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# Muslims Strive for Tolerance -- and Votes

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Mukit Hossain has been up since 5 a.m., crisscrossing Northern Virginia in his tiny 10-year-old pickup truck to help turn out the Muslim vote in a presidential campaign that has left many Muslims feeling marginalized. He has stopped five times to pray in the truck, which is covered with political bumper stickers. One says "We Need Syeed" -- Afeefa Syeed, a candidate for [Loudoun County](#) supervisor -- and he thinks that may be one reason a state trooper stopped him last week and asked all kinds of personal questions before giving him tickets for a cracked windshield and not wearing his seat belt.

As he heads up Interstate 395, Hossain says his best investment last year was the GPS device that tells him how to get where he's going. The only advice the voice does not give is where to go to escape the suspicion many Muslims encounter -- suspicion that follows a man to his job and his children to their schools, lives with his family on their street, hangs over him as he tries to participate in a democratic society.

The sun is high and the air cold when he pulls into the Muslim American Society Center in Alexandria to meet with Ibrahim Ramey, director of its civil rights division. Ramey, a Virginia native who converted to Islam, sees an anti-Muslim sentiment running through the campaign season.

Republicans spread a false rumor that [Barack Obama](#), whose middle name is Hussein and whose paternal grandfather was Muslim, is secretly a Muslim himself; Obama, a church-going Christian, denied it, and many said he did not go far enough in denouncing the racism behind the claim. At a rally, [John McCain](#) corrected a supporter, saying Obama is not an Arab but a family man.

"There is a subtext of extreme distrust that filters in the mainstream," Ramey says, "that Muslims are not patriotic. That Muslims are unworthy of trust. The comments generally tend to underscore an element of deep racism and xenophobia in the political establishment. Sometimes, it's spoken openly. Sometimes, it is spoken in code."

"The rhetoric of anti-Muslim sentiment has become more acceptable in public gatherings and in the right-wing media," Hossain says. "It has made Muslims very, very concerned that there is a rekindling of the post 9/11 paranoia," when many Muslims were detained for questioning simply for being Muslim and many more feared being attacked in the streets.

So Hossain, a Bangladeshi immigrant who laughs when he tells you he has just bought a farm in rural Virginia "where the real Americans live," organizes. The 48-year-old dictates news releases. He distributes get-out-the-vote literature. He gives speeches at mosques. He calls taxi drivers, promising monetary help for those who take time Tuesday to get people to the polls.

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"Many of the Muslims who came to this country came from countries where voting was a dangerous and dirty thing to do," Hossain says. "We have to convince them that voting is not only safe and clean, but it is a civic responsibility."

In the center parking lot, he hands Obama volunteer David Kirshbaum, 53, a stack of yellow cards printed with a mild endorsement of the candidate by the Virginia Muslim Political Action Committee: "Muslim Americans were upset that Senator Obama, when called a Muslim by fear and hate mongering bigots, failed to make a principled stand . . . by not asking what's wrong in being a Muslim anyway while he asserted his own faith. However . . . now that has become a target of racial slurs and pejorative epithets, it is incumbent on us to make the same principled stand we had asked of him. We must challenge the politics of bigotry and divisiveness."

It took [Colin Powell](#), a Republican, to break the tension.

"Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this country?" Powell said last month on "[Meet the Press](#)." "The answer's 'no.' Yet, I have heard senior members of my own party drop the suggestion, 'He's a Muslim, and he might be associated with terrorists.' This is not the way we should be doing it in America."

Powell's public plea was a salve to the Muslim community.

"It was brilliant. It was courageous. I was extremely proud of General Powell," Rep. Keith Ellison (D-Minn.), the first Muslim elected to Congress, said in a telephone interview. "He said something people were waiting to hear. I think it is important in America for a 7-year-old, whether Muslim or Christian or Jewish. He or she should think they could be president. This is the land of opportunity. Powell talked about a soldier losing his life. Talked about the photo on the son's grave. That there was not a cross or a Star of David at the top, but a crescent, an Islamic symbol. When he talked about that, I had to wipe away a tear."

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Last week, a DVD entitled "Obsession: Radical Islam's War Against the West" was sent to voters in battleground states, showing images of children reciting calls for jihad.

"We are getting calls from all over the country saying, 'My friends, co-workers

and neighbors got copies of the DVD, and I'm afraid they would have very negative feelings toward me and my family,' " said Ibrahim Hooper, a spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations in Washington. "Can you imagine receiving a hate-filled DVD that demonizes your faith and you being the only Muslim on the block? How would that make you feel?"

The council recommends that Muslims who have received the mailing simply have conversations with friends and neighbors who also received it. "Our research shows that prejudice goes down when people meet an ordinary Muslim, like the bus driver, the physician, the checkout person at the local [Wal-Mart](#)," he says. "Anybody you interact with or see as an ordinary American, but they happen to be Muslim."

Ahmed Rehab, executive director of CAIR in Chicago, says the DVD is one more example of the way "Muslims and Arabs have become political lepers." Another was the statement made by McCain a few weeks ago when he took the microphone away from a woman at one of his rallies after she said she didn't like Obama because "he is an Arab." "No," McCain said, "He is a good, decent family man."

Ahmed said he knows McCain did not intend to say that "a decent man is not an Arab. . . . I know that is not what he meant because that is too obscene."

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Hossain's next stop is a [McDonald's](#) on Little River Turnpike, but he is late, and the student organizer he was supposed to meet has left. Hossain goes inside and orders a fish sandwich, fries and a soda. He does not want it super-size. "After the election," he says, "I will stop eating junk food for a while." (A [BBC](#) reporter recently did a short segment on Hossain and the dangers of being politically active and described Hossain as short with the "beginning" of a paunch.)

In his home country, he witnessed poverty, hunger and famine. In the United States, for the first time, he heard people making jokes about famine. He came to this country to attend Duke and graduated with degrees in philosophy, mathematics and economics. Now he is a telecommunications consultant between jobs.

Underneath, he says, he is a human rights activist, fighting not just for Muslims but for other ethnic groups, which share a common experience, facing discrimination in a society that seems to not want "otherness," no matter what that looks like.

"Over the last eight years, whatever the ugly underbelly of society used to be has become more public and acceptable," Hossain says. "Presidential candidates have not been immune to that. It's acceptable to make racial slurs and not flinch about it. I hope whoever the next president is makes a tremendous effort to

bring back basic decency. . . . This 'us versus them' sentiment is very powerful in terms of winning elections. But it may be equally fatal for building a civil society."

His cellphone rings. His next appointment is with Abdul Hashem Ahamed, 48, a Herndon taxi driver who will drink tea with Hossain at a [Starbucks](#) in McLean, where he also manages a [7-Eleven](#). He will agree to take Muslim voters to the polls Tuesday.

But before Hossain sets out for their meeting, he steps into the McDonald's parking lot and excuses himself. For 15 minutes or so, he sits in his truck, eyes closed, head bowed, lips moving, an American Muslim in a baseball cap praying between campaign stops.

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