

Changing the Political reality

Thursday Reflections (Feb 25-2016)
Dr. Hamid Slimi

Reading articles and watching countless clips here and there of the recent political debates in the US one would wonder how prepared and organized are the American Muslims for the upcoming presidential elections on Nov 08 of this year. Although the number of Muslims in America is very small and around 1 to 2% of the general US population – according to PEW Research Center 3.3 Million and according to some Muslim sources 6 Million – this small minority must be ready and more importantly fully engaged in politics and cannot afford to sit back and watch. There is a lot of work to be done and although making du'a and praying is good, it is not enough to change one's reality. Everything is possible and this why faith is needed to give us assurance that in spite of all the negativities one should never lose hope that things can change including any political reality we face anywhere and any time.

More than ever before, political involvement is vital especially when your faith is questioned, you are unknown and always considered as an alien even if you are native and born in the country or no matter how much you try to integrate yourself, reach out and build bridges. Unfortunately Islam and Muslims are increasingly seen as a potential source of trouble in the present and near future especially after Sep 11, 2001 disastrous events, Fort Hood shootings and the recent San Bernardino horrific killings. For a minority that is seen as a potential source of worry for the nation, it is quite challenging in spite of the fact that many Muslim leaders and organizations have been working tirelessly to present an authentic and positive image of Islam and Muslims not only by words, lectures and conferences but also by media contribution, pop culture, social activism and involvement in grass root efforts to address poverty, education and community issues. However, having said, that the image of Islam and Muslims still remains more unfavorable and negative by Americans compared to other faith groups (see <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/07/16/how-americans-feel-about-religious-groups/>). This survey asked Americans to rate members of eight religious groups on a “feeling thermometer” from 0 to 100, where 0 reflects the coldest, most negative possible rating and 100 the warmest, most positive rating. Overall, Americans rated Muslims

rather coolly – an average of 40, which was comparable to the average rating they gave atheists (41). Americans view the six other religious groups mentioned in the survey (Jews, Catholics, evangelical Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and Mormons) more warmly.

The study also compared Republicans to Democrats and found that the former gave Muslims an average rating of 33 compared to the latter who gave 47. The reason of this difference is the concern of Republicans about the rise of Islamic extremism in the world (83% vs. 53%) and in the U.S. (65% vs. 38%) (<http://www.people-press.org/2015/12/15/views-of-governments-handling-of-terrorism-fall-to-post-911-low/>)

The survey also found that Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say that Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence among its believers (68% vs. 30% of Democrats) and that Muslims should be subject to more scrutiny than people of other religions (49% vs. 20%). Overall, most Americans (61%) say Muslims should *not* be subject to additional scrutiny solely because of their religion.

According to another recent survey following San Bernardino shootings on Dec 02, 2015, 46% say the Islamic religion is more likely than others to encourage violence among its believers; about as many (45%) say the Islamic religion does not encourage violence more than other religions. About two-thirds (68%) of Republicans say Islam is more likely to encourage violence, little changed from September 2014 (67%). In contrast, the share of Democrats associating Islam with violence has declined 12 percentage points since last year, from 42% to 30%.

Muslim minorities in America or in any other parts of the world must not only build good relations with faith leaders and faith groups but also be engaged in different political parties and contribute not only financially but also by correcting ideas and perceptions within the circles of a specific party. We may criticize any political leader all day long but how much effort have we put to reach out to him/her? We may want to oppose those who oppose us from the inception but have we found out why they do so? We should not always assume that because

they belong to a certain party they are by default against Islam and Muslims. This assumption is unfortunately the most popular amongst minorities – including Muslim minorities – when they take one political stance against one specific party and lose the opportunity to change and influence.

The concept of Da'wah (invitation to learning about Islam) is not restricted only to faith matters and information about Islam and Muslims, but it extends to building good and healthy relations that are based on respect in spite of differences, cooperation on fundamental issues including but limited to peace and justice issues, human dignity and the rights and freedoms of every citizen regardless of political affiliations and policies.

These recent political debates only reflect how unfortunately many politicians - except a few - would say and do anything to attract voters even if they know it is against a minority group endangering thereby its very existence and the fundamental rights and freedoms of its members. When asked whether they knew a Muslim person or read about Islam, many republicans or those who tend to support their ideas about Islam and Muslims said they never met a Muslim in their life and most of what they know about Islam is from television, movies, internet or from their religious groups.

Lastly, in the light of the abovementioned words let us all reflect on the following Qur'anic verses and make the intention as Muslims to live and practice these great teachings that make wonders in our lives and can change our realities to much better ones:

[Who is better in speech than one who invites (people) to Allah, works righteousness, and says, "I am one of the Muslims"? Nor can Goodness and Evil be equal. Repel (Evil) with what is better: then will he between whom and you was hatred become as it were your best and closest friend! And no one will be granted such goodness except those who exercise patience and self-restraint none but persons of the greatest good fortune.] (41:33-5)