

Muslim Early Vote Day designated to mobilize the masses

By: Carmel Delshad

TAMPA—With the 2008 presidential race winding down, much concentration has been placed upon black and Hispanic voter turnouts. But one group has largely been excluded from the eyes of political pundits nationwide.

Muslims make up about 0.6 percent, or 1.8 million, of the American population, according to the CIA World Factbook.

Two Islamic groups, the Center for Voter Advocacy Foundation in South Florida and United Voices in Tampa, have made it their goal to increase the number of Muslim voters in Florida.

Saturday, October 25 was designated “Muslim Early Voter Day” all-across Florida, from Miami to Orlando to Tampa.

Since this election has brought Islam to the forefront of numerous controversies dealing with Democratic candidate Barack “Hussein” Obama—whose father is Muslim—many followers of the religion feel that designating a day for Muslims to vote will increase awareness of their religion.

Ahmed Bedier, founder of United Voices, said that creating a specific day for Muslims to vote was imperative in getting the community motivated.

“Since our community is a small minority, motivation is a major factor.

We designated a date to rally the community. Mobilizing the community was most difficult step. People are very busy with their lives and sometimes need to be invited several times before they start paying attention,” Bedier said.

The Center for Voter Advocacy Foundation (CVA) had similar goals with the onslaught of Muslim Early Voting day.

Farooq Mitha, CVA board member, believes that by engaging the Muslim community to assimilate into the ways of American democracy, they will be recognized as a strong political force in the future.

“We decided to sponsor this event so we could show that our community has a voice that needs to be heard in the political process. One good way to do that is to have people in our communities vote early and vote together. When we are seen doing this, we show that we have strength in numbers and it makes us a force to be reckoned with,” Mitha said.

According to Mitha, roughly 1,000 Muslims voted on Muslim Early Voting Day. United Voices has conflicting voter turnout numbers, stating that 1,500 voters came out on the designated day.

Politicos and pundits alike know that Florida is one of the key swing-states that will decide the election. Both McCain and Obama’s camps have placed Florida in the limelight as the main battleground for the presidency.

Mitha argues that even though the number of Muslims who voted early did not surpass the CVA’s goals, the number was still strong since the 2000 election was decided by roughly 500 votes.

Hillsborough County Supervisor of Elections Buddy Johnson was at the Temple Terrace Library during the early voting and commended the efforts to rally the Muslim community.

“It’s fabulous, it’s incredible. We are glad that every voter gets a chance to participate. To me, the reason it’s important is very simple: the election system is where we express our voice. And when all the voices, and the more voices that sing the song of democracy, the symphony is prettier. It’s better, it’s stronger and it’s more confident as the voice of America,” Johnson said.

Early voter Dyma Musallam-Abu Oleim, 28, views the voting process as an extension of her voice as an Arab-American during a time when Muslims are looked down upon.

“Absolutely it’s important for us to constantly participate in the election. We are American citizens; we are Muslims in this community. We always want to make sure our voices are heard, especially this year because of the negativity and using terrorism as a scare tactic and the fact that Barack “Hussein” Obama could be a Muslim—which he isn’t. They are using it as a negative. Well, so what if he is a Muslim? We are not negative people, we love this country just as much as a Christian or a Jew would. It’s important for us to stand up for ourselves by voting,” Abu Oleim said.

Both United Voices and CVA have enlisted the help of volunteers to spread the word on voting. Phone banking has been the main source of communication, with Facebook and mass e-mails set up as secondary means of outreach.

Humam Armashi, phone banker for CVA, records the statistics of the registered voters he has called.

“The vast majority of the people I have reached are worried about the economy, even putting foreign policy second. Calling people really helps the CVA get an idea of the trends among voters and specifically Muslim and Arab voters. We are trying to give them a voice, and this is the way to do it,” Armashi said.

Muslims of all ages came to vote, making the event a family affair, according to Bedier. Though there is a stronger push for the younger generation to vote, using means such as e-mail and Facebook, the turnout was split evenly among the ages.

“There is some apathy among Muslims, but I think our community votes in higher percentages than other constituency groups, however we have no way of showing this to various campaigns since we don’t do it in a cohesive manner and we don’t focus enough on strong get-out-the-vote efforts,” Mitha said.

“I think the Arab and Muslim community did not find top-ticket candidates much to be excited about previously. This is a historic election and the Arab/Muslim community can be a critical swing group,” Bedier said.

Lisa Montelione, Obama team leader in Hillsborough County, witnessed the turnout of Muslims at the Temple Terrace Library during the early voting.

“I think that the work in all of the counties proves that we can be solidified as a community, across boundary lines, across racial lines, across economic lines, to show that we are united. In this election, there has been a lot of undue attention in part because Barack Hussein Obama carries a name of a particular disenfranchised group who has been marginalized. I think that the emphasis on Barack’s connection with the Muslim community is seen by a lot of Americans as being a negative thing. Muslims are just another segment of society, like Puerto Ricans, blacks, Hispanics, and they make up our democracy. This [event] was a beautiful thing,” Montelione said.

The Muslim Early Voting Day was the first of its kind, according to Mitha. Its importance lies within the fact that Florida is a key state with numerous Muslims, and if all banded together, a shift could potentially occur.

“This is a historic election in a time when America is at a crossroads regarding its future. Our

communities, though small, can be very powerful if organized because. If we work hard, we could potentially flip the state. If we want our voice to be heard, and if we really want to see a policy shift in the future (whether it be for domestic or foreign policy) we need to be involved,” Mitha said.