

**COMMUNITY EDUCATION TOOLKIT ON DOCUMENTED INCIDENTS OF
XENOPHOBIA AND INTOLERANCE IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE**

PART II: COMMENTS AIMED AT SOUTH ASIAN CANDIDATES FOR POLITICAL OFFICE
[JANUARY 2008 UPDATE]

Xenophobia, racism, and intolerance have no place in political and civic discourse. Yet, a pattern of such rhetoric continues to exist in America's political environment. When xenophobia and racism permeate the political sphere, there can be far-reaching consequences. Xenophobic rhetoric made by political and public figures can foster similar sentiments on the part of the public, and perpetuate misconceptions and stereotypes. It can also influence support for policies and practices that target or harm people of color and immigrants. And it can further feelings of marginalization and hamper political and civic participation on the part of immigrants and communities of color.

For decades, African Americans and Latinos have been subjected to racist rhetoric in the political sphere. More recently, South Asians, Muslims, Sikhs and Arab Americans have been the targets of xenophobic and intolerant rhetoric. In addition, candidates of South Asian descent have also reported encountering xenophobic and intolerant comments by their opponents.

Since August 2006, SAALT has been gathering, analyzing, and publicizing instances of intolerant rhetoric in the political spectrum. This 3-part toolkit includes: (1) Documented examples of such rhetoric, aimed generally at South Asian, Muslim, and Sikh communities as a whole; (2) Documented examples of such rhetoric aimed specifically at South Asian candidates running for elected office; and (3) Tips for community members on how to respond to such rhetoric. SAALT updates sections of the toolkit periodically, and alerts community members, the media, and elected officials when xenophobic rhetoric begins to increase. As the 2008 election cycle approaches, SAALT is being even more vigilant about monitoring intolerant rhetoric in the political sphere. This section, the second part of the toolkit, focuses on *comments targeted against South Asian individuals running for political office*. To obtain the other sections of the toolkit, please visit the SAALT website at www.saalt.org or contact SAALT at saalt@saalt.org.

SAALT is a national, non-partisan, non-profit organization dedicated to fostering civic and political participation by South Asians through a social justice framework that combines advocacy, community education, coalition-building, and leadership development.

It is important to note that the examples contained in this document are intended to provide only a snapshot of the types of intolerant rhetoric that exists in political discourse. We encourage community members to assist with this documentation process by sending us examples of similar rhetoric in the political sphere to saalt@saalt.org. SAALT will use this document to advocate for a more effective response from political parties regarding xenophobic rhetoric in the political sphere.

SAALT acknowledges the input of community members who have helped to shape this document. We especially thank Rishi Agarwal (Illinois) and Nitasha Sawhney (California); Anil Kalhan (New York); interns Pooja Merai (Illinois) and Neha Singhal (Maryland); and our Board of Directors and Council of Advisors.

INCIDENTS TARGETING SOUTH ASIANS RUNNING FOR POLITICAL OFFICE

Running for office in America as a person of color or naturalized citizen is not an easy road. When candidates are subjected to xenophobic and intolerant comments by opponents or the general public, they face even greater challenges to fully participating in political and civic life. Below are examples of incidents targeting South Asian candidates running for political office.

- ***Hindu Candidate Receives Opponent's Concession Asking Him to "Know Jesus"***

In November 2006, Satveer Chaudhary, a newly re-elected Minnesota State Senator and practicing Hindu, received a written concession from his opponent, Rae Hart Anderson, asking him to convert to Christianity. The email included the following statements:

"I've enjoyed much of this race, especially the people I've met...even you! I see your deficits—not all of them, and your potential—but not all of it. Only your Creator knows the real potential He's put in you. Get to know Him and know yourself...you'll be more interesting even to you!

The race of your life is more important than this one--and it is my sincere wish that you'll get to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. He died for the sins of the world, yours and mine--and especially for those who accept His forgiveness. His kingdom will come and His will be done--on earth as it is in heaven. There's more....I love belonging to the family of God. Jesus is the way, the truth and offers His life to you and each human being. Pay attention...this is very important, Satveer. Have you noticed Jesus for yourself...at some moment in time, yet???"¹

According to Ms. Anderson's former campaign manager, the email was written because "Chaudhary is not Christian and he needs to find his soul."²

Significance: Such statements send the message that those who practice non-Christian faiths have weaknesses and failings that render themselves unfit for political office. They also have the impact of making the political candidate an outsider who is different from his or her constituency.

- ***Patriotism of Muslim Congressman Challenged by Opponent, Media and Fellow Representatives***

In September 2006, Minnesota Republican Party Chairman Ron Carey sent a fundraising letter to voters challenging the patriotism of Keith Ellison, a Muslim-American Congressional candidate. In the letter, Carey stated that Ellison had received "financial support from a self-identified supporter of Hamas" and criticized him for accepting campaign contributions from leaders of the Council on Islamic-American Relations (CAIR)³, which it refers to as "a group that Democrats say has deep

¹ "Concession e-mail from Rae Hart Anderson" WCCO, November 16, 2006. Available at http://wcco.com/local/local_story_320175549.html. (Last accessed January 7, 2008)

² "Concession e-mail to Hindu Sen.: 'Know Jesus'", WCCO, Mary Tan, November 16, 2006. Available at http://wcco.com/local/local_story_320195110.html. (Last accessed January 7, 2008)

³ CAIR is a national organization that supports the rights of Muslims in the United States and has repeatedly condemned violence and terrorism.

ties to terrorism.”⁴ Congressman Ellison’s opponent Alan Fine, later stated that he was “*offended as a Jew that we have a candidate like this running for U.S. Congress.*”⁵

Since his election victory in November 2006, several members of the media have also questioned Congressman Ellison’s loyalty to the United States because of his faith. During an interview, Glenn Beck of CNN asked Congressman Ellison, “*Sir, prove to me that you are not working with our enemies.*” Mr. Beck added, “*I’m not accusing you of being an enemy, but that’s the way I feel, and I think a lot of Americans will feel that way.*”⁶ Syndicated newspaper columnist Dennis Prager also criticized Congressman Ellison for intending to be sworn into office on the Quran instead of a Bible. Mr. Prager wrote “*if you are incapable of taking an oath on that book [the Bible], you don’t serve in Congress*” and that “[*Congressman Ellison*] *will be doing more damage to the unity of America and to the value system that has formed this country than the terrorists of 9/11.*”⁷

Significance: It is problematic to employ electoral tactics and political rhetoric that make assumptions about candidates on the basis of their religion, as was the case here by linking Congressman Ellison to terrorism merely through his affiliation with a Muslim organization or his faith. Congressman Ellison’s ability to be a political leader and loyalty to the United States was doubted simply because he is Muslim.

- ***Muslim Candidate in Maryland Harassed***

In August 2006, the Associated Press reported that Saqib Ali, who was running for a seat in the Maryland House of Delegates, was harassed by a man outside his home. *The man sat outside Ali’s home in Gaithersburg, Maryland, with a sign reading, “Islam Sucks,” and a shirt with the slogan, “This mind is an Allah-free zone.”*⁸

Significance: This incident marginalizes and demeans Mr. Ali by using religious slurs. It also perpetuates anti-Islam stereotypes in the public’s mind, and connects Mr. Ali only with his religious affiliation rather than his credentials and experience. Mr. Ali won his electoral race.

- ***Congressional Race in Philadelphia: No “Roots” in Community***

In June 2006, in a Congressional election against Indian-American candidate, Raj Peter Bhakta, incumbent Allyson Schwartz commented that Raj “*has no roots in our community.*”⁹

Significance: In political races, it is not uncommon to hear candidates implying that their opponents do not have roots in the community. However, when such comments are made about candidates of a different nationality, they have the added impact of implying that the candidates are not “American.” In this case, Mr. Bhakta was born and raised in Northeast Philadelphia.

⁴ “Lee posts photo with Sabo; Fine ad attacks Ellison,” *The Minnesota Star-Tribune*, October 11, 2006.

⁵ “Muslims supporting Congressional hopeful,” *Washington Post*, September 27, 2006.

⁶ Video Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgbg604XqPY. (Last accessed January 7, 2008)

⁷ “America, not Keith Ellison, decides what book Congress takes its oath on,” Dennis Prager, November 28, 2006. Available at http://www.townhall.com/Columnists/DennisPrager/2006/11/28/america_not_keith_ellison_decides_what_book_a_congressman_takes_his_oath_on. (Last accessed January 7, 2008)

⁸ “Man Protests at Home of Muslim Candidate,” *Associated Press*, August 13, 2006. Available at http://www.beliefnet.com/story/197/story_19776_1.html. (Last accessed January 7, 2008)

⁹ *India Post*, June 23, 2006.

- **Florida Race Raises Specter of 9/11 and Terrorism**

In November 2005, Tom Abraham, a 60-year-old nuclear medicine technologist of South Asian descent, ran against Don Sherrill for City Council Seat 4 in Orange City, Florida. During the campaign, Mr. Sherrill derided Mr. Abraham's accent at a community forum, claiming that he could not understand him.

The *St. Petersburg Times* reported that "... in a newspaper interview, Mr. Sherrill said voters in this city of about 7,200, 30 miles north of Orlando, wouldn't support Mr. Abraham if they saw and heard him. "I'm usually not prejudiced, but I don't want an Indian in my government," Mr. Sherrill, 69, told the *Orlando Sentinel*. "As far as I know, he could be a nice guy, but these kind (sic) of people get embedded over here. . . . You remember 9/11.""¹⁰

Significance: Mr. Sherrill's remarks portray the range of stereotypes used to marginalize South Asians. His comments raise the specter of 9/11 and terrorism, and perpetuate misperceptions associated with people from certain parts of the world. Mr. Sherrill did not apologize for his comments. Mr. Sherrill won the election.

¹⁰ "City official criticizes foe's ethnic background," *Associated Press*, November 3, 2005. Available at http://www.sptimes.com/2005/11/03/State/City_official_critici.shtml. (Last accessed January 7, 2008)