

Muslims in US need to have a long-term political strategy

Ramzy Baroud

Muslim and Arab Americans' real salvation in the upcoming election is to vote as a bloc, and to vote for the right candidate. Anything else shall yield further disintegration in their political clout and will alienate the skeptics among them, who see the "system" as utterly corrupt and easily manipulated.

Without a doubt, the last three years have witnessed a political awakening among members of the growing Muslim and Arab population in America. That awakening however, by and large has been accidental, even forced upon these communities. Many of its members immigrated to the United States seeking deliverance, escaping oppression and poverty at home, rather than "trouble" elsewhere. For many first-generation Muslim and Arab immigrants, politics was considered a costly nuisance and understandably so.

The tragedy of Sept. 11, 2001 changed much of that perception.

Even though Sept. 11 might not have placed politics in a more positive light for Muslims and Arabs, it greatly diminished the undeclared illusion among them that absence, in both a political and social sense, is the key to survival in a country forged on alliances, political and cultural integration and most important, active pursuit for change.

Things seem to be changing, however, or so inform us the plethora of press releases issued by various American Muslim groups. The scattered Muslim voices in the American political scene are finally com-

Muslims. It is rather to highlight the subject of political rejectionism, a philosophy that many communities inherited from their prior political experiences, and an idea to which many continue to adhere.

Aside from the failure to capitalize on the common turf that binds Muslims, Arabs and other minority groups that strive to protect civil rights and liberties in America, there is an equal lack of understanding regarding the value of "the vote" itself.

In the upcoming elections, voting seems to be only understood within the context that Bush betrayed his promises by walking out on Muslims after he promised them "respect". That belief turned into a dilemma as many Muslims and Arabs, attentively listening to John Kerry highlighting his foreign policy agenda on the Middle East - a major concern to US Muslim and Arab voters - detected little difference between the two major candidates: Kerry wishes to strengthen Bush's shaky war coalition in Iraq and is equally enthusiastic about maintaining the "bond" between the US and Israel.

While it makes sense for the average Muslim voter to build his/her perception of a candidate based on the candidate's political posture toward issues he cares about, those who represent Muslim voters must not be equally constrained or narrow in perception. In American politics, there is no black and white, but many shades of gray. In fact, a group representing the Muslim and Arab constituency is not only

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ing together. Now, we hear of Muslim groups with missions that never before existed, at least not on such a large national scale. One is the US Muslim Civil Rights and Election Committee, an umbrella group comprising major American Muslim organizations with the sole purpose of guaranteeing that American Muslims vote and that their votes make a difference.

There is an equal abundance of news about active registration drives across the country to bring as many Muslims and Arabs as possible to "rock the vote" on that critical November day. Needless to say, America's Muslim and Arab communities endured much of the brunt of what they've fathomed as the Bush administration's transgression on the country's rights, and particularly their civil liberties. For them, voting is not a simple act of exercising and asserting one's rights, but maintaining a shred of dignity and preserving whatever basic rights have not yet been violated.

But to employ democracy to their advantage, US Muslims should be aware that voting is only one aspect of the democratic process and not necessarily the most vital. There is an entire culture that must accompany the act of voting that many Muslim and American groups fail to recognize.

In a recent commentary, Chicago-based Arab American journalist, Ray Hanania, protested the exclusion of the Arab Christian constituency - "who suffer equally with their Muslim brethren" - from alliance by US Muslims in their fight for political recognition. "Arab Christians offer the advantage of having open access into America's Christian societies.

They are members of many churches, from Maronites and Orthodox sects that are based overseas to Catholics, Protestants and Baptists," Hanania wrote in an Arabian newspaper.

Of course, this is not an attempt to agitate a discussion of which groups should be exploited politically to represent a "strategic alliance" to US

meant to recommend to Muslim voters their choice of candidates once the candidate divulges his agenda at the endgame, but also to relentlessly work to influence that agenda while it is still in a formulation mode.

Those who watched the presidential and vice-presidential debates so far must've realized that little was said to satisfy the Muslim and Arab voters' concerns and demands, whether nationally or abroad. Other groups had a great deal to boast about.

According to a recent September poll by Georgetown/Zogby International, only 7 percent of the eligible Muslim voters are voting for Bush in November. There are no surprises here, considering the blunders of the administration that left American Muslims both in a state of fear and grief. Evidently, whether intended or not, Muslims will be voting in a bloc, a behaviour that is undoubtedly the outcome of personal and collective experiences, not a political strategy per se. Without a responsible, long-term political strategy, this bloc vote can hardly translate into an affective tool that takes Muslim and Arab voters from their decades-long slumber moulding them into a meaningful political force.

The US Muslim and Arab constituency might've finally realized how costly their self-imposed political estrangement and indifference was. They are certainly becoming more aware of the political influence in the reach of their members, which are millions strong. However, to capitalize on this potential, they must adapt to the political culture of their new surroundings, abandon political rejectionism altogether and seek further integration and allies.

They must also realize that voting in itself is not the end of the road, but the beginning of a long struggle that requires commitment, skill and resolve. Otherwise, their success will be confined to self-congratulating press releases and e-mail messages following Election Day, filled with false victories, espousing equally false hope.

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