

Choice of US Muslim

BY DR. FAROOQ HASSAN

With just days left to the US polls for the election of the next American President, many concerned circles in Pakistan are very interested to know how the Muslim voter in America would cast his ballot. Even more relevant, though not surprising, is the clear message of the Pakistani administration that it would wish for a Bush success.

Indeed, from General Musharraf to Sheikh Rashid and now to the Punjab Governor, every good wish, even prayers, have been expressed for a Bush victory. Such blatant sycophancy notwithstanding, it is in very bad taste for any serving administration abroad to try to adopt such a partisan attitude about an election in another country. Alas, in a country such as Pakistan, where the rule of a military junta is very much in evidence, any expectation of adherence to constitutional niceties or diplomatic proprieties is really too much to expect.

However, since it is possible to see the most recent available data to evaluate the theme of our inquiry, let me turn to such an analysis. The overwhelming majority of U.S. Muslims surveyed in a recent poll said they would not vote for the Bush-Cheney ticket in the November election. But there is apprehension among some in the Muslim electorate that the Kerry-Edwards ticket might not bode well for Muslims either.

The thrust of the debate within the Muslim-American community revolves around the Bush administration's domestic policy towards US Muslims against the perception of likely problems resulting from a Kerry administration's foreign policy toward the Muslim world. The Arab American Institute announced earlier the results of six polls it conducted among Arab-American voters in Florida, Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania: Fifty-one percent said they would vote for John Kerry, 24 percent for George W. Bush and 17 percent for Ralph Nader. Earlier, in April, a survey released by the Michigan-based Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, which polled American Muslims in the greater Detroit area, revealed that 85 percent of the respondents said they disapproved of Bush's performance.

While such statistics indicate that most U.S. Muslims are unlikely to vote for Bush, information released to the press from sources within leadership circles in the Muslim community suggests that some Muslim voters harbour distinct reservations about the Democratic challenger as well. These apprehensions are not only because the average U.S. Muslim voter is a social conservative, but also because of the fear that a Kerry administration, in an attempt to get tough on so called Jihadi institutions, may prefer policies that might harm the long term interests of Muslim states such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

Knowledgeable estimates place the Muslim community in the United States at around 7 million. According to the prestigious Muslim Electorate's Council of America, the potential pool of voters ranges between 2.7 and 3 million. Since only 60 percent of those eligible to cast their ballot are registered, the actual number of those who could vote is no more than 1.5 to 1.7 million voters.

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In view of their conservative religious identity, the Muslim community in the United States has traditionally found affinity with the Republican Party, especially on issues such as homosexuality, abortion and the role of religion in public life. The statistics highlighting resentment toward the incumbent Bush are therefore not just paradoxical but staggering; in 2000, over 78 percent of the Muslim-American vote is believed to have gone in favour of Bush, whereas now, many of those same Muslims who previously voted for Bush are clearly against him.

In the aftermath of September 11, however, there is, for many Muslim communities, the overriding issue of civil liberties. According to the information of some of the polls mentioned above, many U.S. Muslims feel they have been unfairly targeted by the Bush administration's domestic counter terrorism measures.

It should also be kept in mind that there is apparently a distinct division between the view on this issue between immigrant and indigenous Muslims in America. Forty percent of the Muslim population is indigenous, composed of African-Americans, Latin Americans and white converts. This community historically tends to vote for the Democratic Party, as opposed to the immigrant community, which is financially in the upper income brackets and is concerned more about overseas policy issues than those of the domestic variety. This latter community has historically favoured the Republicans.

The war against terrorism and the war against Iraq are the two primary reasons behind the shift of the immigrant Muslim electorate away from the Republican Party. Muslim voters, both immigrant and indigenous, see the Bush administration as unfavourable to the protection of their civil liberties at home. They also have misgivings because of the war in Iraq, which many Muslims feel was unjustified because of the absence of any credible link between al Qaeda or the 9/11 tragedy and the regime of Saddam Hussein.

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late into more votes for Kerry. Some statements of the Democratic challenger regarding the adoption of a tougher policy against countries such as Saudi Arabia or Pakistan are worrisome to many expatriates from those countries. The fact also remains that some Muslim communities see the Democratic Party as disproportionately pro-Israel, a factor that may weigh against a Kerry vote in the end.

What do we mean by an Islamic entity? The answer to this question is rather difficult. This is on account of the fact that within sizeable Muslim communities, there appears to be a tendency to take shelter behind "national" identities of the Muslims from the countries they have come from. Most "Islamic" communities in the US immigrant category identify themselves as Muslims of communities of Pakistani-Americans, Arab-Americans or as African Muslims. While they agree that a Kerry administration could be beneficial for their well being in terms of domestic civil liberties, they continue to be uncertain and divided in their fears of what could happen to their respective home countries with Kerry as President.

For example, a few Pakistani-Americans publicly interviewed think that the Bush administration has been good for Pakistan; this is a view, as already submitted above, that is shared by Islamabad's military junta. But a much larger number is horrified by what Bush has done to ignore the blatant undemocratic policies of General Musharraf in the country. Then there is the issue of how a Kerry administration would weigh in on the Palestinian issue. Kerry has maintained a staunchly pro-Israeli attitude throughout his campaign.

An eminent professor emeritus of sociology at the State University of New York, Dr. Bayunus, has undertaken an estimate of the U.S. Muslim population by a state-to-state statistical analysis. Bayunus says there are significant numbers of Muslims in potential swing states such as Florida, Missouri, Ohio, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Michigan, who remain "undeclared" but are more than likely to go for Kerry. Their lack of a "declared" status stems from a fear that exhibiting their preferences now may be harmful to them.

The latest polls on these issues have come from Georgetown University. In a report released as recently as 20 October, it is maintained that 38% of surveyed Muslims believe that the post 9/11 victimization is being conducted only against Muslims worldwide. But more troublesome is the conclusion that these 39% think that it is not only a campaign against Muslims, but against Islam. Only 33% surveyed believe that this worldwide war is against terrorism, whereas 29% could not tell if this war is against terrorism or Islamic states. The cumulative effect of these diverse inquiries leads the Georgetown Report to conclude that 77% of Muslim voters in the US will support Kerry whereas 7% may go for Bush in the next presidential elections.

The writer is a Special UN Ambassador for Families, Professor of Law & Foreign Affairs and a practicing senior lawyer in the US, UK and Pakistan.