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Among Young Muslims, Mixed Emotions on Obama

By [PAUL VITELLO](#)

It was easy for them to love the candidate. With the same passion, and for the same reasons that millions of other young people did, they loved [Barack Obama](#)'s call to activism, the promise of change, the sheer newness of the guy.

What was hard was feeling they could not show it because they were Muslims.

"I pretty much kept away, because I didn't want to appear with an Obama button and have people look at me and say: 'Oh, a Muslim girl supports him. Aha,'" said Sule Akoglu, a 17-year-old [New York University](#) freshman, who wears a head scarf.

Like just about all the Muslim students who gathered Wednesday night at the university's Islamic Center on the day after the election, Miss Akoglu described a mixture of delight and frustration at the successful campaign of the nation's first black president-elect.

He had run a great race, broken so many barriers, done so much right. Yet the persistent rumor that Mr. Obama was a Muslim had led his campaign to do things that the students found hurtful, they said. The campaign had dismissed a Muslim staff member for seemingly flimsy reasons. A campaign worker had shuttled two young Muslim women wearing head scarves out of the line of sight of TV cameras at a rally.

And the candidate known for his way with words had never said the words they waited for.

"In my community, people were saying to me, 'Who do we support?'" said Meherunnisa Jobaida, a journalism student from Queens. "The person who is making the stereotype? Or the person who is not defending us?"

The words defending them were finally spoken instead by former Secretary of State [Colin Powell](#), when he announced his support for Mr. Obama on Oct. 19. Answering a question about the candidate's faith, Mr. Powell said: "Well, 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 remark struck so profoundly, said the young Muslims at the meeting, that Mr. Obama's election — in which they thoroughly rejoiced — was like the icing on Mr. Powell's cake.

Lina Sayed, a Queens native and a recent N.Y.U. graduate now working in finance, said Mr. Powell's matter-of-fact articulation of an essential American principle lifted a sense of alienation that she had come to accept, and was almost unaware of.

“I forgot about the American dream,” she said. “I forgot that something like this was possible.”

The Islamic Center at N.Y.U. serves about 2,000 students who identify themselves as Muslim, offering activities like skating and bowling, as well as a place for religious instruction, daily prayers and regular meetings like the one on Wednesday night, where students are invited to come and talk.

Though a small sample, the views of the dozen students that night — most of them the American-born children of immigrants from South Asia and the Middle East — generally reflected the results of surveys and recent scholarship.

The Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, for example, recently found overwhelming support for Mr. Obama among the country’s estimated 2 million Muslim voters; and scholars like Jen’an Ghazal Read, a [Duke University](#) sociology professor who studies assimilation patterns among Muslims in the United States, has described the sense of resignation many Muslims felt at how the pejorative use of the word “Muslim” went unchallenged during most of the campaign.

“This is a very sober, mature voting population,” Professor Read said in a telephone conference call with reporters yesterday. “They understand the realities.”

Sufia Ashraf, a freshman pre-med student, voiced that sobriety: While disappointed by Mr. Obama’s failure to speak up for Muslims, she was willing to let it go. “I would rather Barack Obama win,” she said. “If he had said something like what Colin Powell said, he might have lost.”

Imam Khalid Latif, the Muslim chaplain who runs the N.Y.U. center, said that throughout the campaign students were “figuring out what it means to be a Muslim in America,” and that seven years after 9/11, young Muslims are still facing tricky questions in their every day lives. To wear a full beard, or trim it? Skull cap or baseball cap?

Ms. Sayed, the recent graduate, said two of her brothers who worked in the Obama campaign in Pennsylvania, both of them with “very Muslim names,” decided to do their door-to-door canvassing as “Alex” and “John.”

Among the students, many are children of small-business owners who supported Senator [John McCain](#). Many were schoolchildren on 9/11, taken by surprise by the taunting of their classmates, and even more surprised by the police security that became part of their daily school life for a while.

Miss Akoglu, the young woman who did not want to hurt Mr. Obama’s chances by campaigning for him wearing a head scarf, had made the religious commitment to wear a scarf, in fact, just the week before 9/11, when she was in the sixth grade. Though she received more attention by wearing it, and more grief, she has worn it ever since. (After Mr. Powell’s public remark, Miss Akoglu began wearing her Obama pin just to the side of the scarf. “That’s when I put it on,” she said.)

For all the apparent conditions placed on full participation in the political process, the students said, they were more optimistic about the future the day after the election than the day before.

The election proved that the promise of America is real, that the only barrier to participation is one's own inertia and that "now is the time for us to step up," said Haseeb Chowdhry, a senior at the university's Stern School of Business.

"We love this country. This country has an ability to change — that is its strength," he said.

The consensus among them about Mr. Obama (only one of those present had supported Mr. McCain) was partly generational, partly an identification with anyone saddled with a name like [Barack Hussein Obama](#), and partly a sense of common ground with another child of the world.

"He's grown up in Indonesia, in Hawaii, in the Midwest," said Mr. Chowdhry, whose family roots in Pakistan allowed him to grow up in two cultures. "The guy is a cosmopolitan. That's important for the future. To be able to understand that we are part of the larger world."

Mr. McCain's only supporter in the room, Jameel Merali, a junior studying hospitality management, said Mr. Obama's victory was a wonderful thing, though he still had reservations about his view of economics.

After explaining his understanding of Mr. Obama's view, and contrasting it with his own — using terms that college students taking economics courses might follow — Mr. Merali concluded that all in all the system of checks and balances would protect the nation against any intemperate economic decisions the next president might consider.

"That's the beauty of it," said Mr. Merali, who was born in Tanzania. "The way it was all set up by our founding fathers."

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