

The Muslim voice: Rising political engagement

by [Leon Howell](#) in the [July 18, 2001](#) issue

When 25 Muslims walked out of a meeting at the White House last month, the Bush administration had an embarrassing but correctable public relations problem on its hands. Of more long-range significance is what the action said about the political consciousness and activity of the millions of Muslims—the figure may be as high as 6 million—living in the U.S.

Representatives from several Islamic organizations were meeting June 28 with the deputy director of the Bush administration's Office of Faith-based and Community Organizations. After about 15 minutes, the Secret Service removed Abdullah Al-Arian, an American citizen and Duke University student who is working this summer as an intern on Capitol Hill. No explanation was given for the action, but participants think it was because Al-Arian's father, Samai Al-Arian, heads a group fighting against the use of "secret evidence" (evidence the defense never sees) in deportation hearings for suspected terrorists. (The younger Al-Arian's uncle is a Palestinian professor recently released after being held more than three years on secret evidence and never charged.)

Samai Al-Arian himself was at the White House the week before for another meeting that ended in disappointment when Vice President Dick Cheney failed to appear. Both events intensified strains between key Muslim groups and the administration over what the Muslims view as a growing tilt by the U.S. toward Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

All these events have a political coloring: the Bush-Cheney ticket received an unprecedented endorsement in the 2000 election from a Muslim body—the American Muslim Political Coordinating Committee –Political Action Committee (AMPCC-PAC). So it was all the more telling that, while the Muslim groups formally accepted the White House apology for disrupting the meeting, they still complained that the slight was "part of an alarming trend seemingly targeting American

Muslims.”

Muslims have been working vigorously to build their influence in U.S. public affairs. The 2000 election offered a dramatic portent of how that might unfold. In March 2000, according to a poll conducted by Zogby International for the American Muslim Council (AMC), Al Gore was favored over George W. Bush for president by a 56-24 margin among Muslims. But during the campaign, Bush worked on his connections to the Muslim community, and Gore did not. “He stiffed us,” Ibrahim Hooper of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) told me, listing several perceived offenses by Gore.

In the debates, Bush called the use of secret evidence un-American, and he condemned racial profiling, thereby reaching out to Muslims on two emotional issues. Moreover, said Aly Abuzaakouk, AMC’s executive director, Muslims were closer to the Republicans on family and sexual lifestyle matters. Plus, Clinton had signed the 1996 Anti-Terrorism Act that permitted the use of secret evidence. In October AMPCC-PAC (which includes AMC and CAIR) issued an endorsement of Bush.

After the election, CAIR released an unscientific survey of Muslim voters which showed that Bush got more than two-thirds of the Muslim vote. The survey suggested that 85 percent of Muslim voters were influenced by the AMPCC-PAC endorsement.

This dramatic shift from March, said CAIR, “signals that a Muslim voting bloc must be taken into consideration in future elections.” Abuzaakouk said reports from AMC’s Florida chapters suggested that 40,000 new Muslims voted there, and that they voted overwhelmingly for Bush.

Whatever the validity of these figures, it’s clear that Muslims spoke more forcefully in this presidential election than ever before. Political engagement is taking place in other ways too. CAIR, an “Islamic advocacy group,” operates Islam-Infonet, which provides a steady stream of news bulletins to the media and the public. AMC, whose motto is “toward the political empowerment of Muslims in America,” works to build grass-roots activity. On June 21 AMC held its annual “lobby day” on Capitol Hill where more than a hundred participants visited their representatives and senators. AMC has a detailed “legislative agenda,” and has 40 local chapters.

The work of two AMC chapters is highlighted in Diana Eck’s recent book *A New Religious America*. One AMC chapter, in Portland, Oregon, reported that in 2000 for

the first time the mayor received a Muslim contingent. The staff of the *Daily Oregonian* meets regularly with Muslims. In Buffalo the AMC plans to campaign for county offices.

“When AMC began in 1990,” Aly Abuzaakouk said, “no Muslims worked on Capitol Hill. Now more than two dozen have staff jobs and many more are interns. In 1999 President Clinton appointed the first Muslim ambassador. Ten Muslim chaplains serve in the U.S. military. People across the country are finding their voice in local politics.” Abuzaakouk is disappointed, however, that no Muslims yet serve in the Bush White House.

Abuzaakouk was not offended when Bush’s inauguration opened and closed with prayers in the name of Jesus. What he took away from the event was Bush’s constant use of the phrase “churches, synagogues and mosques.”

Eck discusses some of the prejudice to be overcome by Muslims and other newly emergent religious groups. Dozens of attacks and acts of arson occurred in the 1990s to the 1,400 Islamic mosques in this country and the houses of worship of other religions. (Still, 66 percent of the Muslims polled by Zogby agree that “U.S. society currently demonstrates respect toward the Muslim faith.”)

Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs are creating their own parallel versions of the Jewish Anti-Defamation League to respond to discrimination. CAIR is the most sophisticated at this, but the group with the best acronym is SMART, the Sikh Mediawatch and Resources Taskforce.

One example of growing Muslim political engagement was the response made to Jerry Falwell in March, when he said that “the Muslim faith teaches hate,” and that if Muslims seek government funds under Bush’s faith-based initiative, they “should be out the door before they knock.” CAIR shot back: “These offensive remarks are symptomatic of the very intolerance that you claim Islam promotes.”

A sign of similar activity at the local level appeared recently in Fremont, California, a town of 206,000, where the Asian population doubled between 1990 and 2000. The *New York Times* reported that a man argued in a public meeting against renaming a street Gurdwara Road, in recognition of a Sikh temple. “I can’t pronounce Gurdwara,” he complained. A Sikh retorted: “And I can’t pronounce Paseo Padre,” a major Fremont avenue.

Perhaps the Muslims will soon borrow a line often used by Ralph Reed when he was head of the Christian Coalition: "All we are asking is a voice in the conversation called democracy."