted that despite the persistence of discrimination, an increasing number of employees have eased their objection to Muslim women's *hijab*.[17]

Since the events of 9/11, Muslims have had to endure the USA PATRIOT (Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism) Act of October 24, 2001. The act sanctions the monitoring of individuals, organizations, and institutions without notification. Its provisions have been protested by American Civil Liberties Union. Several Arab and Muslim organizations have recently sued the American government insisting that the act is unconstitutional. Recent disclosure of secret wire-tapping of suspected terrorists and the federal government's admission that, in search of a terrorist nuclear bomb, it has run a far-reaching, top secret program to monitor radiation levels at over a hundred Muslim homes, businesses, and mosques in the capital region and in other areas, have all augmented Muslim concern regarding their civil rights. In numerous cases, the monitoring required investigators to go on to the property under surveillance, although no search warrants or court orders were ever obtained. In December 2005, under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), CAIR filed a request to access all government records relating to this program. Due to its efforts to safeguard the interests of the Muslim

community, CAIR has emerged, in the eyes of many Muslims, as the Muslim equivalent of the Jewish Defense League.

These Muslim public affairs groups have been able to make the stereotyping of Muslims a matter of public debate and have documented many incidents of harassment, discrimination, and defamation against Muslims. They have also monitored and publicized discriminatory measures by government agencies and civic groups and have highlighted the distortion of Islam in the media.

By convening seminars, publishing articles in magazines and Islamic newsletters, delivering lectures at various conventions and workshops, organizations such as ICNA, ISNA, AMC, CAIR, MSA, and MYNA (Muslim Youth of North America) have altered the way Muslims think about the United States and about themselves. As the back-home mentality gradually faded in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, these organizations shifted Muslim political and civil discourse in America to how Muslims could interact with Americans and yet maintain their own distinctive identity. Muslims also grappled with issues like the scope and nature of Muslim participation in the American public square. The vision was now on repositioning Islam as an element of American national interest and not as a threat to it.

The four leading American Muslim political organizations (AMA, AMC, MPAC, and CAIR) engage in political lobbying and encourage Muslims to run for electoral office. In 1999, these four institutions agreed to coordinate their activities under the umbrella of the American Muslim Political Coordinating Council (AMPCC).[18] Through their various activities, these groups have provided a vision for Muslim engagement with America's political institutions. In the process, they have had to confront not only a hostile American media and an unsympathetic US government, but

also traditional Muslim scholars who decried any involvement in the American public sphere.

Resistance to Muslim Political Discourse in America

Attempts at making American Muslims a viable and active political force have met with firm resistance from within the Muslim community. As mentioned earlier, certain segments within the community have resisted integration or political discourse with American society, claiming that America is an infidel state that is based on secular values and laws. Those advocating such a perspective include foreign based movements like the Tablighi Jamat, a group of propagators that started in India and is now a transnational movement. Tablighis try to permeate mainstream Muslim life, using mosques as bases for their activities. Their primary objective is to preach to Muslims, urging them to return to the *sunna* (practices) of the Prophet and early companions.[19] In their view, only God has the prerogative of framing the law. Hence, obedience to or participation in the policies of a secular state is deemed to be *haram* (religiously proscribed).[20]

The Salafis have also tried to sway Muslims to their way of thinking. They emerged from Saudi Arabia and other parts of the Middle East. They see the Western world as moral corruptive, which must be shunned. Their emphasis is on maintaining proper belief and a return to the Islam of the pious ancestors (*salaf*), i.e., the early Muslim community. The Hizb al-Tahrir, a foreign group that attempts to resurrect the caliphate, claims that registering to vote is tantamount to registering to commit a religiously forbidden act. This is because participating in the American political process is tantamount to implementing man-made laws, which, in their understanding, is prohibited in the Qur'an. During the 2000 elections, their motto was, register to vote, register to

commit *haram*.[21] Thus, many Muslims have eschewed any participation in the American political system as they see America to be a secular state. Any involvement in it would violate the Islamic belief in the interfacing of church and state.

Similarly, Shi‘i aversion to American politics can be discerned from the following anecdote. In 1996, there was a major discussion on the Shi‘i based internet discussion group called the ahl al-bayt discussion group (ABDG) as to whether Shi‘is should support candidates running for federal elections. The majority felt that since they were living in a non-Muslim country, Shi‘is should eschew all political involvement. Others even argued that, given American penchant toward Israel, voting for a candidate would be tantamount to supporting the Israeli cause. Therefore, they decreed that it was *haram* to support or vote for a candidate. A small minority disagreed, arguing that voting for a candidate of their choice might help the Shi‘i cause in America and perhaps influence American foreign policy.

The distinctive views of the various groups have been propagated in the Muslim media, Friday sermons, workshops, and over the internet. In the process, the question of political participation in America has become a battle of rhetorical devices, with Muslims employing Qur’anic hermeneutics and traditions from the Prophet to vindicate their respective points. America has become a battleground for Muslim minds and voices as traditional differences between those who call for political engagement and isolation have resurfaced, engendering further fragmentation of the Muslim community.

Immigrant Muslim aversion to political involvement is further evidenced when we examine the cases of two former Muslim congressional candidates, Riaz Hussain of New York and Bill Quraishi of California. Both candidates sought

Muslim votes, but conservative Islamic groups disliked the candidates' perceived accommodation to Western culture. They were blamed for not keeping a beard and for adopting a Western name.[22]

Muslim Engagement in American Politics

Upto the late 1970s, most of the immigrant Muslims did not organize or mobilize themselves as a political force within the American universe of political lobbies. However, this attitude changed significantly in the second generation of Muslims because of their greater assimilation into American culture and their adoption of an American identity. In addition, the denigration of Islam and hostility toward Muslims in America demanded a more positive Muslim response.

The process of indigenization that I described above meant that there was a definitive shift in Muslim political discourse. With the establishment of Muslim civic and political institutions, Muslims became increasingly aware of the US government's domestic as opposed to foreign policies, especially those which impacted their daily lives. Muslims also concluded that political power can be only be enhanced by the politics of engagement between American Muslims and the political system. It was to the advantage of Muslims to seek ways of influencing governance, especially with regards to policy formation. They realized the need to monitor and influence American foreign and domestic policies, and that self-denial of voting power would make Muslims more vulnerable.[23]

Muslims also realized that the politics of numbers can benefit the community in a positive manner and that the source of power in America lies in the mobilization and institutionalization of statistical advantage i.e., by the channeling of votes, political

lobbying, and influencing the views of Senators and Congressmen. As a matter of fact, Muslims have made significant progress in attaining symbolic recognition, perhaps more so than any other group, in the past few years. Since the middle 1980s, several Political Action Committees (PACs) have been established. The first was the Houston based All American Muslim Political Action Committee (AAMPAC) in 1985. Other PACs were later formed in California and Michigan.[24] Even ISNA established an umbrella PAC body called ISNA-PAC.[25]

Similarly, Warith al-Deen Mohammed and his associates have founded the Coalition for Good Government to provide political vision for American Muslims. Warith al-Deen's view of engagement with, rather than denunciation of, the American political culture has led to greater Muslim presence in local and national political life.[26]

By the mid-1980s, ISNA felt the need to coordinate local political activities and make Muslims a political force. In 1986, a report issued by its planning committee stated:

> In order to exert influence on the political decision-making [*sic*] and legislation in North America, ISNA should launch a campaign to educate Muslim citizens about their voting rights and mobilize them to vote on issues affecting Islam and Muslims. On a longer term basis, ISNA should develop communication with and among politically active Muslims and establish a separate organization in due course.[27]

As the Muslim community became more visible and vocal in the 1990s, Senators, Congressmen, and even the White House paid increasing attention to the American Muslim community. Muslims were being recognized as an integral part of American society. In the fall of 1995, Vice President Albert Gore became the highest-ranking U.S. official to visit a mosque.[28] President Clinton's speech on

religious freedom on July 12, 1995 acknowledged Muslims several times. African-American Muslim leaders Siraj Wahhaj and Warith al-Deen Muhammad delivered invocations in the House and Senate, respectively. Friday prayers are now held regularly in the U.S. Capitol building for Muslim staffers, federal employees, and other Muslims in the area. Since 1998, a crescent and star is displayed on the White House lawn alongside a menorah and Christmas tree.[29]

President George Bush Snr. began a tradition of wishing Muslims a happy holiday on *eid*, which President Clinton expanded upon by holding an *eid* celebration in the White House, usually attended by Ms. Clinton. Despite negative coverage in the media, the Clintons opened the White House to Muslims.[30]

In the run up to the election in 2000, the struggle between Muslims who advocated for engagement with and those who wanted to isolate from American politics intensified. The isolationists were largely marginalized as Islamic organizations succeeded in mobilizing Muslims to vote in large numbers, making a difference in the crucial state of Florida.[31] Increasingly, American Muslims have realized that political isolation is detrimental to their interests in America.

Muslims have become more assertive and made positive contributions in the political arena. In the 2000 Presidential elections, they sent delegates to Democratic and Republican election conventions, run in various local, state, and congressional district elections, made financial contributions to various campaigns, and voted in large numbers. In its national gathering, the American Muslim Alliance featured the theme "How to Get 2000 Muslim Americans Elected to Public Offices in 2000." Its focus was to empower Muslims so that they could run for positions in school boards, municipal posts, mayors, and state legislators.[32] These facts indicate a clear paradigm shift in Muslim political

consciousness, from complaining about the inequities of American policies to seeking measures to redress them.

During the 2000 Presidential election, at both the Republican and Democratic national conventions, Islamic prayers were offered for the first time, broadening the symbolic boundaries of American religious culture to include Islam. Various Muslim groups endorsed George Bush for Presidency. For example, the Political Action Committee of the American Muslim Political Coordination Council (AMPCC-PAC) endorsed Bush due to his outreach to the Muslim community and his stand on the issue of secret evidence. Furthermore, during the presidential debates, Bush questioned the fairness of profiling of Arabs and Muslims. Muslims even sent delegates to the party conventions before 2000 elections, seven to the Republican, twenty six to the Democratic.[33] Both parties featured opening invocations by Muslims.

Increased political activity can be seen from the fact that Muslims have participated in the electoral process as candidates. The website of American Muslim Alliance (AMA), whose main purpose is to promote Muslims seeking public office, lists eleven Muslim candidates running in various local, state, and congressional districts in the 2000 elections. Eric Vickers, a St. Louis Muslim lawyer and member of the board of directors of AMA, received six percent of the vote in his congressional district in the Democratic Party primary on August 8, 2000.[34]

Other Muslim candidates won some electoral seats at the state and local levels. In 1996, Larry Shaw became a state Senator in North Carolina—the first Muslim ever to occupy such a position in any state. Several other Muslims have won city council seats, including Yusuf Abdus-Salaam in Selma, Alabama; Yusuf Abdul-Hakeem in Chattanooga, Tennessee; and Nasif Majid in Charlotte, North Carolina. According to the American

Muslim Alliance, two dozen Muslims were elected to party conventions at precinct, county, state, and national levels in 1996.[35]

Muslims attained prominent positions in other spheres too. In 1991, Charles Bilal, an African-American Muslim, was elected mayor of Kountze, Texas, becoming the first Muslim mayor of an American city. Another Muslim, Adam Shakoor, served as deputy mayor of Detroit, which has a large Muslim community, in the early 1990s.[36]

Muslims have also made financial contributions to various political campaigns. Many supported the political campaigns of candidates directly, others channeled their contributions through political actions committees (PACs). The Democrats received $357, 506 and the Republicans $249,672 in the 1998 and 2000 elections.[37]

Muslims are also voting in increasing numbers. Exit polls conducted by the Minaret magazine and MPAC of 400 randomly selected Muslims indicated that sixty five per cent registered to vote; another survey by the Minaret in 1996 shows seventy six per cent of the Muslims surveyed voted in the elections.[38]

The project MAPS that was initiated under the auspices of Georgetown University also conducted a survey in 2000. It indicated that seventy nine per cent of the Muslims registered to vote; forty per cent voted for Democrats, twenty three per cent Republicans and twenty eight per cent independents. According to Karen Leonard, African Americans are more likely to vote for Democrats, Pakistanis are more inclined towards the Republicans and Arabs are evenly divided.[39]

In January 2006, CAIR launched an *eid* voter registration drive, in which it urged American Muslims to register at *eid* al-Adha events. The *eid* voter registration drive was part of a major non-partisan Muslim political mobilization effort to be conducted during

the 2006 election cycle. The effort was to include in-person and online voter registration drives, candidate forums, production of voter guides, get-out-the-vote campaigns, conducting research on and surveys of American Muslim voters, and other grass-roots activities. CAIR also stated that it would be calling on Muslim students to volunteer in political campaigns.[40]

Even allowing for some exaggerations, the figures quoted above indicate enhanced Muslim political awareness and participation. They also reflect how Muslim institutions like CAIR, AMC, and MPAC have mobilized the community to exert political pressure on lawmakers and legislators in America. The various figures quoted above also testify to the growing Muslims awareness that, to be a political force, they must reposition their focus from mosque construction and community projects to political mobilization and interest articulation.

Shi'i Political Discourse

Unlike the Sunni community, the American Shi'i community has not been politically active. Lack of Shi'i involvement in the American political process can be attributed to the relatively young age of the centers. Most Shi'i centers in America have been established since 1985. Thus, Shi'is have used their limited financial resources to build and consolidate their centers rather than to engage in political activity or make financial contributions to campaigns.[41] Shi'i political inactivity is also explained by the fact that the Shi'is have yet to form nationwide institutions like CAIR, AMC or AMA. Hence, there is no institution that can unite the Shi'i community or address issues that are of political concern. It is only in the past three years that the United Muslim Association of America (UMAA) has been established. However, this nascent organization has yet to

formulate any definitive direction for the Shi‘i community, nor has it been able to bridge the chasm that has divided different ethnic entities within the community.

Shi‘i political aspirations in America have yet to crystallize into a concrete body with a properly formulated political agenda. In the absence of such political institutions, political activism manifests itself in public discourse on moral and social issues that impact the community.

In a few isolated cases, some Shi‘is have nominated themselves to run for Congress by seeking votes from local Shi‘i and Sunni communities. However, most of these candidates run independently and are not directly supported by any Shi‘i institution. In some areas of America, Shi‘i political activity has taken the form of establishing eclectic bodies that transcend sectarian boundaries, cooperating with Sunnis to create a unified and effective challenge for local posts. Shi‘i institutions like al-Khu’i Foundation in New York have persuaded their members that their votes and involvement in the political process can make a difference to their lives in America. Thus, some Shi‘is cooperate with Sunnis to provide Muslim candidates for school boards, municipal posts, working for the election of Muslim mayors and state legislators. The intent is to get Shi‘is to vote for fellow Muslim candidates, planning for an eventual Muslim presence in Congress or the Senate.[42]

Lack of Shi‘i political involvement is further discerned from the fact that during the elections in 2000, there was little discussion within the Shi‘i centers on any involvement in the Muslim election campaign. Another striking point is that the Shi‘is are not represented even within the Muslim organizations that participate in American civic society. Thus, there are no Shi‘i representatives in the American Muslim Council, the Council of American Islamic Relations, or in the Islamic Society of North America. For

Muslims to collectively make a significant impact in the American political process, they will have to set aside their ethnic, sectarian and nationalistic differences.

Conclusion

Relaxation of immigration laws in 1964 meant that new waves of Muslims from overseas were dominated by students and professionals who established new institutions in America. Changes in the Muslim population occurred due to the immigration of a large number of highly educated Muslims from various parts of the Muslim world, specifically from the Middle East and South East Asia. These migrants built new institutions that have effectively shaped Muslim political consciousness. Thus, it is correct to state that in recent decades, Muslims have sought to indigenize Islam, and to foster a distinctly American Muslim identity.

The struggle among American Muslims for the definition of the self, to give meaning to their new identity as American Muslims, and to the new socio-political context of their existence is manifesting itself in tensions between the intellectual and conservative, indigenous and immigrant, young and old and between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims. Conflicts have arisen due to an immigrant community having to come to terms with an alien culture. The American Muslim Community is split between those who are willing to engage the larger American society and those unwilling to do so. In the last three decades, through the efforts of Muslim activists and various organizations, Muslim focus has shifted from battling the West to building bridges with it. In the battle for American Islam, Muslims have gradually marginalized their co-religionists who advocated for resistance to and disengagement from American public sphere.

Paradoxically, the very institutions that are supposed to unite Muslims (the mosque and institutions) have become a catalyst for the perpetuation of a distinctive ethnic ethos.

[1] On the waves of Muslim migration see Yvonne Haddad and Adair Lummis, *Islamic Values in the United States: A Comparative Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 13-14.

[2] Linda Walbridge, *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 16-17.

[3] Ibid., 17-18.

[4] Yvonne Haddad, *Not Quite American? The Shaping of Arab and Muslim Identity in the United States* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2004), 5.

[5] For an excellent discussion on the tension between immigrant and indigenous Islam see Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), chapter two.

[6] Ibid., 70.

[7] Ibid., 73.

[8] Steven Barboza, *American Jihad: Islam after Malcolm X* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 58.

[9] See Liyakat Takim, "From Conversion to Conversation: Interfaith Dialogue in Post-911 America." *The Muslim World* 94, no. 3 (2004): 343-55.

[10] On the difference between indigenization and assimilation, see Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican*, 169.

[11] Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "American Foreign Policy in the Middle East and Its Impact on the Identity of Arab Muslims in the United States," in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, ed., *The Muslims of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 225-26.

[12] Haddad, *Not Quite American?* 17.

[13] Ibid., 20.

[14] Ibid., 49–50.

[15] Ibid., 22.

[16] Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "American Foreign Policy in the Middle East," 220.

[17] Mohammed Nimer, "Muslims in the American Body Politic," in *Muslims' Place in the American Public Square: Hope, Fears, and Aspirations*, ed. Zahid H. Bukhari, Sulayman S. Nyang, Mumtaz Ahmad, and John L. Esposito (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004), 149.

[18] Karen Leonard, *Muslims in the United States: The State of Research* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003), 18.

[19] On the mass movements in Sunni mosques in America see Barbara Metcalf, "New Medinas: The Tablighi Jama'at in America and Europe," in Barbara Metcalfe, ed., *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 113.

[20] See Omar Khalidi, “Living as a Muslim in a Pluralistic Society and State: Theory and Experience,” in *Muslims’ Place in the American Public Square*, ed. Z. Bukhari et. al., 67-68.

[21] Ihsan Bagby, “The Mosque and the American Public Square,” in *Muslims’ Place in the American Public Square*, ed. Z. Bukhari et. al., 329.

[22] Asma Gull Hasan, *American Muslims: The New Generation* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 152.

[23] Ali Mazrui, “Muslims Between the Jewish Example and the Black Experience: American Policy Implications,” in *Muslims’ Place in the American Public Square*, ed. Z. Bukhari et. al., 127.

[24] Steve A. Johnson, “Political Activity of Muslims in America,” in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, ed., *The Muslims of America*, 116.

[25] Jane Smith, *Islam in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 186.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Quoted in Steve A. Johnson, “Political Activity of Muslims in America,” in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, ed., *The Muslims of America*, 111.

[28] Asma Gull Hasan, *American Muslims*, 153.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ali Mazrui, “Muslims Between the Jewish Example,” 128.

[31] Muqtedar Khan, “Living on Borderlines: Islam Beyond the Clash and Dialogue of Civilizations,” in *Muslims’ Place in the American Public Square*, ed. Z. Bukhari et. al., 106.

[32] Smith, *Islam in America*, 185.

[33] Asma Gull Hasan, *American Muslims*, 157.

[34] Mohammed Nimer, “Muslims in the American Body Politic,”161.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Asma Gull Hasan, *American Muslims*, 159.

[37] For details of other Muslim financial contributions see Mohammed Nimer, “Muslims in the American Body Politic,” 160-61.

[38] Asma Gull Hasan, *American Muslims*, 157.

[39] Karen Leonard, *Muslims in the United States*, 101.

[40] See Press released issued by CAIR over the internet on January 5, 2006.

[41] See Liyakat Takim, “Multiple Identities in a Pluralistic World: Shi‘ism in America,” in *Muslims in the West: From Sojourners to Citizens*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 218-232.

[42] Ibid.