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US Muslim voters are election year outcasts

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The Associated Press
Thursday, October 23, 2008; 4:29 PM

-- Lepers. Untouchables. Politically radioactive.

These are ways American Muslims describe their status in an election year when Barack Obama's opponents are spreading rumors that he is Muslim, when he is Christian, and linking him to terrorists.

So when Colin Powell, a Republican, condemned using Muslim as a smear _ a tactic he said members of his own party allowed _ there was an outpouring of gratitude and relief from American Muslims.

"That speech really came out of left field and really shocked us," said Wajahat Ali, 27, an attorney and playwright from Fremont, Calif. "The sense is that it's about time. He said something that needed to be said."

The retired general, who was President Bush's first secretary of state, made the comments on NBC's "Meet the Press," as he broke with his party to endorse the Democratic nominee for president. Powell noted in last Sunday's broadcast that Republican John McCain did not spread rumors about Obama's faith, but Powell said he was "troubled" that others did.

"The correct answer is, he is not a Muslim, he's a Christian. He's always been a Christian. But the really right answer is, what if he is? Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this country? The answer's no, that's not America," Powell said. "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 said he felt especially strongly about the rumors because of a photo he saw in The New Yorker magazine of the mother of a Muslim soldier in Arlington Cemetery embracing her son's grave, which was marked with a Muslim crescent and star. The soldier, Kareem R. Khan of New Jersey, was 20 when he was killed in Iraq.

"We American Muslims have talked about our patriotism and the heroism of some American Muslims till we were blue in the face, and neither the media nor the people listen," said Seeme Hasan, a Pueblo, Colo., Republican whose family has given tens of thousands of dollars to the GOP.

"Gen. Powell made people listen and at a very humane level," said Hasan, who is backing McCain. "More people in leadership positions need to say this and recognize this _ that American Muslims have worked very hard to fight this war on terror."

The inaccurate claims that Obama is secretly Muslim started as soon as he was mentioned as a potential presidential candidate. There were false rumors that he was educated at a radical Islamic school as a child in Indonesia and that he was sworn into the Senate on the Quran.

His opponents emphasized his middle name _ Hussein _ and circulated a photo of him wearing traditional Somali garb on a 2006 visit to Kenya.

Kari Ansari, a mother of three from Villa Park, Ill., said the allegations upset her 10-year-old son.

"It sort of made him feel like, `If they won't elect him president just for trying on Muslim clothes, they will never elect me because I'm a real Muslim,'" said Ansari, a founder of America's Muslim Family, a quarterly magazine. "That's heartbreaking for us as Muslim parents."

Obama has combatted the claims in speeches and on a campaign Web site dedicated to debunking inaccuracies about him. But the belief persists.

A poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found 12 percent of voters believed the Illinois senator is Muslim. That poll was released Tuesday _ coincidentally, the same day the head of a New Mexico Republican women's group called Obama a "Muslim socialist" and said "Muslims are our enemies." County and GOP officials condemned the statements.

"Muslims feel jaded by the 2008 election precisely because they see the smearing of their identity," Ali said. "Muslim or Arab is seen as a scarlet letter, political leprosy, kryptonite. There is that taint there. We're the lowest of the low."

The experience isn't entirely new for American Muslims, who have struggled for acceptance in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The major parties have quietly courted them for years, yet presidential candidates have refused to publicly associate with them, leaders say.

The exact number of U.S. Muslim voters is not known. But many are wealthy professionals who came to the country to earn graduate degrees in engineering, medicine and business. They settled in significant numbers in key states including Michigan and Florida.

Presidential candidates "are not willing to have their photo taken, they don't meet with Muslim organizations, and they shy away from any issue that may link them to the Muslim community," said Salam al-Marayati, executive director of

the Muslim Public Affairs Council, a Los Angeles advocacy group leading a national Muslim voter registration campaign.

"We're treated as untouchables in politics," al-Marayati said.

Yet, this year has been especially painful because of the attacks on Obama.

Hesham Hassaballa, a physician and author from Chicago, said this month he formally left the GOP, partly because of the allegations.

Like many other Muslims, Hassaballa had joined the Republican Party because of its small-government philosophy, social conservatism and pledge to limit taxes. In 2000, he supported McCain in the primaries, then Bush in the final election. Four years later, he backed Democrat John Kerry for president, partly to protest Bush policies on detaining and interrogating terror suspects, but remained Republican.

Now, he says the party has abandoned its principles.

"The McCain of 2008 is not the McCain of 2000," Hassaballa said. "With the way the campaign has been going and a lot of the anti-Muslim rhetoric, just how the McCain campaign has conducted itself, just really turned me off."

The McCain campaign did not respond to requests for comment.

In defending himself, Obama has rejected the idea that being called Muslim is an insult. His campaign also has an outreach coordinator to the Muslim community.

Some American Muslims said they wished the Democratic nominee would say more forcefully that their religion should not be used as a smear, but said they understood that it could damage his presidential bid in this political climate.

"I don't think there could have been any better messenger than Colin Powell, being someone who is a well-respected Republican, a former secretary of state and an army general," said Arsalan Iftikhar, a Washington, D.C., civil rights lawyer and writer who supports Obama. "American Muslims feel slightly politically radioactive at this time. This sends a resounding message of inclusiveness."

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