**Muslims as nationals in North America**

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Muslims in [North America](https://dailytimes.com.pk/540813/bon-jovi-plot-north-american-tour/) have relatively recently settled in sizable numbers to form minority communities. Estimates of Muslims range from 3 to-7 million in the US, depending on the method of counting. Canada has more than a million Muslims. Being a minority in liberal, secular and democratic societies is a new experience for Muslims.

Besides being a minority, the global war on terrorism has stigmatised Muslims, fanning anti-Islam sentiments. These sentiments find expression in the surveillance of mosques and Islamic associations, Muslims being hassled on borders and increasingly denied entry into the US by the Trump administration. Mosques are occasionally targets of vandalism and murder. Internet trolls about Muslims’ conspiracies and the so-called threat that Islam poses roll through the social media. This is how Islamophobia bites a majority of Muslims.

Yet there is the other side of Muslims’ life in North America. Muslims express satisfaction with their life in America. The Pew Research Centre survey of Muslims in 2018 found that about 90% of Muslims in the US expressed pride in being Americans. Similarly, about 80% were satisfied with their lives.

Muslims generally do not encounter overt hostility in daily routines. They are found in all professions and places. There is even sympathy for them among liberal and progressive segments of society, upholding their rights as equal citizens. This paradox of satisfaction and anxiety defines their everyday life. The question is what can be done to neutralize anti-Muslim sentiment?

Muslims’ strategy lies in being socially more integrated, without compromising their identity and rights as citizens in these multicultural and multiracial societies. Participating fully in public life and building interfaith alliances are necessary. Pursuing not just their own causes but also the national movements for peace, social justice, women’s equality and environmental protection, will help them combat anti-Muslim sentiments. This strategy has two parts, each of which is being followed , one more vigorously than the other.

**Patterns of asserting rights**

As citizens, Muslims can and do resort to legal remedies against overt acts of discrimination and denial of rights. Similarly, Muslims are right to counter anti-Islam narratives in the media and provocative nationalist/rightist discourse through respectful public arguments and peaceful protests.

Muslim organizations such as Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR) and the National Council of Muslim Canadians(NCMC) among others are active in the legal defence of Islamic viewpoints and representing Muslims’ interests. Many progressive mosques, Muslim students’ associations and Islamic centres are involved in practical measures of social service and anti-racism initiatives .

Apart from the political and legal activism, Muslims success in professions, arts and literature enhance their image. On all these scores, both individual and community initiatives are relatively satisfactory.

The second pillar of the strategy is an inward look by Muslims to further adapt to the civic culture of North American societies. The objective could be to reduce the practices and behaviours that make them stand apart and feed stereotypes. It requires community actions by Muslims themselves, not any public interventions.

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Muslims come in conflict with North American civic norms and values in three areas.

i. Inequality of women justified by the orthodox and customary interpretations of Islam.

ii. Overt expressions of religiosity in the largely secular public sphere.

iii. Preaching opinions that conflict with not only civic norms and values but also go against the liberal and multi-interpretative tenets of Islam.

The overwhelming majority of Muslims do live within the range of acceptable diversity of opinions and practices on the above three points. It is only a small minority of North American Muslims and preachers who fall outside the majority’s views and practices.

Regarding the status of women, Niqab (face veil) and Burqa (whole body cover) are the two practices of few women in North America that contribute disproportionately to the stereotyping of Muslims. They violate public trust, raise security risk and convey separation. The individual right to practice religion is trumped by considerations of social cohesion in this case.

Covering or not covering the face is not an uncontested interpretation of the Islamic injunction of women’s modesty. The more striking argument against this practice is that an overwhelming majority of Muslim women all over the world do not cover their face partially or totally. Now a Saudi princess without a Niqab is that ultra conservative country’s ambassador to Washington indicating a change even there.

Hijab (head covered with open face) is another matter. Many western women wear a head scarf, including occasionally Queen Elizabeth ,Nuns and eastern European women. The Hijab has been accepted in the North American repertoire of women’s attire. One indication of which is the inclusion of Hijabis in advertisements for fashionable goods and services. The province of Quebec is an exception for its secular fundamentalism. Hijab should be strongly defended .

The requirement of modesty also applies to men, without any specific Islamic dress.

Despite the Judeo-Christian heritage, overt expressions of religiosity are not the norm except for some ceremonial purposes. A few Muslims praying visibly in public places go against the civic norms. There is a long accepted Islamic practice (Kaza-being late) of postponing a prayer, if other obligations are pressing.

Some conservative Imams voice opinions about sexuality, marriage, and Islamic laws that do not represent the highly diverse interpretations of Islamic beliefs and practices, which vary by sect, region and period. These differences must be respected.

The CAIR, ISNA , NCCM and other Muslim associations are defending the rights of Muslims as citizens and nationals. They should also increase their efforts to engage Muslim communities in reforming their practices in line with the ‘lived’ Islam of a majority of Muslims worldwide.

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