

Muslims seeking greater influence

Effort puts resumes of top candidates in White House hands

By Noreen S. Ahmed-Ullah

Tribune reporter

March 29, 2009

In a bid to get more Muslim Americans working in the Obama administration, a book with resumes of 45 of the nation's most qualified—Ivy League grads, Fortune 500 executives and public servants, all carefully vetted—has been submitted to the White House.

The effort, driven by community leaders and others, including Rep. Keith Ellison (D-Minn.), was bumped up two weeks ahead of schedule because White House officials heard about the venture, said J. Saleh Williams, program coordinator for the Congressional Muslim Staffers Association who sifted through more than 300 names.

"It was mostly under the radar," Williams said. "We thought it would put [the president] in a precarious position. We didn't know how closely he wanted to appear to be working with the Muslim American community."

The effort aims to get the administration focused on Muslim Americans, a group that has at times felt like a pariah. During the campaign, Obama's staff prevented Muslim women wearing head scarves from being photographed behind him, in one of many incidents that left Muslim Americans feeling slighted by the candidate.

Now, Muslim Americans—who according to a recent study overwhelmingly backed Obama in the November election—have been carefully watching the administration's every step.

Most expressed disappointment with Obama's initial silence during Israel's offensive in Gaza. They've been encouraged by the video message the president issued recently to the Iranian people on the eve of the Persian holiday of Nowruz, and they want more diplomacy with Syria and Iran. They've been troubled by FBI admissions of sending what activists call "agents provocateurs" into mosques, and the bureau's break in ties with Muslim American organizations such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

Community leaders hope the White House will consider Muslim Americans for posts in the administration. They say this is not just a chance for Muslim Americans to show their patriotism but also a chance for the country to engage the community

and recognize its importance. There are an estimated 7 million to 8 million Muslims in America, but there have not been any Muslims appointed to key positions, as yet.

A White House aide confirmed the Obama administration had received the resumes, noting that it is "not unusual" for the administration to consider lists of job candidates suggested by constituent groups.

"We're still very much in the middle of the [hiring] process, even when it comes to very senior government employees. These things take time, and they're all based on finding the right fit," said the aide, who declined to be identified because he is not authorized to speak publicly for the administration.

"Muslims are not looking for handouts," said Abdul Malik Mujahid, the Downers Grove founder of the Muslim Democrats, who points to Zalmay Khalilzad, tapped by former President George W. Bush for many key roles. "We're just looking for equal opportunity and inclusiveness. That will give a far better message to the Muslim world than speeches."

Eboo Patel, founder and executive director of the Chicago-based Interfaith Youth Core, said Muslims need to ask themselves what they can do for their country.

"While that question would have made many feel squeamish in the Bush administration, asking that question in the Obama administration should elevate us," said Patel, who was recently appointed to the president's advisory council on faith-based and neighborhood partnerships. "During the era of Obama, it feels right to ask and answer that question."

Many Muslims, such as Rami Nashashibi, executive director of the Inner-City Muslim Action Network in Chicago's Marquette Park area, are ready to serve.

He said he wants the administration to listen to activists on domestic issues such as housing or helping ex-offenders re-enter communities. Muslim Americans have a lot more to offer than just feedback on foreign policy or national security issues, Nashashibi said.

Obama is off to a good start, said Ellison, the first Muslim member of Congress—the second being Rep. Andre Carson (D-Ind.).

"He's done a lot, and I believe he will do more," Ellison said, adding that "I identify with the impatience. I want to see things happen faster."

Some hope Atty. Gen. Eric Holder will reverse Bush administration actions such as the FBI's decision to break formal ties with CAIR because it was named as an unindicted co-conspirator in the case involving the Texas-based Holy Land Foundation.

"We're hoping that once Eric Holder puts the department in order and places people in different positions, we can re-establish what were very positive relations [with the FBI] in our 15-year history," said CAIR spokesman Ibrahim Hooper.

Many Muslim American leaders are telling members of their community to remain realistic.

Obama is "not going to be a magicmaker," said Imad Hamad, Midwest director of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee in Michigan. "The chilling effects that this community has endured over the last eight years with the erosion of civil liberties will not end within the first six months of this administration. People are not going to witness a major switch in certain policies."

Tribune correspondent Mike Dorning contributed to this report from Washington.

nahmed@tribune.com

Copyright © 2009, Chicago Tribune