

The Washington Post  
October 4, 2015

## When a Muslim ran for local office in Virginia



*Atif Qarni, the Democratic candidate for Virginia Delegate District 13, poses for a portrait as his younger son Saber, 5, plays in the leaves at his home in Manassas on Nov. 7, 2013. (Nikki Kahn/The Washington Post)*

By Atif M. Qarni

Republican presidential candidate [Ben Carson faced intense criticism](#) recently for his remarks about [Muslims not being suitable to be president](#). In 2013 and 2015, I ran for a seat in the Virginia legislature. Although Republicans such as Carson and [Donald Trump](#) may be vociferous in their anti-Muslim rhetoric, they are not the only ones who think this way.

Many Americans are struggling with the concept of Islam and trying to come to grips with what it means to be Muslim in the United States. Can a person be a proud American and a Muslim at the same time?

In the minds of many Americans, Islam and the United States are diametrically opposed. To support a Muslim running for public office would require that two “competing” ideologies somehow be reconciled; it would require people to see Muslim Americans as assets to our nation rather than as “threats to national security.” For many, this is a bridge too far.

The hysteria surrounding Muslims surfaced again last month when a [14-year-old Muslim boy was handcuffed and interrogated](#) at his school in Texas for bringing in a homemade clock that school officials said they thought was a bomb.

So what happens when a Muslim American announces he is running for state Senate? I am a Virginia public school teacher who was born to Pakistani immigrants. I served honorably and proudly in the Marine Corps, including a tour in Iraq in 2003.

I was invited to meet with the legislature’s key Democratic leaders and told I needed to drop out of the race because a Muslim would never win. I was told Republicans would use my religion against me and make my life miserable. Several Democratic Party members also told me that my wife’s headscarf would be a problem with voters, as would my beard, which I maintain for vanity, not religious purposes. I was told Richmond is black and white, not brown.

I was shocked by the party establishment’s response to my announcement in 2015. Just two years before I had challenged the 21-year Republican incumbent, Del. Robert G. Marshall (Prince William), and [come within 500 votes of beating him](#). No other Democratic candidate had come this close. Hadn’t I proved my loyalty to the party? Didn’t my hard work and impressive numbers from the 2013 campaign show that I was a serious contender, that I could raise money and get people to the polls? Wasn’t I fighting for basic progressive values, such as women’s health-care rights, responsible gun control and same-sex marriage?

I ignored the party’s warnings and [proceeded with my campaign](#), knowing that fundraising and solidifying a voting base were key to winning the nomination. If the establishment wasn’t convinced that a Muslim running for state Senate was a good idea, I would prove it wrong. Ultimately, I knew that voters, not politicians from Richmond or Fairfax, would decide the outcome of my election.

In retrospect, I was a bit naive and possibly too idealistic. The same group of legislators who tried to persuade me to drop out of the race [found a candidate they deemed better suited for the job](#). Not coincidentally, the candidate was a white Christian male.

When the campaign heated up, I was supported by a coalition of “non-establishment” Democrats, while my opponent was supported by the “establishment.” I raised several ethical concerns about my opponent’s response to a whistleblower complaint. The rebuttal from my opponent’s campaign: A mailer, a few days before the primary, that depicted me in a cartoonish fashion, with an angry expression and overgrown facial hair. My son’s reaction: “I can’t believe they made you look like a terrorist.”

There is no greater insult to a Muslim American (especially a combat veteran of the Iraq war) than to depict him as a terrorist. I was disappointed with the state of affairs in my own party.

Virginia Democrats claim to fight for ethics reform, represent working-class people and lead a big-tent party, yet they groom and recruit mostly white, Christian, male candidates. A party that prides itself on being inclusive can be very exclusive.

Muslim Americans proudly serve their communities in many capacities — in the military, as public school teachers, as state and federal government employees, as doctors, as lawyers and so forth — because they love this country. In a political capacity, many Muslim Americans, including me, are actively involved in raising money, knocking on doors and hosting events for candidates. But when it comes to running for office, we're not considered "American" enough.

This is a cautionary tale for Democrats and Republicans alike. Fearmongering for short-term gains in elections has long-term repercussions, including a loss of trust in the people who represent us.

The road to political power is not easy for Muslims, but we must continue to pave the way.

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