MUSLIM POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN CANADA:

From Marginalization to Empowerment?

ABSTRACT

Historically, Muslim Canadians participated at a lower rate in the political process. However, certain seminal events forced the community to the centre of the political stage and as a result, it became more socially and politically active. The main catalyst for new found activism was 9/11, the ensuing war on terrorism and the subsequent anti-terrorism legislation. This coupled with the release of the Statistics Canada census that confirmed that Muslims are the fastest growing religious community in the country, with the youngest median age of any religious group, resulted in an awareness of potential political clout. This clout manifested itself in the June 2004 federal election where 80% of the Muslim population voted – one of the highest turnouts for any Canadian religious community in history.

Until the early 1990s, the Muslim community in Canada played a marginal role in society and politics as a distinct group. The early immigrants believed their sojourn in Canada would be a temporary one and did not take much interest in Canadian politics. The bulk of Muslims are fairly recent immigrants, still with roots in their countries of decent. The majority seemed to take more interest in the affairs of those 'home countries' than in Canada. As a result of these and many other complex factors, the Muslim community was significantly outside the margins on many indices, including political and social participation.

It is partly because of this realization of a sense of marginalization that the community began to function as a coherent force in national politics and voice demands in the name of the community as a whole. Earlier, Muslim activism was fragmented. It tended to be restricted to agitation for specific national or regional causes (Kashmir, Palestine, etc.). Political involvement took place within the general context of racial and ethnic polarization, and did not define the participants as specifically Muslim.

Recently, a number of seminal events catapulted Muslims to the centre of the political stage. The tragic events on September 11th and the 2004 invasion of Iraq brought Muslims to the forefront of national and international concern. Muslims found themselves, intentionally or not, at the very centre of Canadian politics. It seemed that all of a sudden, everyone was talking about Islam and Muslims. The media microscope resulted in a growing political activism and evolving sense of identity-formation.

For the first time, major Muslim organizations in Canada organized conferences and meetings to discuss what it meant to be a Canadian Muslim. The idea of 'back home' was quickly fading in these discussions and debate sprang about the formation of a new Canadian Muslim Identity. Major papers were published and articles printed on this topic.

The evolving role of Muslims in Canadian politics raises some important questions about the future of Canadian democracy. It has also raises questions about the limits of tolerance and the paradoxes of democracy. The impact of 9/11 and the ensuing anti-terrorism laws contributed to an atmosphere in which Muslims felt harassed and under suspicion. They became the primary victims of an erosion of civil and political liberties that threaten to undermine Canadian democratic life. Interestingly, the newfound Muslim political activism came at a juncture when their civil liberties were the most threatened.

This paper will draw a profile of the Muslim community in Canada; discuss some historic obstacles to Muslim political participation; explore a number of the seminal events that facilitated an emergence of a political consciousness; highlight some of the emerging trends that developed as a result of this consciousness; examine the 2004 Canadian Federal Elections; and finally, suggest ways to further increase Muslim political participation in Canada.

Who are the Muslims?

According to Daood Hamdani, Islam is now very much a Canadian religion and the Muslim community is a microcosm of Canada's multicultural mosaic and a reflection of Islam's universality.

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One-quarter to one-third of Muslim Canadians were born here. While some Muslim immigrants came to Canada to flee religious and ideological persecution and escape the occupation of their homelands, the vast majority came to seek a better life. They had the skills and qualifications and were looking for opportunities.[1]

Muslims are among the most highly educated groups in Canada. 27% percent of those working in what economics calls the "prime labour force group" have university degrees, compared with 17% of the general population. Since Muslims are mainly in the working age population, they contribute far more to sustain and strengthen the social security system than draw from it. While five workers support one retired person in Canada as a whole, Muslims have fifteen people in the working age group to support each retiree.

According to the 2001 National Census, between 1990 and 2000, the Muslim population increased by a blistering 128% – by far the largest percentage increase of any religious group in Canada. Islam is now the third largest religion in Canada trailing only Catholicism and Protestantism. The population of Muslims in Canada is estimated to be approximately 650,000, 45% of whom reside in the Greater Toronto Area. Important to consider is the fact that many new Muslim immigrants came from lands ruled by tyrants and dictators and they were often uncomfortable publicly pronouncing their faith out of fear of possible persecution. The census also confirmed that the median age of the Muslim community is 27, the lowest of any faith group. In other words, the Canadian Muslim community is the most educated, affluent, fastest growing and youngest community. All signs indicate that this community will increase in political and economic clout.[2]

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Historic Obstacles to Participation

Canada has an unflattering history in denying racial and religious minorities political enfranchisement. The effects of these exclusions have implications today. Many minorities may not feel comfortable or welcome politically participating because of these historic obstacles. The Japanese, Chinese and South Asian Canadian communities were all specifically excluded from voting rights and experienced infringement on their civil liberties at one time or another.

Clearly, the 1918 expansion of the franchise to women was significant. However, white women campaigned for the right to vote by capitalizing on the anxiety over the deterioration of the Anglo-Saxon race,[3] and organized against the expansion of the franchise to people of other racial backgrounds. In 1920, the Solicitor General of Canada, the Hon. Hugh Guthrie, brazenly said during a debate on the *Dominion Elections Act:*

> So far as I know, citizenship in no country carries with it the right to vote.
> The right to vote is a conferred right in every case…
> This Parliament says upon what terms men shall vote…
> No Oriental, whether he be Hindu, Japanese or Chinese, acquires the right
> To vote simply by the fact of citizenship…[4]
> (Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1997:81)

Such racial exclusions to the franchise were not eliminated until after the Second World War. The right to vote and to be a candidate for office was enshrined in the 1982 in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms.*

Besides these and other systemic barriers to Muslim political participation, the immigrant condition was also a barrier to increased political participation. The vast majority of Canada's Muslims arrived in Canada in the last 30 years. Being transplanted from one social milieu to another is, for most immigrants, a very disruptive experience. It requires transformations in their identity, their social relations, their cultural habits, their linguistic capabilities and their institutional knowledge and skills.[5] The longer that one lives in one's new country, the easier the transformation becomes.

The Emergence of a Political Consciousness

A number of seminal events starting with the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the Palestinian Intifada in 1987 and the first Gulf war catapulted Muslims into the centre of the political stage in Canada. Years later came the tragedy of September 11th, the war on terrorism, the attack on Afghanistan, the passing of terrorism related legislation, the Maher Arar controversy and the second invasion of Iraq. These events and the anti-Islamic culture surrounding them intensified Muslim activism and a definable Muslim political consciousness emerged.

September 11, 2001

The single greatest motivation for increased Muslim political activism seems to be September 11th, the ensuing anti-terrorism legislation and the "war on terrorism." The *Anti-Terrorism Act* outrages many Muslims, and motivates them to engage in the social discourse.

In addition to the broad and ambiguous definitions, this Act gave the government the power to arrest people "preventatively" to impose conditions without laying criminal charges, to tap telephones more easily, and to detain persons

under a security certificates without publicly revealing the evidence against them. It gave cabinet the power to decide what organizations were labeled "terrorist," with minimal due process, and to impose penalties for supporting or facilitating such organizations and their members, even if the person in question knew of no specific terrorist acts. The legislation also allows cabinet the power to involve the military more easily in enforcing domestic order, to keep information secret that would previously have been public.

A joint brief by a coalition of Muslim organizations and Toronto's Urban Alliance on Race Relations was particularly concerned with the use of "religious, ideological and political" motivations in the Act's definition of terrorism this inherently meant that those whose religion or politics differ from the institutionalized norm are more likely to be targeted under this Act. Currently, there are six Muslim men who are held under these security certificates. Neither the accused nor their lawyers have had the opportunity to examine the government's evidence against them. These certificates are seen by many Canadian citizens as legal abominations. Muslims around Canada were outraged and felt the need to organize and address these problems. One such organization is Ihya Foundation (Ihya).

Ihya Foundation is an Islam-inspired, Toronto-based, not for profit organization that stands for social justice. Ihya has held several events addressing the climate of the Muslim Canadian political landscape. For example, within weeks after September 11th, Ihya organized an event titled "Healing the Wounds: Uniting in the Aftermath of September 11th". At this event, former mayor Barbara Hall, as well as many leaders of the Canadian Muslim community discussed ways of healing and building bridges between the various communities in Canada. In September 2003, Ihya organized the Muslim communities first "Toronto Muslim Summit" where a broad, cross-section of the community gathered to discuss the most important issues affecting the community. The subsequent document was sent to all area politicians. In December 2003, Ihya organized a lecture with North America's leading Islamic scholar, Hamza Yusuf and one of the Americans responsible for drafting the new Iraqi constitution, Dr. Noah Feldman titled "Islam and Democracy: A clash of Civilizations?" Over 1,500 Muslim and non-Muslim attendees listened as the two speakers discussed how to foster a Muslim political identity in Canada. These are just a few of the many events that Ihya organized to facilitate the emergence of a Canadian Muslim identity and community empowerment.[6]

Mobilization for the 2004 Federal Elections

The Muslim community recognized its political power when it exercised its right to vote. In a system that gives one person, one vote, numbers count. According to the Census, no other religious community has increased its numbers in Canada in the last 10 years like the Muslim community. The 2004 federal elections (2004 Elections) were unique because it was the first opportunity after 9/11 for Muslims to express themselves at the ballot box about issues that concerned them. According to Hamdani, in the past, only 49% of Muslims participated in casting a ballot during elections. However, all signs indicated that these elections would be different.

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Journalists and political scientists began commenting on the potential impact of the Muslim community on the 2004 Election. An Ottawa Citizen article's headline declared "City Muslims awaken to emerging power." The article reported that the Ottawa Muslim population is the second largest voting bloc in the city – nearly double the combined strength of Jews, Hindus and Sikhs. Their sheer numbers make Muslims a potential force to be reckoned with, "a veritable power block in certain ridings."[7]

Muslim Canadians recognized their new found political clout. Nearly two months prior to the declaration of the federal elections, the Canadian Islamic Congress (CIC) published a report called "Elections 2004: Towards Informed and Committed Voting." Based on an analysis of public statements, electoral objectives and legislative voting records of each of Canada's 301 elected parliamentarians, the CIC evaluated each one's record on 20 different domestic and international issues, including promotion of closer ties to Muslim countries and support for domestic civil liberties. The report also highlighted, much to the surprise of many, that Canadian Muslims represent a swing vote in 101 electoral districts, nearly one third of all ridings, where they hold a anywhere from 1.8% to 13.5% of the vote.[8]

Others were not so surprised. Riad Saloojee, the executive director of the Council of American-Islamic Relations – Canada (Cair-Can) wrote an opinion piece in the *Ottawa Citizen,* just three weeks before the elections. In the piece, he gave notice to the various candidates [perhaps directly to the 101 districts where Muslims held the swing vote] what the Muslims may be looking for in their elected representatives. He stated that Muslims want: a review of the anti-terrorism legislation; more thorough scrutiny of the *Public Safety Act* and its unprecedented executive power in collecting and sharing information on Canadian citizens; an overhaul of the non-transparent security certificate process; oversight of our security agencies to ensure that racial profiling – which does exist in Canada – stops; and the need for increased debate and participation in policies on security and safety.[9]

The 2004 Elections were extremely exciting for Muslims. A record number of ten Muslim candidates ran. As a

community, for the first time they felt that their vote represented something of value. As well, it was clear that the usual Liberal monopoly on the Muslim vote was in jeopardy. Alliances began shifting. Approximately 10 year ago, Muslims would not have voted for the New Democratic Party, because of its support for abortion rights. However, in the 2004 Elections, there were 6 NDP Muslim candidates – the most candidates for any party. The most prominent NDP candidate was Monia Mazigh, the wife of Maher Arar, the Canadian who was detained and tortured in Syria.[10]

The results of the 2004 Elections were excellent for Muslims. Three Muslims were elected, including the first ever Muslim woman, Yasmin Ratansi. Perhaps more importantly, the CIC proclaimed that over 80% of the Muslims who could vote, did so – surpassing the national average by nearly 20%.

Such a strong showing made international recognition as many dailies in the Arab world mentioned the impressive electoral showing. As well, the Jerusalem Post recognized the new awakening of the political influence of the Canadian Muslim community in an article dated August 17, 2004, titled "Muslim Power in Canada."[11]

Suggestions to increase political participation of Muslims in Canada

Although the 2004 Elections proved to be a banner year for Muslim Canadians, there needs to be a sustained effort by the community and the respective governments to maintain political participation. In a paper titled, "Inclusion and Exclusion," Anver Saloojee argues that the government has a responsibility to actively encourage the widest possible political participation by members of racialized and newcomer communities. It can do this by working with community-based organizations to reverse the trend towards voter apathy and declining voter turnouts.[12]

Secondly, the government should assist in the viability of organizations representing the interests of the Muslim community. Saloojee posits that there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between formal political participation and the strengths of community organizations. The financial and organizational well-being of the latter is essential prerequisites for a healthy democracy.[13]

In summary, the Muslim community is maturing socially and politically in Canada. They are developing a sense of confidence. This confidence is a catalyst for political empowerment. However, it is too early to tell if the massive political participation in the 2004 Elections can be replicated. More transparent lines of communication must be established between the Muslim community and the respective governments.

Notes

1 Daood Hassan Hamdani, "One hundred years of Islam in Canada" *Islamic Horizons.*

2 Statistic Canada, Census 2001

3 Working Group on Racial Equity, City of Hamilton. p. 27

4 Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1957 p. 81

5 Raymond Breton, "Social Capital and the Civic Participation of Immigrants and Members of Ethno-Cultural Groups." Conference on the Opportunities and Challenges of Diversity. A Role for Social Capital. p. 18

6 For more information please visit their website at www.ihyafoundation.com.

7 Ottawa Citizen, "City Muslims Awaken to Emerging Power", Saturday, February 21, 2004.

8 Canadian Islamic Congress, "Election 2004: Towards Informed and Committed Voting", April 13, 2004.

9 Ottawa Citizen "A Tyranny of Choice for Canada's Muslims", June 7, 2004.

10 See www.canadianislamiccongress.com for a full analysis of the 2004 elections.

11 Jerusalem post, "Muslim Power in Canada", August 17, 2004.

12 Anver Saloojee, "Inclusion and Exclusion" Bridging the Worlds Conference material p. 46.

13 Ibid., p. 47.