

Civil Society and Political Participation

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Introduction

Active engagement in civil society is a basic duty in Islam. Our faith emphasises that this duty must be fulfilled through dialogue and collaborative effort based on mutual respect and tolerance. To be a nation truly representative of its people we must listen to each other and to learn how to work together to fulfil our collective potential and realise the strengths of our diversity. Though many British Muslims demonstrate their ethic of civic duty through their record of public service, especially in local government, as well as in the host of local organisations and charitable bodies, we feel that more can and should be done in the field of political participation. Muslims are willing and capable of contributing in the highest public and civic institutions of the country. It is a matter of priority for the whole society that they are invited and encouraged to do so.

As the Secretary General of the **Muslim Council of Britain**, I am proud to announce that it is committed to play a constructive role in building a nation full of diversity, a nation able to appreciate shared values, acknowledge common interests and build inclusive communities through collective endeavour. In many respects the needs and aspirations of Britain’s Muslim community are no different from those of our fellow citizens. Concerns about health and education, national prosperity, strong public infrastructure and good public services are common to us all. From our diverse backgrounds and beliefs we can make common cause to achieve a better Britain for everyone.

Britain’s Muslims are predominantly young, and more of them are born and raised in Britain. Their parents come from many ethnic backgrounds and cultures with a rich diversity of heritages. A ‘community of communities’, British Muslims have been, and are, united through strong ties of faith identity that transcends ethnic boundaries. It is the moral and ethical principles of their faith that urges them to be concerned and responsible citizens and active participants in the life of their nation.

Our National Life

The MCB aspires for a more inclusive society whose shared values are shaped through the participation of people of all faith and none. We dream of a society that accepts and appreciates the contributions of the diverse cultures of all its citizens. We work for a compassionate and caring society, one where no groups are left behind through disadvantage and discrimination. Muslims are eager to play their part in bringing about this vision.

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Towards a More Cohesive Society

Integration is a vital aspect of building a cohesive society. Muslims have been actively pursuing integration. For instance, for last several years, **Islam Awareness Week** organised by our affiliates has provided a focus for Muslims across Britain to open their mosques, their community centres, their homes and, above all, their hearts, in order to build friendships, trust and mutual respect with their neighbours.

Such local, regional and national endeavours are a necessary but not sufficient element in building community cohesion. Significant structural barriers remain that must be tackled by public authorities and government initiatives. In reality, there are too many Muslims who are disadvantaged, excluded and alienated.

Political Representation

A representative democracy and its institutions need to reflect the diversity of its people. We want greater representation than just the current four (Labour) Muslim Members of Parliament. The main political parties must realise they can not continue to allocate only unwinnable seats to their Muslim candidates. We welcome the appointment of Muslims to the reformed Upper House but that number should also increase with time. Muslims are still greatly under-represented, leading to a perception and reality of disenfranchisement. This is the case not only in Parliament but also in other areas of public life.

Public appointments should reflect the diverse nature of our country. We are concerned that talented, qualified British Muslims – women and younger people being among them – are not having proper opportunities to bring their dynamism to our public life. All political parties should set targets to ensure that all relevant public bodies contain appropriate representation of ethnic and faith minorities on their boards.

To play its part, the Muslim Council of Britain is prepared to work with all parties on practical initiatives aimed at increasing representation, identifying people to participate on public bodies, creating shadowing and mentoring programmes that develop a pool of competent people and generate better connections between the grassroots of the community and our national and public institutions.

Human Rights

Parts of the Muslim community experience some of the highest levels of discrimination and disadvantage. All key indicators point to an unacceptable level of exclusion of Muslims, particularly the young. There have been, for example, well-documented cases of anti-Muslim discrimination in the workplace and in many there seems to be an unseen glass-ceiling, frustrating their efforts to progress through the ranks.

The Muslim community welcomes some incremental steps taken to tackle discrimination. The creation of a single equality commission needs to provide the required institutional support for all citizens, including British Muslims, to benefit from equality of opportunity and to fulfil their potential. This can only be done by taking into full account the needs of our communities, in its leadership, priorities, effectiveness, expertise and staffing.

Coercion is contrary to the Muslim code of conduct, whether in public or family matters. Forced marriages are therefore un-Islamic and a violation of human rights. This is however a sensitive area requiring thoughtful handling and a joint approach between government and the communities themselves. To ensure successful outcomes, we urge Government to consult thoroughly with relevant stakeholders before considering any further action, particularly legislation.

Faith Identity and Service Provision

Many Muslims would like to be identified on the basis of their religion – not just ethnicity. Though ethnicity does play an important role, but the rightful place of a faith-based identity needs to be recognised. Census (2001) has demonstrated the need for a more equitable allocation of public services and provide baselines for monitoring representation and social exclusion.

I strongly feel that as a natural consequence of the Human Rights Act 1998 and the law prohibiting discrimination on grounds of religion, monitoring of faith identity should be made compulsory in all public services. This will not only ensure the eradication of discrimination but also help plan for a more equitable allocation of public services. Faith-based voluntary sector organisations should be given fair access to resources and not penalised due to their religious ethos.

Voluntary Sector

I have no doubt that all parties recognise that faith-based voluntary organisations provide a valuable contribution to society, providing practical help and advice to disadvantaged groups. In London alone, the *Muslim Directory* lists over 250 Muslim charities and social and welfare organisations, including some 30 Muslim women's projects. Yet, the Government's approach to Muslim voluntary organisations put them in a double bind: they are unable to benefit because of religious and conscientious barriers to accepting lottery funding; and, as faith based organisations, they are denied government funding because of the absence of a race element in their work. Added to these is new paranoia of tying up all funding, especially in case of Muslim organisations, with what came to be known as 'preventing extremism agenda'. In my view religion should not be used as a justification to hinder good work already underway, and we feel that, these bodies should be given greater access to alternative and equivalent funding.

Muslims Should not be treated as 'Conditional - Britons'

Political parties should be responsible and avoid using the issues of immigration and asylum for political gain. The issue should be debated in a responsible manner avoiding the headline grabbing sensationalism. Such tactics increase the sense of insecurity of British citizens, and makes second and third generation Muslims feel like conditional Britons. It directly contributes to long-term feelings of exclusion and to division.

Education

Religion is a positive academic motivator. For Muslims, education is both an individual responsibility and a sacred duty laid on the community as a whole. Muslims seek educational environments that are infused with values that promote respect for teachers, good discipline,

respect and tolerance for others and care for the physical environment of schools. These are shared values and common concerns. Muslim parents should come forward to work with and for state schools where the vast majority of Muslims send their children. However, the greatest problem is the continuing under-achievement of Muslim students, a tragic waste of human potential. We need to go into the root of this problem in order to find a long-term solution.

The Government should commit itself to eliminating the gap in educational attainment levels between different faith groups and the national average within the next ten years. For this, targeted initiatives aimed at improving parental involvement in education are required. The National Curriculum should be culturally inclusive, which will reflect the heritage of pupils from diverse range of cultures, thus promoting tolerance and understanding.

There is important for an equality of treatment for Muslims in the provision of State funding for Muslim schools. There also needs to be much greater emphasis on promoting life-long learning to Muslim adults in order to tackle poor skills levels, enhance integration and improve employability. Initiatives, such as targeted recruitment and Shari'ah-compliant student loans, can help remove barriers for students to enter a wider range of courses in higher education.

Employment

British Muslims are proud of the role they play in promoting the prosperity of the nation. In business as well as across a range of professions in the public, private and voluntary sectors, the contribution of Muslims is strong and growing. Many Muslim immigrants came to Britain to fill the critical shortage in our labour market.

Anti-terrorism Legislation

In the current situation, we need to engage in reasoned debate and take measured response to actual or likely threats to the security of our country. If we fail in this challenge we risk more enduring damage to the essential values of our national life and community relations than any terrorist could plot. The measures contained in recent Anti-Terror legislations contradict with human rights. The House of Commons' Home Affairs Committee in its Terrorism and Community Relations report (6 April 2005) noted that 'Muslims perceive that they are being stigmatised by [anti-terror] legislation'. The MCB believes that it is more than a matter of 'perception'. The report also finds 'overwhelming evidence' that the media exerted 'a powerful and often negative impact' on public attitudes towards British Muslims and that 'representatives of the media appeared unaware or dismissive of this.' This is a call for more balanced and responsible journalism.

Recent years have seen the characterisation of British Muslims as a 'problem community' in much of the media and through statements made by some in the government and police. These have contributed to a growing anti-Muslim climate in the UK.

We oppose the effort of the government to increase detention without trial up to 42 days. The proposed extension is not the solution.

Encouraging Integration

Young Muslims are finding it difficult to integrating into the British society, which is leading them into alienation and disillusionment. Therefore, measures ought to be taken to eradicate such barriers like the discriminatory allocation of resources at a local level, the failure to recognise the importance of the Islamic faith to young Muslims, and the persistence of negative stereotypes in the media and politics. As the debate on our national identity intensifies, young Muslims, like everyone else, need the space and encouragement to formulate their own reference to Britishness. The debate as it stands – imposed by the media and certain politicians, stifles the ability to discover one's own national identity.

Poverty & Low Income

Britain's Muslims are identified consistently as one of the most disadvantaged communities in Britain. Compared with the rest of the population, Muslims are three times more likely to be unemployed, the least likely to have a qualification and over three times more likely to live in the ten most deprived local authorities. Though significant improvements have been made in reducing poverty and social exclusion in recent years, the government's Social Exclusion Unit shows that such improvements have not been equally shared by all disadvantaged communities. In fact, the government statistics, together with a succession of studies from various organisations make for sombre reading.

Housing & Neighbourhoods

Many British Muslims are concentrated in urban areas, often in neighbourhoods suffering multiple sources of deprivation, where they disproportionately experience poor environments and living conditions and exclusion from life chances.

Faith-oriented organisations have made a significant impact in addressing housing, regeneration and social inclusion issues. However, the government should ensure that the Muslim community's specific needs are addressed through mainstream policies. The government needs to ensure that housing and regeneration policies recognise diversity and address the needs of the Muslim community.

Media

The media is a powerful agent in shaping attitudes and beliefs. The media is a gatekeeper with enormous power to affect the way in which national debates are borne and driven. It can either enable us to talk to each other and come to know each other better, or promote division that will work to the detriment of us all. We seek to work with the media, not through a culture of complaint and antagonism, but through a pro-active and constructive relationship. Unfortunately, some section of the British media has not helped in the integration, rather they continue to demonise Islam and Muslims whenever there is an issue related to Islam. This has increased Islamophobia to a large extent.

International Affairs

The British Muslim community is a microcosm of the world. Its members have connections with people, cultures and languages which are now spread all over the world. The Muslim community can help Britain build bridges with crucial regions to serve our national interests. This input has never been more needed since Britain is now looked negatively in the

international arena through its involvement in the Iraq War, which was on the basis of dubious intelligence.

The responses to the attacks of 9/11 and 7/7 mark the beginning of a new era in British foreign policy, the backwash of which profoundly affects community relations at home. We urgently need to reflect on the policies we have been pursuing and re-define our course to reflect consistent principles of morality and justice in international relations. We should work for the democratisation of the institutions and agencies of the international system, beginning with reform of the UN Security Council, and the equally unrepresentative voting rights of the IMF and the World Bank. These institutions should be given the necessary capability to ensure that we do not live in a uni-polar world.