

Muslim Professionals Forum
Press Briefing for the Bengali Print and Electronic Media
Venue: Montefiore Centre, Hanbury Street, London E1 5HZ
Date: Monday, 9 February 2015

Dear Journalist Friends,

Welcome to the press briefing on the importance of “Voter Registration and Muslim/Ethnic Minority Communities in the UK” organised by the Muslim Professionals Forum (MPF) *. The purpose of this briefing is to share our thoughts with local [Bengali Print and Electronic] media about the importance of the upcoming General Elections for Black Minority Ethnic (BME) and Muslim communities, voter registration, and strength of BME votes in deciding who wins and losses, to influence policy and to set the agenda at this election. As per the voter registration, the views expressed here reflects the opinion of our voter registration partners which included Operation Black Vote, CitizensUK and Migrant and Refugee Community’s Forum (Forum).

According to the 2011 Census Report, the population of England and Wales was 56 million. Of this 56 million - 48 million were classified in the 'white' category of the census, and the remaining 8 million are from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME). The census also showed that there are 2.71 million Muslims in England and Wales -which is 4.8% of the population. There are 77,000 Muslims in Scotland and approximately 4,000 in Northern Ireland. Muslims are Britain's second-largest religious group.

The Census data also highlights that Muslims are the most ethnically diverse of all religious groups. There are substantial number of Muslims from South Asian, African and Middle Eastern backgrounds, as well as white and black converts. Bangladeshis form one of the UK's largest immigrant groups and they are also the youngest and fastest growing communities with an estimated population of 500,000. 1.2 million of the Muslim population are British born second generation.

In August 2014 MPF organised a seminar on 'Census Report 2011: Ethnic Minority Communities in the UK' - which was held at the House of Lords. **Professor Anthony Heath** from Oxford University - in his presentation highlighted that migrants tended to hold lower paid jobs than average and that Muslims were no exceptions. Although the Muslim population in Britain is diverse in terms of their backgrounds and generations, they all experience the common “ethnic disadvantages” in Britain. Studies further revealed that even though there are substantial differences between different ethnic groups, Muslims tend to experience an additional disadvantage over and above their 'normal' ethnic disadvantages.

In regards to political integration for minorities, Professor Heath noted that second generation Muslims feel more British and are interested in local politics. However, overall Muslim communities in the UK are the least active in civic participation and research shows that Muslims are the lowest group in terms of voter registration.

When the Office for the National Statistics first published data on the 2011 Census, there were several melodramatic headlines in some sections of the media, for example:

'I feel like a stranger where I live.....it feels as if they [the Muslims] have taken over'.
- Jane Kelly in the Telegraph, 29 January 2013

In his presentation **Dr Jamil Sherif** of Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) referring to the data from the 2011 Census Report, gave an analogy of the increase of the 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 could 4.8% (Muslim population) take over Britain?

Too often the national conversation about Muslims tends to focus on counter-terrorism and counter-extremism. The Census report is an opportunity for Muslim civil society to set its own agendas on what should be its matters of real concerns and policy priorities.

The Census data shows that Muslim population have far greater numbers in the young age group (21% aged 5-15) and there are far fewer numbers within the old age group (4%). 33% of the Muslim population was aged 15 years or under in 2011 compared to 19% of the overall population; and the median age of the Muslim population is 25 years, compared to an overall population median age of approximately 40 years. So our political leaders need to identify Muslim youths as an asset and must stop marginalising them.

The Muslim population is increasing, the growth of this community is breaking the established political settlement - whereby 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 is easy to maintain. It is no surprise that at the last election the BME voters, and Muslim voters in particular-29% canvassed as opposed to 54% of the wider population. The sheer size of the community - in particular it's growing middle class who are moving to suburban constituencies make this old pattern unsustainable.

Muslims, Black and Minority Ethnic communities dominate in popular culture, sports and entertainment, small business and entrepreneurship. The Black pound is worth more than 10 billion pounds per year. Yet we are nowhere to be seen in the corridors of power, and around the decision-making table. Why? Because - while we don't register to vote and engage in the wider democratic process, those in the citadels of Westminster and elsewhere can continue to ignore us.

5th February was the UN's International Voter Registration Day (across the world). Any UK citizen over the age of 16 can register. The old system whereby the head of household registering everyone has now changed and individuals have to register themselves. It is estimated that about 1million people will disappear off the Register nationally as a result of this change.

The General Election on 7th May 2015 is likely to be the most crucial in a generation. The outcome is more difficult to predict because of the rise in popularity of UKIP - at the expense of the three main parties - and the number of Scottish Labour seats that appear to be at risk to a resurgent Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP).

It is therefore important for the Muslims and Black Minority Ethnic communities to get involved and play an active role in the forthcoming General Elections. Most importantly get onto the electoral register and use their votes wisely and effectively.

Currently one in four people are not registered in our communities. This is four times higher than in the wider community. At the last General Election less than half of those from Black Minority Ethnic communities turned up at the polling station. **This is not good enough!**

Martin Luther King said: 'Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.'

Muslims, alongside other faith communities and black minority communities must make their voices heard by organising and mobilising to minimise the malign influence of UKIP - an overtly anti-immigrant party, in a possible hung Parliament following the election.

So in simple terms, everyone who opposes their policies, must register to vote and use that vote on Thursday 7th May. You can even register online now if you have your National Insurance/Social Security number. The deadline to register is 20th April.

There are over 200 Black Minority Ethnic candidates, including 8 of Bangladeshi origin standing in the election representing each of the major parties. Some are in safe seats, others contesting winnable marginal's. But again, if members of the BME community wish to vote for these candidates in their constituencies, they have to be registered.

Research shows that 18% of BME citizens were not registered to vote in 2010 General Elections compared to 7% for white residents.

Research carried out by Operation Black Vote shows that the black vote will make a difference in 168 electoral seats in England and Wales - which could probably decide the next Government. 168 seats equates to 29% of all constituencies in England and Wales. 74 of these 168 seats have Asian majorities; many of which are Muslims and their votes will decide who wins. It is understood within the political circles that between 100 and 130 seats will determine who forms the government in 2015. Marginal seats have a majorities of less than 6000 votes though a handful of seats with majorities of fewer than 7000 votes also qualify as marginal seats.

Muslim Professionals Forum in partnership with Operation Black Vote, CitizensUK and other partner organisations will continue its work to encourage and inspire those from Black Minority Ethnic communities to engage and achieve in local and national politics as well as the wider democratic process in the UK. In particular we urge Muslim leaders to mobilise the Muslim youth to consider how they vote and who they vote for.

The Muslim/BME communities are growing fast, and there is a correlation with the increase of hate crime, Islamophobia and racial abuse/discrimination in Britain towards ethnic minority communities. The situations have worsened as a result of the negative impact of the Government programmes such as 'Trojan Horse',

PREVENT, and more recently the ISIS issue. Muslims should prove in the forthcoming election that they will not be silenced.

Finally, on the basis of the above, we want to highlight the following points:

- i. Muslims/BME communities 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 issues related to equality and justice for all.
- ii. Appeal to our community and business leaders; mosques, voluntary and professional organisations and every household to support our campaign for voter registration.
- iii. Engage with young people to project the Muslim community more positively. Muslims should not only be concerned about their own communities but also concerned about the wider society.
- iv. Asian and Muslim media should have a role to play to highlight the importance of the General Elections. In particular we invite Bengali print and electronic media to support our voter registration campaign.

Thank you.

**The Muslim Professionals Forum, UK (MPF) is an independent and non-profit organisation for Professionals. Founded in 2008, we welcome professionals from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds and those who are willing to support the progression of the Muslim community through intellectual dialogue.*

MPF aims to work against islamophobic and racist attitudes, religious extremism, racial discrimination, crime and disorder, domestic violence and violation of human rights. At the same it aims to promote public decency in order to establish a just and tolerant society and uphold justice, rule of law, community cohesion and religious harmony.

The MPF is committed to work in partnership with other Muslim groups, professional bodies and voluntary organisations. We endeavours to enable other groups to come together and have a platform whereby they can share ideas, expertise and exchange opinions freely and help to eliminate some the problems faced by migrant communities in the UK.

For more information, please visit our website: //www.muslimprofessionalsforum.org/