

The US Muslim voter: part

American Muslims remain politically pre-pubescent. They tried to come of age in the 2000 presidential election with the first-ever Muslim bloc vote but 9/11 effectively demoted them besides serving to asphyxiate their civil rights. Muslims are essentially America's lepers, despite the semblance of normalcy that people try hard to maintain.

With the presidential election looming ahead what should the suspected, the shunned, the frisked and the frowned on, do?

In 2000, American Muslim leaders dreamt of 2 million Muslim voters flexing their political muscle and it was the Bush campaign that understood their potential power. Or was it just serendipity? Gore had presided on the committee that had passed the Law of Secret Evidence and Bush vowed to do away with it in a presidential debate. The Muslim bloc vote materialized and the rest is history.

The paradigm has not just shifted since then; it has been rocked into oblivion. The Patriot Act makes all other legislation look like play and now that Patriot Act II is on the horizon, Americans are really in a state of disorientation for it is easy to see past the thin veneer of democracy and confront an absolutist government. Kerry creamed his competition in the first presidential debate and he and Edwards have been able to effectively convey that the Bush government is engaged in the wrong war at the wrong time with the wrong enemy.

It is fallacious to think that foreign policy is the only concern of the American Muslim voter. Education, health care, taxes, jobs and their outsourcing

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concern all Americans, and actually affect the American Muslim in perhaps a more fundamental manner than the war in Iraq. 9/11 served as the great equalizer and now Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Israel and Palestine have all moved into the average American's consciousness.

Many sound bytes were spent in the first presidential debate on the eradication of terrorism. Though presidential and articulate most of the time, Kerry insulted the viewer by his simplistic "I will hunt down and kill the terrorists" statement. One immediately envisions Kerry in a coonskin hat and a gun darting around in the woods. Perhaps the less mentally endowed voter needs those basic statements to comprehend and connect. In the Iraq exit strategy it made sense to reach out to the Muslim world, create a larger coalition and isolate the extremists. And yet, he still skirted the central issue as did Bush.

In the vice-presidential debate, when asked about the Israel-Palestine issue, Edwards' indignation appeared boundless. Israel, he said, did not just have a right but a duty to defend itself and it was so tragic that Israeli children were dying and that if the unilateral attempt of Israel to withdraw from the Gaza strip were resisted, the use of any means was justifiable. And though the question was about Israel and Palestine, he self-righteously went on about bringing Saudi Arabia and Iran to task. This segment was as violently anti-Muslim as it could possibly have been.

BY DR MAHJABEEN ISLAM

Muslims must play the political system. Pouting and passivity are as bad collectively as they are for individuals.

John Edwards has lost his sense of justice or developed pre-Alzheimer's dementia. The displacement of the Palestinian people, the wanton killing in Sabra and Shatila, the razing of homes with people still in them with tanks financed by the American taxpayer, the Apache helicopter gunship attacks on a defenseless people is beyond unconscionable. And to think that they would not defend themselves with suicide bombing is inane.

And like I said, Muslims are certainly current day lepers. After all, Palestinian children killed by high tech weaponry are not to be mourned and only Israeli deaths are to be avenged. Their lives are inconsequential; lepers are not whole to start with, so how does it matter if all of them die?

Just a couple of days prior to the vice-presidential debate, I had gotten a yard sign that said "Kerry/Edwards: for a stronger America" At this point in the debate, I almost ran out to pull out the sign, but was stopped in time by my daughter, wiser than her tender 17 years. "Muslims must learn to play the political system," she said.

Participate or pout?

A Nation

And just as they acted cohesively, incidentally very atypical behavior for Muslims, 9/11 happened and the monstrous Patriot Act shattered lives in every corner of the nation.

As far as the Muslim voter is concerned, Bush's policies had effectively dug his grave. The two presidential debates just sealed his coffin tight. The American political system is flawed not only in that it has the Electoral College system and not one-man one-vote but also that the two party system is so entrenched that voting for a third like Ralph Nader is like giving one's vote to the conservatives.

Muslims were not wooed in the 2000 election; Bush happened to give them audience. In the 2004 election, just the word Muslim is cause for adrenaline release. Neither campaign wants the tarnish, for the race is tight already and even though there is a large representation of Muslims in key so-called battleground states such as Ohio and Florida, neither campaign has made tangible moves to win Muslim votes.

Neither presidential candidate appeared at ISNA, the Islamic Society of North America convention in September this year where 25,000 Muslims had congregated, nor did either show up at APPNA, the Association of Pakistani Physicians of North America convention held in Washington DC in July, even though the Kerry campaign had been promised a tidy sum in fund-raising at APPNA. It underscores the extent to which the Muslims have become political hot

potatoes.

In contrast the Jewish lobby moulds the winner. In election after election, the Jewish vote has proven itself to be organized, unified and monied. AIPAC, the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee is second only to the National Rifle Association in terms of power on the Hill. Not surprising, then, to see Edwards' apoplexy in responding to a question about Israel and Palestine.

The sole truism that Musharraf has uttered has been in regard to determining the root cause of terrorism; perhaps he got his cue from Malaysia's Mahathir Mohammed. Kerry should shelve his coonskin hat and gun and Bush need not give more teeth to the Patriot Act. The central issue is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; until the day that America is able to be the unbiased arbiter, arming both sides, vetoing UN resolutions on merit and not favouritism, creating the Palestinian state now rather than depending on sundry contingencies, terrorism will continue unabated worldwide.

Muslim voters have not been wooed and they should not pursue a bloc vote. Participate they must. If Bush is given a second term, there shall not just be more of the same, there shall be the enactment of Patriot Act II, worsening terrorism worldwide, civil war in Iraq, sagging of the economy and emboldened neo-conservatives which, in and of itself, can spell disaster. Sairah is right; Muslims must play the political system. Pouting and passivity are as bad collectively as they are for individuals.

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