

American Muslim Community under Bush and Obama Administration

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Abstract

Incidents of 9/11 caused American government to shift policy towards American Muslims. The policy changes involved legislative measures. One major legislative measure was the Patriot Act. The FBI was authorized to increase the surveillance of Muslim American citizens. These measures negatively affected the Muslim American communities including restrictions on immigration rules. The political and the social environment in Bush and Obama administrations were different; the public have different views of the problem of National Security and Muslim community. Local and state government reflects to these views at the federal level specific laws such as the Patriot Act, also changed in each administration. The Muslim community is now learning to find its voice and become participant in the American society and politics. In order to understand the different impact of government policies on the American Muslim community in the post 9/11 environment, it is necessary to analyze what happened during each administration.

Keywords: American Muslims, American government, 9/11, Obama administration, Policy Changes.

Introduction

Since September 11, both the Bush and Obama administrations made policy changes that affected the American Muslim community. The policy changes involved legislative measures. One major legislative measure was the Patriot Act. This act restricted visas. Also, it allowed the federal government to arrest suspected terrorists through the use of racial profiling (Tirman, 2005). The FBI was authorized to increase the surveillance of Muslim American citizens. These measures negatively affected the Muslim American communities. All these measures were demeaning and demoralizing to the American Muslim community. The Obama administration has had a different approach to handling the issues of national security and terrorism when compared to the Bush administration. Even though the Obama administration has been governing for only three years, and it is quite early to evaluate its policies, some analysts see some positive changes in terms of its impact on the American Muslim community. One example involves the right of Muslims to have organizations and mosques everywhere in the United States, even a Mosque at “Ground Zero”. Also, the Obama administration made progress in preventing people from burning the Qur’an, which would have made the American Muslim community have negative feelings against the general public in the United States. The American Muslim community has had different reactions to the Bush and Obama administrations. The Bush administration’s policies kept the Muslim community from supporting the Republican Party in the last election. The American Muslim community chose President Obama in the hope that he would make positive changes. In order to understand the different impact of government policies on the American Muslim community in the post 9/11 environment, it is necessary to analyze what happened during each administration.

1. Background

The Muslim American population in the United State is as follows: 42 percent African Americans, 24.4 percent south Asians, 18, 6 percent Arabs and North Africans, and 12.6 percent Europeans and others. The first major group, the African Americans, has found Islam an alternative to Christianity and the white American culture.

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The Arab and North Africans usually come from countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, Morocco, Algeria Libya, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. The third group is south Asian Muslims who are from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan (Leonard, 2002). All these groups were affected by the 9/11 events. But the diversity in their backgrounds and interests is so great that it is difficult to talk about a single Muslim American community or a single response to Bush and Obama administration policies After September 11, there were noticeable changes in the government policies towards the American Muslim community in the United States. Both Republicans and Democrats were united to face the threat. Also, the U.S. government asked other countries for support to capture the terrorists. In general, security measures were tightened all over and new laws were quickly passed. The Patriot Act was one of the first laws that was passed by the Congress and signed by the President in the last week of October 2001. This act was expanded by executive branches to arrest people without evidence that they were guilty of anything. One year later, in 2002 the Department of Homeland Security was formed. Its emphasis was on controlling the border and immigration policies instead of focusing on terrorist and safety issues (Tirman, 2004). Along with changes in governmental policies, there were changes in public opinion and the press. The public backlash soon started with hate crimes, and speech. The event of September 11 highlighted the inhospitality of the American public to Muslims in the United State. The Patriot Act targeted the Muslim community and gave more power to the executive branch to arrest, interview and attempt to control the Muslim community and made judicial bodies less effective (Jamal and Maira, 2005). Muslims in the United State faced numerous threats from government and social forces during the Bush administration. For example, one year after the September attacks Arab and Muslim group reported two thousand incidents against Arab and Muslims (Ayers, 2007).

American Muslims were affected by several incidents such as the bomb in Oklahoma City in 1995 and the Trans World Airlines crash in 1996(Nimer, 2002). This incident made American Muslims face discrimination, violence and harassment every time any incident happened. Unfortunately, American Muslims faced in September 11 attacks the most difficult time of discrimination and harassment from the United State Government and the public. Muslims were also facing different discrimination actions in work place. Muslim were discriminated by supervisors and friends in the workplace and were viewed as foreigners who looked “suspicious” and “did not fit in,” This reflected the ignorance of the general public about Muslim people (Nimer, 2002). According to the media plays a negative role for covering the news and the issues of Islam and the Muslim culture. All of this affected the public view of events, and then affected government policies (Gerges, 2003).

2. Muslim American Responses to September 11

Muslims tried to show solidarity with the rest of the public by condemning the September 11 attacks, and inviting the public to meetings where they explained that they were not involved. In addition, Muslims contributed thousands of dollars to charities that helped the victims of the attacks (Curtis, 2010). Another way the Muslim American community responded to the 9/11 attacks were to work through non-profit Muslim organizations. The Council on American- Islamic Relations (CAIR) is one example. It existed before 9/11/2001, and had a history of providing accurate information and trying to change negative perceptions about Islam. CAIR is “a non-profit, membership organization dedicated to presenting an Islamic perspective on issues of importance to the American public. CAIR conducts sensitivity training workshops for the benefit of administrators and other personnel at corporations and government agencies” (CAIR, 2005b). In addition, “Their mission is to enhance the understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding” (CAIR, 2012). They work with Muslim and non-Muslim groups to combat their prejudicial ideas and negative stereotypes about Muslims.

After the September 11 attacks, Muslim organization condemned the tragedy. Even so, CAIR posted on the Washington Post’s front page that their prayers and thoughts are with the families and friends of those who were killed and injured. Also, the Muslim Public Affairs Council issued similar statements and offered more support for the victims. The Muslim Student Association (MSA), which had more than seventy thousand branches in colleges and universities throughout the United States, provided many lectures, fund raisers, workshops, and other activities helped the victims (Abdelkarimand Erb, 2002). CAIR and MSA provided thousands of books, films, and lectures to universities and the public throughout the United States to present the impact of the September 11 attacks on Muslim communities. Also, they invited other religious organizations to have break the fast in mosques during the holy month of Ramadan. Muslims in the United States want to send a clear message that the hijackers who made the attacks were not part of their community (Peek, 2011). Recently, CAIR has been documenting cases of discrimination against Muslim Americans and helping them with litigation. In 2008, CAIR filed 2,652 civil rights cases (Hacking, 2010).

The Muslim community is mostly organized through the mosques, which also manage the Muslim charity groups because “zakat,” or tithing, is one of the central pillars of Islam. These charity groups were affected by government regulations after 9/11. They have been the groups who recently filed anti-discrimination suits against the government, although these suits have not been very successful (Hacking, 2010). The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) has found that 57% of the Muslims in the United States have faced discrimination since 9/11, and 87% said that they “knew of a fellow Muslim who experienced verbal abuse, religious profiling, and workplace discrimination” (Ayers, 2007).

3. Bush administration

The Bush administration responded to the September 11 attacks by developing strategies through the Homeland Securities Department and the Patriot Act to monitor and attempt to control Muslim communities inside the United States. One of the controls involved monitoring charitable donations and other financial matters. The Muslim communities did not have anything to do with the attack. The people who hijacked the planes were foreigner invaders. The Bush administration responded by arresting many American Muslims who were residents and had families and businesses. More than 100.000 Muslims were arrested and held in secret locations. Their terms of detention were indefinite. The FBI used other measures such as wiretapping. All of these actions did not produce any evidence that the Muslim communities inside the U.S. were related to the 9/11 attacks (Tirman, 2004). The Bush administration continued to monitor and attempt to control Muslim communities, including their schools and Mosques. It cut and monitored the donation to reduce Muslim activities. The schools and mosques did not have any obvious relations to the terrorist attacks. Muslims believed that they were marginalized and targeted as the “others” and that their civil rights and physical safety were affected. For example, a few days after the September 11 attacks, one woman was wearing the hijab (veil) and walking in a parking lot, was attacked by white male who hit her in the back. The suspect said, “You terrorist pig” and run away (Jamal and Maira, 2005).

Immediately after the September 11 attacks Bush met with the religious leaders and visited the mosques in Washington. One of the Islamic leaders President Bush met was Shaykh Hamza Yusuf discuss that, “Islam was hijacked on that September 11, 2001 on that plane as an innocent victim” (Leonard, 2002). Muslims in the United States did not benefit from the Bush administration and the Muslims rejected Republican Party policies whether they came from Congress or the President (Ayers, 2007). According to Council of American Islamic Relation CAIR, “1200 Muslim Americans were detained by law enforcement officials nationwide within the first two month of September 11”. Many Muslim Americans were affected by anti-terrorism policies. Participants in the Gaskew survey thought that the USA Patriot Act and other counterterrorism policies were directed against American Muslim Americans. The Patriot Act’s impact on Muslim American led to “deep feeling of shame, guilt, and humiliation” in whatmany Muslim Americans perceived as a “government supported’ Islam phobic social environment” (Gaskew, 2009). After 9/11 the American government wanted preventive measures to use against terrorists in the United States and better safety for important facilities and cities. President Bush called for the “hardening” of society (Tirman, 2004). This hardening included arresting terrorist suspects, targeted harassment, special surveillance and “special registration.” This meant that people from certain countries such as Asia, Africa and Muslim areas had to register their passports with immigration before travelling domestically and outside the U.S. They also had extra processing in the airport. In addition, they were finger printer and photographed. The purpose was to monitor these visitors in the interest national security. These measures were canceled in 2002.However it made people feel humiliated and involved racial profiling (Tirman, 2004).

At the agenda level, the Patriot Act was made in an emergency situation. There was little formulation and legitimation of goals and programs before the act was implemented. Ten years later, however, the controversial provisions such as the surveillance measures are being discussed again. The Act was passed in May 2011 and lasts until 2013 when the government must decide whether or not to extend, terminate or limit the powers in some way.

4. Impact on Muslim communities in the U.S.

After the attacks the American Muslim communities condemned the September 11 attacks and placed flowers outside the entrances to many Mosques in New Jersey and other places. Muslims held signs that said, “The Muslim Community Does Not Support Terrorism” (Curtis, 2010). Many American Muslim organizations and Muslim leaders showed their sympathy and support to the victims’ families of 9/11 and showed clearly that they were support of the U.S. government to catch and punish the guilty. In the beginning after the 9/11 attacks, the Muslim community and the Bush administration agreed that the American Muslim community is not involved. However, the Muslim Community soon began to receive mixed messages (Curtis, 2010).

Nearly 200,000 American Muslims experienced mass arrests, secret detentions, closed hearings, secrete evidence, government eavesdropping on attorney- client conversations, FBI home and work visits, and wiretapping (Alsultany, 2007). The general public reaction became more negative.

For example, in Chicago three days after the attacks the mosque in Bridgeview, which has a large Muslim population was surrounded by mobs of angry people. The verbal and physical attacks, property burning continued. Another unfortunate result of the attack on Muslim community was that charities and other institutions were afraid to donate money to mosques or help Muslim families in need because the government would investigate, arrest or even deport people if they were suspected terrorist ties (Tirman, 2004). This resulted in Muslim families being stressed more than before. In addition, any available funds that the Muslim community funds had were used for defense of arrested people and civil right activities. Another unexpected impact on Muslim communities was that different Muslim ethnicities such as Asia and North Africa were forced to begin to share resources and support. This sense of common cause helped the growing defense of the Muslim community but in the end, the final result of public reaction and government measures was that they were “politically voice less.” All of this made Muslim in the United State believe that they were in danger “as a group that is dangerous and potentially subversive”. This was an expansion of the concept being thought guilty by association. About 39% of Muslim American reported anti-Muslim discrimination since September 11. The council on American Islamic Relation (CAIR) find that 57% of the Muslim in the United State faced bias or discrimination since September 11 and 87% said that they “knew of a fellow Muslim who experienced verbal abuse, religious profiling and workplace discrimination” (Ayers, 2007).

The two main frames for discussing government surveillance of American citizen have very different policy and political consequences. One of the consequences of looking at the situation as “War on Terror” is that it makes the Patriot Act a permanent necessity. This is seen in how in Peter King argued to eliminate the expiration date. This means that there will continue to be laws and policies that allow the government many secret powers by removing controls and eliminating appropriate procedures. As far as the effect of the surveillance measures on the Muslim American community are concerned, O’Neill who is the leader of Arab American Institution, stressed that the “draconian” Patriot Act had targeted the minorities in the U.S. and especially Muslim Americans. He said that, “The extended powers of search and seizure and increased domestic surveillance have alienated a community that is really eager to participate in and protect this country” (www.muslims.net). Several analysts argued that these oppressive measures were purposeful ways to create a sense of anxiety and mistrust in the general public which was unnecessary. Cole and Dempsey argue in their book that the measures made during the Bush administration scarified many civil liberties in order to make Americans believe that there were safer. The government did things that were “unnecessary and unconstitutional” (Cole, David and Dempsey, 2002). This was the situation at the end of the Bush administration and at the time of the election of Obama.

5. Obama Administration

President Barak Obama, when he was an Illinois state representative, opposed the Bush policy of calling the other culture the “evil doers”. Bush who said that evil should be tackled by whatever means necessary and this led to the ignoring he also opposed what the constitution and international laws said. Obama rejected these ideas and the “terrorism-mongering” tactics. President Obama, when he was elected in 2008 as President, mentioned that he was looking for new way to deal with Muslims. He made a clear speech in Ankara and Cairo where he said ‘Our nation seeks a new beginning with Muslims around the world, a relationship based on mutual interest and mutual respect, It’s a relationship that requires us to listen , share ideas, and find areas of common ground in order to expand a peaceful, prosperous future’ (www.state.gov). That speech show us that the Obama Administration was looking for ways to counter terrorism by opening the door for Muslims instead of using military force and negative propaganda. Hilary Clinton, the current Secretary of State, mentioned that using political, cultural and economic tactics instead of military forces. She said “we must use what has been called smart power- the full range of tools at our disposal, with smart power”. Instead of the Bush strategy such as “social hardening” and the negative propaganda, the Obama government used dialogues, debate, and cooperation with other cultures to make the country safe (www.State.gov). The Obama administration created an office of special representation to the Muslim community under the Department of State. This office is currently headed by special representative Farah Anwar Pandith, who is responsible for executing Secretary Clinton’s vision for engagement with Muslims. This office invited Muslim institution inside the U.S. for roundtable discussions, conferences, and receptions (www.State.gov). Another thing Obama did was ask the NASA Administrator Charles Bolden to “reach out to the Muslim World” (NASA New Mission). President Obama gave a lot of positive support to Muslim community. He supported the right for freedom of religion.

For example, he supported the right for Muslim to build an Islamic organization near “Ground Zero” and he mentioned that in this country all American have the freedom of practicing religions. President Obama was also against the idea of burning the Qur’an in September 2010 (Miah, 2010). Which one leader of a Church was planning to do and tried to have the public support. Obama said it needed to be changed during the Bush administration.

But experts suggested that several terrorist plots had been stopped over the past year and the Democrats falling rating due to the health care debate slowed any move to reform the act, which was passed after 9/11 (Farrell, 2010). On May 15th 2011 the amended provisions were passed till 2013 with the support of both parties. However, President Obama’s administration was not able to alter the Patriot Act provisions, even though he had promised to do so before being elected. The political situation was too difficult.

6. Analysis and discussion

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States today. The Muslim population in the United States is estimated between two to five million (Ayers, 2007). In another estimation, the population of Muslim in the U.S. is six to seven million (Gaskew, 2009). This means that number is at least 5% of American population, which is still a minority in the U.S population. However, the mainstream American public is also becoming more aware of domestic issue after September 11 and more interested in knowing more about Islam. According to Dr. Leonard, the copies of the Quran have been sold out in bookstores and many Islamic organizations. Mosques are holding open houses. Also, the head of the organization of Islam conference on October 10, said “At no other time has the Muslim community in America been more effective in working with the American government”. Approximately 40% of American Muslims believe “the U.S. is fighting a war against Islam” (Ayers, 2007). This percentage is alarming. According to Said, it reflects a cultural war between the West and Islam. It is not only economic and ideological, but it is a cultural war as well. This would be a type of culture war many Muslims think that the negative treatment they received from Bush administration after 9/11 should make them stick with their Islamic foundation. As one Muslim American think Muslim should not “hunting down” fellow Muslims, they should follow what prophet Mohamed exemplified and he think the Patriot Act has long term negative impact on the Muslim in the United States (Gaskew, 2009). Also, American Muslims believe that they were “politically voiceless” in the issue of war against terrorist. For example, American Muslim women “reported they feel they are part of the community that any effect on American politics” (Tirman, 2004).

There are two tactical concepts: First, the global war on terrorism cannot be won without the cooperation of Muslims in the United State. Second Muslim Americans are the key to successfully defeating extremism and the potential growth and practice of radical Islam within the United States. United States government should be more understanding, work and cooperate with the American Muslim community instead of using draconian tactics such as multiple arrests and deportations (Gaskew, 2009). The American civil rights community criticized the Bush administration for over-stepping its legitimate power, especially in terms of violating freedom of speech and other civil liberties. Post-9/11 racial profiling of Muslims labeled them the “suspected other”. U.S. governmental officials should challenge the notion of a “war on terrorism”. What this war should be must be debated publicly (Tirman, 2005). Colin Powell, the Secretary of State, in an interview talked about the U.S. government’s vision for future of the Iraqi government. He expected that would be an Islamic country by faith, just as we are a Judeo – Christian country” (Tirman, 2005). Clearly the United States contains other religious faiths, primarily because of the cultural diversity, but religious prejudice is still apparent in many places. The Patriot Act violates constitutional rights including freedom of speech, freedom of religion and freedom of association. For example, under this law even innocent associations with suspect groups could get a person arrested or deported.

The author gave hypothetical example of potential donation of coloring books to a nursing school which could get the person in trouble if that organization had some connection to political or religious groups that were in terrorist list. The argument is, if they donate these materials the organization can save money for military actions. In addition, by donating to these groups the person could get into trouble by “guilt by association (Cole and Dempsey, 200). Even if the person was working with an organization to stop the terrorism, he or she could be deported as a terrorist. Painting with a broad brush is simply not a good law enforcement tool; it wastes resources on innocents and alienates communities, making it all the more difficult for law enforcement to distinguish the true threats from the innocent bystanders (Cole and Dempsey, 2002). The Patriot Act also violated “due process” because people could potentially detain indefinitely for being suspected terrorists without proof. Due process requires that the agency seeking to deprive a person of a liberty afford him a fair procedure in which to be heard (Cole and Dempsey, 2002). The results of the war on terrorism were laws and policies allowed the government many secret powers by removing controls and the eliminating the appropriate procedures.

One of the laws, as mentioned earlier, the Patriot Act, authorizes security searches and wiretaps without proof. Section 206 of the Patriot Act, also known as the “roving wiretap authority or the John Doe wiretap, is controversial because it goes further than any of the existing wiretapping provisions available to the police or to Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act authorities (FISA). The FISA powers were established in 1978 and they deal with the physical and electronic surveillance of foreign agencies, but which can include American citizens and can be used in the U.S.

The Patriot Act of 2001 was an amendment to the FISA, and it was later further expanded in 2008 to cover any counter terrorism measures in the U.S. The basic differences between these special powers and the normal criminal procedures were the way the agents get permission or warrants, and also the scope of the wiretapping powers. This is important because many of the 2011 proposed amendments to Provision 206 involved making the powers closer to the existing civil laws. Part of the problem of section 206 is that the wiretapping occurs without warrants, and instead there are secret subpoenas, called National Security letters (NSLs). The NSLs allow the FBI to act without any independent oversight or judicial review and to seize private information about any American. Recipients of NSLs are forbidden, or “gagged”, from ever revealing the letters existence to their coworkers, to their friends or to their family members. The ACLU said that is FBI's systemic abuse of power. The Act was discussed and attempts were made to amend it, but in the end, it was passed without any changes. However, the debate over the legality and abuse of civil rights of that bill continued.

7. Links to Other Literature and Themes

A society needs a sense of security and community. However, the U.S. has also valued diversity through immigration and religious freedom. Therefore, there has been a problem of divided communities and intolerance throughout the history of the country, and especially in the cities, where most of the immigrant groups formed communities that often were not fully integrated into the mainstream. The Bush administration dealt with the problems of the public's reaction to Muslim communities in their cities by making laws and trying to control and repress. The Obama administration, however, asked for dialogue between the different communities. The central problem, however, continued to be how the Muslim American community has been seen as the outsider. Many Americans today, for example the Tea Party, would like to return to the type of society described in Boyer's book Boyer describes mainstream American in book as mainly Protestant. The history of how the mainstream looked at groups from other religions shows how the outsider has been treated in America in the cities over the years. His main point is that communities need moral order. The moral order of early cities was provided by recreating in the cities the moral order of the village (Boyer, 1978). This was done mainly by using religion and the main religion was protestant and evangelical. Although the author does not talk about it, anyone from different religion would not fit in. then later in the book the author talks about how “civic loyalty” substitute for this religious moral order (Boyer, 1978). As part of this movement to find city idealism, people called for more parks and monuments (Boyer, 1978). Today In “Ground Zero” project in New York, the building of the mosque was very controversial because it was an example of what happened when more than one religion and ideas of moral order and are not integrated. Muslim Americans are not clearly defined by economic class, since there are so many different groups, but there are cases of discrimination based on economic differences (Gans, 1982)

In comparison, the Muslim American community is defined by its general religion, Islam. However, the different ethnics groups have different types of acculturation and sense of community identity (Gans, 1982). The media had a big effect on the Italian community and media can make difference to West Enders. And also accepting themes from the outside (Gans, 1982). In the Muslim's situation, the mass media did not help them. The mass media had focused on Muslims without a clear idea of the differences between the Muslims, and there are still portrayals of Muslim-types being the bad characters. On the other hand, Muslims did not use the media to try to present themselves and their clear situation. Monti looks at how reformers tried to fix urban problems.

One of the main problems has been how to make people live together and get along well. It must be possible for “different kinds of people [to] learn to accept or at least tolerate each other” (1). He would classify Bush as a pessimistic reformer and Obama as an optimistic reformer. Because Bush uses military actions and “war against terrorism” to fix the problem of nation al security and to face the threat, he seems more aggressive and more inclined to see the Muslim community as a potential enemy. On the other hand, Obama uses dialogs and political power, giving the people the empowerment to handle their issues. For example, he withdrew his troops from Iraq to let Iraqis to handle their problems. The same principle holds for Muslims in the United States. As mentioned earlier, he let the Muslim community to have their center in “Ground zero.”

Neither of the two administrations have clear strategies for helping the Muslim American community become more integrated, with programs such as affirmative action laws. The affirmative action as a tool to make people mix does not always work because people who most need help in becoming better mixed with the rest of us may not be the ones who are assisted most of the time (Monti, 2010). This is an optimistic form of government. In the affirmative action program Muslim community is not benefiting from it because the government did not realize there was a problem and did not apologize about the side effects of the policies and Patriot Acts. So, they have to bring more attention to the problem that they facing through the “War on terrorism” time.

8. Conclusion

The political and the social environment in Bush and Obama administrations were different; the public have different views of the problem of National Security and Muslim community. Local and state government reflects to these views at the federal level specific laws, such as the Patriot Act, also changed in each administration. The Muslim community is now learning to find its voice and become participant in the American society and politics. As argued, the government of the United State abused its power by coming down so hard on the American Muslim Community. Therefore, changes must be seriously considered. Aspects of the Patriot Act should be re-written. The American Muslim Community need to come educated about how to effect governmental policies through their elected officials and how-to utility effective the American mass media.

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