

Muslims' search for a common voice

Canadian Muslims are grappling with how to protect their faith and preserve their diversity, writes Mohammed Adam from Toronto.

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The Ottawa Citizen

Sunday, August 14, 2005

When Prime Minister Paul Martin met a group of imams in Toronto last month to discuss terrorism, the first thing he wanted to know was: Who represents Canadian Muslims?

The imams had no answer.

The Canadian Muslim community is composed of diverse nationalities, ethnic groups and sects, so it's not surprising that Islam in this country does not speak with one voice. But in the post 9/11 world, Islam has been under fierce scrutiny and many Muslims are seeking a certain unity with which to address the issues confronting them.

A recent statement condemning terrorism and extremism, signed by 120 imams from across the country, was part of the search for a strong unified voice. In Greater Toronto, home to more than half of Canada's 700,000 Muslims, several hitherto warring groups and mosques are working quietly to form coalitions and reduce the cacophony of voices.

Canadians tend to see Muslims as a monolithic group, but in truth the community is a cauldron bubbling with diverse, sometimes competing identities, languages, political agendas and religious practices. It is a rich stew of liberal and conservative, of Arab, Asian, African and European.

Consider what happened in the immediate aftermath of the meeting with Mr. Martin. Even on an important issue like terrorism, long-simmering differences boiled over into vicious name-calling. The secular wing of the community accused the imams of being misogynists and homophobes who don't represent the majority of Muslims, and it criticized the prime minister for coddling up to them. In more conservative circles, some questioned why imams such as the contrarian Aly Hindy were not invited.

For example, Tarek Fatah, of the small, but vocal, Muslim Canadian Congress, took umbrage that women and leaders from minority sects were excluded from the meeting. "Many of these imams have preached against gays, women, mixing with Jews and Christians. We believe that the No. 1 step to extremism is the exclusion of women from all walks of life and the prime minister bought into the stereotype that Muslim leaders are primarily men," Mr. Fatah said.

Mr. Fatah argues that many Canadian Muslims don't attend mosque on Friday, the holy day, and so religious leaders don't necessarily represent the rank-and-file.

"The vast majority of Muslims are like all Canadians and the way to talk to them is not

just through imams but in community organizations, parent-teacher associations and other such groups."

Other Muslim leaders dismiss Mr. Fatah as a publicity-seeking secularist who rages against mainstream Islam to attract attention to his fledgling group.

Riad Saloojee, executive director of the Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations, said that just because Mr. Fatah has doctrinal differences with some imams doesn't mean he should to denigrate a significant effort to confront terrorism and extremism.

"The Muslim community is greatly decentralized and no one can purport to speak for the entire community," Mr. Saloojee says. "But the 120 imams, those that signed the declaration on terrorism -- I believe they do represent the mainstream community opinion in a much more significant way than Mr. Tarek and his group."

Mohamed Elmasry, president of the Canadian Islamic Congress, called Mr. Fatah's criticisms gratuitous and unwarranted. "There are about 400 imams in Canada and you cannot say that all of them are wrong and the prime minister cannot meet with some of them," he said.

There have always been internal tensions in Islam, as in other religions, but the recent squabbling exposes serious political rivalries and a struggle for the souls and minds of ordinary Muslims. While traditional leaders like Mr. Elmasry minimize the spectre of a power struggle, it's clear that new voices are emerging to challenge the existing order.

"There is a fight going on for what it means to be Muslim in a secular, post-modern society like Canada," says Mr. Fatah.

The root cause of the problem lies not just in the history of Islam, but also in the way immigrant communities established themselves in Canada.

Unlike other religions, Islam is not formally hierarchical and power does not devolve from a high authority to lower echelons. There is no pope or Archbishop of Canterbury whose word or edict is generally accepted as law. There isn't even the equivalent of Ottawa's Archbishop Marcel Gervais, who speaks with an authority that many local Catholics accept. The Muslim spiritual leader, the imam, speaks only for his congregation.

In the Greater Toronto Area, where 400,000 -- about 57 per cent -- of Canadian Muslims live, there are at least 50 mosques. Conservative mosques like Imam Aly Hindy's Salaheddin Islamic Centre live uneasily with liberal ones like the Umma, an Ahmadi mosque where women can lead prayers. Imams act and speak independently, as do the many Islamic organizations.

While the major divide in Canada is between the Sunni majority (about 490,000 people) and Shia minority, there are smaller sects like the Ismaili and the Ahmadi, better known as Qadiyani, who originated in Pakistan and are considered by some traditionalists not to be real Muslims. The Shia population in Canada is said to be about 120,000. The Ismailis number between 50,000 and 60,000, while Ahmadis have about 30,000 members.

The differences are sometimes exacerbated by ethnic rivalries. Muslim immigrants to Canada came in waves -- South Asians from the Indian subcontinent, Iranians fleeing from the revolution, Lebanese fleeing civil war. There are Africans (many of them Somali, also fleeing civil war). Recently, there've been Bosnians and, to a less extent, Kosovars, fleeing Serb atrocities.

Then there are skilled workers from all parts who came for a better life. When they arrived, the various immigrant groups found comfort in numbers and tended to stick together. The mosques they founded tended to be along ethnic lines. The mosques were

not just places of worship, but cultural and social centres where ethnic and national ties were reinforced.

Consequently, many mosques and organizations bear the imprint of individual nationalities such as East Indian, Pakistani, Lebanese, Turkish, Somali, Bosnian, Iranian, each with a particular identity and agenda. As one ethnic group established its own mosque, another was compelled to do the same, if only for reasons of cultural pride.

Each individual mosque may have been created out of a desire to forge unity and cement an identity, but collectively the mosques have morphed into an instrument of division and controversy.

This is not to say that no effort has been made to establish pan-Canadian organizations. Groups such as the Islamic Forum of Canada, the Islamic Centre of Canada, the Islamic Society of Canada, the Muslim Association of Canada, Jamia Islamia Canada, and the Canadian Society of Muslims have names that suggest a national orientation but in reality have little national standing.

Historically, Mr. Elmasry's Canadian Islamic Congress, which claims to be the country's largest independent Muslim organization, has been the most recognized group. It is probably the group with the largest national membership and Mr. Elmasry is a constant presence in mosques around the country. But some Muslim leaders say that the congress's basic weakness is that in the Toronto area very few groups are affiliated to it.

The Muslim Association of Canada, a largely Arab group, says it has 11 chapters across Canada but, even so, the organization has very little profile and its leaders are hardly known.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, the Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-CAN) has attracted much attention with its emphasis on human rights. Founded five years ago, it has a paid staff of five but the number of members is unknown. It scored a major coup when it persuaded 120 imams to sign the declaration against terrorism.

It was the council that helped organize the prime minister's meeting with the imams, a role that raised the organization's profile but also provoked some criticism that it was deliberately cozying up with the government in order to supplant the Canadian Islamic Congress as the leading Muslim organization. Another complaint is that the council is essentially an American organization.

Mr. Saloojee calls such allegations nonsense.

"I've never thought that there is a rivalry and it would be wrong to try to elbow others out," he says. "There was an opportunity to do something historic with the imams and we did. There was an opportunity to meet the prime minister and we did."

With a membership of only 200, the secular Muslim Canadian Congress may be the new kid on the block, yet is still managing to attract much media attention. Religious Muslim leaders dismiss him as a publicity hound who represents no one but himself, but Mr. Fatah is equally dismissive of them.

"We may not represent the majority of Muslims but we resemble the majority of Muslims," he retorts.

While the different groups are jostling for national attention, the real power in the Canadian Muslim community resides in Greater Toronto, and that power radiates from the many mosques spread around the city. Among the leading ones are Madina, Salaheddin, the Islamic Society of Toronto mosque, the International Muslim Organization mosque, the Islamic Foundation of Toronto mosque and the Jami mosque, the oldest in Ontario.

There are even divisions within divisions. The minority Shia community, for example, operates several different mosques to cater to the different nationalities. The leading one is the Toronto Jaffari Islamic Centre, made up largely of East African Muslims of Indian origin. The Imam Ali Centre, also in Toronto, houses under one roof separate prayer spaces for Iranians, Iraqis and Pakistanis.

The negative impact of so many discordant voices was the driving force behind the establishment in Toronto of the Coalition of Muslim Organizations, a body "to create a united and effective Muslim presence in Canada."

Made of more than 30 groups ranging from the very conservative to the very liberal, the coalition pushed for, and received, a recent meeting with Public Safety Minister Anne McLellan to discuss the Muslim community's relationship with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service.

Muslim leaders agree that this is the best way to serve the community.

"There can never be one voice for Canadian Muslims. The Muslim voice has to be a coalition of voices," says Mr. Fatah.

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