

## **Part Four**

### **Breaking the bounds**

## **15. Muslims and electoral politics in Britain: the case of the Respect Party**

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### **1. Introduction**

In comparison with many other European countries, Britain's ethnic minorities have been very successful at achieving political representation and making an impact on the political system.

Whereas migrants and their descendants in other countries may have struggled for years to gain the right to vote and stand in elections, Commonwealth migrants to Britain from her former colonies were automatically given the right to citizenship including full political rights. This even pre-dated the mass migration to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, and three Members of Parliament (MPs) from the Indian subcontinent, though none Muslim, were elected to the House of Commons before World War II (Anwar 2001). Even today, citizens of the Commonwealth countries have full voting rights at all levels and can be candidates. Muslims have certainly played an important role in British electoral politics - be they migrants, British-born or even converts to Islam. The vast majority of Muslims in the UK trace their heritage to South Asia and it is they who have made the biggest impact. The first Muslim in Britain to hold elected office was Bashir Maan who emigrated from Pakistan to Britain in 1953. He became a City Councillor in Glasgow in 1970 and it was in that same city that Mohammad Sarwar was elected as the first Muslim MP in 1997. This was followed one year later by the first Muslim life peer in the House of Lords. Since then a number of British-born Muslims have also made an impact in politics, including Shahid Malik who in 2007 became the first Muslim Minister in the UK government when he was appointed as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in the Department for International Development by then Prime Minister Gordon Brown. All of these pioneers were male and represented the Labour Party. Until quite recently, the overwhelming majority of all Muslim politicians, whether at local or national level, fitted this profile.

Parties across the political spectrum now make great efforts to connect with Muslims voters. Muslim communities are often geographically concentrated in certain neighbourhoods and it is widely assumed that they can affect the results of elections in a number of areas in the country. Over half of British Muslims live in just 50 parliamentary seats and in ten of these seats, the Muslim population is over 20%. In the constituencies of Bethnal Green and Bow (East London) and Bradford West, it approaches 40%. British local government authorities are split up into electoral districts called wards which elect several councillors. Those wards with high numbers of Muslim residents usually elect fellow Muslims as their representatives and consequently over 200 Muslims are represented in British local government. The London Borough of Tower Hamlets has 30 local councillors who are Muslim, in Bradford there are 24 and Birmingham city council has seventeen. As of 2012 there are eight Muslim Members of Parliament (six Labour and two Conservative), two British Muslim Members of the European Parliament, two Muslim Members of the Scottish Parliament and one Muslim Member of the National Assembly for Wales. Muslims have represented all the major political parties including the regional nationalist parties the Scottish National Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru. Even if Muslim candidates have been elected for a variety of parties, it is still the Labour party which most of them continue to represent. Labour also receives the most support in areas with a high concentration of Muslim residents. Indeed, constituencies with high numbers of ethnic minorities, whether Muslims or not, have traditionally represented 'safe seats' for the Labour party. The relationship between Labour and Muslim communities has always been very strong and most Muslims who are members of political parties are also most likely to be associated with Labour. Purdham (1996: 133) even remarked that 'many local Labour parties in areas with a high Muslim population are now under Muslim control.'

The only party to make any significant impact on Labour's dominance in constituencies with large numbers of Muslims is the Respect Party. It has been noted for the massive involvement of Muslims and its electoral success in East London, Birmingham and Bradford, where large numbers of British Muslims reside. It managed to drastically reduce Labour's support in certain areas and

achieved representation both within local government and in the lower house of the Westminster Parliament. This was a staggering achievement considering that minor parties in Britain have always been disadvantaged because of the ‘winner takes all’ voting system. As this chapter will show, the Respect Party concentrates on an essentially local campaigning strategy and uses civil society contacts in order to boost its electoral prospects. It is unique in Europe as the only party dominated by Muslim leaders and activists which has made an electoral breakthrough. This chapter provides an overview of the party and demonstrates how it has contributed to breaking down traditional community politics that was exploited by the Labour Party. The empirical evidence is drawn from a series of semi-structured interviews with Respect councillors who were elected to Tower Hamlets London Borough Council as well as election material produced by the party. Additional material obtained from newspapers, party websites and other publications has also been used to inform the analysis. The chapter is divided into three sections; the first presents a history of the party and an examination of its electoral performance, it then details the specific dynamics at play within ‘ethnic politics’ in the UK before finally explaining how mosques, faith-based organisations and community groups helped Respect to gain support in the local community and representation in both local and national political institutions.

## **2. A brief history of Respect and its electoral performance**

‘RESPECT – The Unity Coalition’ (hereafter Respect) was founded in January 2004.<sup>1</sup> It grew out of the British anti-war movement and the Stop the War Coalition (SWC) which organised the largest public demonstration in British history on 15<sup>th</sup> February 2003 to oppose the invasion of Iraq. The anti-war movement was crucial in the politicisation of a new generation of young people, especially British Muslims (Peace 2008). The unprecedented success of the movement, coupled with the widespread disappointment of many traditional Labour party supporters, made the idea of forming an alternative party particularly attractive. This idea gained further credence when Labour

performed poorly in local elections in Birmingham and Leicester in May 2003, results which were largely attributed to Muslim voters (BBC 2003). The project to form a party was spearheaded by the journalist and environmental campaigner George Monbiot, and Salma Yaqoob, a British Muslim woman who was the chair of the Birmingham chapter of the SWC. The MP George Galloway joined the fray after he was expelled from the Labour Party in October 2003. He would become Respect's figurehead and most well known personality (although he was never the party leader). The Socialist Workers Party (SWP), whose leaders were very active in the SWC, were also heavily involved in setting up Respect which aimed to provide an outlet to voters angered by the war in Iraq but also federate elements of the British radical left.<sup>2</sup>

Soon after its formation, Respect's leaders began campaigning ahead of the London Assembly and European parliament elections scheduled for 10 June 2004. They were well aware that a significant number of Muslim voters would be willing to switch their allegiance from Labour. The proportional voting systems employed also meant that this would be a golden opportunity to get Respect candidates elected. Many of these candidates were Muslims and election material actually advertised Respect as 'the party for Muslims'. They also specifically billed the elections as a 'referendum on Blair and the war' in order to capture the vote of those angered by the invasion of Iraq (fig.1). Given that the party had only been in existence for six months, its electoral performance was quite remarkable. In the European election, the party polled a quarter of a million votes. In the London region alone they received 91,175 votes, although this was not enough in order to elect an MEP. It also achieved 4.5% of the vote in the London Assembly contest but again narrowly missed out on a seat.<sup>3</sup> The breakdown of the vote showed that they had outperformed all other parties in the East London boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Newham, the two local authorities with the highest numbers of Muslim residents in the country.<sup>4</sup> One month later, the party won a local council by-election in Tower Hamlets and Oliur Rahman became Respect's first elected official. The party then set about preparing to elect its first MP. This would be no mean feat as the 'first past the post' plurality voting system in the UK makes it much harder for smaller parties to

win seats than under proportional systems. It does however favour those parties whose support is geographically concentrated (Boucek 1998) and the residential segregation of many Muslim communities meant that those involved in Respect thought they might be able to capitalise on the weakness of Labour in some of its former strongholds. Respect were not the only group trying to exploit bitter feelings about the Iraq war amongst Muslim communities. There was also a campaign to unseat Labour MPs in the North West of England by the Muslim Public Affairs Committee (Russell *et al* 2008).

The 2005 UK general election saw Respect put forward 26 candidates in England and Wales, again the majority of its candidates were Muslims. It was in East London where the party saw most potential for success as three of the four sitting Labour MPs had voted in favour of the invasion of Iraq. They also targeted other constituencies with large Muslim populations in places like Bradford, Birmingham, Manchester and Leicester. Respect candidates were however also fielded in places where very few Muslims live like Dorset and Neath. Its election manifesto made a stinging attack on the Labour party and advocated for socialist principles:

We believe that there is an alternative to imperialist war, unfettered global capitalism, and the rule of the market. We aim for a society where wealth is used to meet the needs of the people, not the profits of the corporations. We aim to organise opposition to all forms of inequality and injustice. We actively oppose the destruction of the environment, inherent in the profit system, which threatens the future of the planet. Our aim is to create a socially just and ecologically sustainable society. As we have seen over the war on Iraq, there is a huge democratic deficit in Britain. Millions marched against the invasion and millions more opposed it. Yet their wishes were ignored, while those of George Bush were dutifully carried out. At the last two elections, millions voted for Labour candidates, expecting them to improve their lives. Not many would have expected tuition fees, privatisation, wars,

attacks on the disabled and asylum seekers, and massive handouts to big business (Respect 2005)

Respect put most of its resources into trying to elect candidates in East London and amassed an army of volunteers to canvass potential electors and persuade them to give their vote to a party that many had never even heard of. To the surprise of many political commentators, George Galloway was subsequently elected as MP for the constituency of Bethnal Green and Bow, overturning a Labour majority of over 10,000. Two other Respect candidates in the area finished second to Labour and Salma Yaqoob also came second in the Birmingham Small Heath and Sparkbrook constituency. The party won on average 6.9% of the vote nationwide in the constituencies it contested and performed quite poorly in most areas outside of London and Birmingham, indeed 17 of their candidates lost their deposit i.e. gained less than 5% of the vote. Success in these two areas was no doubt linked to the fact that the anti-war movement had been strong and Respect had a base on which to build. Following the 2005 election results, a number of local councillors from both Labour and the Liberal Democrats decided to defect to Respect.

At local elections in May 2006, the party fielded over 150 candidates and went on to elect a total of sixteen local councillors, twelve of whom for Tower Hamlets Council. In 2007 it also elected an additional two councillors bringing the nationwide total to eighteen. Until this moment the party had been making steady progress but events later that year would lead to a sharp decline in its fortunes. In late 2007 there was a split, not uncommon in parties of the radical left, and those connected with the SWP left the coalition. The effect on its electoral scores was devastating. It performed poorly in the 2008 London Assembly elections and did not even put forward candidates for the 2009 European elections. In 2010, the party had only eleven parliamentary candidates for the general election that was held on 6 May that year. They failed to elect any candidates and lost the seat previously held by George Galloway. They also lost most of their local councillors who were represented in Tower Hamlets, Newham and Birmingham. Galloway attempted to get elected to the

Scottish Parliament in May 2011 but received just 3% of the vote. Many assumed the party was destined for the history books but at the by-election for the Bradford West constituency in March 2012 the party pulled off its biggest win to date. George Galloway returned as an MP with a stunning 56% of the vote. This result shocked the whole political establishment and Galloway called it 'The Bradford Spring' (BBC 2012). Respect's previous best performances came at a time when the Iraq war was still a very salient issue. Its success had been interpreted by most as an anti-war protest vote. The victory in Bradford showed that the reasons were perhaps more complex than that. Yet again, the party had shaken up the electoral landscape in an area with a large Muslim population that was considered to be a Labour heartland. One of the ways it achieved this was by challenging the manipulation of minority communities and the political process that was hitherto common place.

*Figure 1. Respect election material (RESPECT 2004)*

*Insert fig. 1 here*

### **3. Ethnic politics in Britain**

The link between the Labour Party and the communities of post-colonial migrants and their descendants has traditionally been very solid and constituencies with high numbers of ethnic minorities have always been bastions of Labour support. In his groundbreaking study *Race and Party Competition in Britain*, Anthony Messina (1989: 151) summed up the situation thus: 'Asian and Afro-Caribbean electors constitute a solid voting bloc; and these constituencies are extremely loyal to Labour. By virtually all indices, Labour is the party of, if not unambiguously for, non-whites.' Indeed, for many years support for the Labour party from these sections of the electorate was seen as natural because most migrants (and their descendants) formed part of the working class and Labour had also supported ethnic minorities by promoting race relations and anti-discrimination



legislation. Labour had also taken a more active role in using pillars of such communities to stand as candidates in elections, although this practice has since been adopted by all the main parties. In comparison with many other countries in Western Europe, actively selecting ethnic minority candidates may appear particularly progressive. However, this has often involved many perverse aspects. Minority communities, in particular South Asian communities, have been commonly used as vote banks in a pattern of co-optation of 'community leaders'. In his study into the politics of ethnic minorities and the Labour Party in Birmingham, Garbaye (2005) identified three main styles of co-optation: patronage, radical activist and ethnic community. The patronage model involves candidates receiving favours for their community in return for securing election victory for Labour. However, they are not given access to decision making processes and merely expected to deliver votes for the party from their community. Radical activists were more involved in the party and often came from the second generation who were more politically savvy than their parents. Their candidacy was often supported by other left wing activists within the Labour Party. In the ethnic community model, councillors built political careers on resources drawn from their communities and merely used Labour as a structure without much interest in party discipline. These three models have tended to overlap and operate simultaneously in areas with high numbers of ethnic minorities in Britain.

This situation has led to undemocratic practices as electors from minority communities, particularly those of South Asian origin, are often encouraged to vote according to family or kinship relations. This is a situation that is prevalent in many Muslim communities. Glynn (2008: 71) describes how patronage worked within the Bengali community in East London:

Clan politics is often explained as an Asian import, but it is probably more accurate to say that a close community with strong patriarchal structures allows for the most efficient use of those non-party ties and networks that are exploited by politicians of all backgrounds. The importance of patronage relations was strengthened by communication difficulties that left

those who could translate English and Bengali (and understood political procedure) in a powerful position. Existing patterns of patronage that are found in many ethnic minority communities will inevitably be exploited in politics, and possibly reinforced. Bengali members would refer to others as ‘my members’; and when Labour canvassers went round Spitalfields they did not bother to knock on every door – Bengali party members knew where to find the community leaders who would be able to deliver perhaps twenty votes.

The Bengali community in East London is very prominent due to a specific history of chain migration from Bangladesh, in particular the region of Sylhet (Eade 1989). In other cities such as Birmingham and Bradford it is the Pakistani community which dominates, in particular those with family ties to Mirpur in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. In these communities the *biraderi* (extended family) has often been used to secure votes for a particular candidate, be they Muslim or non-Muslim. The Labour party in particular has exploited this situation for many years and has knowingly ‘allowed *biraderi* politics to flourish’ (Lewis 2007: 52).<sup>5</sup> Kingsley Purdham studied Muslim councillors in the mid-1990s and discovered that ‘74 per cent of councillors interviewed for this research stated that in their experience individuals have attempted to invoke loyalties along kinship/caste/*biraderi* lines in their appeals to Muslims at the local level. 13 per cent of the Muslim councillors interviewed refused to comment, a denial which may suggest an even higher overall percentage’ (Purdham 2001:151). This kind of politics occasionally leads to outright corruption, such as the Birmingham postal vote scandal in 2004 which led to three Muslim Labour councillors being ousted and banned from standing for office by an election commissioner who found them guilty of corrupt and illegal practices (Stewart 2006).<sup>6</sup> The Respect Party as a whole, and George Galloway in particular, campaigned against vote-rigging through the postal voting system and indeed an end to postal voting on demand (BBC 2005). It saw this as a means for Labour to siphon off some of its potential support and it lodged a petition on 31 May 2005 which challenged the

general election result in the constituency of Birmingham Sparkbrook and Small Heath because of suspicion of electoral fraud. Respect also resisted pressure from community leaders to select candidates based purely on their family background, as former leader Salma Yaqoob explains:

It is for the reasons that *biraderi* (extended clan) networks can exert undue influence that we have been campaigning in Birmingham against postal votes. Women in particular have been disenfranchised. Postal votes are filled out in the ‘privacy’ of one’s own home. But it is not private when family members, candidates or supporters, can influence – subtly or otherwise – the way you complete your vote... Last year in Birmingham Sparkbrook we came under considerable pressure when we selected a candidate whose family were originally from the same village in Pakistan as the sitting Lib Dem councillor. It was alleged we were splitting the *biraderi* vote. And that we could not win by so doing. We resisted those pressures, just as we resisted pressures when the same people said we could never win by standing a woman candidate (Yaqoob 2008).

In the wake of the by-election victory in Bradford West, the media quickly picked up on the importance of the *biraderi* system. Pressure to vote according to kinship ties is a concern for many younger Muslim voters who have in the past decided not to vote as a form of protest. Journalists reported that many young people they spoke to in Bradford admitted they had gone against the wishes of their parents or the community elders to vote for Galloway. Therefore the Respect party challenged many of the prevailing orthodoxies associated with British ethnic politics and has reaped the benefits.

Respect was often criticised for being ‘communalist’ i.e. only campaigning for one particular ethnic/religious group. Respect never aimed to base itself exclusively on Muslim voters, even though its support was disproportionately from the Muslim community. In reality, all the major parties try to appeal to a Muslim electorate, both through their policies and candidates.

Nevertheless, it is inaccurate to talk of a 'Muslim vote' in the sense of one homogeneous voting bloc. Muslim voters are usually split according to several different cleavages whether related to family ties, theological affiliations or simply the kind of socio-economic cleavages that separate all voters.<sup>7</sup> Parties need to do much more than gain a hypothetical Muslim vote. They need to deal with both local political concerns as well as taking into account diaspora politics imported from abroad. For some British Muslim councillors, 'political involvement with the country of departure can extend into British politics and into active involvement in political causes or political parties of their departure country. Activists can therefore maintain a foot in two countries.' (Purdham 2000: 53). The Kashmir issue has been very important in British politics because of the sheer number of people who still have strong family ties to this area. (Ellis and Khan 1998) In Birmingham for example, the People's Justice Party (PJP) was formed in 1998 to campaign on this issue and even elected a handful of local councillors. In the 2001 general election it gained 13% of the vote in the Birmingham Sparkbrook and Small Heath constituency. Unsurprisingly, Respect's Salma Yaqoob has always spoken out about events in Kashmir and campaigned against the actions of the Indian security services by, for example, picketing the Indian consulate. Galloway too never failed to mention Kashmir in his campaign in Bradford, as well as the issue of Palestine.<sup>8</sup>

In Tower Hamlets, there is an Islamist/secularist cleavage amongst the Bengali community which relates to the Bangladesh Liberation war of 1971.<sup>9</sup> The politics of Bangladesh have also been transported to Britain, leading to:

A complicated interweaving of political struggles between (1) the major parties (Awami League, Bangladesh National Party and Jatiya Party) and Islamist pressure groups in Bangladesh and (2) British political parties. Political struggles between Bangladeshi activists in Tower Hamlets operated at several levels, there – at the level of formal British political discourse and practice, as well as at formal and informal levels where Bangladeshi political issues were more important. These different levels influenced elections and debates in the

Tower Hamlets political arena, so that support for a particular political party and its policies could not be taken at face value (Begum and Eade 2005: 184).

Many of the elected politicians from the Bengali community in this area have links with parties in Bangladesh and it is through such links that they have been able to build up their political capital. When George Galloway ran for MP in 2005, he was taken by Respect members on a tour of Sylhet in order to garner support for his candidacy.<sup>10</sup> A Respect councillor explains this decision:

We said to George ‘go and visit those poor areas, family members will appreciate that, they will then phone up and canvass for you from Bangladesh’ and that’s what happened. People phoned up telling their family members to ‘give this gentleman a chance’. Also, we needed to divide the voters as soon as possible because we also have the Bangladeshi politics to deal with too. This meant trying to make friends with all the political parties over there, giving them hope and aspiration, providing neutrality as an MP and to serve the interests of Bangladesh. This helped to neutralise the [Bangladeshi] political parties who would normally have affiliated themselves with the Labour party.<sup>11</sup>

Such divide and conquer tactics demonstrate an astute political awareness of the likely voting patterns amongst the local community. Respect activists were very shrewd in taking into account both local politics and what was happening back in South Asia.

Respect also received criticism for only using Muslim election candidates. Again, this is slightly unfair as the party has put forward candidates from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds and its leaders have often been keen to point out that their candidates are the most diverse, not only regarding ethnicity but also in terms of age and gender.<sup>12</sup> It is a simple fact that in areas of high Muslim population, parties are most likely to select candidates who are also Muslim. This has been the case at the local level for quite some time and is now also becoming more

common for parliamentary elections. For example, in 2010 the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties put forward only Muslim candidates in the parliamentary constituencies of Bethnal Green and Bow and Birmingham Ladywood. In the past, parties (in particular Labour) encouraged ethnic minorities to serve at the local level in order to control a particular council but made it more difficult for them to stand for parliamentary seats. Indeed many prominent government ministers have been elected in such constituencies which are seen as ‘safe seats’. Councillors representing wards with a high ethnic minority population are inevitably members of ethnic minorities themselves, irrespective of their party affiliation. Respect usually elected councillors in wards which had a high proportion of Muslim residents such as Sparkbrook in Birmingham, Green Street West in Newham and Shadwell in Tower Hamlets.

#### **4. The role of mosques, faith-based organisations and community groups**

Respect provides an interesting case study of the relationship between political parties and civil society as it evolved directly from a social movement. Such a trajectory represents a somewhat anomalous path for modern day parties but is of course not novel in the history of Western European democracies where mass parties often started as ‘a movement from society towards the state’ (Biezen 2005: 169). From the outset Respect was, by its very nature, already embedded in a host of civil society organisations and networks connected to the anti-war movement but also to the wider movement against neo-liberal globalisation (Peace 2008).<sup>13</sup> Its platform included issues that could be readily identified with the radical left such as opposing neo-liberalism, renationalising public services and promoting trade unionism as well as a commitment to ‘social justice’. Specific manifesto pledges included opposition to privatisation policies, higher taxes aimed for businesses and high earners, the repeal of ‘anti-union’ legislation, safeguarding the National Health Service (NHS), defending civil liberties and raising the minimum wage (Respect 2005, 2010). International issues such as government foreign policy have also been used as key mobilising themes, even for

local elections. Opposition to Britain's military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan has been central to this, but Respect candidates also attempt to mobilise the electorate around other issues close to the heart of many Muslims such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Respect candidates combine this with a strong focus on local issues. One Respect councillor who was interviewed stressed that he wanted to make a point of winning by operating at the grass roots level. It is through their links with mosques, faith-based organisations and community groups that they are able to gain support for their candidates despite the stiff electoral competition from more established parties.

The party is in fact at a massive disadvantage regarding both human and financial resources in relation to the established parties, a fact it readily admitted in its campaign literature: 'We do not have the money or the media coverage the big parties have. Our strength is you. We need you to contact us and take leaflets to your local mosque, study circle, community organisation etc' (Respect 2004). The mosques and local community groups (which may not necessarily have a religious focus) are the two most important aspects of civil society that Respect has relied on in order to achieve electoral success. Such a strategy is commonplace in ethnic politics and is also employed by competing politicians, many of whom are also from the ethnic minority community in question. In Tower Hamlets for example, former Bengali youth activists occupy a pivotal role in the community organisation sector and many have entered the local authority through either Labour or the Liberal Democrats and subsequently succeeded in securing funding for cultural and community projects (Eade & Garbin 2006: 185). Community organisations are dependent on council funding which encourages a patron-client relationship with local councillors and the party they represent. Respect candidates were thus forced to innovate and bypass some of the traditional structures, or in some cases create new rival organisations.

In areas of high numbers of Muslim residents, mosques and other faith-based organisations are some of the most visible and influential civil society players. These organisations have become even more important in recent years as both national and local governments seek to engage faith groups in order to facilitate regeneration, provide consultation on policy making and service

delivery as well as generally promoting 'community cohesion' through interfaith activity (McLoughlin 2005). The leading mosques in East London are involved in partnerships with local authorities to carry out social welfare functions and faith led groups are heavily involved in preventive work on drugs, youth homelessness, teenage pregnancy and anti-social behaviour (Begum & Eade 2005). The East London Mosque (ELM) has developed a particularly dominant role in this respect and works in close collaboration with the health authorities, job centre and local schools (Glynn 2008). It is seen as a key power broker in the local political arena, so much so that every local politician is obliged to speak with its leadership and publicly visit the mosque if they want to stand a chance of being elected.<sup>14</sup> ELM 'has been highly successful at building alliances with local government officials, and its recent expansion that resulted in the creation of the London Muslim Centre (used for prayers, recreational facilities and housing) has strengthened its position at a time when funding for secular groups significantly declined' (Eade & Garbin 2006: 188). It has also become an important actor through its membership of Citizens UK which unites over one hundred different civil society organisations across the city campaigning on various social issues.<sup>15</sup>

Mosques do not usually openly support one particular candidate at election time as this could be divisive and also counter-productive. Some are strictly apolitical and avoid involvement in party politics altogether.<sup>16</sup> The description that Schmitt-Beck and Farrell (2008: 14) provide about organised interests is certainly apt concerning the more political mosques such as ELM:

Often, they refrain from clearly taking sides at elections, for fear of alienating members who no longer automatically come from the same political background, but also in order to prevent their relations to government officials from being entirely dependent on the fickle electoral fate of just one particular party. On the contrary, they generally try to stay on friendly terms with several parties at the same time. Sometimes they avoid clear party political statements and refer to more subtle techniques of signalling to their members what the best electoral choices are.



Likewise, faith-based organisations are often registered charities and this too means that they are legally not permitted to endorse political parties or display partisan affiliation. However, it is widely acknowledged that leaders within both mosques and related organisations hold the ability to sway the opinions of many voters and so local politicians often enter into negotiations with them. As one Respect councillor simply put it, ‘they need our help and we need their votes’. To this end, Respect candidates and supporters would often leaflet outside mosques after Friday prayers and on certain occasions were allowed to address those inside. In Newham, the link between local mosques and Respect candidates was very close. Respect’s candidate for the parliamentary seat of East Ham in 2005 was Abdul Khaliq Mian, a local community organiser and part of the Newham Muslim Alliance (NMA), a coalition of leaders from 25 local mosques. He organised several hustings, debates and fundraising events at venues such as Muslim faith schools and his selection was endorsed by other mosque leaders: ‘Before I stood we called a meeting of the elders from the mosques and explained the process. They endorsed me’ (Taylor 2005). The Respect candidate for mayor of Newham in 2006 was Abdurahman Jafar, a human rights barrister and vice-chair of the legal affairs committee of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). Both candidates were able to mobilise large numbers of voters in Newham, despite coming second in both contests.<sup>17</sup> These links have also been important in Birmingham, the other area where Respect has made an electoral breakthrough. Salma Yaqoob is a spokeswoman for Birmingham central mosque and also secured the backing of several Muslim scholars for her campaigns (see fig. 2).

In his campaign for election in Bethnal Green and Bow in 2005, George Galloway made a point of visiting all the mosques in the area and spoke to their trustees. ‘Their support was crucial for George’s campaign; all the mosques helped George because he did the right thing. He went and visited them all and talked to the leadership. They gave him advice and he took it.’<sup>18</sup> Indeed, although it is difficult to gauge just how vital this support was, it is widely assumed that institutions such as ELM and faith based organisations close to it such as Islamic Forum Europe (IFE) were

instrumental in his election victory. So much so that Bangladeshi politicians from the secularist Awami League were urging their supporters in London to vote Labour in spite of the Iraq issue (Hussain 2007).<sup>19</sup> IFE and its youth wing the Young Muslim Organisation (YMO) are affiliated with the Islamist political party Jamaat-e-Islami.<sup>20</sup> Respect came in for a lot of criticism because of its links with activists from IFE. When questioned on this subject, a Respect councillor defended this strategy:

We have to speak to everyone. You can't say 'OK we're going to support Awami League and exclude Jamaat-e-Islami.' Jamaat is very powerful in Bangladesh, all the business sector in Sylhet is controlled by Jamaat and there is big support for Jamaat in Tower Hamlets.<sup>21</sup>

The journalist Andrew Gilligan has repeatedly criticised the IFE and its role in local politics, even claiming that it exercised significant control over the council in Tower Hamlets (Gilligan 2010).<sup>22</sup>

Community groups, whether they are religious or ethnic in character, are useful for local politicians who often maintain direct links with them and provide their revenue through council funding. In his study of Muslim councillors, Purdham (2000: 49) noted that they had 'voluntary experience in various anti-racist agencies, community action groups and advice centres'. Respect candidates were no different and also had connections with different grass roots community groups and drew on these connections for their campaign. Community workers were also encouraged to come on board and be part of this. Thus a lot of time was devoted to these groups because:

In the Bangladeshi community there are so many associations linked to their particular village or geographical area and the whole cultural psyche is linked to that. They do a lot of projects and fundraising...if you understand that well you can utilise it to your advantage.<sup>23</sup>

Once elected into office in 2006, a number of Respect councillors in Tower Hamlets mobilised the tactic of setting up local community groups in the wards they represent. Respect put forward a number of female candidates and they worked particularly hard to gain a female vote for the party, something that is often neglected by mainstream parties that tend to focus on male community leaders. Former Respect Councillor Lutfa Begum attributed her election victory and that of her daughter Rania Khan to the support of women's groups that met in the mosque.<sup>24</sup> This kind of canvassing is not limited to the Bangladeshi community. Pensioner's groups were also approached, as they contained many residents who were upset by the shift away from traditional working class values by Labour. In its manifestos, Respect targeted these voters by calling for a rise in the basic state pension, free long term care for pensioners and an extension of their free local bus travel privileges to be extended to include rail services (Respect 2005, 2010). Tenants and Residents Associations (TRAs) were also another way for Respect candidates to gain support in the local community, particularly through the campaign to stop councils selling off their remaining housing stock.

Local campaigning against the war on Iraq contributed the most to Respect's successes. Tower Hamlets Stop the War (THSW), was one of the largest local branches of the SWC. Many of those who were candidates for Respect were involved in this branch and its success and implantation into the local community also helps to explain why Tower Hamlets became the heartland of the party. Once Respect started campaigning as a political party it could rely on the pre-existing networks that had been built up with various sections of civil society as a solid base for support. It also meant that the party had at its disposal a virtual army of volunteers ready to help the campaign, including many young people who had become politicised through the anti-war movement.

We had a lot of volunteers. On the Saturday before the election 400 went out. That was exceptional, but there were regular teams from other parts of London. We had local Respect

supporters and attracted more during the campaign, including lots of Bengali kids. They provided lots of canvassers. On the day of the election there were banners hanging from windows and across streets.<sup>25</sup>

Many youth groups had been involved in THSW and Abjol Miah who was elected as a councillor in 2006 had previously worked for Tower Hamlets council as a youth leader. This gave him a significant amount of political capital amongst the local youths and those voting for the first time. Tower Hamlets has a young population and the youth vote itself was extremely important for Respect. Respect's task was facilitated because those born and brought up in Britain are more likely to reject the traditional pattern of the father dictating the political direction of the family and delivering bloc votes to a particular candidate. Labour was still relying on this *modus operandi* which younger voters often oppose and perceive as archaic.<sup>26</sup> The same factor was at work in Bradford in 2012 where the youth vote was seen as one of the keys to the by-election victory.

*Fig.2. Election flyer for Salma Yaqoob in 2005*

Insert fig. 2 here

## **5. Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how Muslims in Britain became involved in electoral politics with the Respect Party. Until very recently it was in the doldrums but the return of George Galloway to Westminster has re-invigorated the party. It is difficult to predict whether they can build on this shock result. The association with the anti-war movement in Britain has been both a blessing and a curse. It gave the impetus for its creation and also provided it with a base within civil society from which it could subsequently draw support. The invasion of Iraq was a central issue on which the

party could campaign given that many voters, particularly Muslims, were angered by this foreign policy decision. Since the anti-war movement became less influential, it has become harder for the party mobilise potential supporters. As Poguntke (2002: 49) has remarked, 'while good links with new social movements may be a significant (though highly contingent) electoral asset during phases of high protest mobilization, it is of little value in quiet times.' British troops have now left Iraq and will soon leave Afghanistan so Respect will need to lose its tag as a mere 'anti-war party' and attempt to re-invent itself.

Although the party has not been able to expand its influence outside of East London, Birmingham and now Bradford, it changed the political landscape in these areas. It forced mainstream parties to re-think their own electoral strategies in response to its success. This is particularly true in Tower Hamlets, where the party was instrumental in campaigning for a referendum for a directly elected mayor.<sup>27</sup> Activists in Bradford are hoping they can achieve the same result and shake up the way local government works there too. Respect has also made an impact in another important ways. It has campaigned for an end to the corruption of 'ethnic politics' that had been exploited by the larger political parties. Although this will continue to persist for many years to come, young British Muslims in particular have shown their disdain for this by-passing of democracy. Respect has in fact brought to the fore a new generation of young British Muslim political activists and leaders, particularly women, many of whom will continue to play an important role in British politics. These young activists will be the ones taking the party forward into the future and its continued success will depend on them.

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<sup>1</sup> 'RESPECT' is a recursive acronym standing for Respect, Equality, Socialism, Peace, Environmentalism, Community, and Trade Unionism. The official name is now The Respect Party, see <http://www.therespectparty.org> For a more detailed history of the founding and development of the party see Peace (2012)

<sup>2</sup> The SWP is a Trotskyist party and the largest organisation on the far left in Britain, see <http://www.swp.org.uk>

<sup>3</sup> Parties must win at least 5% of the party list vote in order to win any seats in the London Assembly.

<sup>4</sup> The 2001 census indicated that Tower Hamlets has 71,389 Muslims, 36.4% of the overall population. In Newham there were 59,293 people who identified themselves as Muslim (24.3%).

<sup>5</sup> It is not however limited to the Labour Party. In fact, the Conservative Party has 'unsuccessfully attempted to divide the Muslim Labour vote by highlighting the biraderi identities of Muslim Labour candidates and selecting rival biraderi Conservative candidates' (Purdham 2001: 151).

<sup>6</sup> For extensive details of cases of electoral fraud and postal voting in the UK see White and Moulton (2009).

<sup>7</sup> For example many Muslim businessmen will naturally vote Conservative. The party has responded to this new electorate by setting up a Muslim Forum <http://www.conservativemuslimforum.com>

<sup>8</sup> Respect and George Galloway played a leading role in the Viva Palestina aid convoy see <http://www.vivapalestina.org/>. Respect councillors also called for the boycott Israeli products.

<sup>9</sup> For more details see Glynn (2002) and Eade & Garbin (2006).

<sup>10</sup> This is where most Bangladeshis in East London trace their origins and links between the villages of this area and the first generation migrants are still important.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Respect councillor for Tower Hamlets Council.

<sup>12</sup> Almost half of their candidates (33 out of 68) were female for the 2004 European elections. At the 2005 general election 9 out of 26 candidates (34.6%) were female and in 2010 it was 3 out of 11 (27%).

<sup>13</sup> Often referred to as the 'anti-globalisation movement' or by its supporters as the 'Global Justice Movement'.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Respect councillor in Tower Hamlets.

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<sup>15</sup> The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO) was launched in 1996 and eventually developed into a London-wide initiative, see <http://www.citizensuk.org> and Jamoul and Wills (2008).

<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, 85% of the Muslim councillors that Pudham (2000) interviewed believed that mosques should not be involved in politics.

<sup>17</sup> It is not however only Muslims in Newham who utilise faith-based organisations. The Christian Peoples Alliance (CPA) is party which has also elected councillors and seeks support from churches. It received 70,294 votes for the London Assembly elections in 2008, beating both Respect and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). <http://www.cpaparty.org.uk>

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Respect councillor in Tower Hamlets.

<sup>19</sup> The Awami League led the struggle for independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan. They are deeply opposed to the ELM as some of the trustees are accused of war crimes from 1971.

<sup>20</sup> Founded in 1941 by Abul Ala Maududi, it competes in elections in both Pakistan and Bangladesh.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Respect councillor in Tower Hamlets.

<sup>22</sup> See also the documentary that Gilligan made with the channel 4 Dispatches programme entitled 'Britain's Islamic Republic' first aired on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Respect councillor in Tower Hamlets.

<sup>24</sup> Pudham (2000: 48) also discovered that female Muslim councillors are contacted more often by female members of their electoral ward.

<sup>25</sup> Sean Doherty, Respect election agent for Bethnal Green & Bow in 2005, quoted in Taylor (2005).

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Respect councillor in Tower Hamlets.

<sup>27</sup> Residents voted in favour of this proposal in 2010 and so power has effectively been taken away from the Labour Party which benefited from the traditional Cabinet system. Respect leaders would argue that the Executive Mayoral System which is now in place gives greater power and accountability to the residents of the borough. They did not put forward their own candidate for Mayor but instead supported the Independent candidate Lutfur Rahman who had been deselected by Labour. He went on to win the Mayoral election which Respect considered to be a tactical victory.