

Margins and mainstreams

Asma Barlas

When I sat down to write my last op-ed—on the rally held recently in D.C. to protest the Bush administration's policies on Iraq (Daily Times, November 5)—I ended with a confession that I had not anticipated making. To wit, that participating in the rally gave me an unexpected sense of political belonging for the first time since I came to the U.S. almost twenty years ago. Ever since then, I have been reflecting on why I should have come to this realization at this particularly inopportune moment in U.S. history.

On the one hand, the Bush administration's war against terrorism has boiled down to killing Muslims abroad in a wanton manner, as was borne out by the wholesale bombing of Afghanistan. If the end result had been to destroy al-Qaeda—thereby putting an end to future attacks against the U.S.—it would have been one thing, though it still would have been scant justification for killing thousands of civilians. However, not only has al-Qaeda survived, but intelligence agencies warn of more, not less, attacks in the future.

There is then the reckless rush to war with Iraq even though there is no evidence linking Saddam Hussein's government with al-Qaeda or establishing Iraq as a threat to any state. Indeed, the US-backed and UN-imposed sanctions regime has decimated Iraqi society by killing off thousands of civilians, specially children (by some accounts, 5000 a month) even though as the first Mr. Bush never tired of saying when he was president, the U.S.'s war was with Hussein and not with the "people of Iraq." (Memorably, when confronted by journalists about the deaths of Iraqi children, former secretary of state Madeline Albright, smugly retorted that it was a price the U.S. was willing to pay to oust Hussein.)

On the other hand, the Bush administration's war against terrorism has set off a veritable witch-hunt against Muslims by various governmental agencies at home notwithstanding Mr. Bush's periodic criticisms of anti-Muslim bias. As a report by Human Rights Watch ("We Are Not the Enemy") notes, the "U.S. government contradicted its anti-prejudice message by directing its anti-terrorism efforts — including secret immigration detention and FBI interviews of thousands of non-citizens — at Arabs and Muslims."

The report goes on to note that after 9/11, the incidence of hate crimes, which include "murder, assault, arson and vandalism," by private citizens against Muslims and Arabs "increased dramatically" —a staggering 1700 percent—in six major cities: New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Seattle, Dearborn, and Phoenix. Thus, the federal government reported "a 17-fold increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes, from 28 in 2000 to 481 in 2001. Muslim and Arab organizations received over 2,000 reports of harassment, violence and other acts of September 11-related bias. Chicago and Los Angeles County both experienced a 15-fold increase in anti-Arab hate crimes during 2001."

As Human Rights Watch points out, "Backlash violence against Arabs and Muslims in the United States is not unprecedented. As chronicled in the report, war in the Middle East or terrorism against the United States associated with Arabs or Muslims has

triggered domestic spasms of bias violence many times in the past.” Given that history, it wonders why government officials and agencies were not “better prepared to combat it” (“U.S. officials should have been better prepared for hate crime wave,” November 14).

In addition to being subjected to governmental scrutiny and vigilante violence, Muslim and Arab academics—and indeed all those who are critical of the Bush administration—are being monitored and attacked by private watchdog groups. One of them—Daniel Pipe’s CampusWatch—has gone so far as to equate “anti-Americanism” and “hatred” for the U.S. with criticisms of the *Israeli* government! On the basis of this slander, the FBI has begun to interrogate Muslim faculty in several academic institutions. More and more, the political climate is starting to resemble the 1920s when the FBI “rounded up hundreds of people for their political beliefs,” as a colleague recently said to me.

Ironically, however, the very fact that Muslims are so deeply at risk in the U.S. today has given me a stake in national politics since I can see the consequences of not having any. Immigrants in particular have stayed out of party politics because of feelings of cultural alienation and that alienation has become the root of our own oppression inasmuch it is the absence of an effective Muslim voice in the political system that has rendered us so vulnerable to its vagaries today. As a member of the American Muslim Council who came to town some years ago kept repeating, Muslims can only bridge the gap between our growing numbers in the U.S. and our lack of political influence here if we eschew our internal self-exile and join the national mainstream instead.

My own political sensibilities do not allow me to join the mainstream; after all, it has taken me nearly two decades to feel a marginal part of the margins. But I do understand that whether Muslims join the mainstream or inhabit the margins, we can no longer afford to continue opting out of politics altogether and still expect the political system to represent our interests and to ensure our well-being.

This is not to say that I have found it easy to develop a stake in politics or to start thinking of the U.S. as my home. For years, I drew sustenance from the idea that I was just “passing through” and that home was Pakistan. In the end, that passage has taken a little less than half of my life and I am coming to realize the need to accept it as my own. This has meant letting go of some of the nostalgia and yearning for Pakistan, at least enough to stop agonizing over which part of my life, here or there, has been more real or meaningful. To me, then, political belonging simply means embracing the need to be present in the political moment in the here and now, painful and hazardous as it may be.