

Muslims to join national voter registration effort

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By Steve Freeman / Special Contributor to the Arlington Morning News

There are no federal or state Muslim officeholders.

Among the Arlington/DFW area's 100,000 Muslims, only about 10,000 are registered voters, said Syed Ahsani, chairman of the southwest region's American-Muslim Political Coalition.

"We tell them we have to be part of the system, we must vote, we have to improve the system - vote and don't just be a bystander," said Dr. Ahsani, an Arlington resident.

Friday may signal a shift for Muslims. The day is set aside nationally for Muslims to begin registering their own to vote in the Nov. 7 presidential election.

Following the worship time of prayers and readings of the sacred Koran, leaders at Arlington's Islamic mosques will join their brethren across the country and distribute voter registration cards.

"We have a long way to go" in getting involved in the political process, said Sakinah James, an Arlington resident who attends Dar Eleiman Mosque, 5511 Mansfield Drive.

In succeeding weeks, volunteers also will staff phone banks and call Muslim residents and business owners to encourage voter registration.

Hasan Ali of Arlington plans a low-key effort at the 500-member Islamic Society of Arlington, 100 Medina Drive.

"We'll make an announcement and they will pick up the cards, but the significance is still important," said Mr. Ali, chairman of the mosque's board of trustees.

"The Koran encourages Muslims to be productive in the community . . . but if we are not a part of the system, how can we be?"

Muslims hope to gain political strength through voting, said Dr. Ahsani, a former ambassador for Pakistan who will head the local phone bank effort.

Muslims say they have the same concerns as other Americans: taxation, education, the economy, medical care, human rights, family values and foreign policy.

Dr. Ahsani said more Muslims are becoming naturalized citizens, and as their numbers grow, their political power can increase.

"Now that we are getting settled, we feel we're being left behind and not getting our fair share," Dr. Ahsani said.

Just 50 Muslim delegates participated in the Democratic convention, and 10 were active in the Republican gathering, Dr. Ahsani said.

Based on their population, Dr. Ahsani believes, 144 Muslims should have served as delegates for the Democrats, and 72 for the GOP.

"This is an evolutionary process, and we are following in the same tracks as African-Americans and Hispanics," he said.

Many immigrant Muslims are unfamiliar with the democratic process, Dr. Ahsani said. The newcomers' priorities often revolve around economic survival rather than political participation, he said.

Among Muslim worshipers at Arlington mosques are immigrants from Pakistan, India, Iran, Syria, Iraq and countries in Africa.

"We have many first-time voters who are leery of government because of dictatorships that exist in the countries they came from," said Mouffa Nahhas, vice president of Dar Elsalam Mosque, 740 E. Lamar Blvd.

Leaders say Muslims have strong views on certain issues, but do not tend to vote based on single issues.

As a group, many are pro-life, opposed to intolerance and discrimination and favor a foreign policy that respects freedom of religion for Muslims, Mr. Ali said.

Muslims are concerned about several political developments, Dr. Ahsani said.

Both political parties support the relocation of the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a move that Muslims fear could tilt the scales of balance against them in the city revered by three great religions, he said.

Also, the Secret Evidence Repeal Act has stalled at the U.S. House Committee level. That bill would repeal a section of the 1996 Anti-Terrorism Act allowing the government to withhold evidence against a suspect because revealing the information would be a threat to national security.

Many Muslims believe the secret evidence policy is unconstitutional and used disproportionately against Muslims and Arab-Americans, Dr. Ahsani said.

Muslims also are watching political officeholders more since the defeat of House Resolution 174 last year. It was passed by the Senate, but the House Judiciary Committee

rejected the Anti-Muslim Intolerance and Discrimination Resolution, citing pressure from other religious groups.

The resolution came about after Muslims initially were falsely blamed for the bombing of the Murrah Federal Office Building in Oklahoma City in April 1995. That tragedy spawned hate crimes against Muslims, who responded by mobilizing.

Dr. Ahsani said American Muslims are peace-loving, law-abiding residents and that instances of terrorism around the world are caused by radical Islamic fundamentalists, a minority sect of the faith.

"The Koran says that to kill one man is to kill all of mankind," Dr. Ahsani said. "Terrorism is not at all sanctioned by Islam."

The quest for political clout for Muslims began a decade ago when national leaders recognized no grassroots support existed for speaking out on issues that affected them.

Although no Muslim holds federal or state offices, leaders say they hope the time is coming when American Muslims will be elected to political offices and garner respect as a voting bloc.

Registering voters the next few weeks takes initial steps toward those goals, Dr. Ahsani said.

To Muslims, the mosque is a convenient place for voter registration.

"We believe politics and religion are part of the same process, that what we do in the first world is preparation for the world hereafter," Dr. Ahsani said.