

Muslim's Election Is Celebrated Here and in Mideast

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR
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SAN FRANCISCO, Nov. 9 — Keith Ellison wore his religion lightly on the campaign trail, mentioning it only when asked.



Eric Miller/Reuters
Keith Ellison, speaking in Minneapolis, said Thursday that he would serve "from a standpoint of improving the quality of civil and human rights for all people in America." Mr. Ellison celebrated with his wife, Kim.

But Muslims across America, and even overseas, celebrated his election Tuesday as the first Muslim in Congress, representing Minnesota's Fifth District in the House of Representatives, as a sign of acceptance and a welcome antidote to their faith's sinister image.

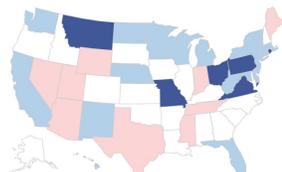
"It's a step forward; it gives the Muslims a little bit of a sense of belonging," said Osama A. Siblani, the publisher of The Arab American News, a weekly in Dearborn, Mich., a state with one of the heaviest concentrations of Muslims. "It is also a signal to the rest of the world that America has nothing against Muslims. If we did, he wouldn't have been elected."

Mr. Ellison's success was front-page news in several of the Arab world's largest newspapers and high in the lineup on television news programs.

Few of his supporters expect Mr. Ellison, a 43-year-old criminal defense lawyer who converted to Islam as a 19-year-old college student, to effect any policy shifts in areas of concern to Muslim Americans, particularly when it comes to foreign policy and civil rights.

Mr. Siblani joked that even if all 28 new Democrats were Muslims, it is unlikely they would be able to sway the way Congress invariably votes in support of Israel. But many Muslims believe that just having a Muslim perspective around can make some difference.

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"Congress needs to reflect the diversity of America, and that means its vibrant religious diversity as well," said Farhana Khera, the executive director of the National Association of Muslim Lawyers and a former senior Senate staff member. "It's good to have diverse voices on the House floor, in committees and caucus meetings. It is good for the country to have different views aired, especially when the primary national issues relate to Islam and affect Muslims in this country and Muslims overseas."

In a telephone interview, Mr. Ellison, who will also be the first black to represent Minnesota in the House, said his faith was particularly helpful in galvanizing the large community of Somali immigrants in his district, but the overall impact was difficult to assess. "For some people, it might have been a problem and other people it was a bonus," Mr. Ellison said, noting that the campaign had received a fair amount of nasty e-mail and

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telephone calls denigrating Islam.

He said that his priority was to represent his district, but that he hoped to do it in a way that touched a wider swath of Americans.

"I think a lot of Muslims feel highly vulnerable and feel that they are under a tremendous amount of scrutiny," he said when asked if he felt he was wearing a particular mantle, of representing Muslim interests. "I am going to do it from a standpoint of improving the quality of civil and human rights for all people in America."

Many Muslim American activists hope Mr. Ellison will inspire other Muslims to run for office, some even comparing his candidacy to [John F. Kennedy's](#) breaking the taboo against a Roman Catholic's being president.

"I think it has inspired American Muslims," said Adeeba Al-Zaman, 23, who flew from her home in Philadelphia to Minneapolis to volunteer to work in the last few days of Mr. Ellison's campaign. "The fact that he won will probably motivate other Muslims that we have a shot and we matter and we are a part of the fabric of this society and we should be engaged because we have a chance."

Ms. Al-Zaman also noted that with Mr. Ellison in office, Muslims would seem more normal, and that Congress and all Americans would see that "we care about things like health care and education and everything else that all Americans care about."

The sense of vindication is even stronger because Mr. Ellison was attacked on religious grounds by his Republican opponent, Alan Fine. In September, Mr. Fine said that as a Jew he was personally offended by Mr. Ellison's past support for [Louis Farrakhan](#), the leader of the radical group [Nation of Islam](#).

Mr. Ellison denied any link to Mr. Farrakhan and reached out to Jews, eventually gaining some endorsements from Jewish groups.

In the end, Mr. Ellison won 56 percent of the vote in his district, a Democratic stronghold that covers much of downtown Minneapolis and its immediate suburbs. Mr. Fine took 21 percent, as did Tammy Lee of the [Independence Party](#). The incumbent, Martin Olav Sabo, is retiring

Attacks on Mr. Ellison's religion helped galvanize Muslim Americans nationally, with supporters raising money from Florida to Michigan to California. His supporters were quick to point out that they backed Mr. Ellison not simply because he was a Muslim, but also because of his progressive platform, which included calls for universal health insurance and a withdrawal of forces from Iraq, and because he was running a positive campaign.

Mr. Ellison's victory was widely noted in the larger Muslim world. The day after the election, it was the third headline mentioned on [Al Jazeera](#), the most popular satellite news channel in the Middle East, right after a report that 18 Palestinian civilians had been killed by Israeli artillery in the Gaza Strip and a report on the overall Democratic sweep in the elections.

The news garnered a rich variety of comments from Arab readers on the Web site of Al Arabiya, a satellite news channel based in Dubai. "God willing in the next election, half of Congress will be from the rational Muslims," wrote one reader, while another said, "May God make this the beginning of victory for Muslims on the very ground of the despots."

A third wrote, "We pray to God that you will be successful and will move forward in improving the image of Islam and the Muslims."

Arab news reports highlighted the fact that Mr. Ellison would probably take the oath of office on the Koran, something which also upset Muslim-bashers in the blogosphere. Some suggested it meant he would pledge allegiance to Islamic law rather than to upholding the Constitution.



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Mr. Ellison said he had not really thought about the swearing-in ceremony and had tried to keep the campaign focused on issues rather than his religion.

Mona el Naggat contributed reporting from Cairo.

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