

## **Introduction**

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There is increasing interest in the political participation and representation of religious and ethnic minorities in Europe (Bird, Saalfeld, and Wüst 2010, Benbassa 2011, Givens and Maxwell 2012, Neilsen 2013). While in many countries this is quite a new topic, such research in Britain actually dates back to the early 1970s. This can firstly be explained by the settlement of large numbers of migrants from its former colonies in the immediate post-war period which meant that issues of immigration, race and ethnicity became prominent relatively early. Also, unlike other European countries which denied voting rights to migrants, many of those arriving in Britain had full political rights as either citizens of the UK or Commonwealth citizens. It was in this context that Muhammad Anwar started his research on political participation amongst minorities in Britain by firstly monitoring the participation of Asians in Rochdale in the parliamentary by-election of 1972 and then participation by all ethnic minorities during the 1974 general election (Anwar and Kohler 1975). His work has been crucial in our understanding of this phenomenon and it is fitting that his foreword begins this current volume. Other important landmarks in this field include works by Anthony Messina (1989), Shamit Saggat (1991) and Andrew Geddes (1995).

These authors were concerned with issues of race in British politics at a time when 'race relations' was still the dominant narrative in terms of the position of minorities in society. Philip Lewis' (1994) account of local politics in Bradford showed that religion could be an equally, if not more, important factor. Campaigns for halal meat in schools and the protests against the head teacher Ray Honeyford in the early 1980s can be seen as the early signs of a developing Muslim identity. The true watershed moment though was the Rushdie

affair which certainly led to the creation of a distinct 'Muslim consciousness' (Meer 2010). Lewis' observations of developments in Bradford 'post-Rushdie' would apply to other urban conurbations with a significant Muslim population, in particular how many were now entering local government:

Residential clustering has also provided a constituency which ensures the appointment of Muslim councillors. The 1980s saw a dramatic increase in their numbers, ensuring that local services began to respond to their special needs...in 1981 only three of Bradford's 90 councillors were Muslim. By 1992 it had 11, all Labour, including the deputy leader of the ruling group. These included both a Gujarati woman and a Bangladeshi. This already indicates co-operation across national and regional groupings (Lewis 1994).

The emergence of Muslim councillors was studied in detail by Kingsley Purdam who carried out his PhD research between 1994 and 1998. He was the first scholar to look specifically at Muslim identities in British politics and electoral participation as 'Muslims' rather than ethnic minorities. By 1996 he had estimated that there were 160 Muslim councillors in Britain, the majority of whom had been elected in wards with large Muslim populations. The success of Muslim councillors was therefore a result of Muslim demographic concentration and the first past the post electoral system which meant that Muslim political participation was of direct electoral significance (Purdam 1996). He also noted the prominence of being Muslim as a primary identity for these councillors (Purdam 2000) and how they attempted to invoke loyalties of kinship and caste in their appeals to voters (Purdam 2001).

Muslims have been participating in British politics for many years but it is only relatively recently that they have come to be defined as such. The semantic shift from an ethnic to a religious identity has the potential to clarify and also confuse. Part of the problem with past political research on 'immigrants' and then later 'ethnic' or 'visible' minorities is that it tended to treat all non-white voters/candidates/citizens as a reified category when they may have had very little in common. Using such categories obscures the inherent diversity

within a given population and ignores the subtleties of how different groups actually interact with the political process and why we may observe significant differences between them. This is illustrated by research on the political participation of ethnic minorities in the UK which shows that there are major differences between various ethnic groups (Heath *et al* 2013). On the other hand, by referring to ‘Muslims’ rather than say ‘South Asians’ or ‘Pakistanis’ we are making assumptions about the importance of religion when other factors such as kinship networks could have a much stronger influence on political behaviour. Indeed, the use of a religious marker is inherently problematic. When we talk about a ‘Muslim MP’ does this imply that the person in question represents Muslims or that his/her own religious beliefs or cultural background is more important than party affiliation? Indeed, it is rare to see references to ‘Jewish MPs’ or a ‘Christian Vote’.

This discussion of identities and labels is not new however. Scholars have been grappling with this issue in relation to Muslims and political participation for a long time. In his research in the 1990s, Kingsley Purdam noted that:

Muslims invoke various interpretations and rhetorics of Islam to justify and inspire particular political strategies. They operate both inside and beyond the *liberal democratic* system. It is evident that in Britain a majority of Muslim voters vote Labour but within this general alignment there are various political and cultural positionings. Muslims are not an undifferentiated group, they are not, in the language of political science a single-issue pressure group. Identities are more complex than this: they are negotiated, contested, unstable historical positionings. Muslims themselves are debating and contesting exactly what it means to be a Muslim, what Islam means and how it should be constructed and reproduced both in the *West* and in the rest of the world (Purdam 1996: 130).

Later, even after 9/11, Stefano Allievi pointed to the dangers of seeing voters in purely religious terms:

If we refer to the electorate of these communities as Muslims, the religious variable must prevail: but the success of specific lists characterised in this way has been inconsistent to date and the degree of identification poor. The basic illusion of these parties is that of the very existence of homogeneous religious communities: it does not take into account the fact that many presumed Muslims are often not Muslims and if they are, they are Muslims in a highly diversified way. In addition, there is often only an instrumental use of the Muslim reasoning

by leaders, with the aim of achieving some visibility, thus producing Islamisation of a debate which, up to now, has only tenuous religious characteristics and which is often short lived (Allievi 2003: 187).

While both statements are still valid, the intervening years have seen the development of a distinct Muslim identity in Britain which has been used in the political arena, as evidenced from the chapters in this volume which point to the need for looking at Muslims as a separate political category despite its inherent problems and contradictions. Social science must take account of such developments as there is now an undeniable salience of religion in British political life, particularly amongst voters who identify as Muslim. The existence of civil society groups which mobilise Muslims to vote is just one example of this phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

Scholarly interest in Britain's Muslim communities has proliferated since the events of 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001 but there has been a surprising lack of work on Muslims and political participation since the pioneering work of Purdam. This volume seeks to fill that gap in the literature by looking specifically at how Muslims have participated in British politics in an attempt to go beyond the over-studied issues of identity, terrorism, headscarves and other items that often make the headlines. Muslims have, in fact, been quietly participating in local politics since the 1970s. Free from the barriers to participation found in other countries, they availed themselves of the ability to vote and subsequently stand for election. The pioneers in this respect were Bashir Maan, elected to represent Glasgow's Kingston ward for Labour in 1970, and Karamat Hussain, elected to Brent Council in London in 1972 (Anwar 1996: 126). Bashir Maan was also put forward by Labour for the East Fife parliamentary constituency in 1974, and in 1979 the Conservative candidate for Glasgow Central was Farooq Saleem. Unsurprisingly both lost but during the 1980s Muslim candidates made significant inroads in local politics with election to posts as councillors. Some went on to become mayors, including the aforementioned Karamat Hussain who became mayor of Brent in 1981, and Councillor Muhammad Ajeeb, first elected to Bradford Council in 1979, who became Lord

Mayor of Bradford in 1985. However, it wasn't until 1997 that Britain got its first Muslim MP when Mohammad Sarwar was elected to the seat of Glasgow Govan for Labour. This was followed one year later by the first Muslim life peers in the House of Lords (Baroness Uddin, Lord Alli and Baron Ahmed) who also represented the Labour Party.

It is this party that has continuously attracted the support of Muslim (and indeed all non-white) voters in the UK and the majority of elected Muslim politicians have represented the Labour Party. In the early years of Muslim political participation it was natural for them to support Labour because of the stance it took on immigration and that the fact that many first generation Muslims were factory workers who would have had strong links with the unions (Hussain 2004). The Labour Party built on its early success of attracting a minority vote by developing a distinct ethnic electorate which included promoting ethnic minority elites (Garbaye 2005). For example, in the case of Pakistani communities, the consequence was a system of patronage whereby local Labour politicians built links with community leaders who were expected to deliver bloc votes. These local leaders were often given minor positions of power and mentored in the ways of the political system. Later they could stand for council seats or at least hold influential roles as subaltern aides. Some community leaders negotiated for community provisions such as neighbourhood centres, whilst others were content with the status conferred on them in the eyes of their compatriots (Akhtar 2013). They also put pressure on their parliamentary representatives to raise issues in parliament relating to international issues such as the Kashmir dispute. In 1990 a Kashmir Human Rights Committee was formed in the House of Commons and subsequently an All Party Kashmir Group was set up, most members being Labour MPs who represented large Pakistani/Kashmiri communities (Ellis and Khan 1998). In Birmingham a political party was subsequently set up in 1998 that grew out of the Justice for Kashmir campaign group. The People's Justice Party (PJP) went on to elect a handful of local councillors before disbanding

in 2006. This demonstrated that loyalty to the Labour Party could not be taken for granted amongst Muslim voters, as was proved by the success of the Respect Party.

The development of Respect represented a new era in the participation of Muslims in British politics. Appeals were now being made to a specific religiously defined electorate rather than an ethnic community.<sup>ii</sup> Respect was branded as the ‘party for Muslims’ and candidates claimed they were backed by ‘Muslim scholars’ (Peace 2013). In the 2005 election campaign, George Galloway constantly referred to the invasion of Iraq as a ‘war against Muslims’ and forced his Labour rival Oona King to also appeal to voters through their Muslim identity (Glynn 2008). This has now become the norm and political parties have set their sights on capturing a ‘Muslim vote’ as if Muslims formed some kind of unified constituency. For example, the Conservative Muslim Forum was ‘founded by Lord Sheikh in 2005 when the Conservative Party recognised that it needed to do more to appeal to Muslim voters’.<sup>iii</sup> Since then a number of landmarks have been passed including the first Muslim minister in 2007 (Shahid Malik as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development), the first Muslim to attend a meeting of the Cabinet in 2009 (Sadiq Khan upon his appointment as Minister of State for Transport) and the first Muslim woman to serve in the Cabinet in 2010 (Baroness Warsi as Minister without portfolio). The general election of 2010 also saw the arrival in parliament of the first female Muslim MPs and Conservative Muslim MPs. So Muslims are playing a prominent role even at the highest levels of British political life. Yet Muslim political participation is about much more than national and local party politics and the chapters in this volume showcase current research into Muslim political participation both in terms of electoral politics and civil society initiatives.<sup>iv</sup>

## **The chapters**

In chapter 1, Parveen Akhtar tackles the importance of biraderi networks which are key to understanding political activity amongst Pakistani communities in Britain. She discusses the concept of political representation and the idea of minorities within minorities in relation to Muslim politicians. She argues that the demographic make-up of Muslim political representatives largely mirrors that of the wider British political spectrum, usually middle class and middle aged men, but that things are beginning to change including the election of more women. She describes how biraderi (or kinship) networks function in the diasporic context and their importance in the migration and settlement process. Local politicians became aware of the electoral potential of such close-knit communities in the 1970s and patronage relationships were subsequently formed. Akhtar makes an important distinction between the use of biraderi networks in everyday life and the use of biraderi-politicking whereby kinship networks are used as a mechanism for political control. Although this practice did limit the political role marginalised sections of the community could play in the political process, there is some recognition that it allowed Muslims to gain representation for their community and its specific concerns. Nevertheless, there is now a perception, particularly among the younger generation, that Muslim representatives may have held the community back because the focus was on narrow community specific issues and not wider social problems which could unite people across different communities.

Chapter 2 continues the theme of electoral participation with a historical look at how Muslim organisations in Britain have made interventions in the political sphere in relation to general elections. Jamil Sherif, Ismail Patel and Anas Altikriti trace the history of these organisations including the Union of Muslim Organisations (UMO) founded back in 1970. Its interventions in the political sphere may have gone largely unnoticed at the time but this reminds us that even if other ethnic or racial labels were more common in that period, some Muslims were still mobilising on a religious basis. The authors demonstrate that there has

been a 'Muslim lobby' since at least 1979 when the UMO general secretary wrote a letter to the leaders of the main political parties prior to that year's general election. The list of concerns presented in this letter and the one sent in 1983 was a taste of things to come regarding Muslim political mobilisation at the end of the 1980s, particularly regarding the provision of halal food and a proposed change to blasphemy laws in the wake of the Rushdie affair. As Sherif, Patel and Altikriti explain, the aftermath of this mobilisation of the Muslim community was disappointing for its representative organisations as the political establishment was unwilling to take any action to have the book banned. They show however that from 1997 onwards there has been concerted effort by the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), and its predecessor the UKACIA, to state what British Muslims expect from their parliamentary representatives by producing a series of policy documents or manifestos. The MCB has been a key player in driving Muslim voter registration and participation in elections through its website and affiliate network. Over the years these attempts to get Muslims involved in elections have become more sophisticated and the second half of the chapter details the work of the YouElect project run by a network of Muslim civil society activists prior to the 2010 general election. Such attempts to shape Muslim voting intentions are likely to continue during 2015 and beyond.

The third chapter in the volume by Siobhan McAndrew and Maria Sobolewska looks at the importance of mosques and their role in the political integration of Muslims into British society. They do so by comparing Muslims who do not regularly attend mosques with those who do to see how this affects political participation. Research from the US in fact demonstrates a positive link between attendance at religious services and civic and political activity. To test their hypotheses with the British Muslim case, the authors draw on the Ethnic Minority British Election Study (EMBES) of 2010. They discovered that mosque attendance is associated with self-reports of having voted and is not a cause of political alienation as

often described in the tabloid press. Indeed, more accurate predictors of political disengagement include a feeling of prejudice and being socially distant from the majority white group. However, on other matters such as the duty to vote religious attendance was not significant and mosque attendance does not predict many other indicators of political engagement. It is therefore important not to try to read too much into religiosity and political participation where British Muslims are concerned.

The second section of the volume is concerned with social movements and in chapter 4 Khursheed Wadia looks at the role of Muslim women as political actors in the UK since 9/11. She points out that the state encouraged Muslim women to get active in community organisations as a means to prevent radicalisation and state-funding provided the opportunity to create new groups and projects. Wadia identifies three main types of participants among Muslim women: 'stay-home political activists', 'civic activists' and 'intense political activists'. The first category concerns those women who made a contribution through actions such as donating money to campaigns or signing petitions, some of whom were also drawn to action outside of the home. The second category includes women who wanted to use their position within the community to counter negative stereotypes. They were often involved in various community organisations and took part in marches, rallies and political demonstrations. The third category refers to those gained public visibility because of their political activism and often had a history of involvement in social movements.

In Chapter 5 Rosemary Hancock explores the involvement of British Muslims in the environmental movement and the emergence of green Muslim organisations such as the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES) and Wisdom in Nature (WiN). She firstly explores how Social Movement Theory has dealt with the issue of religion and notes how religious movements tended to be left out of social movement studies until quite recently. This was especially true with Islamic activism although that situation has now

been redressed with the wave of studies that have surfaced in the wake of 9/11. Hancock looks at some of the central concepts in Islamic environmental discourse and then turns to her case studies of Islamic Environmental Organisations in Britain by outlining their goals and means for achieving them. She then elaborates on the ideology and framing of both IFEES and WiN showing that the former is more formally grounded in Islamic beliefs while the latter is more influenced by left-wing political activism associated with more mainstream environmental groups. Where IFEES is more international and seeks to work with governments and institutions, WiN prefers a bottom-up approach that remains committed to local grassroots action. The two groups demonstrate the diversity of options available to those Muslims interested in saving the planet where they can meet like-minded individuals who share their faith. However, Hancock also points out the similarity of these groups to the larger secular environmental organisations such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth which Muslims are now increasingly likely to join.

Timothy Peace's chapter concludes the section on social movements with an overview of the participation of British Muslims in the anti-war movement. He traces the history of this participation with a focus on some of the key figures and activists that were involved. He argues that the involvement of Muslims in the anti-war movement acted as a springboard to the development of what is now referred to as 'Muslim civil society' and created opportunities for a new generation of Muslim leaders to emerge from the shadows of the first generation. He contrasts the mobilisation against the 'war on terror' with protests during the Rushdie affair, the success of the former being based on successful partnerships being built with organisations that formed the Stop the War Coalition. The formation of Just Peace, a small London-based group, started the ball rolling for Muslim participation in the anti-war movement. Its role is often forgotten due to the later exposure given to groups such as the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB). Peace also demonstrates that Muslim

participation in the movement was not as straightforward as many leaders have publically claimed. Nevertheless the anti-war movement, and in particular the massive demonstration of 15<sup>th</sup> February 2003, is a key moment in the history of British Muslim political participation and directly led to the formation of the Respect Party.

Part 3 of the volume looks at the political involvement of young people, an important topic given the demographics of the British Muslim population. Asma Mustafa's contribution analyses the perception of young second generation British Muslims regarding political violence, foreign policy, citizenship and political engagement. She shows how many young Muslims use religious teachings, morals and values to inform their political perspectives and activities. Some respondents directly referred to the Qur'an but Mustafa highlights the diversity of religious interpretation and subsequent broad range of views espoused by those she interviewed. She notes that despite their loyalty being called into question, many young Muslims feel a shared sense of Britishness and engage in moments of national pride. Others may perceive their citizenship in purely instrumental terms and feel that their only allegiance is to the 'ummah' or global Muslim community. Irrespective of their emotional attachment to the country, most respondents did feel passionate about politics and in particular elections and the right to vote. Boycotting was also a method that many used to signal their discontent on certain political issues.

Chapter 8 looks at how young Muslims use Facebook to explore ideas of the political. Brooke Storer-Church used Facebook Groups to recruit participants for her study and observed the discussions that they engaged in on this social media platform as well as conducting online and offline interviews. Facebook afforded her participants the opportunity for education and engaging in conversation with people who hold a wide range of political views. This even includes engaging with political groups that are hostile to Muslims such as the English Defence League (EDL) Facebook Group. Other groups more focused on British

Muslims provided a point around which respondents could gather, debate and discuss the terms of their identity and representation. They also were used as tools for participation in collective action through particular political campaigns. Facebook therefore provides a space for the articulation of reflexive politics and an arena for democratic debate as well as a springboard for offline political action such as street protests.

Political engagement is explored further by Khadijah Elshayyal and in particular the development of British Muslim identity politics. Her focus is on the reactions to 9/11 both among Muslim advocacy groups and the British government. Prior to this she recounts how the 1990s were a period of religious discovery and self-assertion of young Muslims. The formation of the MCB meant that for the very first time the British government had a privileged Muslim interlocutor, however the period of 2001-2005 saw a host of new initiatives that were designed to represent British Muslims. Elshayyal also discusses how Muslims have reacted to the emergence of the far-right which traded particularly heavily on stoking fears of Muslims. The means for dealing with this problem became the source of tension between those who believed people of faith need protection against incitement to hatred and those who sought to protect freedom of expression, even of those they might disagree with.

Chapter 10 takes an even deeper look at the Muslim Council of Britain as part of the final section on participation in institutions. Ekaterina Braginskaia examines the MCB's relationship with successive British governments in the period from 1997-2013. She analyses the changing nature of its engagement with the political establishment in light of the opportunities and constraints offered by a rapidly changing political climate. She notes that the initial years of the MCB could be considered as a honeymoon period as there was successful cooperation between senior politicians and the Council. This coincided with an effort by the government to demonstrate a greater receptivity to faith and faith-based

identities. The MCB became the unquestioned representative organisation for Muslim interests and successfully lobbied for a religious question to be included in the 2001 census. As Braginskaia points out, this was a notable achievement on behalf of the MCB as it paved the way for the recognition of a Muslim identity in the public sphere with statistics to back it up. The events of September 2001 would merely confirm the salience of this identity and this event also provided the MCB with its biggest challenge. Braginskaia documents how the relationship between the Council and the government gradually broke down. She also details how the change from a Labour to Coalition government led to a pluralising of state-Muslim relations.

In her chapter (Chapter 11), Ekaterina Kolpinskaya analyses the role of Muslim MPs in the Westminster parliament. She challenges the assumption that Muslim politicians may lack opportunities to contribute to legislative decision making. She also shows that belonging to a religious minority does not determine how they engage with the legislative process. The chapter adopts an institution-centred approach and demonstrates that Muslim MPs are more than able contributors to the legislative process including the introduction and scrutiny of legislative proposals and policies. They are thus involved in decision-making at the heart of British parliamentary democracy. Indeed, it is noted that by 2012 four of the six Labour and one of the three Conservative Muslim MPs had held either ministerial or Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS) positions. Although Muslim MPs have not been particularly successful at introducing Private Members' Bills, this again is not due to their background but rather their disengagement with this type of parliamentary activity. This is more than balanced out by preparing and passing government legislative proposals as either ministers or PPS, and conversely scrutinising such proposals as members of the opposition. In fact, this chapter reminds us that Muslims are actually over-represented on the frontbench when

compared to other MPs with a minority background. This is a measure of the progress that has been made since the very first Muslim MP was elected in 1997.

Finally, chapter 12 deals with Muslim representatives in local government with a case study of the London boroughs of Hackney, Newham and Tower Hamlets which are all home to large Muslim populations. Eren Tatari and Ahmet Yukleyen examine the extent to which ethnic minorities engage in community politics and represent the interests of their own communities rather than the entire constituency. They argue that while substantive representation is necessary, it is not sufficient for Muslim political representation. Their research draws on original data from in-depth interviews with a range of Muslim leaders, political activists and city councillors as well as a quantitative analysis of all Muslim councillors across the three boroughs. The data show that Tower Hamlets Council has the highest local government responsiveness to specific Muslim demands. The authors also demonstrate that party fragmentation among Muslim councillors can impact their cohesion and effectiveness in terms of their responsiveness to Muslim demands. The research does however show that Muslim councillors do not focus exclusively on Muslim interests. So while they might articulate and pursue the concerns of the Muslim community, they also devote time to working on issues that have no religious, ethnic or racial content. Tatari and Yukleyen also remind us that these Muslim elected officials encourage civic involvement among Muslim youth and are alternative role models to the extremists who shun democratic institutions.

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<sup>i</sup> A good example is the YouElect campaign run by a network of Muslim civil society activists in the lead up to the UK general election to promote Muslim voter registration and political engagement (see chapter 2). The Muslim lobbying group ENGAGE also runs an initiative called Get Out & Vote!

<http://www.getoutandvote.info/>

<sup>ii</sup> It could be argued that the first party to do this was the Islamic Party of Britain, established in 1989 by convert David Musa Pidcock. It stood candidates in Bradford at the 1992 general election and received just over 1000 votes.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.conservativemuslimforum.com/about-us/overview>

<sup>iv</sup> Many of the chapters in this volume were first presented in April 2012 at a conference in Edinburgh organised by the Alwaleed Centre at the University of Edinburgh in partnership with the Muslims in Britain Research Network (MBRN). As part of the conference, the Centre also organized a public debate called 'Muslims and the political process in Scotland' held at the Scottish Parliament; the speakers included Hamira Khan, Hanzala Malik MSP, Shabnum Mustapha and Humza Yousaf MSP and was chaired by Professor Mona Siddiqui OBE. <http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/literatures-languages-cultures/alwaleed/muslims-in-britain/conference>