

Muslim Political Space in South Africa: Imagining a Local *Ummah*

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Since the first democratic elections, many previously ignored communities in South Africa have received attention and achieved prominence. This is true of the vociferous Muslims as it is true of other less vocal communities. As a political, social and religious group, the South African Muslim community is taking on concrete shape in a process analogous to the emergence of the South African nation as a whole.

From a political point of view, Muslims find themselves in a bind. On the one hand, their political profile is extremely high, a fact reflected in both organised political activities and Muslim representation in broader civil society. On the other hand, the state of Muslim politics is far from ideal. Despite the opportunities presented by the new South Africa, Muslims are faltering and stumbling at several instances.

Muslims are easily identifiable in political activities representing the broad community of South African voters. They are most numerous in the leadership of the African National Congress, both at local, provincial and national levels. Some of these political leaders, particularly Minister of Justice Dullah Omar and Western Cape ANC leader Ebrahim Rasool, have a high-profile public role within the community and are often invited to deliver keynote addresses at Muslim gatherings. Others, such as Hassan Solomons, Farida Muhammad and Rashied Salojee, all ANC members, have lower public profiles in the Muslim community. Most, however, particularly those holding ANC seats, believe that they represent the values of liberation, freedom and democracy which are values integral to Islam. Some Muslims appear to judge political party representatives in terms of their supposed religious commitment, which is often a matter of hearsay and rumour. It must be remembered that these leaders represent a broader cross-section of South Africa than only the Muslim community. And, in the final analysis, they are answerable to their parties and constituencies. Nevertheless, there is the desire on the part of some Muslims to hold their Muslim political representatives accountable to some "Islamic" standard. This expresses a need to be represented as "Muslims" and a wish to see the flag of Islam flying high in South African politics. The Islamic party alternative presents one way of ensuring such direct Islamic representation. This option was pursued in the 1994 elections by the Cape-based Islamic Party under the leadership of Abdullah Gamiieldien, and the national Africa Muslim Party under Imtiaz Sooliman. These parties gained some votes, but not enough to gain a single seat. After the 1994 elections the two parties merged to form the Africa Muslim Party. Since then there has been no programme for the 1999 elections.

This is an extraordinary state of affairs, since the ostensible reasons for their poor performance in the last elections were attributed to a lack of unity and insufficient time to prepare. Now that there is a single Islamic party and certainly enough time before the 1999 poll, insufficient preparation seems to remain the order of the day. In this context, the Islamic Unity Convention is said to be preparing to launch a party or to organise Muslims for a bloc vote in the forthcoming elections.

Apart from poor organisation and lack of leadership with regard to the Islamic party alternative, other problems persist in Muslim political concerns. Although Muslims turned out in their thousands to vote in the 1994 elections, and continued to engage in the democratic processes, some have tended to debunk democracy in one way or another. There is an underlying message that suggests that to some democracy is not compatible with Islam or the essence of Islam.

The major objection against democracy is that a democratic parliament might pass laws which conflict with the "laws of God and the Prophet". IUC and Qibla leader, Achmat Cassiem, expressed this kind of misgiving before the 1994 elections when he said: "If democracy opposes Islam, then Islam opposes democracy. For example, if by so-called democratic procedures the majority of citizens in a country support the legalisation of marijuana, Muslims will oppose that democratic decision."¹ This position was first popularised this century by the late Indo-Pakistani Islamist Abu al-A'la Mawdoodi, and continues to influence Muslim political thinking in different parts of the world. This attitude does pose a challenge to Muslim democrats in South Africa.

Generally, however, Muslim political theorists are prepared to accept the advantages of living in South Africa. For example, African Muslim Party spokesperson Sheriff Mohamed, reflecting on the advantages of living in the South African secular state, noted that instead of a "theocracy where our values are suppressed like Bosnia and other countries ... we have a Constitution which recognises religious tolerance, religious freedom." It could be argued in this regard that he, like many others who advocate the option of an Islamic party, stops short of accepting the full implications of democracy.

Notwithstanding such questions about the allegiance of elected representatives to the Constitution and democracy, a considerable number of Muslims have joined the South African civil service. In the past, most Muslims avoided it because it was run on a racialist basis. Now many Muslims, particularly professionals, see it as an opportunity to serve the country. Such high-profile personalities as Chief Justice Ismail Muhammad and High Court Judge Siraj Desai, Mohamed Navsa and Yusuf "Joe" Ebrahim, are some examples. Often, in one way or another, such individuals gain the attention of the media for the work that they perform.

Muslims have also been involved at another level of political activity, one regarded by many political scientists as the cornerstone of a strong democracy. Many community organisations provide vital services for the upliftment of society in general and the Muslim community in particular. They include the [^]ulama& organisations, educational institutions, welfare and support services and media bodies which preceded the 1994 elections and continue to prosper in the new South

Africa. Each of these form part of civil society and as such can influence policy and legislation. The role of such non-governmental organisations is not to obstruct or impede, but rather to provide checks and balances for those who have been given the power to govern.

On the basis of Muslim organisational strength, one can expect Muslims to make policy inputs in matters relating to welfare and religious institutions. Muslim representations to the Constitutional Assembly certainly had an impact on the constitutional clauses dealing with customary law and the relation between religion and the state. This illustrates how systematic debate on issues of importance can be channelled into the broader political front.

Perhaps the most dramatic Muslim intervention has been on the anti-crime front, where the emergence of People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (Pagad) has had a marked effect on state approaches to crime, police corruption and gang activity. However, open conflict with gangs and a lack of co-operation with the state authorities has eroded much of the initial goodwill towards Pagad. While Pagad activities over the past year have demonstrated clearly that organised groupings can galvanise public opinion and place pressure on the authorities, they have also shown that there are limits to this kind of mobilisation. People who make the final decision in a democracy are not those who can organise a mass meeting or a mass march, but those who win the majority of votes in free and fair elections.

Pagad's open display and use of arms has undermined, even negated, its potential as a responsible partner in a democratic South Africa. Nevertheless, it is likely that the future of Muslim politics in South Africa will be overshadowed for some time by the Pagad example of dramatic marches, fiery speeches and sensational press conferences. The most serious consequence is that for some time Muslim politics will be condemned to being confrontational, militant and alienating to the rest of the nation.

If the South African Muslim community can only be identified by the clothes they wear, or the food they eat, then they clearly have a long way to go towards making a coherent political contribution. At the same time, Muslim political activity in the country is important for its diversity and dynamism, ranging from key Muslim representation in government to pressure groups within civil society. In one way or another, these activities confirm the particular nature of being Muslim in the South African political space.

The strength of such political activity lies in the contribution that individuals and groups make to the well-being of all South Africans. However, the soul of Islam in South Africa requires the evolution of a coherent political strategy. Vigorous debate is yet to be undertaken and is essential on a number of crucial issues, including the notion of democracy as the foundation of a society. Another is the question of armed confrontation, often declared as *jihad*, in a state whose legitimacy is not in question among the majority of people. It seems that Muslims cannot simply live in the country under the shadow of "secularism" or the convenience of the Bill of Rights.

See Appendix I: Census on Muslims in South Africa.

Endnote

1. *Boorhaanol Islam*, Meelad-un-Nabi edition, Vol. 28, No. 4, January 1994, pp. 29-32.