

Agendas:

1. Introduction by Mohammed Khaled Noor
2. Welcome speech by Lord Nazir Ahmed
3. Presentation by Professor Anthony Heath – “Muslims in Britain today: economic disadvantage, civic and political engagement”.
4. Presentation by Dr Jamil Sherif – “The value of the 2011 Census for Muslim civil society”
5. Presentation by Ashok Viswanathan – Deputy Director, Operation Black Vote.
6. Presentation by George Gabriel, CitizensUK
7. Contributions from guest audience
8. Questions and Answers session
9. Concluding remarks

DISCUSSION AND DECISIONS

Introduction – Mohammed Khaled Noor

Muslim Professionals Forum (MPF) Chairperson Mohammed Khaled Noor welcomed participants. He provided an introduction of MPF and its activities.

Welcome Speech – Lord Nazir Ahmed

Lord Nazir Ahmed gave a brief opening speech.

Lord Ahmed gave a breakdown of populations highlighting Muslims in UK. He emphasised that each election is generally important for ethnic minorities; however the forthcoming general election is more important for a number of reasons. The main reason is the present climate. We are currently under unique circumstances, UKIP is marching on.

Lord Ahmed highlighted the importance of getting involved and playing an active role in the forthcoming General Elections. He stressed for the communities to get themselves into electoral register and where necessary to opt for postal votes. The Ethnic Minority Community will have a significant impact on the next General Elections, we need to make sure that the BME Communities register for votes and start campaigning for the issue related to equality and justice for all. He emphasised that Muslim communities need to make sure that they use their votes wisely and effectively while making it clear that he was not advocating for any particular parties.

Muslims in Britain today: economic disadvantage, civic and political engagement – Professor Anthony Heath

MPF chairperson Mohammed Khaled Noor gave a brief biography of Prof Heath and a brief introduction to some of his work.

In his introduction, Prof Heath said that in the course of his professional career, he was

particularly interested in social class at around the 1970s. Social class and social mobility has remained an issue and his focus has therefore remained on this subject matter. He, quoting from the findings of various studies, highlighted that migrants tend to get lower paid jobs than average and that Muslims were not exceptions.

Prof Heath highlights that the 2.7 million Muslims in England and Wales make up the second largest religious group in Britain. They are also the most ethnically diverse of all religious groups, with the largest group being of Pakistani origin. There are also substantial numbers Muslims with other South Asian, African and Middle Eastern backgrounds, together with white and black converts. He further highlights the fact that 1.2 million of the Muslim population are second generation, who were actually born in Britain.

Prof Heath gave an analogy that although the Muslim population in Britain are diverse in terms of their backgrounds and generations, they all experience the common “ethnic disadvantages” in Britain. Studies further revealed that although there are substantial differences between different ethnic groups, Muslims tend to experience an additional disadvantage over and above their ethnic disadvantages. For example, Indian Muslims have higher unemployment rates than Indian Hindus. In addition, a recent report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation highlights that half of the Muslim in the UK are unemployed; this is greater than any other faith group. This highlights the inequality though the UK policy is for equality.

Prof Heath highlights that migrants from Somalia and other countries are less likely to be fluent in English. However, second generation Muslims are fluent in English. So the disadvantages are not merely due to language though lack of fluency acts as a barrier when looking for jobs. Women do unpaid jobs though it is unclear if this is voluntary or involuntary. Prejudices, discriminations are also barriers for Muslims to get a job.

Prof Heath then touched on political integration for minorities. He said that Muslim first generations are more interested in politics back home, whereas the second generations feel more British and are interested in local politics. Second generations are as active as other communities in terms of campaigning, signing petitions etc.

Prof Heath said, in conclusion, that although there was no definitive conclusion from his studies, there is considerable evidence that Muslims do share various disadvantages in the labour market over and above disadvantages which can be attributed to ethnic background.

Operation Black Vote – Ashok Viswanathan

Ashok Viswanathan highlights the importance of joining political activities. He said that he was inspired to become active in political engagement through a voluntary organisation. Mr Viswanathan highlighted that 38 degrees did a poll and found 9 out of 10 MPs are doing a good job.

They also did another poll on how many people actually knew and or met their MPs. The figure was overwhelmingly low, which highlighted a gap between this and the findings of the previous poll.

The forthcoming elections will be fifth general elections where the black vote will make a difference in 168 electoral seats.

Mr Viswanathan says they are trying to encourage all these voters to register their votes. 74 of these 168 seats have Asian majorities. A lot of them are Muslims and their votes will decide who wins. He says Operation Black Vote urges Muslim leaders to mobilise the Muslim youth to consider how they vote and who they vote for.

Presentation by Dr Jamil Sherif - "The value of the 2011 Census for Muslim civil society"

Dr Sherif discussed Census report 2011 and gave an analogy of the increase of Muslim population in Britain and how some mainstream media reacted following the publication of the report. He articulated his view that some of these reports, for example, "It feels as if they (the Muslims) have taken over" are pure scaremongering. He questioned how 4.4% (Muslim population) can take over Britain? He stressed there are a number of factors behind the increase in Muslim population. These include young population at the child bearing stage of life and new settlements from war torn countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria.

Dr Sherif discussed the implication of the Census report. He said that too often, the national conversation about Muslims tends to focus on counter-terrorism and counter-extremism. He stressed that the Census report is an opportunity for Muslim civil society to set its own agenda on what should be its matters of real concerns and policy priorities.

Dr Sherif highlighted four areas that require reflection and further discussion. These include:

1. Religion in society today which has an implication for Muslims as ambassadors of a noble faith.
2. Opportunity for better self-recognition of what we are as a community, particularly our internal diversity. This has implications on both the structure of Mosques and community centre and BME alliances.
3. The need to focus on youth and education
4. The census has uncovered social realities which require both short-term and long-term work. The common thread is the emphasis on the community's responsibilities, whether acting independently or in partnership with other sections of society.

Dr Sherif provided an in-depth analysis of the above and highlighted that Muslim population have far greater numbers in young age group and far fewer numbers in old age group. He said that this needs to be considered when mosques are structured. He emphasised that political leaders needs to identify Muslim youths as asset. Dr Sherif said Mosque must reflect the diversity within Muslim population and they must empower Muslim women. He stressed that Muslims' slogan should be what is good for BME, is good for Muslims.

Dr Sherif concluded his presentation by emphasising that political leaderships must stop demonising Muslim youths and must recognise them as an important asset of the country.

George Gabriel – Citizens UK

Mr George Gabriel gave a brief presentation on the work of Citizens UK. He said that Citizens UK has built a permanent network with Muslim communities/organisations and that he enjoys profoundly working with Muslim community.

Mr Gabriel said that it is kind of a common knowledge that Muslim community is growing fast. The growth of the Muslim community is breaking the established political settlement made with it. The vote has historically been solidly labour leaning, highly concentrated in urban constituencies. As such the incentives towards greater political organisation have been low, the community's established routes to influence easy to maintain. As such it's no surprise at the last election of BME voters, and Muslim voters in particular 29% canvassed as opposed to 54% of the wider population.

He pointed out that the sheer size of the community, and it's growing middle class who are moving to sub-urban constituencies, make this old pattern unsustainable and open up two possible futures. The first is continuing and worsening Islamophobia, seeing the community defined by it's most radical elements, anti migrant sentiment rise further, hate crime and discrimination. AS the community approaches the point of being in the majority in a greater number of cities opposition to it, both political and social could become more and more extreme.

He talked about the increasing hate crime, Islamophobia and racial abuse in Britain and said this is not helped by some of the government programmes, for example "Trojan Horse".

Mr Gabriel said Citizens UK is proud to work with the Muslim community and he hopes to achieve the objectives though he recognises that the challenge is huge.

Habib Rahman – Chief Executive of JCWI and Steering Committee Member of MAX

In his brief speech on Movement Against Xenophobia (MAX), Mr Habib Rahman said that although most people in Britain believe that immigrants contribute to the society positively; a large proportion of the population do not want more immigrants coming to the UK. He highlighted the work that Movement Against Xenophobia has been carrying out and said that Trade Unions have also voiced their support for the movement against xenophobia.

He urged audience to support the movement.

Dr Mohammed Abdul Bari – Former Secretary General of MCB

Dr Bari highlights the importance of the forthcoming election. He talked about the negative impact of Governments programmes such as Trojan Horse, Prevent and the ISIS issue, but urged that Muslims should prove in the forthcoming election that they will not be silenced.

Q&A

- More emphasis should be given on registering Muslim votes.
- Engagement with young people to project Muslim community more positively. Muslims should not only be concerned about their own communities but also concerned about wider societies.
- Muslims need to use Asian media and Muslim media to highlight the importance of election.
- There is an increase in Muslim population – due to refugees coming from Somalia and other war torn countries. Muslim votes have not been taken seriously.
- Political engagement, political activism should continue.

Concluding Remarks

The seminar was closed by MPF Chairperson Mr Mohammed Khaled Noor's concluding remarks.