EFFECTIVE REPRESENTATION OF MINORITIES IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT:

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES

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West European countries are host to numerous minorities. These groups identify themselves by their distinct religion, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, immigrant status, etc. and most are characterized as 'disadvantaged' by socio-economic and political criteria. Recurring riots, violent backlashes and increasing religious extremism demonstrate that the accommodation of minorities is a pressing issue for West European governments. In this study, I investigate the dynamics of minority political representation in British local government, and seek to answer the question: does minority political representation matter for peaceful resolution of social conflicts? As one of the largest minority groups in London and in city councils, I focus on the political experiences of Muslim city councilors across 32 London boroughs (there are approximately sixteen million Muslims living in Western Europe, and about 2 million reside in Britain alone).

In order to examine the issues of descriptive versus substantive (effective) representation, I conducted in-depth interviews with 20 Muslim leaders, political activists, and city councilors in London. The goal of this research was to analyze political experiences of Muslim city councilors across London boroughs, their platforms, whether or not their presence helps reduce conflict at the local level, and impact of party politics on their performance.

Currently, there are no policies in place in the U.K. that explicitly addresses the lack of effective representation of minorities at the local level. U.K. has also not adopted any form of institutionalized action to address the underrepresentation of women or ethnic minorities at the national level. On the other hand, all public authorities are bound under the Human Rights Act 1998, and have to act compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights. Also, certain public agencies were founded to tackle issues of discrimination. Most relevant is the Equality and Human Rights Commission that was established by the Equality Act 2006, and came into being effectively on 1 October 2007. It assumed the responsibilities of three former commissions: the Commission for Racial Equality[1], the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Disability Rights Commission. Its responsibilities also expand beyond these former commissions to cover discrimination based on age, sexual orientation and religion or belief, as well as human rights.

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[1] The Commission for Racial Equality was established by the Race Relations Act 1976, under James Callaghan's Labour government. CRE's primary responsibility was to tackle racial discrimination and promote racial equality. Yet, Muslims did not qualify as a racial body, so were not protected by law.

My research revealed that local Muslim political representation facilitates the acquisition of services for Muslim citizenry, yet performance of Muslim elected officials is contingent upon institutional constraints, in particular strong party whip.

British political system is characterized by the *responsible party government model*. "Proponents of the responsible party government argue that democracy works most effectively" when political parties provide alternative policy programs, voters choose parties based on an informed assessment of their respective policy platforms and performance while in office, and regular free and fair elections are held to ensure alternation of power and party accountability (Norris 1997, 7). In this model, "what matters for defending the interests of the poorer, less-educated sectors of society, women and ethnic minorities is getting policies accepted *by parties* which defend their interests" (Norris and Lovenduski 1997, 186; italics added). Also, this model creates a political structure where parties are responsible for the two crucial roles: political recruitment process (who gets initiated into the hierarchical and professional political career leading to the Parliament), and due to strong party discipline, agenda setting and policy formulation at both the local and the national levels. Hence, in the *responsible party government model,* the focus of representation is no longer the individual representative but the political party from which he or she is elected.

Specifically looking at the role of parties at the local level, Copus (2004), an academic and a former city councilor in Britain, argues that British local government in Britain is party-based government where "local representation has been reduced from broad ideals of citizen empowerment and involvement to a narrow focus on party loyalty and party interest" (10). He introduces the concept of a 'party person' who is first and foremost loyal to the party and all of his or her activities are concerned with serving party interests (Copus 2004, 3). A problem of representation arises when parties are not concerned with local interests "deterring many well-qualified potential candidates from seeking local office…subjugating the needs of the community to the needs of the party" (Copus 2004, 1). Copus (2004) states that,

> Political parties have little or no loyalty to recognizable local communities as such. Rather, they are concerned with capturing control of a council- a specific local government unit- the boundaries of which are more likely to be drawn for administrative convenience and to meet technocratic and managerial needs, rather than reflect communities of place… it is power and the control of those units, more than community representation, that interest political parties (7).

Moreover, British political system is characterized by strong party discipline. Gianetti and Laver (2005) define party discipline as a "'top down' phenomenon- the outcome of a strategic game played within the party in which rank and file members respond to rewards and punishments created by some internal decision-making regime" (2). In general, electoral rules that give power to party leaders to choose candidates produce strong party discipline (Schugart 2001). Even though decisions are made in the council through a general vote, councilors vote as a bloc, hence decisions taken in the party group are usually the outcome of the council vote. The political party group is "a discrete (and indeed discreet) unit of party organization within each of the three main political parties… has its own rules, procedures and organizational structures…is a coherent, unified and discipline bloc of councilors, sharing the same political party membership or allegiance" (Copus 2004, 92). Furthermore, "the group will elect a whips office and a chief whip, charged, amongst other things, with ensuring the group retains its coherence

and unity in public, and that members are aware of group policy and decisions on all issues" (Copus 2004, 93). These arguments have serious repercussions for the functioning of a representative democracy and thus deserve careful analysis.

My research has also confirmed the views and findings of these scholars. Muslim politicians suspect that during the recruitment process, major political parties evaluate whether a candidate would cause the party to lose votes or would breach party discipline. 'Party persons' who conform to the leadership's views, who please all the local and national veto players, are more likely to make it to the ballot. Still, the parties do strategically give some leeway to candidates in close races in which dissent from party policy could allow the candidate to win. Our interviews with activists from all three parties also suggest that they also allow Muslim candidates in unwinnable and marginal districts to speak their mind and contradict party platforms in the hope of shoring up party support in those districts with large minority populations. The parties achieve local gains and incur no commitment costs because the candidates are not likely to get elected. Party discipline, peer pressure and the threat of retaliation generally prevents them, with few exceptions, from advocating on behalf of minority rights and positions on foreign policy, even if they wish to do so. Indeed, many Liberal Democrats and Respect councilors are far more outspoken on issues of Muslim civil rights and the British misadventure in Iraq than most Muslim elected officials in Labour and Tories.

Muslim minority representation benefits British Muslims, but in complicated and mixed ways. The benefits on the local level can be summarized as follows: issue advocacy, guidance with how to lobby for their interests, obtaining local services in a more effective manner, and higher levels of political involvement through connections with elected Muslim councilors. On the other hand, certain factors obstruct the effective representation of Muslim interests. Party discipline generally prevents them, with few exceptions, from advocating on behalf of minority rights and positions on highly contentious issues (such as foreign policy), even if they wish to do so. The strictures of Labour and Tories are such that the majority Muslim population of a Tower Hamlets constituency voted for Muslim candidates from the Respect Party over Muslims running from Labour because they recognized that Respect Party would allow more effective representation. It is likely that Muslim councilors would become more outspoken as they consolidate electoral support, develop strong networks within their parties, assume government and party leadership positions, and increase in numbers.

Muslim representation in the Labour or the Conservative Parties currently does not help Muslim minorities as much as it could. The leaders of Labour and the Conservatives may want to provide their Muslim councilors with more autonomy if they wish to attract the Muslim vote and have their Muslim candidates gain greater legitimacy among minority constituencies. They do not need to look far for an example of the electoral benefits this would bring: Lord Ahmet Nazir of the House of Lords, who developed such legitimacy by speaking forcefully on issues of interest for the Muslim minority, and actively recruits Muslims for Labour. They may also wish to empower Muslim elected officials to effectively institutionalize conflict resolution at the local and national level. Britain would benefit if Muslim Labour and Conservative elected officials become effective representatives of their minority constituencies.

Based on my research, the following policies to facilitate minority representation and improve democratic means of social conflict resolution in Western democracies are suggested.

1. It was observed that political parties recruit sufficient number of minority candidates (to achieve proportaionlity) for both safe seats and electorally competitive districts in order to secure minority votes. Hence, efforts should focus on the experiences of elected minorities in the post-election phase rather than recruitment phase.
2. Since underrepresentation (at the descriptive level) of minority candidates is not evident, quota systems to secure minority representation are not advised.
3. Systematic studies aimed to find what accounts for the lack of effective representation of minority interests should be commissioned to non-partisan scholars or agencies. Collection of empirical data on levels of minority representation and concrete results of descriptive representation should be sponsored.
4. Mechanism, such as independent consultative and scrutiny committees or bodies, to assess whether local party politics obstructs the democratic representation of citizens' interests should be devised and implemented.
5. To improve the effective representation of minorities by elected minorities, government grant programs to local authorities should be implemented for the training of elected minorities prior to commencement of official duties and throughout the term.
6. To improve the effective representation of minorities by all elected representatives, government grant programs to local authorities should be implemented for the training of councilors and council staff to increase awareness of problems, needs and concerns of minority communities.
7. Local politics should shift towards deliberative democracy including the wide spectrum of diverse communities at all levels of decision making processes. Translation services should be funded and provided where necessary.
8. Further research and deliberation is suggested to find the most effective institutional arrangements and practices to enhance minority participation in decision-making bodies and to reduce social conflicts, partially arising from underrepresentation and ensuing lack of government legitimacy.

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