

Muslims wish Obama would be more positive about Islam: Reaction to candidate's response to rumors

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Muslim Americans and political observers heralded the 2006 elections as a sort of debutante's ball for the Muslim voter, when anger and organizational heft pushed unprecedented numbers of Muslim citizens to vote and get involved with U.S. politics.

The 2008 election cycle, however, isn't quite working out that way. Many Muslim Americans sense that presidential candidates have, at worst, conflated their faith with terrorism and, at best, treated them as a liability to be kept at arm's length.

They're especially disappointed that Senator Barack Obama, in denying claims that he is a closeted Muslim, left it at that. They say he could have at least defended Muslims, or knocked down the notion that being a Muslim is somehow a negative.

"I think he knows Islam isn't a violent religion, but he certainly has some sort of hesitancy to talk about his experience with it because of a fear that this will damage his campaign," said Qasim Rashid, 25, who covered the issue on his weekly Muslim-themed online radio show.

It's almost as if Muslims are asking for an Obama version of the famous "we're-not-gay" denial from *Seinfeld*: "Not that there's anything wrong with that."

Many Muslims say the dust-up over Obama's Muslim rumors reflects their continued persona non grata status in U.S. politics ever since 9/11. In fact, some Muslims aren't surprised at all.

"I wish Barack had been more vocal about the fact that there is nothing wrong with being a Muslim," said Pamela Taylor, a Muslim American activist in Indianapolis, but added, "Clearly no one wants to be deemed a 'Muzzie-lover.'"

Candidates have been keeping Muslims at a distance since even before the 2001 terrorist attacks. In her 2000 race for the Senate in New York, Hillary Clinton returned \$50,000 in contributions from the American Muslim Alliance after her Republican opponent alleged, wrongly, that the group had terrorist links.

The Obama controversy stems from a 2007 article in the conservative *Insight* magazine that alleged that Obama, whose middle name is Hussein, attended a radical Islamic school as a young boy in Indonesia.

A recent flurry of e-mails suggest that Obama's Indonesian stepfather was a radical Muslim and claim that Obama took his oath of office on a Qur'an instead of a Bible. They also suggest that Obama refuses to say the Pledge of Allegiance and that his church membership is a charade to conceal his Muslim identity.

John Green, a senior fellow at the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life in Washington, said "general antipathy" toward Muslims helps give the rumors staying power. "Some issues like this are very difficult to dispel," Green said, "because they have a face validity to them. Hussein is a Muslim name, and to many Americans, Obama sounds very Arabic."

Numerous news outlets have proved the rumors baseless.

Obama's biological father, from Kenya, was a secular Muslim who divorced Obama's mother when he was two. She then married an Indonesian Muslim and, while living in Jakarta, sent her son to both a Catholic school and a public school that was also attended by Muslims. The lawmaker who was sworn in on a Qur'an was not Obama but Representative Keith Ellison (D., Minn.), who actually is a Muslim.

Despite the outlandishness of the allegations, many Americans have fallen for them—something that observers attribute to Americans' lack of religious literacy, especially when it comes to Islam.

"There's a certain amount of gullibility in American life," said Alan Wolfe, a religion and politics expert at Boston College. He added that the allegations could hurt Obama's presidential bid. "It's going to matter some, especially in a close election."

While Obama's campaign has generated some buzz on Muslim Web sites—including a Muslims for Obama site—some Muslims resent what they see as Obama's cold shoulder.

“You could have simply said, ‘While I am a Christian, I resent the implications in being branded a terrorist-sympathizer merely by association with Muslims.’ . . . Instead, your campaign sought to play the defensive card,” wrote Manan Ahmed, a Chicago-based blogger at the Muslim-themed Web site www.chapatimystery.com, in an open letter to Obama.

Some of that may be changing, however slowly. Speaking in Boise, Idaho, on the eve of the Super Tuesday primaries February 5, Obama referred to the e-mails and the closeted-Muslim rumors.

“Don’t try to insult not just me but people of the Islamic faith by playing on people’s fears,” Obama said. “I know who I am.” And, in a recent interview with *Christianity Today*, he said, “I am respectful of the [Islamic] religion, but it’s not my own.”

Still, some Muslims—including some who are Obama supporters—seem resigned to their status in American political life. “Frankly, as a Muslim, I’d rather stay away from publicly supporting Obama,” said Ani Zonneveld, a Muslim activist in California. “Believe me, this will be held against him.” -*Omar Sacirbey, Religion News Service*