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The New Muslim-Liberal Coalition

The victory of Minnesota's Keith Ellison, the first Muslim elected to the Congress, shows the changing alliances that were set in motion by 9/11

By PETER SKERRY

The victory party for Minnesota's first African-American congressman, Keith Ellison, took place at a trendy nightclub in Minneapolis's downtown warehouse district. Down the block from a glitzy sex shop, Trocadero is the kind of place where both gays and straights look to get picked up, either at the bar or on the dance floor. But on this occasion, the floor was packed with enthusiastic supporters of Ellison, who also happens to be the first Muslim elected to the U.S. Congress.

Not the kind of place where any self-respecting Muslim would normally be found. But on this occasion, drably dressed, bearded Muslim men rubbed shoulders with stylish women in revealing outfits, the latter drinking plenty of alcohol. Meanwhile, Muslim women wearing long, shapeless dresses and head-scarves stood around in small groups. I spoke with an elderly, bespectacled imam from Somalia who wore a large woolen shawl over his shoulders and a colorful, pointed cap, embroidered with ancient-looking but unfamiliar shapes and symbols. His limited knowledge of English did not prevent him from repeating the words "peace, peace, peace" over and over again to me.

The reason for this curious gathering is not hard to figure out. Muslim Americans in Minnesota and throughout the nation have been forging a coalition with liberals on issues like those articulated by Congressman-elect Ellison — universal health insurance, tougher environmental regulation, opposition to the Patriot Act and an immediate end to the war in Iraq.

Just a few years ago such a coalition would have been unthinkable. In 2000, Muslim American leaders overcame their reluctance to get involved in politics and, almost unanimously, endorsed George Bush for President. For the most part well educated and affluent, Muslim Americans went along with Bush's low-tax, limited government philosophy and enthusiastically embraced his conservative social agenda — especially Bush's pro-life and anti-gay rights stance.

But since 9/11, all this has changed. Now secular liberals and culturally conservative Muslims are united in their intense opposition to Bush's policies at home and abroad, especially in the Middle East. And it should be no surprise that an African American like Ellison has emerged as a key broker in this coalition. About one-fourth to one-third of all American

Muslims are African Americans. These are not "black Muslim" followers of Louis Farrakhan, but orthodox Sunni Muslims, accepted as such by their brethren from traditionally Muslim societies.

This is not to say that there have not been, and continue to be, important rifts between African-American and immigrant-origin Muslims here. Not the least of these was the latter's support of Bush in 2000, which dramatically highlighted the social and economic gap between these two groups. But in the wake of the Patriot Act and perceived ethnic profiling, such strains have been overcome, though hardly eliminated. For immigrant-origin Muslims, African Americans' long-standing concern with civil rights suddenly has a relevance it previously lacked. And now, Muslims from places like Pakistan or Egypt, who might in the past have avoided politics, see the need for allies and guides through the unfamiliar American political landscape. No wonder the Rev. Jesse Jackson and other nationally prominent blacks journeyed to Minnesota to campaign with Keith Ellison.

Still, immigrant Muslims remain devout social conservatives. And in Minneapolis in the days leading up to the celebration Tuesday night, one could hear many of them trying to reconcile their support for Ellison and other liberals on Minnesota's Democratic-Farmer-Labor ticket with their unrelenting opposition to abortion and especially homosexuality. It is clearly not easy for them to do so, but as one Muslim American leader born in Afghanistan put it, "the majority of Muslims weigh the alternatives" — and vote against President Bush and the Republicans.

It remains to be seen, of course, whether this coalition will last. But if their anger at the Bush Administration and its policies is any guide, then Muslim Americans — immigrant and African American alike — will not soon break with their new-found liberal allies. In the meantime, many non-Muslim Americans will be troubled by these developments and find in them further evidence of the widespread sentiment that Muslim Americans are not being straight with their fellow citizens, that they are hypocrites. Perhaps they are. But then non-Muslims ought to recognize that "hypocrisy" of the sort on view in Minneapolis last week is akin to the tolerance on which our pluralistic society depends. In fact, just such behavior demonstrates that Muslims are beginning to learn what we all must do to get along in America.

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