Getting Heard in America
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Hindus can learn from Muslims' political activism

Donna Abu-Nasr, Washington (AP)

Brahim Hooper travels around the country to teach Muslims how to make their voices heard, American style. For example, writing a letter to the editor to criticize a government policy won't land them in jail. Long-winded rhetoric will not help get their message across. Men who appear on TV talk shows will have to wear make-up, and no, it's not a feminine thing.

Hooper's work as national communications director at the Council on American Islamic Relations is part of a nationwide drive by American Muslims to become more assertive socially and politically as an ethnic and religious group. "Muslim political activism is still in its infancy. We have a lot of work to do," Hooper said. "It's not something that's going to happen overnight."

Yet, already, the efforts are paying off. The community, which American Muslim groups say numbers about 6 million, has gained visibility and recognition from top leaders that it didn't have just a few years ago. Building on that progress will be a topic of discussion as the Islamic Society of North America holds its 33rd annual convention in Columbus, Ohio, beginning

Friday under the banner of "Muslims for peace and justice."

The Muslim community is beginning to emerge now because of the influx of immigrants in the '60s that brought Muslims not only from the Middle East but also from the Far East, said James Zogby, who heads the Washington-based Arab-American Institute.

U.S. Rep. Tom Davis, R-Va., said, "They're getting a little bit more organized and we're starting to pay attention, and I think in America that's the pathway to power through the ballot box."

In his speech at the Republican convention, House Speaker Newt Gingrich, at the request of Muslims, added "mosque" when he mentioned "churches and synagogues." Calling Islam the fastest-growing religion in America, Hillary Rodham Clinton held a celebration in February--the first of its kind at the White House--to mark Eid el-Fitr, the Muslim feast that ends the fasting month of Ramadan.

And Rep. Joseph Kennedy apologized to the American Muslim Council in February for his use of the word "jihad." This central Islamic concept means the personal struggle to make oneself a better Muslim, but Muslim extremists use it to mean "holy war." Kennedy used the word to describe some Republicans as overzealous and extremist.

Even Warner Bros. will edit its movie, "Executive Decision,"

before its release in some countries in the Middle East and the Far East after the company met with Muslim and Arab organizations that complained the movie contained imagery offensive to Islam.

Hooper said most political progress is made from the bottom up, however. So he's teaching Muslims new to this country to shed their fear of standing up for their rights which could lead to persecution in their native countries.

He encourages Muslims to participate in local radio and TV talk shows to explain their religion to Americans and dispel some of the stereotypes and prejudices they face. He also encourages the community to open up its mosques and centers to the larger community.

"When we get a call that a mosque has been firebombed, very often we find that the community was very isolated--which breeds suspicion on the part of the larger community," Hooper said.

American Muslims are a diverse community--in addition to African-Americans, they include immigrants or descendants of immigrants from Asia and the Middle East. They don't vote as a homogeneous block. But Khaled Saffuri of the American Muslim Council said Muslims tend to vote overwhelmingly Republican because they support conservative stands on abortion, homosexuality and the death penalty.

Yet, he expects a "big shift" this year because the Clinton administration has shown "lots of respect" for the Muslim community, including a visit by Vice President Al Gore to a mosque in Washington, D.C. Davis said if the Muslim population "is smart they're going to have to play both parties because you don't want to get taken for granted by one party."

He said politicians will pay more attention to Muslims in the future "the more they become givers and become involved."

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